ADVOCATES FOR IMMIGRANT STUDENT EQUITY

AISE

EQUITY IN EDUCATION FOR IMMIGRANT STUDENTS

A GUIDE TO HOW THE AMERICAN COLLEGE ADMISSIONS PROCESS WORKS

by students for students

Welcome Message & Purpose of the Handbook

Dear Student,

Welcome to the next stage of your academic journey!
Navigating through the American college admissions process may feel confusing, unfamiliar, and even overwhelming at times and that's completely okay.

This guide was created for you.

Its purpose is simple: to help you understand how college admissions work in the United States. This guide goes over application platforms and financial aid forms to essays, interviews, and everything in between.

Think of this as a friendly roadmap. We want to equip you with the knowledge, clarity, and confidence to take charge of the college application process.

You are not alone. Many others have walked this path, and support is out there. We hope this handbook empowers you to take your next steps with courage and excitement.

We're so proud of how far you've come, and we're honored to be part of your journey.

Warmly,
Advocates for Immigrant Student Equity
[AISE]

This project was completed as part of AISE's mission to ensure equitable access to educational resources for all students, regardless of their background.

Founded by Joseph Shing, AISE (Advocates for Immigrant Student Equity) was created to address the systemic barriers that immigrant and refugee students often face when entering the U.S. school system.

Overview of the American College Admissions Process

Applying to college in the United States involves several steps and pieces of information. First, you choose where to apply and fill out application forms (often online through platforms like the Common App or Coalition App). You'll need to send in your high school transcript (a record of your courses and grades) along with any required standardized test scores. Most colleges also ask for personal materials like essays and recommendation letters.

Many U.S. colleges use a "holistic" admissions approach – this means they look beyond just grades and test scores to see the whole person, considering your essays, activities, and more.

The timeline usually starts in the fall of your senior year: some colleges offer early deadlines in November, while most regular applications are due around December or January. After you apply, you wait for decisions, which typically arrive in March or April of senior year. If you're admitted, you then choose your college (usually by May 1st) and complete enrollment.

It may seem like a lot, but this guide will break down each part of the process in a clear and easy way.

Academic Transcript and GPA (Weighted vs. Unweighted)

Your academic transcript is the official list of all the classes you've taken in high school and the grades you earned. From these grades, schools calculate your GPA [Grade Point Average].

Your Grade Point Average [GPA] is a number that represents your average academic performance. It is very important for college applications.

Unweighted GPA

- This is the standard GPA on a 4.0 scale.
- An A is a 4.0, a B is a 3.0, a C is a 2.0, and so on.
- It does not matter if you take a standard, honors, or AP class; an A is always worth a 4.0. This GPA only measures your letter grades.

Weighted GPA

- This GPA recognizes that some classes are harder than others.
- It gives extra points for taking more challenging courses like Honors, AP, or Dual Enrollment.
- For example, an A in an honors class might be worth a 4.5 instead of a 4.0, and an A in an AP class might be worth a 5.0.
- This means your weighted GPA can be higher than a 4.0. It shows colleges that you have challenged yourself.

why this matters:

Colleges look at both your unweighted and weighted GPA. They want to see that you have earned good grades and that you have been willing to challenge yourself with difficult courses.

In short, your transcript and GPA tell the story of your academic performance throughout high school, which is an essential part of your college application.

Standardized Tests: The SAT and ACT

what is it?

In the United States, standardized tests are exams that are administered and scored in a consistent, or "standard," manner. They are designed to provide colleges with a common data point that can be used to compare students from different high schools and educational backgrounds. For college admissions, the two primary standardized tests are the SAT and the ACT. Most colleges in the U.S. accept scores from either exam.

It is also important to note that some colleges are test-optional, meaning they don’t require test scores for admissions.

SAT (Scholastic Assessment Test):
This test has two main sections: **Math** and **Evidence-Based Reading and Writing.**
The SAT is about 2 hours long and is scored out of 1600 points (combined score from the two sections). A higher score means you answered more questions correctly.

ACT:

The **ACT**, or **American College Testing** consists of four sections: English, Math, Reading, and Science.
The Science section is unique to the ACT and tests a student's ability to interpret data and scientific reasoning rather than specific knowledge. It is scored on a scale from 1 to 36, which is an average of the four section scores.

when is it taken?

Most students take the SAT or ACT in 11th grade [junior year] or early 12th grade [senior year].
You can take these tests more than once and send your best scores to colleges.

free resources:

There are tons of free resources on the internet that will help you prepare for the SAT/ACT. Go on Youtube, Google etc.

