

INTRODUCTION

The American college application system is, without a doubt, challenging to navigate. Nevertheless, every year hundreds of thousands of students successfully apply. If you want to do it, you will do it. You will take the right tests and send the scores. You will fill out the proper forms. You will put in the time to write thoughtful essays. You will succeed!

While applying is do-able, it is not going to be easy. Gaining acceptance or “getting in” to an American College is a long and arduous process, one that requires hours of effort beyond the grades and scores that make up the core of other applications. American colleges seek to evaluate each student as a whole. What does that mean? It means that such intangible qualities as character and citizenship are evaluated through extracurricular activities, recommendations, and essays. It means that anything is fair game.

This guide is here to help, but remember that there are hundreds of other resources that you can and should consult. You should use the internet, your teachers, and your friends and family. There will be more information about resources at the end of this guide.

The following is a five part guide intended to be a helpful but by no means completely exhaustive informational tool. Its first version was written in August of 2008 by Daniel Liss, an American student working at MaP in the counseling office. He can be reached at DLiss32@gmail.com and will always, no matter how many years since 2008 you are reading this, find the time to answer any and all questions you might have.

Good luck!!

PART ONE: HOW DO I GET IN? THE APPLICATION**An Introduction**

So, to begin, how do you get in? The answer, like most answers in this guide, is not clear-cut. You get in because of who you are as a whole applicant: your big picture. How do colleges see who you are? The application. Each college technically has its own application. However, in recent years a common application has been developed that can be filled out once, copied, and filed online at any of the colleges that accept it. Most colleges do accept the Common Application, or “Common App,” as it is known. When you do your college research (more on this in part two), you will discover quickly whether a particular college uses the Common App. If the Common App is used, a supplemental application particular to that university is almost always required. These supplemental applications ask many more questions and often require additional essays. You will need to submit separate school-specific supplemental applications. In contrast, if the Common App is not used, you must fill out the school’s individual application.

Application Submission

Most applications will be due around January 1st. However, each college is different. Thus, it is critical to make sure that you know each college’s date and that you do not submit materials late. If you are late, colleges may refuse to look at your application. Keeping that in mind, you should try to submit as much of your application material online as possible. Internet submission reduces the likelihood of submitting an incomplete application. Make a list of all the colleges you are applying to with the dates applications are due next to each school. Leave space to write down additional dates, such as dates by which the SATs and recommendations must be received.

Most applications require payment of a fee. However, the fee is sometimes waived for online submissions. In addition, fee waivers are often available for those with financial need.

Transcript

Your transcript, subjects taken and marks received, is the single most important part of your application. Colleges are most interested in what you do in the classroom on a daily basis, and your transcript is a testament to your work. It includes MaP marks and Cambridge exam results. Both are very important. If applying at the end of Form 6, you will send colleges your projected A-level results and then forward them a copy of your A-level results as soon as they arrive. There is no minimum score necessary for admission. Furthermore, colleges do not make conditional offers.

SAT and SAT Subject Tests

Standardized tests are another substantial part of the American college application. The SAT Reasoning Test (commonly referred to as just The SAT) is a 10 part test that is over four hours long and is administered by a for-profit company called the College Board. Incorrect answers on College Board tests cost you a ¼ point deduction of your raw score. Your raw score, the total numbers of answers right minus the deductions, translates to a point value out of 800. The entire test is broken up into three section scores out of 800: Math, Critical Reading, and Writing, combining for a cumulative score of 2400. A truly exceptional score would be over 700 in each section. However, it is not necessary whatsoever to score so highly to get into an American college.

Nevertheless, **studying hard is a must**. Most American students spend dozens of hours over many months doing practice tests and learning SAT skills. While the test-makers claim that the SAT is a measure of intelligence, it is really a measure of how well you know the test. This is a skill that can be vastly improved with practice. Most MaP students who study hard can raise their scores 200-300 points or even more. So, how does one best study? Sitting down and practicing full exams! The SAT is extremely long and it takes practice to build the necessary endurance. Use the books in the library and the resources in the counseling office. In particular, check out the **MaP SAT Strategy Guide**, available in the counseling office. This is a terrific resource.

