



ADMISSIONADO

**GUIDE TO ELITE COLLEGE ADMISSIONS**

## A SPECIAL THANKS...

A lot of hard work and late nights went into making this book happen. And for that, we want to thank our main contributors: Senior Editor Michael Anichini, Senior Editor Katherine Kendig, and the rest of the tireless Admissionado staff.

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# **PART 1: THE COLLEGE LANDSCAPE**

# 1 – INTRODUCTION

## What is college?

In the game of life, college is your first big-time move. You're signing yourself up for another four years of high-caliber learning, opportunity and achievement. College offers you specialized classes, expert-level engagement with your favorite subjects, a whole new independent approach to being a student... and much more.

30 or 40 years ago, getting a college degree was optional. Sure, it was helpful for jump-starting a career, but many people still found professional success with just a high school diploma. Those days are loooong gone. Today, a college degree is essential to landing a good job. More people than ever attend a university, which means that employers expect a higher level of education from their employees.

College courses tend to be more challenging than high school courses (more reading, more papers), but that's a good thing! A college experience pushes you to think about complex subjects in a meaningful way. This prepares you for the problems you will face as an adult - whether in graduate school or the "real world."

Don't be afraid... college is an amazing time of self-discovery and growth! You'll have a chance to meet interesting people, take classes in topics you never heard of in high school, and attend tons of performances, lectures, and events. Just imagine: you could attend an African dance performance, load up on gadgets and posters at a campus fair, cheer yourself through an animal rights protest, and end up at an evening talk by a leading cancer-research scientist, all on the same day... after a morning of classes. Simply put, it's a chance to figure out who you are, what you really think about the world, and what kind of career you may want to pursue.

# 2 – INSIDE COLLEGE

## Year-By-Year Breakdown of College

Just like high school, a college education typically lasts for four years: freshman (1st), sophomore (2nd), junior (3rd), and senior (4th).

Let's suppose your college expects students to take a total of 33 classes over those four years. Just about every college requires students to pick a major - a primary topic of study, like psychology or economics. Different colleges have different rules, but

usually, students are required to take 10-15 classes relating to their major. Another 10 classes may be basic requirements (like math and writing). The last 10 or so are elective courses: you have the freedom to choose whichever subjects you want. So how do all these classes - major, requirements, and electives - balance out? And what will your college career actually look like? Let's go through each year, one by one.

### **Freshman Year**

At first, freshman year is mostly about getting situated - learning the layout of the campus, finding your way around buildings, figuring out which clubs you want to join, and adjusting to college life. For some, this may be your first time away from home. This can be an adjustment. You'll share a room with a stranger. This can be an adjustment. You'll be in charge of your own schedule. This can be - yep - an adjustment. Freshman year is ALL about adjusting. Let it happen. Don't force yourself onto a particular path prematurely... you're liable to handcuff yourself this way.

### **Sophomore Year**

By sophomore year, most colleges will require students to declare a major. This is the subject that students take the most classes in - it's their academic focus. The trend these days is for students to gravitate not toward the most practical course of study, but rather, the one that interests them the most. In the old days, the idea was to major in something related to your future career: study biological sciences if you want to be a doctor, study history and political science if you want to be a lawyer, study theatre if you want to be... unemployed. (Kidding!) But today, the more rounded thinkers are often the ones that appeal to graduate programs and employers. These days, med schools encourage undergrads to major in everything BUT biology. Sure, a healthy mix of sciences is essential to even consider pursuing the medical path... but if all your classes involve microscopes, you'll miss out on critical ideas and ways of thinking that are highly valued in today's doctors and researchers. So when choosing a major, follow your passions. Major in the subject you're likely to commit to the most - after all, you'll be spending a lot of time with it.

### **Junior Year**

By junior year, you're kinda running the show. The incoming freshmen seem like little babies... all of a sudden, other students are asking you for advice instead of the other way around! At this point, you know the campus like the back of your hand: where to find the most delicious late-night falafel, how to find a free study space during the chaos of final exams, and which social events are worth going to. And by now, you also know exactly what the perfect balance of work and play is - although whether you're achieving it is another matter entirely. There is still a full academic year between you and your next move after college, when you have to face the question "What do I want to do with my life?" But it may be time for those decisions (grad school? career? fellowship? travel?) to start percolating in a preliminary way, especially as you start to

really dig into your major classes. This can help slowly steer you toward relatively concrete plans and ideas, without cramping your ability to take advantage of the freedom college affords you.

