College Admissions Handbook

A Guide to Equip Parents for the Road Ahead



A CRIMSON EDUCATION PUBLICATION

Introduction

The world of college and university admissions is not what it was ten, twenty, or thirty years ago. The admissions process to top 100 programs has become more competitive each year, with acceptance rates now lower than ever before. So why is pursuing a degree in higher education so competitive?

Many students share the same dream; by attending a top university, they will gain access to opportunities that guarantee a range of future career possibilities. The barrier of entry into competitive and many (not all) well-paying jobs is gated by higher education; careers like computer science, medicine, law, and engineering are nearly impossible to infiltrate without a degree (and often from a top university).

So where do you come in? The college application process can be tricky to navigate, especially for students trying to balance their extracurriculars, classes and homework, family time, social life, and much more.

This Crimson Education guide will explore the various aspects of the college application process, equipping you with the tools you need to help your student navigate their journey to university, while also answering a question that so many parents ask: “Why is it so important to invest in my child’s education?”



Why Students Should Aim for Top Universities

A recent report from Georgetown University found that a bachelor's degree gives graduates access to 57% more job opportunities than a non-graduate, and this number could grow to 65% this year. Of course, not every opportunity will be available to your student simply because they earned a college degree; there are other variables at play. But extra opportunities will simply be unavailable to students without a degree.

According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), "the more you learn, the more you earn." In 2017, BLS shared a study of average salaries according to education levels, and also their respective rate of unemployment.



A university's reputation is what places it at the top of the most important college rankings, such as US News & World Report, Times Higher Education, and QS Top Universities. These rankings indicate how relevant the institution is, considering indicators such as outcome (graduation and retention rates, graduation rate performance and social mobility), faculty resources (class size, faculty salary), expert opinions, financial resources, student excellence (standardized tests scores and high school class standing), and alumni giving.

Based on those criteria, institutions will be placed in national, regional, or major-related rankings. Discussing top universities' reputation and their positions in relevant rankings highlights all the advantages their students possess and the direct impact of such benefits on their future professional careers.

Key players in the job market understand that top college grads have a higher chance to succeed in their positions and bring a certain degree of knowledge, discipline, and talent to their roles. This is clearly illustrated by three main benefits top university graduates enjoy: more job opportunities, higher starting salaries, and a higher return on investment.

Understanding the College Application Process Today

Due to the constantly evolving nature of college admissions, parents often have a misconception of what really counts when applying to top colleges and universities today. Many factors influence admissions decisions and it's important to know how much each factor weighs. Courses taken, grades received, class rank, standardized test scores, personal statements and essays, letters of recommendation, extracurricular activities, and interviews are all integral parts of college admissions.

Crimson Education has spent the last 8 years analyzing admissions trends and supporting over five thousand students from around the world in their admissions journeys.



Crimson offers extracurricular and leadership mentoring, strategic planning and guidance, opportunities for research, internship placement, online supplemental AP courses, standardized test tutoring, application support, and essay review, as well as career mentoring and postgraduate planning.

Having reviewed the success of over 20,000 applications with input from the many Former Admissions Officers on our global team, we've determined that there are three essential pillars in the U.S. admissions system. While these percentages are not exact as admissions policies vary by school, this breakdown represents the importance of each criterion.

- Academics (Class rank, GPA, AP or IB grades) and SAT/ACT Tests = 40%
- Extracurricular and Leadership = 30%
- Application, Essays, and Interviews = 30%

College admissions have become increasingly competitive in recent years. Over the past ten years especially, it has become more difficult for students to gain admission into their top-choice schools, both public and private. Expectations and requirements for admissions have also risen for factors like test scores, grades, etc. With information more accessible now than ever, students are consistently learning more about education opportunities outside of their local communities and reaching higher to stand out. For example, a record-low 4.5% of Harvard applicants received admissions offers to the Class of 2023 (but students who worked with Crimson had a 10% success rate!)