SAT Subject tests are hour long exams also scored out of 800. Unlike the SAT Reasoning Test, SAT Subject tests evaluate actual knowledge. Subject tests are related to what you have learned in the classroom. Most but not all American colleges require two SAT subject tests in addition to the SAT. Some schools require 3 subject tests, others require none at all. Each school's individual policy can be found on the internet, but you should not make a college list of non-subject test schools in order to avoid taking the subject tests. **You should take at least two SAT subject tests**. As of 2008, SAT Subject tests are offered in Mathematics (Levels I and II), Biology (E or M), Chemistry, Physics, Literature, US History, World History, Spanish, French, German, Latin, Italian, Russian, Hebrew, Chinese, Japanese, and Korean.

As of 2008, The SAT is offered five times annually in Botswana. See the timetable in Section III for advice about when to take the test.

For your reference, The ACT is the other standardized test accepted by American colleges; however, as of 2008 the ACT is not offered in Botswana.

Essays:

The essays are perhaps the most difficult part of the American application. There is one essay on the common application; historically, students have been able to write on a subject of their choosing. In addition, colleges will ask for at least one more essay on their supplemental applications. Some of these essays are very direct questions. Other are vague and thus you can re-use a second polished essay on many of the supplemental essay questions.

So what question should the essay answer? There is no perfect answer, but the closest would be: who are you? However, how many students can answer the question "Who are you?" on one page? It cannot be stressed enough that the essays are really, truly hard to do. They require hours of brainstorming, drafting, redrafting, and proofreading. Good essays are started months before the application deadlines. The following five points are advice that you should follow, but the best way to get a picture of a successful essay is to **read other college essays!!** There are books available in the library that you can check out.

- 1) Answer the question. Surprisingly, many submitted essays fail in this fundamental requirement.
- 2) Make it personal
- 3) Make it thoughtful and reflective
- 4) Proofread!
- 5) "Make it a story that NO ONE ELSE CAN WRITE"

In writing the essays, it is important to be honest and avoid melodrama. Remember that your world is extremely interesting. It is best to write about issues of local color- this often means **AFRICA**. This piece of advice follows from point five. Your life in Africa gives you plenty of material for a story that no one else can write. You should try as best as you can to talk about living conditions, economy, environment, disease, politics- anything that you can write about with passion. Nevertheless, while you will be talking about something, you must give an impression of yourself. The essay must be about YOU and what this subject means to you or what you have learned from an experience. The admissions officers want to hear

your voice. Within limits of intimacy, you should strive to put yourself on the page. Remember also to put yourself in as positive a light as possible.

When you think you are done with your essays, you are not. Put them down for a day and try them again the next day. Have someone else (a teacher, your parents) take a look. There is always more work to be done!

Recommendations:

Recommendations allow colleges to get a better picture of who you are by hearing from three outside sources. These outside sources include two teachers that you pick. They should be teachers who have seen you at your best, that like you, and that you feel confident will have positive things to say about you. You want to ask the two teachers who you think will write the best recommendations for you! You need to ask the teachers well in advance of the deadline and give them the appropriate form so that they can mail in their recommendations. The two teachers should have taught you in the last year.

The third recommendation is written by the “college counselor,” your form head. Whereas the teacher recommendations serve to illustrate your classroom performance, the counselor recommendation is more of a character reference. It is absolutely critical that you get to know your counselor so that he or she can write in specific detail about your good qualities or your struggles and challenges. When you know that you want to apply to American colleges, you should fill out the Maru-a-Pula College Advising Questionnaire and discuss it with your counselor. This form will allow the counselor to get to know you better as a person. It should absolutely be filled out before term 3 of the year you apply. There is also an optional Parents Worksheet for your parent(s) or guardian(s) to fill out. In that vein, if you have any other people in your life (coaches, employers, pastors...) whom you would like to have send in a recommendation, you can have those people send a recommendation to the counselor. The counselor can then include excerpts within his or her recommendation.