Khan Academy is a great, free resource to help you prepare for the SAT. It's officially partnered with the College Board [the group that creates the SAT], so the practice questions are real and accurate.
You can create a free account, link it to your PSAT scores [if you took the PSAT], and get a personalized study plan. Even if you haven't taken the PSAT, you can still use Khan Academy to practice reading, writing, and math at your own pace. It's one of the best ways to prepare AND it doesn't cost anything!

Testings Section of the Application

PSAT:

The PSAT (Preliminary SAT) is a practice test usually taken in 10th or 11th grade. Your scores on the PSAT aren't sent to colleges for admission – instead, the PSAT helps you practice for the SAT and a high enough score can qualify you for the National Merit Scholarship Program.

SAT/ACT:

The SAT and ACT are the main college entrance tests. They assess skills in areas like math, reading, and English to give colleges a sense of your college readiness. Many colleges require or recommend an SAT or ACT score as part of your application, though some schools are now test-optional (meaning you don't have to submit a score).

AP Exams:

AP Exams are subject tests taken after completing Advanced Placement courses in high school. Scoring well on an AP Exam can potentially earn you college credit or advanced placement in college classes.

Purpose:

Standardized tests are exams designed to measure students across schools on the same scale. They can play a role in admissions by allowing colleges to compare students from different schools, and good scores may also help you earn academic scholarships or college credit.

Importance of GPA and Test Scores

for College Admissions and Scholarships

Your grades (GPA) and test scores are two of the most important academic factors in college admissions. Colleges will look at your GPA to see how well you have done in high school, and strong SAT/ACT scores can further show your academic ability. These numbers aren't the only things colleges consider, but they do carry a lot of weight.

For example, many merit-based scholarships (scholarships awarded for achievement rather than financial need) have minimum GPA requirements. A higher GPA can open the door to more scholarship opportunities. Similarly, a high standardized test score can make you a more competitive candidate for scholarships that consider academics.

In admissions, a solid GPA and test score indicate you are prepared for college-level work. However, remember that U.S. colleges also care about other aspects like your essays and activities.

Overall, keeping your grades up and doing the best you can on exams will improve your chances not only of getting admitted, but also of receiving scholarships to help pay for college.

Types of College Application Deadlines

When you apply to colleges, you'll notice there are different application plans with various deadlines. The main types are Early Action, Early Decision, and Regular Decision (plus some variations).

Early Action:

Early Action (EA) means you apply earlier – typically in November of senior year – and get an admission decision early (often by December or January). Early Action is non-binding, so if you get accepted, you are not required to attend that school; you can still apply to other colleges and make your choice in the spring.

Early Decision:

Early Decision (ED) is also an early application (deadlines around November), but it is binding – if you apply Early Decision, you sign an agreement that if you are accepted, you will attend that college and withdraw your other applications. Early Decision is for students who have a clear first-choice school and are sure they want to go there (and can afford it). Some schools offer ED II, a second round of Early Decision with deadlines in December or January.

Restrictive Early Action:

Restrictive Early Action [sometimes called Single-Choice Early Action] is a hybrid plan used by a few highly selective colleges. Like EA, it's not binding [you don't have to attend if accepted], but it is restrictive in that you cannot apply early to any other private colleges. In other words, you can only apply early to that one school [though usually you may still apply to public universities early].

Regular Decision:

Finally, Regular Decision [RD] is the standard timeline with deadlines often in late December or January. Decisions are usually released in March or early April. Under Regular Decision, you apply to as many colleges as you want by their deadlines and then choose from any acceptances by May 1.

Rolling Admissions:

There's also Rolling Admission, which means a college reviews applications as they come in and gives decisions throughout the admissions cycle [no fixed deadline, or a very late deadline].

Things to keep in mind:

Each of these plans has its pros and cons. Early Action and Early Decision can sometimes give you a slight advantage (since colleges know you're very interested), but you need to be prepared earlier.

Regular Decision gives you more time to work on your applications. What's important is to keep track of each school's deadlines and rules.
Mark your calendar so you don't miss the dates, and give yourself plenty of time to prepare the application materials you need.

Application Platforms

CommonApp and Coalition App:

Filling out individual applications for every college would be a lot of work, so many colleges accept application platforms that let you apply to multiple schools with one main application.

The two most widely used platforms are the Common Application (Common App) and the Coalition Application (Coalition App).

Both of these are online systems where you enter your personal information, essays, and achievements once, and then send that application to many colleges at once.

The Common App is by far the most popular – over 1,000 colleges use it. The Coalition App is a smaller platform used by a smaller number of schools.