Sound intimidating? Not to worry! We are here to support your entire family through the admissions process. Despite admissions numbers decreasing across the Top 100, it is important for students to still aim high — but as college and university admissions become more saturated, the threshold for competitive degrees also rises. Many students are looking to attend the likes of the Ivy League, MIT, Stanford, and other top-tier schools as a way to stand out after graduation; and while top universities certainly aren't the perfect fit for every student, they do offer certain opportunities that lesser-known colleges and universities do not.



Admissions Requirements

With more students applying to U.S. and U.K. universities than ever, both requirements and competition are becoming more rigid. Schools that have used the Common App for more than two years have reported a 6% increase in applications from last year.

Chances are if you applied to a college/university in the US, the application process was rather straightforward. Institutions looked for applicants that were well-rounded with strong grades. These days, the same institutions look for students with clear passions and authentic interests. If a school accepts a class of all students with well-rounded extracurriculars in a variety of areas, chances are that class will be pretty homogenous — something admissions committees try to avoid.

To be eligible for admission to the world's top universities, students must demonstrate throughout high school — not just senior year — that they are excellent students and community members prepared to succeed in a college environment.

While this may put pressure on students, it's important to know that some pressure (everything in moderation) is a good thing! Consider it to be an inspiration. Pressure and competition push students to work hard and think creatively in order to succeed. It is not our goal to scare you or your child, but to offer some insider advice on what it takes to stand out to admissions officers who are reviewing thousands of applicants.

The Importance of Extracurriculars

A fantastic way for your child to get ahead early in their high school career is to focus on meaningful and unique extracurricular activities. Extracurricular activities are a fundamental evaluation touchstone within the university's selection process, as they show the candidate's talents, skills, and passions, and what contributions they can bring to the university.

All this to say: a top university wants a well-lopsided candidate. This means they want students to be great in one area but involved in other activities as well. Overall, your child will want 1 or 2 activities that they're very involved with, plus a broad base of different activities. For formal extracurricular activities, typically they will want to do things that are internationally regarded and related to their intended area of study. For leadership projects (projects they begin themselves), it's important to show the impact they have made.

By looking for and accepting "well-lopsided" candidates, colleges and universities will have more diverse classes. Schools don't want 5,000 students that are pretty good and involved in student government, soccer, and community service. They want 5,000 students that have varying interests, talents, and abilities! By being strong in one interesting area and being the best (or close to it) at what your child does, they'll stand out to admissions officers.

The key to having a successful and impressive extracurricular profile is to think outside and above the box. Heading or creating an initiative is not always impressive; students can be the president of a team or club and not instill any change.

Have your child think about what they're already involved in and how they can make it even better. We encourage students to scale their projects and level up! Students should think about how they can make the initiative grow, be more efficient, and make changes that will separate that initiative from the hundreds of others like it.

Having an exciting and comprehensive extracurricular and leadership profile is essential to creating a competitive college application. It is necessary for your student to showcase their personal and intellectual interests in a way that helps them stand out among the tens of thousands of students applying to the same competitive universities.

Crimson pairs students with a mentor to work one-on-one to help identify and develop their interests, create a plan and execute a fantastic leadership project. Some examples of Crimson student leadership projects include: building an app, founding a nonprofit, launching businesses, crafting community service initiatives, conducting international research, and much more! We have many students who are also intrapreneurs; meaning they start leadership projects within existing organizations.



One of our students, Elaine, created a non-profit called StoryWish, where she paired teen mentors with critically ill children to help them to write, illustrate, and publish their own children's books. You can read more about Elaine's story here.

Another way for college applicants to demonstrate their passion and share the kind of students they are is through letters of recommendation. Recommendations provide admissions officers with an understanding of how the student will perform on and contribute to a campus: academically, socially, and extracurricularly. They provide a lens into how educators and administrators view the applicant as a student and member of the community. This component highlights parts of the student that grades and test scores cannot.



Standing Out with Extracurricular Initiatives

The demonstration of leadership that admissions officers look for doesn't always come in the form of a leadership position within a club or organization. What matters is the impact a student makes, and what is even more impressive is a student's ability to bring their ideas to life in the form of a leadership initiative — or a capstone project, as we call it at Crimson.