### **Senior Year**

Ah, senior year. By this time, students are taking their final courses in their major, leading clubs and committees, squeezing in last-minute classes, shows, and opportunities they know they won't have next year; and preparing for life after college. Most students try to decide what their next step is by the fall of their senior year (if not before) so they're not totally unprepared when graduation rolls around in the spring. However, not everyone has it figured out yet – and that's okay. No matter where you're at, senior year can be a stressful time: Writing senior theses. Preparing resumes for jobs. Filling out grad school applications. Regardless of your chosen path, senior year becomes increasingly bittersweet as you near the end of your college career.

## **The Five Golden Opportunities of College**

### **1. Independence**

For most people, college is the first time they'll be away from their parents. Living on your own poses a few challenges, like doing your own laundry, buying your own groceries, and making sure the dust balls under your bed don't grow to the size of a small dog. On the upside, though, you won't have a curfew, no one will nag you about doing chores, and you can decorate your room however you want.

Most universities require that students live on-campus during their freshman year. According to a 2010 survey, just 20.3% of first-year students lived off campus, either with their parents or in their own apartments.

Basically, living independently is usually some combination of confusion, freedom, terror, vulnerability, and joy. Thankfully, you'll have a roommate to help you navigate all of these pitfalls and questions. (Many people actually end up becoming lifelong friends with their freshman year roommates – given how much time you spend together in a small room, forming a strong bond with your roomie is almost delightfully inevitable.)

### **2. Discovery**

Colleges have a rich array of clubs and activities. If you've always wanted to try something, college is THE place to do it. Painting, photography, filmmaking, modern dance, computer programming, knitting, writing for the newspaper, environmental



activism – there’s usually a wide variety of clubs to choose from. And on this road of self-discovery, you never know which new activity might become a life-long passion. For example, perhaps you were a champion robotics engineer in high school. That’s awesome! Maybe you’ll join your college’s robotics club, and your team will design a robot that can see through walls.

But maybe one day you’ll also see a flyer for the tap dancing club, and you’ll think to yourself, “You know what? I’ve always wanted to try tap dancing!” As it turns out, the club is giving tap lessons that week. You show up, discover that you love it, and ta da – a new hobby is born! (Hopefully your roommate won’t mind your late-night tapping sessions...)

So take a look at the clubs your school has to offer that fit with your interests (and potential interests). Oh, and if the club you’re looking for doesn’t exist... guess what? You should START it! With some clever advertising and a little effort, you are almost sure to find like-minded folks who will help make your vision into a reality.

### **3. Friendships**

By living independently and exploring your interests, you will end up meeting people from a variety of backgrounds. Your roommate might be from Ohio, while your lab partner is from Bangladesh. Perhaps for the first time in your life, you will be working and hanging out with people with a broad range of life experiences, opinions, and cultural sensibilities. Some kids will come from affluent backgrounds while others will have supported themselves since childhood. Some will be Christian and others will be Muslim. There will be free-spirited economics majors, math-loving artists and ambitious philosophers. This melting pot of backgrounds and attitudes is occasionally difficult to navigate, but on the whole it makes for an extremely rich college experience.

While you might not click with everyone, there are bound to be a few people that you totally connect with. And since college is such a formative time, friendships developed in this environment tend to last throughout your life. Your newfound buddies might share your reason for being in college (maybe you both want to be engineers or famous authors), and tend to share your interests, sense of humor, politics, and outlook on life... but don’t rule out friendships with people totally different from you, either! Some of the best college relationships come from opposites attracting.

You’ll also form professional contacts, whether you realize it or not. Doctors, lawyers, engineers, professors, artists, designers – you’re all starting out together. The friends you make now could be your colleagues later on... and amateur partnerships formed in college can turn into successful enterprises after graduation.