In practice, the Common App and Coalition App ask for similar information (personal details, high school courses and grades, test scores, activities, essays, etc.).

Note:

Always double-check which platform each of your target colleges accepts. Many accept the Common App, some accept the Coalition, and some have their own application system.

Writing Section

Personal Statement (Main Essay)

Your college personal statement is a short essay (around 500-650 words) that you write as part of your application. This is often called the “college essay,” and it’s a chance for you to share your story, personality, and voice with admissions officers. Think of it as an opportunity to tell colleges something about you that isn’t obvious from your grades or scores. For example, you might write about a challenge you overcame, a passion that drives you, or an experience that shaped who you are. Colleges use the personal statement to get to know you as a person. They want to see how you think and what matters to you.

Supplemental Essays

In addition to the main personal statement, many colleges have supplemental essays. These are shorter essays or questions specific to each college. Common supplemental prompts include “Why do you want to attend this college?” or “Describe an extracurricular activity that’s important to you.”

Note:

College Admissions Officers are not looking for perfect writing. What’s important is that it’s authentic and in your voice. Take your time to brainstorm topics, write multiple drafts, and if possible, have a teacher or mentor give you feedback. The essays are your chance to show the human side of your application, so use them to share your values, experiences, and dreams.

Letters of Recommendation

Letters of recommendation (often just called "recommendation letters" or "rec letters") are letters written by teachers, counselors, or other adults who know you well, to support your college application. In these letters, the writer describes you as a student and person. They might mention your academic strengths, your attitude in class, your growth, or contributions to the school or community.

Most four-year colleges ask for 1 to 3 recommendation letters. Typically, schools want at least one from a teacher (usually a teacher from 11th or 12th grade who taught you in a core subject) and often one from your school counselor.

Some applications also allow an "additional" recommender, like a coach, employer, or community member, especially if that person knows you in a different context and can speak about qualities not covered by teachers. These letters help colleges see a more personal, human side of you: beyond your grades and test scores.

For example, a teacher's letter might talk about how you participated in class, improved over time, or helped your classmates, giving insight into your character and work ethic. A school counselor's letter often provides an overview of you in the context of your school or any personal challenges you've overcome.

How do you get these letters?

In the spring of junior year or early fall of senior year, you should ask the teachers or counselors if they would be willing to recommend you. Ask politely and provide them plenty of time before the deadlines (at least a month if possible).
It's helpful to give your recommenders a summary of your accomplishments or a resume, and let them know what colleges or majors you are aiming for, so they can tailor the letter if they wish.

Once they agree, you usually enter their email into your application platform, and the system sends them a link to upload the letter directly (you won't see the letter). Don't forget to thank your recommenders for helping you; writing these letters is a favour they do for you.

A good recommendation can really strengthen your application by reinforcing the positive things you've shown in your own essays and grades.

Activities Section of the Application

Extracurricular activities are all the things you do outside of your regular classes. This can include school clubs (like biology club, debate team, or art club), sports teams, music (band, choir, orchestra), student government, volunteering in your community, part-time jobs, internships, taking care of family members, or any hobbies and projects you pursue on your own.

U.S. colleges are very interested in your extracurricular involvement because it helps them understand who you are beyond academics. When you list your activities on an application, it gives colleges insight into <u>what you're passionate about</u>, <u>how you spend your time</u>, and <u>what skills or qualities you've developed</u>.

For example, being on a sports team might show teamwork and dedication, or playing an instrument might show discipline and creativity. There's no specific list of "right" activities. You should pursue what genuinely interests you.

why?

In short, colleges look at extracurriculars to see what kind of person you are and what you might contribute to their campus community. So, whether you love soccer, coding, painting, or volunteering at a local shelter, make sure to participate in a few things consistently during high school.

Get involved in something! It not only boosts your application, but also helps you grow as a person.

College Interviews

what are they?

College interviews are another aspect of the process that lets the college and the student get to know each other better. Not every college offers interviews & those that do usually make them optional. An interview could be with an admissions staff member or more commonly with an alumni (a graduate of the college) near your area or via video call.

types of interviews:

There are two main types: *informational interviews* (for you to ask questions and learn more about the school) and *evaluative interviews* (where the interviewer will report back to admissions with their impression of you).

Either way, it's usually a relaxed conversation lasting about 30 minutes to an hour. The interviewer might ask about your interests, why you applied to that college, what you want to study, or to talk about your experiences from high school. This is not an exam: it's more like a friendly chat, so they can get to know you more as a person.

