

by Sarah Kinney Contomichalos

Reducing Anxiety in the Admission Process for the International Applicant



Each April 1st, acceptance rates at the most prestigious American colleges and universities inch lower. Those few with acceptances are overjoyed, and others are often initially devastated and then, slowly, by May 1st come to terms with their choices. Many juniors and their parents are tense with anxiety at hearing of top students denied their first, second and even third choices. How can we as college admission officers, high school counselors, teachers, and parents diffuse this anxiety—especially for international applicants who live abroad—and rationalize the process? Let's start by identifying some of the issues and then look at some suggestions to help ease the tension.

The US college application process is complex and can be overwhelming and confusing, particularly when compared to the uniform and streamlined application processes in Great Britain and other countries. Part of the complexity comes from a lack of uniformity, despite the expanding membership of the Common Application. Each college is free to set its own application requirements. For example:

- Are standardized tests required and, if so, how many?
- Is there a college supplement?
- Are there additional requirements for scholarship applicants?
- How do admission officers weigh the different parts of the application?
- Which part of the application is weighted most?
- Will applying for financial aid impact my chances of admission?
- When is the application due?
- What types of application types exist in addition to regular decision—Early Decision, Early Action, Single-Choice Early Action?
- What is the interview policy?

• Specifically for international students:

- When is the International Certification of Finances due?
- What is the minimum Expected Family Contribution (EFC) even for students who receive full tuition scholarships?
- Does a strong IELTS or TOEFL score help offset a weak Critical Reading score? Does the student have to take the TOEFL if he or she is in an English language curriculum?
- Do international students have a different application due date?
- Are interviews available overseas or through Skype?

To reduce international applicants' anxiety, college admission officers should be very specific about criteria for admission. In some cases, it's a matter of reiterating the information easily available on the college website, such as the SAT policy for internationals, policy on the Certification of Finances, and answers to the questions listed above. Be sure that the individual answering the phone in the admission office knows either how the application process differs for international students or to refer the call. As an independent education consultant (IEC), I have, from time to time, received incorrect information from the admission office and have learned to call back or email for confirmation. Recognize that for the Certification of Finances not all banks are able to complete another institution's form and provide a

sample letter for international families. Be aware that the CSS Profile is both complicated and invasive. Admission officers and counselors should provide resources to help families complete it. Other information, such as how the different components of the application are weighted, can vary by college. Be very clear about the difference between scholarships versus need-based financial aid and the minimum EFC for an international student applying for financial aid at your institution. If an international family can't meet the minimum EFC, it is better for all if they don't apply. If the college offers merit scholarships, present a realistic picture of how much more competitive these are than simply applying for admission. Clarify whether your institution is need-aware or need-blind for internationals. At on-campus information sessions, be sure to differentiate between US and international applicants. Many families return from college tours and tell me the admission officer said that, "If you need money, we will give it to you if you are accepted." I don't doubt them, as I have occasionally heard similar statements during my own visits.

Aside from the application process itself, international students and their families are often nervous about topics including:

- How to pay for college?
 - Who qualifies for financial aid?
 - How do I complete the CSS Profile?
- How safe are college campuses? This is an area of great concern for international parents. (Gun violence in particular worries parents, as in many countries handgun ownership is quite restricted compared to the US).
- Will my child's future be in jeopardy if his or her college is not highly ranked or well-known outside the US?
- Which degrees will lead to a good job?

All of us need to remind students that they are choosing colleges, as well as being chosen. Educate families early about the application process and encourage them to develop their own criteria. This is especially true for international families who may have limited experience with the US. There is a huge amount of information to assimilate, and college research takes time. Students need to be educated about the variety of educational opportunities in addition to the top 25 schools and to consider the myriad of details that constitute the best college fit. A college education is an enormous financial investment and merits careful investigation to ensure the best educational and financial options.

Standardized testing is a huge topic in the application process. International families often spend an enormous amount of time and money preparing for the SATs. The ACT is not as well known in much of Europe, and consequently preparation options and test centers are more limited. I encourage students to take the PSAT for practice; the PLAN is not available in Greece. I also administer a diagnostic to determine if the student is better suited for the ACT or the SAT. The difficulty with the ACT in Greece is that local test preparation options don't really exist and not all families are very comfortable with the idea of long-distance or remote tutoring.

In the US, most students have completed "bubble tests" for several years prior to taking the ACT or SAT, but this is usually not the case for internationals. To address test anxiety, I explain in detail the purpose of standardized tests and emphasize that the students' grades are the most important part of any application. I stress the importance of taking mock exams under timed conditions, rather than simply working on one section at a time. The exhaustion factor is not taken into account by students or parents. The Critical Reading section of the SAT tends to be the most challenging for international students. In my view, the best preparation is to encourage the student to read regularly in English. I urge students to read *The International Herald Tribune* regularly, particularly the editorial page, and also recommend reading articles in *The Economist*. Such regular reading introduces students to a variety of topics and vocabulary, as well as increasing reading speed; these are skills that will serve them for a lifetime, rather than simple test preparation. As a school counselor (or teacher), take the high school students to your school library and help them select books for summer reading.

It is also important to put standardized tests in perspective. Many international families focus intensely on SATs and don't realize that the student's grades over the four years of high school are equally if not more important. One explanation for this viewpoint is that in a number of non-US education systems entrance to university is determined solely by a student's performance on a national exam at the end of high school. I have found it necessary to define the holistic US process by explaining that neither the SAT nor the IB Diploma exams solely fulfill US institutions' requirements. Some families assume that by taking one set of exams, the student does not have to take the other. As an IEC, I stress over and over the importance of a student's grades starting from ninth grade. For US applications, a strong finish alone is not sufficient to make a student competitive for the more selective colleges.

