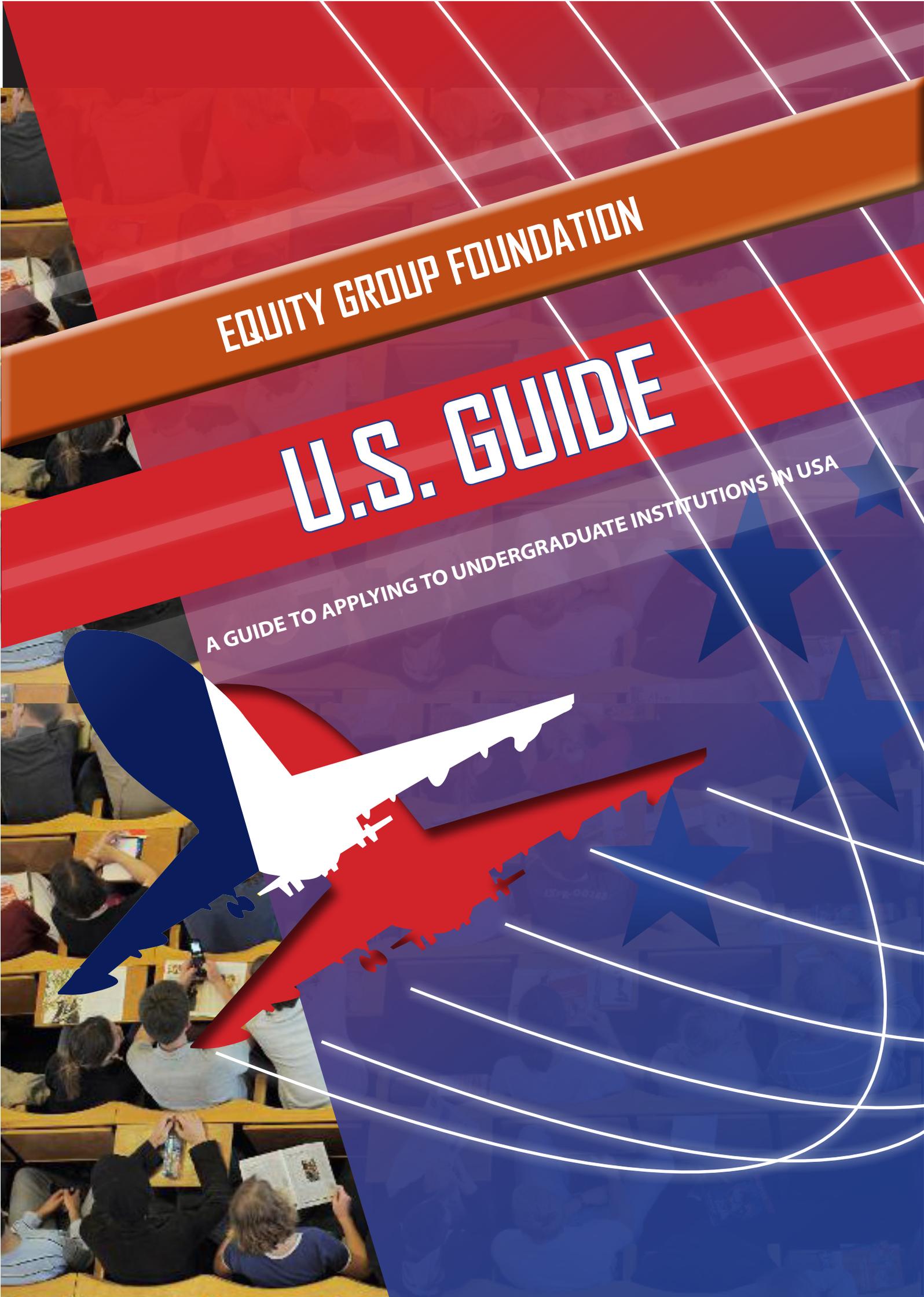


EQUITY GROUP FOUNDATION

# U.S. GUIDE

A GUIDE TO APPLYING TO UNDERGRADUATE INSTITUTIONS IN USA





**STUDY ABROAD**  
Equity Group Foundation

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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*This guide is aimed at ensuring that our scholars maximize their chances of gaining admission to and gain scholarship assistance from the universities that best match their interests and needs.*

