

Key Points for New Zealand Students Interested in Studying in the United States

There is a large amount of choice and variance when considering schools to apply to in the United States

There are over 4,000 accredited institutions of higher education in the United States. These provide a wide range of services, but can be most easily broken in to three classifications.

1) Private University

These schools accept no money from the Federal Government. Their funding comes from internal revenue streams and private donations. Private schools tend to have smaller student populations, normally between 2,000 and 8,000. Private schools are also typically more selective. Because they do not accept government money, their fees are usually the highest of U.S. schools, though they also normally have the largest amount of financial assistance.

2) Public University

Public schools accept money from the Federal and State Government, allowing them to, in general, maintain lower fees than private schools. Public universities normally contain the largest student populations, with some schools reaching over 40,000 students. Public schools tend to have a large administration and extremely diverse range of degrees. Acceptance rates are slightly more relaxed for public schools, but they also have less financial assistance available.

3) Community College

In the United States, college normally refers to a tertiary learning institution. A traditional community college lasts only 2 years, though some are beginning to offer full bachelor's degrees and 4 year courses. Acceptance rates for these schools tend to be more open, as they receive fewer applications than larger or more well known schools. These institutions do normally have the lowest student fees. These schools often offer a very small range of degrees. Most of these schools have articulation agreements with larger 4 year schools, where after two years the student has automatic admission to transfer into the larger school and finish their last two years there. This is a great way to save money, but is also a viable pathway for students who lack the grades to gain admission to their top-choice school. Even without an articulation agreement, many universities will only require the transcript from the community college for transfer, rather than needing to see the full high-school transcript.

Liberal Arts

'Liberal arts' is a term that refers to a schools emphasis on giving a student a broad foundation in many disciplines. This is accomplished through the requirement of elective credits, classes students take that are of interest to them and not part of their degree. Because the students are required to take these non-degree specific classes, their degree normally takes at least four years to complete. This additional year does offer students the opportunity to explore their passions, and the fact that elective credits can be cross-credited means that changing degrees is quite simple.

Selectivity

Selectivity is a term that students will need to understand when applying. Essentially, selectivity is the admission rate of a school. While selectivity is normally reported in terms of Very Selective, Selective, etc., it refers to the percentage of all applications that actually gain admittance to the university. This percentage is not a true reflection of international admissions rate; normally the percentage is even lower for international students. For instance, if a school has an admissions rate of 13%, then the actual rate for international students may be only 10%.

Rankings and the Right Fit

Every year there are new sets of rankings of universities released. These rankings could be for schools generally, as in which ones are best, or they could be broken down by different factors, such as degrees, athletics, internship opportunities and the like. Factors making up these rankings might individually be of some significance to students, such as freshmen retention rate, graduation rate and faculty resources. However, things like the amount of money alumni give back to the school, or the universities reputation as decided by other academic presidents and deans of schools probably mean very little to students. Of particular note is that participation in these rankings is completely voluntary, some universities actively choose not to participate for many reasons.

For most undergraduate students, where a school falls on any given ranking system should mean very little in relation to their own motivations for attendance. With nearly 5,000 schools, there is a heavy emphasis in America on finding the right fit for a student.

Similarly, schools are also seeking to find the right fit. They are not seeking to fill their institution with students will spend their time in the library studying rather than contributing to the community. They admit students for their life experiences, or because the student has always wanted to study a particularly niche degree.

Equally, students should not be awed by the rank of a school. They should find the institution that where they will be most comfortable. This means they should take into account factors such as the region where the university is located, the size of the student population, the surrounding town and its atmosphere. They should look at the diversity of the school, and whether they can receive financial assistance. The important thing to remember throughout the admissions process is that rankings are an important way for schools to measure themselves against each other, but significantly less relevant when students are looking for the right fit.

Ivy-League Schools

Ivy-League schools are some of the oldest institutions in America for higher education. They tend to have famous reputations and attract the best minds in a given field as lecturers. They are normally the most selective schools, though they do offer high amounts of financial assistance. While these are some of the best universities America has to offer, they are not always the right fit for a gifted student. I would urge any student considering applying to these schools to reflect on their reason for applying, and make sure it is not simply because of the brand.

Financial Assistance

It is important to note the difference between financial aid and financial assistance when speaking with U.S. universities. Financial Aid refers to the student loans and scholarships that U.S. citizens are entitled to from the U.S. Government. Financial assistance, on the other hand, refers to the money set aside by a school to help students with need.

Very few universities in America have need-blind admissions for international students. The majority of these schools are the Ivy-League schools. Need-blind admissions means that a school admits a student whether or not that student can afford to attend the university. Should a student be accepted, the school will then offer assistance for (typically) 100% of that student's demonstrated financial need. Demonstrating need for international students is difficult, but essentially the school will look at their and their parents' financial records, and make a decision on how much that student can pay.

