

## Foreign Education - Undergraduate Admissions in US

### **1. Why do I need to study in US?**

US universities are by far the best in terms of infrastructure facilities and education quality. While there are more than 1500 institutions of higher learning, I would not attribute that statement to all the colleges and universities. There are below average universities / colleges even here. US News publishes university rankings every year. I would say top 200 institutions in that list are better in terms of facilities and education. Again don't go by this ranking completely. US News takes in to account lot of things which are not even necessary. So you have to consider individual program rankings. For example, Harvard / Wharton / Stanford / Kellogg are best for management programs, while University of Arizona is best for Optical Science & Engineering, Astronomy, Agricultural economics and MIS. The reasons to study in US are plenty. I will list some of them below.

- Very good infrastructure facilities
- Freedom to select courses within a program
- Quality teachers (Some would be pretty bad even here). You would have the chance to interact with Nobel laureates and world renowned professors.
- Value based education (Meaning you would know what you are studying practically. Students just don't memorize and write exams to get marks here)
- Brand US (US degree is deservedly valued higher around the world)
- True cosmopolitan country. In some ways you enjoy more freedom in US than in your own country. You just have to use it positively.
- One of the very few countries where you can still live like an Indian (Meaning you can get all Indian food items, meet lot of Indian friends, can go to temple etc.)
- Chance to work in US after study and settle permanently in US. No other country on earth gives you as much opportunity as US. You can work here and go back to India or you can get Green Card or you can get citizenship. You can do lot of things. There will be small hurdles along the way, but those are nothing compared to hurdles you would face in any other country.
- Some might refer to bad incidents here and there. But they are very few exceptions.

**Overall ranking – Includes Private and Public Institutions**

<http://colleges.usnews.rankingsandreviews.com/best-colleges/rankings/national-universities/data>

**Only Public Institutions**

<http://colleges.usnews.rankingsandreviews.com/best-colleges/rankings/national-universities/top-public/page+3>

## **2. What are the requirements for US Undergraduate Admissions?**

The good thing in the US admission process is that they don't go by just one criterion to select students. Each university has got its own set of requirements in terms of admission. Some universities require SAT or ACT test scores while some universities mention it as optional. For Example, Harvard University and University of South Florida require SAT scores to admit a student but Pennsylvania State University and University of Arizona does not make it mandatory. Listed below are the common admission requirements for most of the US universities.

- Completed Application
- Application Fee (Ranges from \$30 - \$200)
- Official Academic Transcripts (10<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> mark sheets sent directly from school to the university with official school stamp. If you are not able to get that, you can get attestation from USIEF and send it.) USIEF stands for United States – India Education Foundation. They are located in all the metros in India.
- Two / Three academic evaluations or recommendations from your teachers (Teachers evaluation of how good a student you are, your strengths and how US education will help you to become successful etc.)
- Essay or Statement of purpose (You have to personally write why you want to study in US, your interests and how studying in a particular program in the university you are applying for, will help you and what you want to become in life etc.)
- Resume indicating your extra-curricular activities and other achievements
- SAT or ACT test scores sent directly to the university (While the average combined SAT score is 1500 – 1600, in order to secure admission in top universities with some financial aid, score of 2000 and above would greatly help. But a score of 600 and above in reading, writing and math sections would ensure admission at least in one good university).
- SAT Subject Test Score (Universities like Harvard require Subject Tests)
- TOEFL scores sent directly to the University (Internet based TOEFL test scores vary according to the university. 80 is the minimum for most of the universities. But having a score of 90 and above would help you to get some financial aid)
- Bank letter showing enough funds for the university you are applying (If you secure financial aid, you don't need to submit this)

## **3. What criteria universities follow in the admission process to select students?**

US universities don't follow any set criteria. They differ on individual basis. In essence they try to attract culturally / ethnically diverse talents. They evaluate each student based on the academic performance, SAT scores, SAT Subject Test Scores, TOEFL scores, recommendation from

teachers, Statement of purpose and your extra-curricular activities. Then they assess the individual student's overall fit to the program among the student pool and award the admission. What this means is, securing 1150 out of 1200 (Tamil Nadu State Board) in 12<sup>th</sup> definitely helps in the process, it does not necessarily get you the admission in good universities in US if you don't fit in to the program based on this overall assessment. You might have 950 in 12<sup>th</sup> but still can get admission in good universities if your SAT score is high and your other materials (Essay, recommendation and extra-curricular activities) are strong. So there are lots of things involved here and all you have to do is TRY and leave everything else to almighty.

#### 4. What is SAT and how much score would ensure an admission?

The SAT tests the skills you're learning in school: reading, writing and math. Your strength in these subjects is important for success in college and throughout your life. Each section is for maximum of 800 points (Reading – 800, Math – 800 and writing – 800).