Extracurriculars

What you do outside the classroom is also very important. Extracurricular activities are a valued part of the application. Colleges want to see that you have been an active member of your community. Extracurricular activity means anything outside the classroom. It can be sports, service, enrichment, religious activity, a job, or whatever else you do in your spare time.

In general, it is better to strive for depth and not breadth in your extracurriculars. It is far better to be heavily involved in two or three activities in which you take leadership than to do 20 clubs over the course of high school without ever getting serious about any one of them.

Interviews

Interviews are the least important part of the application. Many colleges do not offer them. Even so, those that do offer interviews barely even consider them in weighing their decision. You should not worry at all; interviews are really intended as a way for you to learn about the college. Nevertheless, always come prepared with a couple of questions to ask about that school in specific to at least show your interest.

PART TWO: WHERE AM I APPLYING? THE COLLEGE LIST

In the United States, there are almost 2500 four-year colleges that enroll about 11 million students. When you apply, you are going to narrow down that 2500 to about ten. Your college list will be the result of much research. You will need to look at the books in the counseling office and the websites of colleges to help you in your search.

If you are applying for financial aid, it is extremely important to factor in whether a college gives good aid money to international students. Where can you find such information? The Doug Thompson Spreadsheet, available from the Counseling office or online at <http://www.oacac.com/links.htm>. See Part Three for a far more detailed explanation of financial aid.

In addition to considering financial aid, you should also ask yourself:

- 1) What size college am I thinking of attending? 400 students per year or 4,000?
- 2) What college setting do I prefer? Urban, suburban, rural? Cold weather, warm weather?
- 3) Where would I like to go to college? East Coast, Midwest, South, West Coast?
- 4) What types of colleges am I considering? Co-ed, single sex, historically black, religiously affiliated?

- 5) Is there a certain program I am interested in pursuing? Performing arts, graphic design, music, engineering, or another focus?

PART THREE: HOW DO I PAY FOR COLLEGE? FINANCIAL AID

How does a student apply for financial aid?

Financial aid consists of a combination of grants, loans, and opportunities to work part-time. The primary sources of financial aid for international students are corporations and private foundations, and colleges themselves. College costs are **extremely** high and families should explore all available financial aid options.

Financial aid is based on a College Scholarship Service formula that defines a family's ability to pay for college. The formula produces an **Estimated Family Contribution (EFC)**. An individual student's total financial aid (the combination of grants, loans, and work opportunities) is generally the difference between the student's total budget for the year (tuition, room and board, books, travel, and incidental expenses) and the EFC. In recent years, more and more colleges have offered aid that does not meet a family's full need. When you are applying for financial aid, it is appropriate to ask an admissions or financial aid officer if the college fully meets demonstrated need.

Each college differs in exactly how the financial aid forms work, so you will need to check each college's website. However, you generally need two pieces of information: One, A significant number of colleges use the **International Student Financial Aid Application (ISFAA)**, a more detailed analysis of a family's ability to pay for college. The ISFAA can be found online at www.collegeboard.org or on most colleges' financial aid websites. Two, most colleges ask for a letter from your parent(s)' employer(s) detailing their salary and benefits.

Colleges may also have their own **Financial Aid Application** forms. These forms may be very simple and will be used to enter data to establish a financial aid file on the school's computer. They may also be complex needs analysis documents. As a general rule, send all information a school requires, but not send additional information unless you are making a case for special circumstances. For example, you may be asked to supply information from your tax returns, but you should **not** send copies of those returns unless you are specifically asked to do so.