Getting to know folks in your field may even lead to a job down the road. You never know – maybe a college friend will find a job with a great company, and you’ll be the

first person they call when that company is hiring. The “alma mater connection” can be extremely powerful, elevating your chances of being hired by that employer.

But even more importantly, throughout your life, you’ll have an instant connection with anyone who went to the same college as you. If you’re wearing an Arizona State sweatshirt, and you sit down next to someone who is also wearing an Arizona State sweatshirt, chances are you’ll smile at each other and start talking about your college experiences. Why? Because college is a hugely influential, eye-opening time! Having gone through many of the same intense experiences, you and your college’s alumni share a unique bond. It’s really powerful, and very cool.

#### **4. Academics**

W.B. Yeats says, “Education is not the filling of a pail, but the lighting of a fire.” Of course, (finally!) one of the key features of the college experience is academia. College courses are much more intensive than most high school classes, which gives you a chance to truly explore the subjects you think are the most fascinating. You’ll have longer reading lists, loads of research and laboratory opportunities, organized discussions with your classmates, and boatloads of essay-writing, which will give you the chance to form your own ideas and learn to express them clearly – one of the most important skills you can ever develop, no matter where you end up.

You’ll also meet college professors who have studied their subjects for decades and are true experts in the fields that interest you. These professors will expose you to new topics and ideas and inspire you to think about the world in unfamiliar ways.

While there are many types of classes, including writing workshops and scientific labs, most of the classes you take will probably involve two main formats: lectures and discussion-based classes. A lecture course generally has more students, anywhere from 20 to 500 or more. The professor stands at the front of the room and - well - lectures for 1-3 hours per class. If students need extra help or want to discuss the issues raised in class, they can attend the professor’s office hours: a scheduled time slot when the professor is required to be available for students to come in and talk one-on-one.

Discussion classes, on the other hand, involve much more student participation and are limited to smaller numbers of students (rarely more than 30). Topics and ideas are raised by the professor, and then discussed as a class, with students volunteering their thoughts, conclusions, questions, and critiques. This is where you’ll start to really develop your own academic personality.

In either type of class, it’s a good idea to get to know your professors. Discuss your papers, ask about research opportunities, share experiences... not only are professors great resources and fascinating to talk with, but they also provide the glowing recommendations that will one day help you get into grad school or land a job.

Most of your classes will revolve around the subject and department of your major, which will also be the focus of your senior thesis should you choose (or be required) to produce one. A thesis is just a big, original research project that you submit before you graduate. For example, if you're a computer programmer, your thesis project might be designing and developing a software program. Alternatively, if you're a biology student, you might research the effect of listening to classical music on lab rats, and then write a 30- to 60- page paper about your findings. Your thesis will probably be your first large, impressive body of original academic work, and an impressive thesis will be immensely helpful if you choose to go on to graduate school.

While the bulk of your academic work is in your major, you'll also be fulfilling your college's basic class requirements and taking electives that stimulate and excite you. The chance to take elective courses is an awesome opportunity that's pretty unique to college. Most employers gravitate towards people who took classes in a wide variety of subjects, and taking unusual courses will expose you to new ideas outside your specialty. For example, maybe your primary focus is computer engineering, but thanks to that food science class you took during your junior year, you'll know the perfect cooking temperature of an egg for the rest of your life!

The point is, exploring a variety of topics will help you lead a richer life after college. Follow your passions, but don't be afraid to dip your toe in something you might not know much about. You never know how or when one random course in college will help you later... or change your whole life path!

## **5. Career Development**

Some folks view college as the first step in a very rigid career path. After graduation, they'll either go directly to grad school, or they'll have a job waiting for them. For these students, the majority of their college experience is geared towards starting their career.

For others, however, their careers won't fall into place until much later in life. That's fine! College will still teach them how to think creatively and allow them to develop important relationships that will "pay off" down the line.

Either way, college is for learning, exploration and development. By taking risks, meeting new people, studying, and joining clubs, students become smarter, worldlier, more aware human beings. It doesn't matter (too much) if students are career-oriented or not – college allows everyone to grow in ways that will serve them later in life.