Standardized tests are even more stressful for students who simply are not good test takers. Parents have a very hard time letting go of the SAT, even when it is not working for their child. “Test optional” is not a concept that international parents are very familiar or comfortable with, and often they insist the student continue with hours and hours of test prep which in the end don’t produce the desired results. In this scenario, I make sure the student applies to a number of test-optional colleges and reassure him or her that, come April 1, they will have several good options. It helps that some colleges are test-optional for international students and will use the IELTS or TOEFL score instead, which reassures parents and helps international students.

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Class rank is not a major issue outside the US and it is my understanding that even in the US not all high schools use class rank. GPA is not a familiar concept in Greece and is usually not provided by the high school. Trying to determine a student’s GPA is also complicated, as many of students I work with are graded out of 20 or A/B/C/D/F, depending on the school system, for the first two years of high school, and then many switch to IB, where each subject is graded out of 7. US colleges usually provide GPAs of admitted freshmen based on a 4.0 scale, which does not relate to the grading scales used outside the US. Adding to the confusion is that the reported average grades are sometimes weighted and sometimes unweighted. It would be helpful to have both weighted and unweighted averages provided by institutions on their student profiles.

The *U.S. News & World Report’s* Best Colleges and Universities rankings are extraordinarily influential, as are other rankings, such as *Forbes* and *The Times Higher Educational Supplement*. As an IEC, I have not been able to successfully fight the role that the rankings play in college decisions. In light of the cost of a US college education, many parents simply won’t pay for a college that is not highly ranked and therefore not perceived to be prestigious. It is not unusual to have a parent with a B/B+

student thinking only about the top 10–20 liberal arts colleges and universities. To diffuse the anxiety created by rankings and keeping in mind that many international families are not able to visit, I try to personalize the colleges for my families. It helps enormously that I have visited many of them, which allows me to provide specifics about the campuses. When possible, I introduce my international students to American students from various colleges who are spending a semester in Athens. US colleges that use local alumni to interview or answer questions also help to individualize the colleges. The rankings are usually a starting point for families, and I provide them with further information in order to keep them in perspective. In some cases, I use rankings

to introduce an unfamiliar college; it is often easier to convince a family to consider a new college if it is one of the top 50 in the listings.

Another aspect of the US process that puzzles internationals is the extracurricular component of the application. It is not unusual for students in Greece who are active in sports, forensics or theater to drop these activities in 10th or 11th grade to focus on their academics and standardized test preparations. I recently worked with a student who was offered a spot on the national swimming team in ninth grade, but turned it down in order to focus on her academics. She then dropped swimming altogether, which made her a less competitive candidate. It was also sad, as she loved swimming and was quite talented. Athletics are also good ways for students to manage their stress!

How students use their summers is part of the conversation about extracurricular activities for those who are thinking of college in the US. Summer programs offered by well-known East Coast boarding schools are popular with international families. These programs are well organized, and introduce students to new areas of study and the American academic perspective. One of the drawbacks of these programs is their popularity. It is not unusual

for 30 students from the same international high school to attend the same program. This concentration of students often means they are less likely to mingle and have an American educational experience, not to mention not taking the full opportunity to practice their English. When they matriculate to college, they will not be attending with a large number of their classmates, but are likely to be one of a few students from their country. Specialized camps, whether they focus on robotics or soccer, encourage international students to mingle, as they share a common interest with their fellow participants. These camps tend to attract higher percentages of American students and fewer internationals, which is a good social experience for the internationals.

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For students in IB Diploma programs, these summer experiences should take place after 9th and 10th grades. During the summer between IB1 and IB2, students are working hard on their extended essay, lab experiments and preparing for the fall exams that are used by high schools for students' all-important predictions. If applying to the US, ideally they should also be completing their college applications and this workload leaves little time for students to do summer programs the last summer of high school. Pressure to have a meaningful summer experience after IB1 creates stress, although a two-week focused summer program can be a very good option.

As students research different colleges, I ask them to answer, "Why college X?" This is often a question on the college supplement, but more importantly it forces students to really focus. Sometimes, while answering the question, a student will realize that in fact he or she doesn't like college X, and we take it off the list. Students complete this exercise using college guides and websites prior to campus visits and then update them post-visit.

While a few colleges clearly state that there is no advantage to applying Early Action, this is clearly not the case for many others (as evidenced by the table in "2013 College Acceptance Rates," *The New York Times*, May 2, 2013). I would argue that there are barriers to applying early for international students. The IB Diploma program grows more popular each year, as more internationals look to the US for higher education. The IB is

a highly rigorous program, and it is not unusual for even top students to need a period of adjustment where their grades fall from their usual high standard. This is particularly true for internationals where the language of instruction changes from their native language to English. In addition, the teaching style and criteria in the IB are quite different from their previous years of education. Their grades may not recover to their previous level until the start of IB2, which can eliminate the early application option. Parents have asked me if their child is better off staying in the national system rather than IB. Recognizing this drop is likely to occur, I still believe the switch to IB is beneficial, because IB students are more prepared for the academic rigors

of a US college education, primarily because the language of instruction is English.

In conclusion, international families often have a steeper learning curve and require more time to assimilate the multitude of details which applying to college in the US entails. International schools may not have a dedicated college advisor for the US and may not be familiar with the process. Given the distances, time zones and expense of travel, international families are often unable to avail themselves of the resources offered by the colleges, such as visits or even phone calls. IECs are not always popular with college admission advisors, but those based overseas who are trained and are members of NACAC and other professional organizations are intimately familiar with the issues faced by international families and can be a great resource for colleges. All of us would like to reduce the stress and anxiety of the US college application process—and the best way to do that is by working together.



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