**Reading:** This section is for 70 minutes. This tests your ability to comprehend what is stated in or implied by the passage, Vocabulary and understanding sentence structure. Average score in this section is around 500. Score of 700 is great but anything above 600 would be helpful to get admission in good universities.

**Math:** 70 minute section. This section tests your ability in Numbers and operations, algebra, geometry, probability, statistics and data analysis. Average score is around 515. Again a score of 700 is great but anything above 600 will keep you in good stead.

**Writing:** 60 minute section. This section tests your ability in grammar, sentence usage and diction. Average score is 500. Score of 700 is great and 600 and above would be helpful.

**Overall:** Overall score of 2100 and above is great and will help you to secure admission in universities like Harvard, Stanford, and Yale etc. with financial aid. A score of 1800 and above will help you to get admission in good universities with some form of financial aid. Students with less than 1800 SAT score will get admission in good universities without any financial aid or reasonably good universities with some financial aid. Several permutation and combinations will work here. So just don't get bogged down on only SAT score.

For more detailed information about SAT tests, please explore the below link. You will get to know all the information you need (Including how SAT is scored) about SAT tests in the below link.

<http://sat.collegeboard.org/about-tests/sat/faq>

## 5. Where can I get the SAT preparation materials?

This is a big industry here in US. There are lots of guides and online courses available to you to get yourself familiarize before you take the test. Barron's SAT Guide, KAPLAN online test preparation etc. are some of the useful ones. You can buy Barron's SAT guide from Amazon.com. There are lots of sites asking for \$300, \$1000 etc. You don't need that. Few good guides and online practice tests are enough. Don't spend more than \$200 (Rs. 10,000) for guides and tests. You can get Barron's test preparation for less than \$100.

<http://barronstestprep.com/sat/faqs.php>

But whatever guides you use, do make sure you get the official test preparation guide from the College Board (which is the closest thing you would get) and practice it. You can buy the official SAT preparation guide / SAT Online course from the following link. Also practice all the tests available in the below website.

<http://sat.collegeboard.org/sat-store>

## 6. How much preparation is needed and how to register for SAT exam?

Depending on the school, board and medium you study in India, test preparation time varies. If you are a brilliant student studying in a good CBSE school, you probably would be very good in English and Math. So you would probably need just 3-4 weeks of preparation. If your medium of instruction is not English, then you have to catch up a lot in English and that would require few months of preparation. If you are not a good student in Math, you have to practice a lot in Math section. **For an above average student who is reasonably good in English and Math, 3-4 months of preparation is enough to get a good score.** Remember that these skills are something you have been acquiring since your childhood. If you never had an interest in Math and English, it would probably a daunting task to acquire it in few months' time. Such students don't need to try SAT just because you are interested to come to US. Follow your passions in India itself and you will be far more successful.

You can register for the exam using the following link. The fee to register for this exam is \$81 (Rs.4250). You can choose the date you like from the available dates as SAT is offered six times in a year internationally. But it is better to take this exam 1 or 2 years prior to start applying so that if your score is low first time, you will still have time to take this exam second time to improve it.

<http://sat.collegeboard.org/register/sat-international-dates>

**7. What is TOEFL, why it is needed, where I can get the preparation materials and how do I register?**

Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) is required for all the students who are non-native speakers of English language as English is the medium of instruction in all the US universities. TOEFL tests your ability to read, listen, write and speak in English and the maximum score is 120. Most of the US universities require a minimum of 80 but higher the score better the chance to get admission and some financial aid. You can get all the details about TOEFL in the below link.

<http://www.ets.org/toefl/ibt/faq/>

You can get official test preparation materials from ETS from the following link.

<http://www.ets.org/toefl/ibt/prepare/>

Barron's TOEFL guide can be purchased online from Amazon.com or at the following link.

<http://barronseduc.com/1438093055.html>

You can register for TOEFL by paying \$165 at the following link or at the TOEFL test center if it is available nearby.

<http://www.ets.org/toefl/ibt/register/>

Depending on your ability in English language, TOEFL preparation might take anywhere from 2 weeks to 2 months.

**8. When do I need to start the process?**

If you are serious about studying in US, then you have to start the process 1 ½ years before the intended enrollment semester. Fall semester (Beginning in August) admission is the most common one even though you can enter in spring or summer too. So let me give you a sample plan for someone interested to join in 2014 fall semester.

- Start preparing for the SAT / TOEFL exams in Jan 2013.
- Start searching for programs you like and the universities.
- Finalize Universities and programs.
- SAT Test dates open in May every year. So take SAT in June 2013 and make sure College Board sends the SAT scores directly to the institutions / department you are applying to.
- Take TOEFL before June 2013 or in Aug 2013 and make sure ETS sends the score directly to the university / department you intend to enroll.