A word to the wise about financial aid: Deadlines for financial aid may be different from admissions deadlines. Be sure to read all applications carefully and **file all of your forms within the appropriate deadlines. If you do not file your forms on time, colleges may have run out of aid money by the time your forms arrive or may simply refuse to consider your request because you did not meet the deadline.**

As of 2008, there are eight schools in the United States that are need-blind for international admissions, meaning that these eight colleges do not consider whether you need financial aid when deciding whether you will be accepted. If you are accepted you will receive aid based on the school's formula. Not all aid packages will be identical. Because they are all need-blind, the following schools are generally considered the top eight schools for international financial aid. They are, in alphabetical order:

- 1) Amherst College (MA)
- 2) Dartmouth College (NH)
- 3) Harvard University (MA)
- 4) Middlebury College (VT)
- 5) MIT (MA)
- 6) Princeton University (NJ)
- 7) Williams College (MA)
- 8) Yale University (CT)

While these eight schools are the best for financial aid for international students, there are dozens of American schools with significant opportunities for international financial aid. They are listed on the Doug Thompson Spreadsheet (mentioned in Part Two).

PART FOUR: WHEN SHOULD I APPLY? THE TIMETABLE

It is never too early to prepare! You need to plan when you will be taking your standardized tests, and it is always good to start putting together your college list. Most of your applications should be finished **before** term 3 of Upper 6.

Forms 5 and Lower 6: Basic Preparations

- 1) **Begin to determine which schools are of interest to you:**
 - a. Consult books in the counseling office including but not limited to the *Fiske Guide to Colleges* and Princeton Review's *The Best 361 Colleges*.
 - b. Consult collegeboard.com, especially the College Search.
 - c. Take a look at the Doug Thompson Spreadsheet for international financial aid (Mentioned in Part Two). See the counseling office for a copy. This spreadsheet should help you narrow down your list.
 - d. Go to schools' websites to research their various features and strengths.
- 2) **Make an appointment with your college counselor to discuss college plans.** Your college counselor will be your year head.
 - a. Talk about the different parts of the application.
 - b. Develop a list of 10-15 potential universities of interest.
 - c. Beginning to plan for your SATs. What month will you take them?
- 3) **Read the MaP American College Application Guide cover to cover.** This should answer many of your questions about the application process. (If you are reading this sentence, you are on the right track!)

Lower 6: SATs

- 1) **Prepare, Register for, and Take the SATs**
 - a. Study, study, study!!
 - i. Be sure to complete as many practice tests as possible and go through the many SAT books available in the library.
 - ii. Obtain a copy of the Magic SAT Vocabulary List from the counseling office.
 - iii. Obtain a copy of the Critical Reading Section Strategy Guide from the counseling office.
 - iv. Look at other materials in the counseling office.
 - b. You must register at least one month in advance on collegeboard.com. If you qualify for fee waivers, you will not have to pay for the exam.
- 2) **Prepare, Register for, and Take at least two SAT Subject Tests**
 - a. Study, study, study!!
 - i. Be sure to complete several practice tests and go through the practice books available in the library.
 - ii. These tests are only an hour long, but they still require preparation.
 - b. You must register at least one month in advance on collegeboard.com. If you qualify for fee waivers, you will not have to pay for the exams. You may take up to three subject tests in one day; however, you cannot take both a subject tests and the SAT I on the same day.

Upper 6: Serious Work

During Term 2:

- 1) If you have not done so already, **Fill out the Maru-A-Pula College Advising Questionnaire and return it to your college counselor.**
- 2) Give your parent(s) or guardian(s) the Parent worksheet to fill out.
- 3) Retake SATs if you are not satisfied with your scores.
 - a. Note: The vast majority of students should retake the SAT Reasoning Test.
 - b. Follow the steps above for registration.
 - c. Many students retake in May or June.

By the Start of Term 3:

- 1) Complete your college list and give it to your college counselor.
- 2) Complete the common application.
 - a. Write out and proofread the common application.
 - b. Make sure that MaP has the necessary forms.
 - c. Select the teachers you will be asking for recommendations and give them the forms.
- 3) If you are applying for financial aid, prepare financial aid applications. See the financial aid section of this guide for more information.
- 4) Essays should be only part of the application that you will continue to complete
 - a. Examples are available in the counseling office
 - b. Look online to find examples
 - c. See books in library

PART FIVE: WHAT ABOUT...? FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

What do you mean by a 'good' college?