# 3 – WHY COLLEGE?

## Why Go To College In The U.S.?

Okay, so we've established that college is great. But why come all the way to the United States? Why not stay in your home country, or even home hemisphere? Here's why:

### 1. The Best Universities In The World Are Located In The U.S.

Perhaps you have heard of the Ivy League schools (Harvard, Yale, Princeton, and five others), but there are also plenty of other rigorous schools, including Stanford, the University of Chicago, and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, to name a few. Each of these universities boasts world-class professors, state-of-the-art facilities, and driven, intelligent students who will push you to achieve (and exceed) your potential. We'll go into a lot more detail on this in Chapter 2.

The range of academic experiences available in the US is truly astounding. Whether you want a big campus or a small one, a school in a city or out in the woods, or a college that specializes in your field of interest (engineering, ballet, even underwater basket weaving), there's a perfect school for you. Well, maybe there's not actually a college that specializes in underwater basket weaving, but you get the picture.

### 2. American Way Of Thinking

In American colleges, a huge emphasis is placed on creative thinking and making original arguments. This makes the American education style different from any other in the world. If you want to learn how to generate innovative ideas, examine problems in original ways, and generally think for yourself, an American university is the place to do it.

Unlike many professors in China and India, American professors will expect you to develop your own ideas in papers and discussions. Sure, you'll use some research that others have done, but you'll be responsible for interpreting that research in your own way. Can you synthesize information? What is your analysis? American professors will want to know! In the US, creating your own arguments and theories is JUST as important as memorizing pre-existing ones. Sure, you know helium's molecular structure, but can you design a creative experiment based on it?

Fundamentally, the act of making an original argument exercises a different BRAIN MUSCLE than memorization does. This will serve you well in any field you choose to go into. This is one of the main reasons why the American education system enjoys such

a great reputation around the world. Learning how to step back from a problem, examine it from all angles, and develop creative solutions is a highly useful skill to have.

This is exactly why many CEOs, tech innovators, and international dignitaries came to the United States to study. Aside from the high quality of education they received, going to a US college gave these people an in-depth opportunity to explore new topics and practice lateral and creative thinking.

Simply put, learning how to write effectively in English, solving problems creatively, and presenting projects to large groups of people are extremely compelling reasons to go to school in the States. Whether you want to invent a revolutionary product, be a leading researcher in your field, or deliver inspirational speeches as a politician or CEO, these skills will serve you well throughout your lifetime.

### **3. Improved English**

Let's face it folks: the world runs on English. To survive in the business world, publish in many academic journals, and pursue other professional and educational opportunities in the US, you'll need to be able to speak English... and speak it WELL.

English is no walk in the park. There are tons of irregular verbs, confusing regional accents, and idioms like "walk in the park." There is no better way to learn English than to live in an English-only environment for a few years. You can study all you want in English class, but until you're forced to speak the language on a daily basis, you'll never master it.

### **4. Preparation For Graduate School**

America also has some of the best graduate schools in the world, and their professors will expect you to be able to write American-style essays and research papers. There's no better way to learn how to do this than to attend college in the States.

Plus, American graduate school admissions officers know and respect American undergraduate colleges. They will be familiar with the undergraduate program you attended, perhaps even the professors who wrote your recommendations. A good recommendation from a respected American professor can go a long way toward getting you into a top graduate program in the United States.

So. Now that you've seen what college is all about and decided to come to the US to continue your education, let's get a little more specific: what are your choices... and how do you choose?

## **PART 2: HOW TO CHOOSE YOUR COLLEGE**

# 1 – INTRODUCTION

Are you pumped up and ready to dive head first into the pool of college life? Awesome! Then go ahead, put on your goggles, and head straight to college!

...Wait a second. Hold on there, my friend.

WHERE are you going to go? You haven't picked a school yet. Before you slather on the sunscreen and make for the nearest diving board, you need to select a destination. At Admissionado, we have one simple, unshakable, fundamental rule we would like you to absorb. Let's call it the Admissionado Golden Rule: Go to the best darn school you can get into.

We'll say it again, in different language: Attend the greatest, top-most college you are admitted to.

This chapter will break down the types of American colleges and universities, as well as who attends them. As you learn all about this selection process, however, don't forget the Golden Rule...