- Finalize the teacher evaluation letters / recommendations, your statement of purpose (SOP) and resume.
- Get copy of your 10<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> standard transcripts (mark sheets) attested and sent directly from the school or you can get it attested by USIEF in Chennai and you can sent it directly to the school along with recommendations and SOP.
- Apply online by paying the application fee. If you are unable to pay some universities offer fee waiver too. You can use credit card.
- Try to apply as early as October 2013. If you are a brilliant student and you need financial aid, then applying early helps.
- Make sure all your materials and application is in by October 2013 – November 2013.
- For specific university deadlines, go to the university website and search the application deadline for the intended program. It widely varies by university.
- Usually university makes early application decisions by January of every year. So you will get the decision by Jan 2014.
- To be considered for financial aid, you have to apply early. Financial Aid deadline is different from application deadline.
- Most of the universities make decisions by May for the fall semester.
- So you will get the decision by May 2014. Once you get admitted, university will send you "I 20" forms which is needed to get visa.
- Fix the visa date with the US consulate in June 2014. For Tamil Nadu students it is Chennai.
- Take "I 20" forms and supporting documents to the US consulate for the visa interview.
- If you get the visa, you are all set to join the university in August 2014.

You can also explore below link to get more information.

<http://www.usief.org.in/Undergraduate-Study.aspx>

## **9. How much it costs to study in US?**

It varies widely from \$ 15,000 to \$40,000 per year depending on the university and the geography. Harvard costs you close to \$40,000 per year while University of Arizona and Pennsylvania state university cost you around \$26,000 per year. University of South Florida tuition fee is \$16,000. So depending on your financial status, you do have options. The fee might seem to be high because UG students are mostly considered as out-of-state students for tuition purposes (Master's students are considered as in-state for tuition purposes because of their teaching / research assistantships job). These fees combined with living costs of around \$10,000 per year and other incidental expenses, the amount can vary from \$30,000 to \$60,000

depending on the university. If you secure some form of financial aid, then this cost can get reduced.

#### **10. Is financial aid available for International Students?**

Yes but not a lot for international **undergraduate** students. Most of the Federal grants, loans and scholarships are for US citizens and permanent residents. But that does not mean you can't get financial aid at all. US universities look for extraordinary talents in various fields (Now you know why they are leading in everything). Financial aid varies by university. Some universities offer \$10,000 per year and some universities offer the entire cost of the program for extraordinary talents. Suppose you have a very good mark in 10<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> combined with a SAT score of 2100, you are sure to get into some top universities with good financial aid. So it's difficult to say definitely unless you try this process. Remember, Master's or PhD programs offer better financial aid opportunities than Undergraduate programs because of the Teaching / Research assistantship opportunities. Financial aid for UG students is the problem and very limited. But if you are an extraordinary talent in something, you don't need to be worried. You just have to try and US will take you with open arms.

#### **11. If financial aid is limited what other options are available?**

- \$1, 00,000 (Rs. 50 Lakhs) was once considered as an impossible amount. But these days most of the middle class people manage easily. So if you are reasonably rich, you can pay on your own even if you don't get financial aid.
- If you do need financial aid, then you have to be brilliant. Try to secure good marks in 10<sup>th</sup>, 12<sup>th</sup>, SAT and TOEFL and you might get most of the tuition if not full.
- If you get partial financial aid, you can pay the rest from your own money. You can also work 20 hours per week on campus which can cover your living expenses. So may be with \$10,000 (Rs. 5.25 Lakhs) per year you can manage to complete the degree.
- Look for organizations that offer financial aid or grant in India itself. Some organizations offer low interest education loans.
- You can get bank loans these days.
- Apply to public universities with lower tuition. For example University of South Florida requires \$16,000 per year for UG programs. If you get some financial aid, let's say \$6,000, and then you can pay the rest from own money or bank loans and work on campus to cover living expenses.

#### **12. Is it worth spending that much money?**

Yes. It is. Once you complete the degree, you are eligible to work in US. If you get into a decent job, you can pay all your loans (if you have taken loans) within couple of years and then you are a free bird to do whatever you want. You can work for few more years and do Masters, MBA or

PhD here itself. You just need to be ready to grab the opportunities. You can go back to India and get a good job with US degree or you can work in other countries too.

### **13. What are the ways to minimize the expenses in the whole process?**

- Get the guides and books in India. SAT / TOEFL books are available in Chennai / Delhi / Hyderabad / Mumbai / Bangalore etc.
- You can also go to USIEF library to access preparation materials.
- Apply to public universities. Public universities are as good as private universities in US. Some are even better than private universities. Public universities offer the same programs with less tuition.
- Apply to universities in geographies where cost of living is less. For example Florida, Texas, Arizona, Kansas, Oklahoma, North Carolina, Iowa, New Mexico etc.