Popular thinking often seems to equate quality with only a handful of famous names. In fact, the number of outstanding colleges noted for academic strength, distinction of faculty, caliber of students, and job placement number in the hundreds in the United States. There are in addition, of course, a great many truly excellent programs, academic departments, and teachers to be found in colleges and universities throughout the country.

Do I need A-levels in order to apply to American universities?

Many MaP students want to apply to American Colleges after Form 5 or Lower 6. However, the vast majority of colleges will not accept students without A Level results. If you are considering applying to colleges without A-Levels, you should contact the colleges on your list to ask whether they accept students without A-Levels. Many of the colleges will tell you that they never do so. Applying to American colleges is an enormous undertaking; you can apply before Upper 6 if you truly desire, but it is best to wait.

Which of a student's credentials are considered most important by college admissions officials?

The school record, what a student has done every day in the classroom, is without a doubt the most significant factor used in the admissions process. The school record is comprised of a transcript of subjects studied and marks achieved in secondary school. Teacher evaluations of each student's ability, motivation, expression in writing and speech, participation in discussion, involvement in classroom activities, pursuit of independent study, consistency of performance, critical and questioning attitude, depth of understanding, personal responsibility, consideration for others, and integrity are also considered.

Important, but somewhat less so, are the standardized testing scores. Students can complete these requirements by taking a combination of the SAT Reasoning Test and SAT Subject Tests. Test scores are interpreted in relation to the school record rather than as separate measures of ability or academic achievement. See the section labeled "Standardized Testing" for more information.

Other criteria also are likely to be taken into consideration. Such factors increase in importance where a college admission office finds that its applicant pool is large and academically well qualified. Among these are a student's extracurricular interests, activities, and achievements evidence of special talent, **the quality of the applicant's statement and essays**, and recommendations written by teachers and others outside the school who know the applicant well.

How important are a student's extracurricular activities?

The more highly selective the college, the more interested it is in a student's other-than-academic pursuits, assuming that he or she is academically superior. All colleges prefer students who are willing to contribute time, energy, and talent to campus life. But admissions officials appear to be less impressed with the student who has attached his or her name to a long list of committees, clubs, teams, and publications, than they are with the student who has managed to go deeply into one or two areas of genuine interests where enthusiasm is real, effort dedicated, and accomplishment, effectiveness, and leadership truly outstanding.

How important are interviews?

More often than not an interview with a college admissions representative provides an opportunity for the representative to describe, and elicit interest in, his/her college. A secondary purpose may be to gain an impression of a student's personality. MaP students should take every possible opportunity to meet whichever admissions officials they can meet. Some colleges make use of voluntary assistance of alumni, who interview students and forward impressions of candidates to the college admission office. As a criterion for admissions, performance in an interview is usually, but not always, the least important factor in the decision. Many colleges do not offer interviews.

How important are recommendations from faculty and outside sources?

Many colleges request recommendations from one or more of a student's Form 5 or 6 teachers. Those are extremely important. They comment on a student's day-to-day performance in class. Colleges are, first and foremost, academic institutions. A few ask for references from adults outside the school who know the students personally and can contribute additional information or insight. Where a student has held a job, done volunteer work, or participated in an activity outside of school, it is helpful to have the person best acquainted with his or her efforts write a description and send it to MaP's college counselor to be included with the student's records.

How important is the school recommendation?

The school is requested in most cases to submit a recommendation as part of the records forwarded to each college. This recommendation, prepared by the student's college counselor, invariably is the strongest that MaP can justify in light of the student's accumulated record of subjects studied and grades received; his or her standardized test scores; the assessments made by his form 5 and/or 6 teachers, coaches and advisors; and his or her record of participation in school and, in frequent cases, outside activities.

How many applications should a student make?

Our college counseling is designed to help students focus their attention on a group of colleges where the chance for admission, based upon the student's record and our experience, is reasonable. MaP's policy is as follows:

We strongly urge you to limit applications to 10. We strongly, strongly recommend that a student apply to a range of schools from those with extremely low acceptance rates to others that are more likely to accept the student. The absolute maximum number of applications for a MaP student is 15. At the limit of 15 applications, MaP will no longer send out your forms. If you have questions about this policy, please consult with your year head.