## 2 – CHOOSE A COLLEGE

### What Make A Great School "Great"?

Good question. Is the answer: *faculty to student ratio*? Nope. *Size*? Nope. *Location*? Nope.

The simple truth is this: a school's greatness is mainly determined by the intelligence and talent of its students. Ask yourself, do you want to go to a lesser-known university filled with so-so students? Or would you rather go to a prestigious university packed with original, high-achieving individuals? In terms of which college will give you a more enriching experience, the second option wins, hands-down.

Student talent should be the MOST important factor in your decision because the connections you'll make with your fellow students will be invaluable. Even if a school is expensive or isn't your favorite size, you will be doing yourself a disservice if you let factors like cost and student population steer your decision.

*No matter what path your life takes, going to a top-ranked school will help you. It will help you get into a better graduate school (if you choose to go) and will help you earn more money once you're in the job market. On average, people who graduate from top-ranked schools end up earning \$23,000 more per year than people who graduated from lower ranked schools.*

The take-away lesson is: Go where the talent is.

Okay, so let's assume that you are following the Golden Rule and are picking your colleges based on student talent (i.e. the best schools). Well done! There's just one problem. Even if you limit your choices to just talent-rich schools - let's say the top 10% -- there are still hundreds of options to choose from. The good news is that you've got Admissionado to help you narrow it down.

As it turns out, schools with stellar reputations attract high-achieving students. This means that college rankings matter, because the best students are going to the most prestigious schools. Although different organizations produce slightly different rankings, overall patterns do emerge, with a group of about 20 universities and colleges consistently claiming the top spots. Below, we give you the rankings of the top 100 US schools.

Remember: no matter what, you should go to the best school you can get into. If you get into a college that has inspiring students who will help you later in life, it won't matter how big the school was, how many professors it had, or how much you paid to attend. When you're middle-aged, all that will matter is that you're better off in life for having attended the best school that you could.

## **Narrow Your Choice: The Three Tiers**

Here's a general breakdown of US colleges, by ranking. College rankings are determined by academic performance, admission selectivity, student-to-professor ratio, and the school's financial resources.



### **What's up with these criteria?**

*“Ranking schools on the academic success of their students makes sense, but isn’t ranking them based on how many kids they reject kind of mean? It’s like high school all over again!”*

*Good point. The idea behind ranking on selectivity is that more qualified people will want to apply to top-level, well-known schools ... in the same way that more people want to go to a highly-rated restaurant. If a school can say it’s fully booked and still turning away tons of people at the door, it must be pretty great. Student-to-professor ratio is a way of measuring the personal attention each student receives: lower ratios indicate that each student gets a bigger share of the professor pie (and probably other resources too...). And financial resources matter because they impact EVERYTHING from the prestige of the professors to the quality of the dorms to the amount of financial aid distributed to the variety of clubs and programs students can participate in. Of course, we think deliciousness of the food should be a major factor in the rankings as well... but overall, these metrics are pretty good.*

## **1. Top Schools**

Top universities have smart, talented students, renowned faculty, and (usually) deep financial resources. The #1 ranked university is Harvard, which accepts only 7.5% of applicants. 95% of the kids who get into Harvard were in the top 10% of their high school class, and 75% scored over 2070 on the SAT. Those are some intelligent classmates!

The 25th ranked university is UCLA (University of California, Los Angeles), which accepts 29.9% of applicants (97% were in the top 10% of their class; average SAT scores ranged from 1750-2110). You’ll notice an approximate 20% increase in acceptance rate between Harvard and UCLA. Both are tough to get into, both have smart students, but when you come down to it, Harvard is still the pinnacle.

### **What's the difference between a college and a university?**

Is one better than the other? Well, in American terminology... there's not a lot of difference. Essentially, a college offers degrees in one academic region (typically liberal arts), while a university is a group of colleges, each focusing on different academic areas (education, engineering, business). At the collective level, there is no "better" choice between a college and a university (or a school or an institute)... what's more important is making sure the specific colleges and universities you apply to offer the programs and degree you're looking for.