Those schools which are need-aware with their admissions (meaning they take into account whether a student can afford their school during the admissions process) may not meet 100% of demonstrated need, though they do often cover at least a portion of the cost for a student. It's important to note that even though a school may be need-aware, they may still admit an exceptional student despite that student's inability to pay their tuition.

With most schools, financial assistance comes in the form of tax-free gifts and interest free loans. The number of schools which offer substantial financial assistance in this fashion is quite small, and typically those schools are private schools.

Schools may also offer scholarships and/or tuition waivers/reductions to help make their school affordable to a student. Most schools' international departments offer competitive scholarships that students may apply for. The individual schools within the university may also offer scholarships. For instance, Vanderbilt University's Blair School of Music has scholarships available to talented musicians. A student who performs well on a standardized test or has an exceptional high school transcript may also qualify for a scholarship or tuition reduction. These scholarships could range anywhere from the cost of books for each semester to the entire tuition plus room and board. Each school is different.

Sports Scholarships are offered by the athletics department to promising athletes. Regrettably, the number of international students which receive a substantial athletic scholarship is quite low. Further, some of New Zealand's best sports are not part of NCAA's (National Collegiate Athletic Association, the governing body for Collegiate Athletics) list of sports which they offer scholarships for, namely Rugby and Rowing. Students can receive scholarships for these sports, but they are given individually by the schools, and not regulated by the NCAA. The process to apply for and receive one of these scholarships is very complex. For more information, I urge career advisors to contact the EducationUSA office, and to look at the NCAA's website: www.NCAA.org.

One very important point to emphasize is that, when looking online, there are many websites which will guarantee scholarships, both academic and athletic. Usually, they will charge a finding fee to provide these scholarships. Most of the time, these websites do not follow through, and the student spends money without seeing any kind of return on their investment. The best advice for someone interested in using one of these services is to have them ask the Education Office at the Consulate whether the company is legitimate.

Timeline

In general, the earlier a student begins to think about which university they would like to attend, the better (particularly for athletes, as they will need to go through the normal admissions process as well as work to be scouted for a team). In general, I encourage students to be seriously considering their university choices in year 12. This gives the student time to sit several standardized tests (should they need them) as well as the Pre-SAT, and also gives them plenty of time to consider their options. Please also remember that American universities begin their first semester in the beginning of September.

18-12 months from their first day on campus

Students should be seriously considering which schools they would like to apply to. They should narrow their list to 5 schools. 2 schools should be a 'reach' for them. Any school which is highly selective is a reach school, but depending on their academic profile and standardized test scores, students should try and be as honest as possible with what may and may not be a school they can gain admission to. 2 schools should be schools they feel comfortable getting into. Perhaps they've spoken with the school, and have been assured they should get in. Perhaps the school has very relaxed admissions. Maybe the school's tennis team has scouted them and begun recruiting them. Finally, 1 school should be a safety school. This is a university that they feel extremely confident they will be admitted to.

12-6 months from their first day on campus

Student should be contacting the schools they will be applying to and asking questions. They should find out if they need to take standardized tests. They should find out what scholarships they can apply for, and whether they would be eligible for any financial assistance. They should be asking for information about the campus and the degrees offered. They should be asking when they need to apply. Student should also be taking standardized tests during this time if they are needed.

6 months from their first day on campus

Students should be applying to universities. The normal application window for schools in the U.S. opens at the beginning of November and finishes sometime in February for the following September start. Some schools will be longer, some will be shorter. Not every school's admissions period will run this full length, either. Some will be only November and December, while others open in January and run to the middle of February.

Every school has a different amount of time between receiving acceptances and sending a response. The one common factor is that every school will send a response to the student with an acceptance or denial, no student will be kept in the dark and left to their own assumptions.

Standardized Tests

Standardized tests refer to the SAT, ACT and TOEFL for undergraduate students. A standardized test is an examination that tries to take the measure of a student. Most New Zealand students will not need to take the TOEFL, an English language test, because English is the language of instruction at their institution. If an international student has been studying at a secondary school in New Zealand for less than 4 years, depending on the university, they may be required to sit the examination.

The SAT and/or ACT may not be required for admission to some universities. Students should always check with the schools they will be applying to before they sit the examination. To be eligible for financial assistance, however, students will normally need to have a standardized test score.

The SAT and ACT are both multiple choice examinations and can be quite challenging for New Zealand students because the format is so foreign. I would suggest that students study before they sit the test, and they should always take the exam a second time, as scores usually improve on the second sitting.

If a student has the opportunity to take the Pre-SAT (PSAT), I would encourage that student to do so. Some of the best universities in America pay very close attention to the scores of the PSAT, and the test serves as an excellent way for students to be noticed by schools in the States. This is particularly relevant to athletes, who should begin trying to get scouted by at least year 12.

Educational Advisors

There are two EducationUSA advising centers in New Zealand, each staffed with a full-time advisor who acts as a free resource for students, parents and schools. The advisors listed below are available for information sessions during school and evening hours. This information sheet cannot answer every question that comes up, particularly as every school in the United States is different. Please feel free to email or call our offices at any time.

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