Especially during COVID quarantines, our students used their extra time to focus on their capstone projects: their accomplishments include designing and launching an accessibility app, building a career mentoring database, interning with a top video platform, and connecting students around the world to teach one another new languages.

Does your student need some extracurricular inspiration? Check out some of these ideas and have a discussion with them about various ways for them to take their ideas to the next level!

Join an Online Interest Group
Move beyond activities just for community members and pursue activities unique to high schoolers

Volunteer Online
Utilize skills you are hoping to build (i.e. Graphic Design) for nonprofits who need it

Participate in or Start an Online Conference
Example: Digital hackathons and virtual competitions

Design Your Own Research
Conduct your own research remotely with guidance from a professor

Write Prolifically
Get your name out there. Enter essay competitions, start a blog, write for your local paper, etc

Work a Job or Internship
Contact dream companies to see if they have remote internships; set up conversations to learn more

Navigating Standardized Tests

While test scores won't tell admissions officers who your child is as a person, they're a great way to prove to admissions officers that your child is prepared for a university-level curriculum. While many colleges and universities have gone test-optional temporarily due to COVID restrictions, that doesn't mean they've gone test-blind (except for the case of the UC system and a few other schools). We still recommend taking these exams because while scores aren't required, they're still considered by students who submit them. That means if students score well, it will enhance their application. Not to mention, impressive SAT and ACT scores can actually

help students land a scholarship from the University of California (UC) system! Stellar SAT and ACT scores can also help students fulfill prerequisite courses like English Composition before even arriving on campus. Submitting scores helps students portray themselves as being college-ready.

Consider this situation: Two students who are considered equally competitive apply to a university. If one student has submitted a strong SAT/ACT score, and one student hasn't submitted one, it's likely that the student who submitted a score will be considered a safer choice for the university.



SAT Subject Tests are Out, AP Courses are In

Although SATs and ACTs are still powerful qualifying tools, SAT Subject Tests are being phased out, leaving many students concerned about how they'll stand out academically to admissions officers at universities that previously required results from these exams. One of the best ways that students can continue to push the boundaries of their academic education and demonstrate intellectual curiosity is by taking AP courses and exams.

AP, or Advanced Placement, is a set of curricula created by CollegeBoard to give students the opportunity to take college-level courses and, depending on the score a student receives on the exam, receive college credit.

AP courses are the perfect way for your student to demonstrate intellectual curiosity in ways that traditional high school courses cannot. They allow your student to:

- **Boost their candidacy for college applications**
  Earning top scores in an AP course is one of the best ways to demonstrate academic ability to colleges.
- **Stand out amongst their peers**
  Showcasing your child's academic ability will help them stand out from their peers, whom they are directly compared to in admissions.
- **Get a head start in high school**
  Studying college-level material early will help your child gain exposure to the academic expectations of college.
- **Take a deep-dive into academic interest areas**
  Your child can explore their passions, such as Psychology or Computer Science, and provide a clear indication of their academic talents.
- **Gain an edge in college**
  AP courses allow your child to earn college credit and pursue more advanced courses as a university student
- **Challenge themselves**
  AP classes are rigorous and demanding, offering intellectual stimulation that students won't get elsewhere.

By taking additional AP courses, your child will show admissions officers that they are actively seeking out opportunities to learn more, explore their possible interests, and stand out from their peers and the global applicant pool. But while many high schools around the US offer APs, there are plenty that do not, or they do not offer the full AP course roster. So how does your child get started with additional APs?

At the end of 2020, Crimson brought together the brightest minds in education to create Crimson Global Academy (CGA). CGA, a fully-registered online high school, offers students the opportunity to take additional AP courses part-time, online, via live weekend classes with world-class teachers. Students can take courses such as Biology, Computer Science, Statistics, and more. Learn more about CGA on our website or request an information pack at this link.

Crafting a School List

The best way to help your student set goals during the application process is to establish different levels of goals. That's why we encourage you to work with them to create a list of safety, target, and reach schools. Students should start off by listing four schools in each category and narrowing down from there if desired. Not sure how to qualify each category? It's simple.