Remember the goal is to be yourself and be polite and engaged. Dress neatly (no need for anything too formal, just look presentable) and be on time. Afterward, send a short thank-you note or email. While an interview rarely makes or breaks an admission decision, a great interview can leave a positive impression (and a poor one could hurt a bit).

Financial Aid

College can be expensive, but the good news is there is financial aid available to help students pay for tuition and other costs. Financial aid comes in a few forms: *need-based aid* (based on your family's financial situation), *merit-based scholarships* (based on achievement), grants, loans, and work-study jobs. To be considered for most financial aid, you will need to fill out some important forms.

FAFSA:

The primary one is the FAFSA, which stands for **Free Application for Federal Student Aid.** The FAFSA is a government form that opens up online each year. When you complete the FAFSA, you provide information about your family's income and finances.

The U.S. Department of Education and colleges use that information to determine how much aid you are eligible for – this can include federal grants (like the Pell Grant for low-income students), federal student loans, and work-study opportunities.

Many states and colleges also use the FAFSA to award their own need-based aid. The key thing about the FAFSA is to **submit it as early as you can** (some aid is first-come, first-served) and make sure it's accurate.

It's free to fill out, and you should submit it even if you think you might not qualify, because you could be surprised and it's often required for certain loans or programs.

CSS Profile:

The second common form, required mainly by private colleges, is the CSS Profile (CSS stands for **College Scholarship Service**). The CSS Profile is an additional financial aid application administered by the College Board (the same organization that runs the SAT).

Not all schools need it – mostly private ones, use the CSS Profile to dig deeper into your financial situation so they can award their own institutional aid (their own grants and scholarships).

Unlike the FAFSA, it is not free – there's a fee to send it to each college, though fee waivers are available for low-income students. If the college you are applying to require the CSS Profile, you should fill that out in addition to the FAFSA.

note:

Both the FAFSA and CSS Profile will typically become available in the fall of your senior year. It's a good idea to talk to your school counselor if you need help with these forms, and gather your parents' tax documents early. These forms are essential for unlocking scholarships, grants, and other aid that can make college much more affordable.

Types of Scholarships

Scholarships are a form of financial aid that you don't have to pay back. There are two broad categories of scholarships: *need-based* and *merit-based*.

Need-based scholarships (or grants)

these are given to students based on financial need. This means they are intended for students who might not be able to afford college otherwise. The amount is often determined by your family's financial situation (usually from your FAFSA/CSS Profile information). For example, the federal Pell Grant is a need-based grant, and many colleges also offer need-based institutional grants. If you qualify as low-income, need-based aid will form the core of your financial aid package.

Merit-based scholarships

These, on the other hand, are awarded based on achievement or talent, regardless of financial need. These achievements could be academic (like having a high GPA or test scores), athletic (being a talented athlete), artistic (art, music, etc.), or related to leadership or community service.

Essentially, merit scholarships reward you for what you've accomplished. For instance, a college might offer a scholarship for students with a GPA above a certain level etc.
Some merit scholarships are automatic (a college will give it to you if your grades or scores meet a benchmark), while others are competitive or require a separate application or essay.

In some cases, a scholarship can consider both merit and need. A quick way to remember the difference: merit-based aid offers financial support **based on a student's achievements**, while need-based aid provides funds **based on a student's financial need**.

Many students receive a mix of both types. For example, you might get a need-based grant because of your family income and also a merit-based scholarship for your excellent grades. Besides colleges, many outside organizations (nonprofits, companies, foundations) offer scholarships – these can be merit-based (like an essay contest or an award for community service) or need-based or a combination.

It's worth searching for scholarships you might qualify for; even small ones can add up. Remember, every scholarship dollar is one less dollar you or your family have to pay. Keep an eye on scholarship deadlines and requirements (some are due early, even before college admission decisions). And never hesitate to apply; you can't win a scholarship if you don't try!

where do i find them?

To find scholarships, check with your school counselor, search online databases like Fastweb, Going Merry, or Scholarships.com, and explore opportunities offered by local community organizations

Net Price Calculators

When you look at college costs, the “sticker price” (the published tuition, fees, room and board) can be intimidating. However, many students do not pay the full sticker price because of financial aid. To help families estimate what they might actually pay at a given college, every U.S. college is required to have a Net Price Calculator on its website.

what is it?

A net price calculator is an online tool that asks you a few questions about your family finances (and sometimes your academics) and then estimates the net price for you.

The net price is basically the cost of attendance minus any grants or scholarships you might receive. In other words, it’s an estimate of what you would personally have to pay out-of-pocket (or with loans/work).