### **14. Where I can get more information?**

INTERNET. If you have decided to come to US for studying, then you should be ready to spend significant amount of time in the internet. Go to each and every university (You can get the university list from the link I have given in the first page of this document) website and look for the following links. Most of the university websites contain these links and you can get all the information you need from the official university website.

- Prospective Students
- Undergraduate Study
- International Students
- Admission Process
- How to Apply
- Program Requirements
- Application Process
- Application Deadlines
- Tuition / Cost
- Financial Aid

### **15. How do I select the Program and Universities?**

Program – You know what you want to study. So you need to be clear on that first. University selection is a tricky process. You have to consider several things and finally decide where you have the maximum chance of getting admission with some financial aid.

Things to consider in university selection

- Your academic credentials, SAT / TOEFL score
- Your financial position
- Whether the university offers financial aid
- Whether the university offers the program you are interested in
- Whether the university is in the location you want (Let's say Florida or Texas)

Don't worry about these things to start with. If you start the process, then everything else will fall in place.

**16. US Admission process looks lengthy and appears daunting. Will I be successful?**

Nothing is easy or simple in life if you want to be successful. You need to have the motivation to succeed in spite of hurdles. If you have everything at your hand and then succeed, that is not success. If you face adversity in every step and still succeed, then that is what success is all about. You need to have confidence in yourself and should be ready to take calculated risks in life in order to succeed in this competitive world. So if your heart says "YES", then start the process, do it to the best of your abilities and apply as soon as universities start accepting applications. Believe me; if you work hard, then you will definitely get something in return. How do I say it? I just walked down the path in which you are about to start walking. So I know a thing or two.

**17. I am from a middle class / lower middle class family, studied in government schools that too in a regional language like Tamil / Telugu. Will I be able to succeed?**

Absolutely Yes. All you need to have is the following.

- Desire to be successful in life
- Motivation to finish the task when you face hurdles
- Willingness to Improve on things you lack (English or Math)
- Desire to Study well in 10<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup>
- Ability to Get good score in SAT / TOEFL

English is just a language like Tamil. Don't give too much importance than it deserves. If you can learn Tamil, learning English is piece of a cake. You don't need to be a Shakespeare to get good score in SAT and TOEFL and you don't need to be from these so called sophisticated "convents" to speak well in English. Believe in yourself and work towards that goal. You will succeed. How do I say it? The question exactly applies to me and lots of my friends as well. I am from a lower middle class farming family, studied in government schools in Tamil medium and have done it. Lots of my friends have done it. YOU CAN DO IT TOO.

### **18. Is everything about US is good? No negatives at all?**

Fortunately / unfortunately there are not that many negatives. But you do have some.

- Cultural difference – If you have spent 18 years in a conservative environment in India that too under the guidance of parents, suddenly you will enjoy enormous amount of freedom in US. Some people might stray and presence in US might prove to be counterproductive. But most of the students succeed. Exceptions are there everywhere.
- You will miss your parents and family and you can't see them when you want to.
- Financially you will be constrained for few years.

Honestly, these are not problems at all if you are from a middle class family and want to succeed in life. There can be other small negatives and that are applicable to every college / university / country.

### **19. Are the information's given above correct?**

All the information given above is accurate as of 10/10/2012. You don't need to pay thousands of rupees to some stupid consulting companies in India to get this information. You can do it yourself by spending time in the internet.

### **20. Who are you? Why you have prepared this document?**

My name is Kumaran Seenivasan. My father was a farmer and farming provided just enough to make both ends meet. My parents were primary school dropouts. In spite of that, they tried to educate my two sisters and me. I studied in government schools in Tamil medium and was not good in English language till my college days (Hopefully you think I have improved a lot after reading this). Did my under graduation in "Agriculture" at TNAU. Secured ICAR fellowship to study my first masters in Haryana. Wrote GRE & TOEFL and got Assistantship and complete tuition waiver to study my second masters in "Agricultural & Resource Economics" at the University of Arizona. If you see, I have essentially studied for free. So I have come across most of the difficulties that every middle class boy / girl from India faces and I think I have been fairly successful. There were not many people to provide this information readily for me and my friends. We actually did it on our own and faced lot of struggles while doing so. Hence, in order to help prospective students, I have prepared these questions & answers on my own. Even one student uses this and becomes successful, that will fulfill my goal.

I don't consider myself extraordinarily brilliant. There were lots of students more talented than me but could not study further and many could not succeed even though they had more talents.

Some with very average talents have succeeded better than I. So, just having talent is not enough. Motivation, desire to succeed, perseverance, ability to survive in the midst of adversity and willingness to take risks are some of the other things you need in abundance to be successful in life. If you don't have it, try to develop it after reading this. GOOD LUCK!