Liberal arts colleges are usually smaller than universities, and focus on undergraduate programs. They also boast great professors and large endowments (also known as... money). Students who go to these schools are usually looking for a more intimate experience.

The top liberal arts college is Williams College (20.4% acceptance rate; 88% in the top 10% of their high school class; 1950-2270 average SAT scores). Again, once you get to the 25th ranked school, admission rates are much higher. The 25th ranked school is Bryn Mawr, which takes 48.6% of applicants (61% of whom are in the top 10% of their high school class; 1790-2080 SAT range).

### **Top 25 Universities:**

<http://colleges.usnews.rankingsandreviews.com/best-colleges/rankings/national-universities?int=9ff208>

### **Top 25 Liberal Arts Colleges:**

<http://colleges.usnews.rankingsandreviews.com/best-colleges/rankings/national-liberal-arts-colleges?int=a73d09>

## 2. Good Schools

Next up, we have a list of “second tier” schools, which are still perfectly awesome – they might just have less famous faculty, fewer hyper-achieving students, and definitely not as much money. Still, they are WAY more academically rigorous than a school ranked 203. Go to any of these schools, and you’ll get a challenging, worthwhile education.

The acceptance rate for the 26th ranked university – the University of Virginia – is 32.1% (average GPA: mostly As, average SAT: 1570-2150). Acceptance rate for the 50th ranked university – Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute – is 42.8% (average GPA: B, average SAT: 1850-2130). Again, you’ll still find tons of creative, intelligent people at these schools.

As for the top 25-50 liberal arts colleges, they range from Macalester College (46.2% acceptance; 1920-2180 SAT range) to Bard College (33.1% acceptance; 1980-2200 SAT range). These schools will give you a solid education, but if you’re wondering what the real difference is between these schools and the TOP schools, it boils down to the type of students who will surround you. Let’s avoid the concept of what’s “better” or “worse” and instead focus simply on what the differences are. The folks who end up at the top programs tend to have more diverse experiences, broader lists of talents, loftier ambitions, long histories of embracing more challenging curricula, etc. The higher you go up the ladder (in a general sense), the richer these things become. Better? Worse? That’s for you to decide, but if those things are meaningful to you, it’s absolutely a reason to aim as high as you possibly can.

## 3. The Rest of U.S. Colleges

As you go down the rankings, acceptance rates tend to be more forgiving, and programs tend to be (arguably) less academically rigorous. However, getting into ANY college is a serious achievement. And even more importantly, college is what you make of it. So, form a club, seek out research opportunities, and knock your assignments out of the park! If you drive your own education, you’ll have a fulfilling experience no matter where you go.

Remember: America has around 629 public four-year colleges, 1,845 private four-year colleges, 1,070 public two-year colleges, and 596 private two-year colleges. That’s over 4,000 college choices! No matter what your grades or test scores, there’s a US college for you.

## Narrow Your Choice: The Three Tiers

Now, dear reader, let's get specific. Overall (as we've said many, many times before), go to the best school you get into. However, what if you get into both Williams AND Cornell? Well, then you have a decision to make based on your preferences. Do you thrive on networking with tons of people? Do you want to be a big fish in a small pond? Are you looking for a great architecture program? Is a top-notch skiing team important to you? Equally stellar schools have specific specialties and features that differentiate them.

Therefore, we will now break down the best of the best. Which schools are the most prestigious? Which ones are generally bigger? Smaller? More expensive? Which schools focus on the humanities, and which ones have computer science programs that will help you invent the next Facebook? Let's take a look...

### 1. The Ivy League

Harvard University, Princeton University, Yale University, University of Pennsylvania, Brown University, Cornell University, Columbia University, and Dartmouth College. Sound familiar? Chances are, you've heard of at least one (if not all) of these schools. That's because this is the Ivy League: a group of eight well-known, highly selective universities in the United States. These colleges are famous for being academically rigorous and for offering extensive alumni networks, a fabulous resource for finding jobs and internships.

Of course, lots of American colleges have great academics and alumni networks. So what's so special about the Ivy League? The answer is status. Most Ivy League colleges have been around for hundreds of years (Harvard was established in 1636!), giving them a long time to build up prestigious reputations [...]

**END OF PREVIEW**

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