



NOTES AND ADVICE ON APPLYING TO AMERICAN UNIVERSITIES

There are good opportunities for study at American Universities, many of which rank amongst the best in the world. Unlike many New Zealand Universities, competition for places is strong and the student as an applicant must prepare their application well. Here is some advice which will help you to prepare a strong application.

Background

There are hundreds of Universities (Colleges) in the United States. There is wide variety: state and private (majority), religious based and parochial, variety of faculty strength and even female only. As a general rule most professional qualifications – medicine, law, engineering etc, follow on as post graduate courses from a basic general degree. Such a post graduate course may follow at any University, including New Zealand ones. It is important that you research well what you expect to gain by studying at a particular University/College. This can readily be done online and via email contact with International Student directors or other personal contacts. What constitutes a “good” University is dependent on your needs, but one would assume that you will be applying for the higher “ranked” or better regarded Colleges. Many of these are private and “Ivy League”, but not all. It should be noted that all Ivy League Universities put students through a Liberal Arts or general degree covering a range of disciplines or subjects. As such a breadth of subjects should have been studied at school.

Applying

You must research well what is required by the College(s) of your choice. Focus your attention on the three or four (maximum) that are of interest to you. Although many applications are done through the Common App, personal responses should be individually prepared for each University applied to. If you are seriously contemplating an American University then you need to start your research in Year 11. Be aware that every application requires you to pay a non-refundable fee.

Amongst the aspects you need to consider should be:

- Can you fund your study?
- What are the “rules” for International Students for employment, accommodation etc?
- Which are your prime choices both of University and courses?
- What subjects should be studied at school?
- What are the desirable entry standards, both general and academic?

Entry Qualifications

Any New Zealand academic qualification, either NCEA Level 3 or A Level in CIE will satisfy the basic level qualification for an “International Student”. Obviously the better your grades within these qualifications the more favourably your application will be regarded. Given that many of you will be applying before you finish Year 13, your academic performance will be reflected in your NCEA Level 2 or CIE AS grades. If you hope to apply for a Sports Scholarship (see later notes) make sure that you have all subject requirements covered. It would seem that Sports Scholarships have to be NCAA approved and there is an appropriate subject breadth requirement that is aligned with American High School Graduation requirements.

For almost all University applications you will need to submit SAT or ACT test scores. The SAT is comprised of Maths, Critical Reading and Writing sections. Most selective Colleges also require you to take three SAT subjects. You will get individual section scores and a composite score, but it will be this composite score that will interest the College the most. It is possible to practise for SAT, which can be sat in New Zealand and practice books are widely available. You may opt to take ACT instead of SAT, both of which are accepted by most Colleges. The ACT has an English, Reading, Mathematics and Science sections plus an optional writing section (some schools require the essay so check with the appropriate College). One advantage of the ACT is that you can take the test several times and choose which scores you submit. If you take the SAT several times all your scores are sent to the Colleges. Colleges are interested in you as a person and the importance of this will vary from College to College. As a rule most Colleges will consider your application in the light of a mix of academic results, SAT (or ACT), co-curricular involvement and increasingly, service involvement. There does not seem to be any “magic formula” for each College, but it requires that you do the best you can in each of these areas.

Personal Qualities

Colleges place some emphasis on “you as a person”. There is still a feeling of “will you bring credit to yourself and the College?” that forms a part of their consideration of your application. What are the personal qualities they are looking for?

- How involved have you been at school?
- Have you made the best of your opportunities and the talents you have?
- What do you bring or will you bring to this College?
- How will you contribute to the international outlook of this University?
- Many Universities have international assistance programmes that operate in their holidays that they may like to see you involved in.

Support Material

You may be required to provide additional support material. Testimonials need to be written by someone who knows you well and who writes in support of your strengths as outlined in your application. Your personal letter is important. It must cover all aspects of your strengths, reasons for choosing a particular College, your goals, both short term and long term and what you would bring to the University or College. Seek advice widely prior to writing this letter from senior teachers, guidance staff and others who know you well or have been through the process

themselves. Get your personal letter proofread. The personal letter is one of the most important parts of your application. Always be truthful and sincere. Almost all applications will require a letter/testimonial from a Principal, Senior Teacher or House Leader. Make sure they are aware of all your involvements, skills and achievements. If you think they may not be aware of what the College is looking for, discuss this with them. This letter and your personal letter are very important given that your other entry qualifications are equal with a number of others.

Scholarships

Universities in USA are more expensive than in New Zealand. Many universities are private and they charge up to two or three times the fees of state universities. Many universities require you to live in halls of residence for at least the first one or two years. Check whether part time work is both available and permissible. There is more scholarship assistance available than in New Zealand, but this is only for the most able. Check the fees and what they cover before you apply.

The size, type and availability of scholarships varies considerably from University to University. It is dependent on available funds in any one year. As a rule academic scholarships are more widely available and of more value in Private Colleges than State Colleges. Sports scholarships have different rules. As a rule applications for scholarship assistance follows the offer of a study place at a University. A further scholarship application may be required. The value of the scholarship you may win will depend upon many factors:

- A financial means test
- How much the University wants you
- Funds available
- Your financial needs
- Your academic "rating", particularly your SAT (ACT) scores.
- What you will bring to the College, particularly in terms of a Sports Scholarship.

Sports scholarships have slightly different rules. It is important to remember that you are competing against the best of high school students and are governed by the same rules, determined by the NCAA (National College Athletics Association). These include rules relating to high school graduation, subject credits from high school, grade average requirements at College and so on. If you wish to apply for a sports scholarship you will generally need to be nationally ranked, or in a provincial team/squad. Different Colleges specialise in different sports. Again research is essential and the support of the National Association with documented evidence is almost essential.

Conclusion

The following important points are stressed:

- Applying for any overseas University requires considerable personal research which should commence in Year 11.
- Several people will be needed to help with and support your application. In fairness to them please be aware of deadlines so that they have the time to do justice to your application(s).
- Attendance at a university does not guarantee you access to citizenship. You may be able to work for 1 year upon completion of your degree.

- Consider starting your university career in New Zealand then transferring to the USA college system.
- Very often attending a small college will provide better access opportunities for post graduate study than a name college. This is because you will be better known and hence will be better supported.

References:

- Websites of American Colleges
- Robert Franek et.al (2008). The Princeton Review: "The Best 366 Colleges". New York: Random House.