Applying to too many colleges is a waste of a student's time and energy. Large numbers of acceptances usually leads to unnecessary confusion; large numbers of rejections brings on unnecessary pain.

Under what conditions should a student apply for an Early Decision?

Early decision is a plan offered by many, but not all colleges, which permits a student to apply to one college as a first choice candidate. Typically, the application and supporting documents must be submitted by early November. A decision will be made by mid-December. If accepted, you are obliged to enroll at the college and **must withdraw other applications**. You can also be rejected or deferred. If deferred, you will be considered along with all regular decision applicants later in the year and may apply to other schools.

An Early Decision application is advisable if you are convinced that a particular college is your **clear first choice**, and if your record is **superior** in light of the admission standards of the college in question.

A number of colleges offer variations of this plan, such as Early Action or Early Notification. The timetable may be the same, but an accepted candidate is not required to promise that he or she will attend that college.

If applying for financial aid, it is dangerous to apply Early Decision because if you do not receive as generous an aid package as you need, there is no way to improve the package. You have committed to going to that college and will be attending. In contrast, during the Regular Decision process,

you have the opportunity to compare competing offers or convince one college to match a higher offer made by another college. By the same logic it is not dangerous to apply Early Action because you have the opportunity to wait for regular decision if the Early Action aid offer is not what you had desired.

What is a liberal arts education?

A liberal arts education seeks to provide students with general knowledge so that they may become more generally educated. Its opposite is going to school to obtain professional or vocational skills. Students at liberal arts colleges have majors, the subject in which they concentrate most of their efforts, but they also are generally required to learn in several other disciplines outside their major.

Liberal arts colleges are generally smaller and more intimate than other colleges. The vast majority of schools with good financial aid for international students are liberal arts colleges. Thus, you should try to apply to at least a handful of them. Keep in mind that in the American system, you do not need a business degree to go into business. You can take a degree in whatever major you choose and get a job in business or journalism (or whatever) even if your focus was chemistry. Another terrific benefit of liberal arts is that you do not have to choose your major upon applying. You can explore many different fields before choosing, unlike other countries' systems where you are often stuck in the degree program to which you first applied.

I'm interested in business, law, or medicine. Is America right for me?

There are always exceptions, but the answer is most often yes. Getting a more general education instead of picking a track early can allow you to learn more about yourself before making the major decision of career choice. You can get an undergraduate degree (Bachelor's) and then go to business school, law school, or medical school. These are graduate degrees, separate schools to which you would apply after your graduation from college.

There are several undergraduate business degree programs to which you could apply. Similarly, but on a far smaller scale, there are some direct undergraduate medical programs. However, these undergraduate medical programs are extremely competitive to get into and have limited aid money. If your heart is set on medicine you are just as well off going to college and then applying to medical school, which you can do no matter what your major. Interestingly, Latin American Studies majors or Classics majors are just as sought after (if not more so) than traditional science students. To apply to medical school you need only to have taken a certain number of pre-med requirements that are consistent for all medical schools, but apart from the pre-med courses you can major in whatever you want. This flexibility in study program is a valuable difference between the American and other systems. There are no undergraduate law schools. All law schools require an undergraduate degree.

What other resources can I consult?

<http://www.collegeboard.com/>
<http://www.oacac.com/links.htm>

...And any other websites or books you can find in the counseling office or elsewhere. The important thing to remember is to keep busy learning!

CONCLUSION:

It is the authors' sincere hope that you have found this guide helpful! Please note that parts of sections three and five have been adapted with permission from materials of the Horace Mann School in New York, USA. Other portions of this guide contain advice shared by both American college counselors and admissions officers.

Remember, if you have any questions, please ask someone. Your counselors are there to help and if they do not know the answers, they can refer you to someone who does. It is most important that you continue to learn about the college process. Start early, work hard, and you should succeed. Good luck!