

One thing is abundantly clear – that data is the foundation of the assessment. So, what is important to remember is that strong essays will not compensate for poor grades. Nor will outstanding leadership experience help you move past dismal standardized test scores. The data components – grades and standardized test scores – will put you into a particular grouping for admissions. The talent, voice and other components will simply advance your application within the grouping.

So, again, focusing on academics is your first priority when planning for college. But make sure to touch upon all the other components so that you can stand out from the pack.

- Components that will put your application into a particular grouping:
 - Rigour of your high school programme and your choices within that
 - School grades / Marks / Board exam scores
 - Standardized test scores
- Components that will advance your application within that grouping:
 - Application form / Résumé info
 - Extracurricular activities
 - Leadership potential
 - School report
 - Essays
 - Recommendations
 - Interviews
 - Financial considerations

Table 2.6 Data Illustrating Competitive Nature of Admissions

	Stanford University	Harvard University	University of Pennsylvania	Carnegie Mellon University	University of Michigan
Total number of applications	38,828	34,295	31,282	18,884	44,563
Admissions rate	5.69%	5.90%	12.24%	25%	35%
Number of international admissions	177	182	419	963	1090
International student admissions rate (as a % of overall admissions)	0.45%	0.53%	1.34% (7.17% admissions rate just for international applications)	5%	2%
Number of countries represented	66	75	100+	90+	90
Number of students offered a place on the waiting list	814	NA	2,816	4,843	10,709
Number of students on waiting list receiving an offer	0	NA	44	87	89
Admissions yield (% of admitted students who enrol)	76%	82%	63%	30%	40%
Other information	Number of students from India matriculating in 2014 11	Number of total undergraduate students from India (all 4 years) 20	Percent of international students in freshman class from Asia 44% Number of students from India receiving offers of admission 34	Approximate percentage of freshman class from India 3%	
% of enrolled students with SAT critical reading scores in the 700 to 800 range	69%	73%	63%	45%	35%
% of enrolled students with SAT maths scores in the 700 to 800 range	77%	77%	73%	77%	57%
% of students with GPA over 3.75	95%	91%	89%	56%	76%

Note: Data compiled from a variety of sources including but not limited to: 2011–12 Common Data Set, 2013–14 Common Data Set and from individual university websites; some values derived or calculated based on known data.

- Demonstrated interest
- Legacy status
- Others

COMPETITIVE NATURE OF ADMISSIONS

The competitive nature of admissions at top-ranked colleges cannot be understated. If you take a look at Table 2.6, which we compiled and derived based on various data points, you will see that the numbers clearly illustrate this point.

What Table 2.6 tells us is that the admissions process at the most selective universities is rigorous for everyone. For Indian applicants, the odds are even tougher given growing demand from US-based applicants, competitive international demand from other countries, the increasing number of schools within India who help their students target universities abroad, financial aid requirements and the negative currency exchange situation. And even at what were once considered ‘safety’ schools by solid Indian applicants, the competition has become increasingly stiff. For example, last year the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) received over 80,000 applications, double the number they received only eight years earlier and with a freshman class of 16,000, the admissions rate has dropped to 20 per cent.⁷

So, it is important for applicants and their parents to understand that just because the admissions seem easier in the US as compared to India’s prestigious institutions – the admissions rate at Harvard or Stanford is around 5 per cent versus IIT’s 1 per cent – there is no way to guarantee admission at highly selective universities in the US in the same way that you are guaranteed admissions to IIT if your rank falls within a given range.

India-Specific Admissions Information for University of Pennsylvania⁸

In a January 2012 *New York Times* article, Admission Dean Eric Furda of University of Pennsylvania recounted the following regarding applications from India:

Penn's applicant pool has grown by 55% over the past five years, and the pool from India by 80% in that same time. For the class of 2015 (applications submitted in Fall of 2011), 31,663 students applied to Penn, and 3,931 were admitted. That is an admission rate of just over 12%.

From India, 460 students applied, and 42 were admitted, for an admission rate of just under 10%. Still, a growing number of students have been admitted from India, with increasing diversity in terms of geography, number of schools, ethnicity and professional/socio-economic background.

Dean Furda's colleague, John T. McLaughlin, regional director of admissions, offered the following insights on applicants from India in an email exchange:

... we are eager to develop our relationship with Indian students, counselors, and schools. We've seen steady growth in some of the major metropolitan markets (e.g., Mumbai, Delhi, Bangalore). As we become more established in the major cities, we are attempting to reach out into secondary markets. We're impressed by the quality of the applicant pool, and we're eager to find students able to make a contribution within and beyond the classroom at Penn. At the moment, we're merely scratching the surface of what we think is possible in our relationship with India.

CONCLUSION

The application components in the US college admissions process are numerous, confusing and may not always make sense to the Indian applicant. But the benefit of such a system is that for students who don't meet a certain 'number' in their marks, there are opportunities to demonstrate a strong candidacy using other factors and attributes.

So, don't be turned off by this process. Embrace it early on and reap the benefits of planning during the application cycle.

CASE STUDIES

Applicant 1: Strong Academics

Background

Gender: Female

Predicted IB: 42/45

SAT I: 2,300+

SAT Subject Tests: Maths 2 - 800, Physics - 800 and Chemistry - 790

Intended Major: Maths

Outcome

Applied to twelve US colleges; admitted to eight; rejected at two; wait-listed at two.

Summary

We had a client from Mumbai who excelled in academics at both her ICSE school through standard 10 and in her IBDP school for standards 11 and 12. She was also a leader in house activities and a strong athlete – captain of her school team for her chosen sport. She was a bright student who was self-motivated, organized and articulate. She approached us late in the application cycle (October) to help her on her application essays.

Analysis

Although this applicant experienced tremendous success by any metric, the two colleges where she was rejected are two of the most competitive in the US. To understand why she was not admitted to these two, we reviewed her entire profile and identified the biggest weakness as failing to distinguish herself from other students from her school and similar schools in India, all applying to the same colleges.

- Her extracurriculars were too ordinary – she participated in what was available in school but did not push herself to do more outside school.