Safety schools

Safety schools are those where your student's academic profile exceeds the school's published requirements for admission. You and your student should feel confident that they would gain admission to these schools. Remember, like target and reach schools, your student's safety schools should be institutions that they'd be happy to attend.

Target schools

Target schools should be colleges and universities that have admissions requirements (think grades, standardized test scores, and class rank) that generally match your student's academic performance.

Reach schools

Reach schools are institutions where your student's academic profile may fall towards the bottom or below the admissions requirements set by the college or university. In some cases, these schools may seem like a long shot, but it's important to remember that more goes into a college application than grades.

By setting realistic expectations and understanding the importance of having safety, target, and reach schools that are all well-suited options, your student should be confident in their abilities and the potential outcome of their applications.

Crimson strategists work in-depth with students to establish their school lists, weigh their strengths and areas of improvement, and guide them through the application process with the goal of gaining admission into their dream school(s)!

Nurturing Your Student's Mental Health



Looking after your student's mental health and helping them practice self-care is a critical part of being successful throughout high school and into college. Navigating this is not always easy — that's why we've compiled our favorite tips and tricks to help parents and students through this stressful time. It is important for each student to set their own goals, manage their own time, and measure their own success. Each student is vastly different from the next, and it's important not to pressure your student to live up to expectations besides their own.

It is important that students independently learn how to take care of themselves but also push themselves. Have you ever heard the phrase you're your own worst critic? It's time to flip that narrative and help your student become their own best critic. One important thing to remember is that your child knows themself best. It is critical that they receive unconditional support and guidance so that they may understand and acknowledge their unique values, goals, and limits before they start applying to colleges/universities.

The world's top schools are looking for students that are self-aware. As mentioned before, US universities, in particular, look for well-lopsided students with a profile that fits with their community. While the admissions process is often approached with the question "will my student be a good fit for this school?" it's also important to consider "is this school a good fit for my student?"

This is why it's crucial to create and establish a school list early on and work with your student to ensure that their goals are clear and they can adhere closely to their personal timeline!

Remember: your student's list of colleges and universities should be the best fits for them! While it's easy for them to talk with friends and classmates about where they're applying and where they get in, it is important not to compare your child to their peers. Each student has different skills, abilities, and goals; not everyone will be a perfect match for Yale, Brown, and Stanford.

The best thing you can do for your student is to support them, nurture their needs, and guide them throughout this journey without taking the wheel and navigating the journey for them.

We've crafted an entire ebook for this very process called Mental Health During College Applications - download it here and share it with your student!

Teamwork Makes the Dream Work

Students not only have to juggle academic work, extracurricular activities, family & community responsibilities, and other important contextual situations but they also often have to engage in additional outside processes like applying to college. Taking all of this into consideration, the best things a parent can do for their student(s) is to help them plan ahead, be timely with their completion goals, and ensure that your student is taking time to rest! Remember, this is a marathon, not a sprint — and having a solid plan and support team is essential!



Conclusion

We hope this guide offers you a better understanding of the necessary steps to equip yourself with the tools and knowledge to prepare your student for the road ahead. Students must have robust extracurricular profiles, excellent grades, strong test scores, and outstanding applications in order to be a leading candidate for top schools. Finding a balance between both their personal and academic prosperity is key.



Your child's college application will dictate not only where they will go to continue their education, but how they will jumpstart their career as well. This momentous time can make students nervous; however, it's important to help your student set realistic expectations and be prepared for whichever outcome prevails. To learn more about what the Crimson journey looks like for both parents and students, check out this student's story from Crimson mother and son duo, Janine and Chris.

Sometimes asking for help is the last step to take before embarking on the journey to university. The good news is that Crimson Education is here to help your family through that journey and set your student on the path to success.

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Ready to Get Started?

Book in a free one-hour consultation with one of our expert Enrollment Advisors who can answer all your individual questions and create a plan for you or your child.

Talk To Us

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