The calculator typically factors in the college’s tuition, fees, average housing and food costs, and subtracts the average need-based aid (and sometimes merit aid) someone with your financial profile might get.

For example, a college might cost $50,000 a year, but after entering your information, the net price calculator might show that you could receive $30,000 in scholarships and grants, meaning your net price would be around $20,000.

why should i use it?

It’s a useful reality check: sometimes colleges with high sticker prices end up being affordable after aid, and the calculator helps you see that early on. These tools are not 100% guarantees, but they are usually pretty good estimates if the info you input is accurate.

To find a college’s net price calculator, you can search the college’s name plus “net price calculator,” or look on their admissions/financial aid webpage. Using these calculators can help you compare colleges financially and plan ahead. They give a clearer picture of your “true cost” at each school.

Remember, net price is what matters – that’s what you’d actually pay – and it can be very different from the sticker price thanks to financial aid.

Fly-in Programs and Campus Visits

One of the best ways to know if a college is right for you is to visit the campus. When you visit, you can take a tour, see the dorms and classrooms, and get a feel for the environment and sometimes you just sense whether you could imagine yourself there. However, travel can be expensive, especially if the colleges are far away or you're a First-Gen Low Income (FGLI) student with limited resources. That's where fly-in programs come in.

what are fly-in programs?

Fly-in programs (also called overnight programs) are special opportunities many colleges offer to prospective students, usually in the fall of senior year. If you apply and are selected for a fly-in, the college will pay for your transportation (flight, train, etc.) to come visit them, often for a weekend. These programs are typically aimed at students from underrepresented backgrounds, first-generation college students, or those with financial need who might not otherwise be able to visit. During a fly-in visit, you might stay in a dorm with a student host, attend classes or information sessions, tour the campus, and meet faculty or admissions staff.

It's like an in-depth open house where you experience college life for a couple of days AND it's free. Fly-ins are a great way to demonstrate interest in a college and to help you decide if it feels like a good fit. They are also fairly competitive (because they're free); you often need to apply in spring of junior year or summer before senior year by writing a short essay or two and submitting your transcript.

note:

Keep an eye on colleges you're interested in. Their admissions website will usually list if they have a fly-in program (examples: many liberal arts colleges and some universities have them). Even if you can't get into a formal fly-in, you can still try to visit campus on your own or do a virtual tour online.

Visiting (virtually or in person) helps you visualize being there and can motivate you during application season. Plus, if you do visit, you can often mention it in your supplemental essay (like "When I visited campus, I loved XYZ"), which signals to the college that you're serious about them. In short, campus visits and fly-in programs are about finding the college where you feel comfortable and excited.

Take advantage of these opportunities if you can – they can be eye-opening and even fun!

how do i know which colleges offer fly-in programs?

Google search "fly-in program list [year you are applying to colleges]"

Majors and Minors

When you get to college, you'll often hear the terms major and minor. These refer to what you study in college.

major in college:

Think of a major as your primary focus or specialization in your undergraduate studies. It's the field in which you'll take the most courses and eventually earn your degree. For example, you might major in Biology, Computer Science, Business, or English – there are many options. A major usually requires a set of core courses and some electives in that field to give you in-depth knowledge of the subject.

Typically, you don't have to declare (officially choose) your major until the end of your sophomore year in college, which gives you time to explore different subjects through introductory classes. Some students enter knowing exactly what they want to major in, while others discover their passion after taking a few classes. Both paths are completely normal and okay.

minor in college:

A minor is like a secondary concentration or a smaller specialization alongside your major. It's an optional thing – you do not have to have a minor, but you can choose one if you have another area you're interested in. A minor requires fewer courses than a major. For example, like a Math major with an Art History minor, just because you love art.

Doing a minor is a way to formally recognize that you've gained a solid basic understanding of another field.

difference between the two:

The main difference between a major and a minor is the depth and number of courses: the major is the primary area where you'll become very knowledgeable, and the minor is a secondary area of interest with a lighter course load.

When you apply to colleges, some applications might ask you to list an "intended major." This is just to get a sense of your interests; it's usually not binding, meaning you can change it later. Many students change their majors once they're in college, and that's okay. There are also students who are "undecided" or "undeclared" – that means you haven't picked a major yet, which is completely fine entering college.

Colleges have advisors to help you choose a major when the time comes. So, if you see questions about majors and minors, now you know: a major is your main focus of study (your degree will be in this), and a minor is an optional secondary focus. Both allow you to pursue the subjects that interest you most and help tailor your education to your goals and passions.