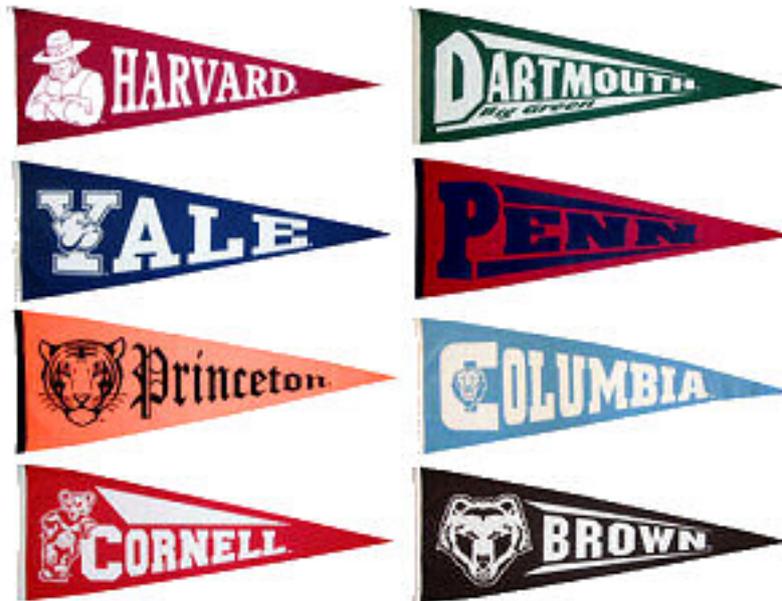
# INTRODUCTION

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While it is possible to get a good college education in Kenya many students have increasingly sought opportunities abroad. Key in their decision have been the immense opportunities such an education can avail to them: global exposure, excellent learning and research facilities, a wide network of friends from across the world, and an opportunity to travel, explore and learn new cultures and languages. An all-rounded experience is a hallmark of an American education. Students are usually expected to take classes in a wide range of disciplines, rather than specialize right from the beginning, particularly in colleges following a liberal arts curriculum. This enables students to graduate having gathered knowledge not only in their area of concentration but also in other fields of study.

This guide is aimed at ensuring that our scholars maximize their chances of gaining admission to and gain scholarship assistance from the universities that best match their interests and needs. This Guide will help you in:

- Identifying universities that fit career goals and personal preferences
- Navigating the university application process
- Identifying and securing sources of financial aid and scholarships



# HIGHER EDUCATION IN THE USA

There are over 3,500 institutions in the US offering tertiary education. National Universities offer undergraduate, master's and doctoral degrees. Many strongly emphasize research. Liberal Arts Colleges, on the other hand, emphasize undergraduate education. They generally have smaller more collegial campuses devoted to undergraduate education and follow a liberal arts curriculum. Undergraduate education leading to a bachelor's degree generally takes four years. However, a majority of the tertiary institutions in the US are two-year Community Colleges offering certificates, diplomas and associate degrees. Associate degrees earned in Community Colleges normally equate to the first two years of "university" should one select to proceed to a [four-year] college/university to earn an undergraduate (bachelors) degree. Professional Schools, including Medical School, Law School and Business School offer career-specific training and are usually only open to applicants who have already earned a bachelor's degree.

## LIBERAL ARTS CURRICULUM

The liberal arts curriculum is a defining aspect of most colleges in the US. Students pursue a general course of study in their undergraduate years, aimed at developing students' rational thought and intellectual capabilities, rather than training them specifically in a singular field of study. Some national universities in the US, such as Harvard and Brown, will offer a liberal arts curriculum even though they are classified as universities.

A liberal arts curriculum means that, for instance, someone studying engineering will do most of their courses towards this, but also a number of courses that may not be directly connected to engineering, e.g. Economics or Biology. Some universities do not follow this liberal arts curriculum, (e.g. Massachusetts Institute of Technology), but even then, there is usually a set of "core curriculum" or general requirements classes, which every student is required to take. Like the liberal arts curriculum, this system seeks to give students a balanced amount of knowledge across a range of disciplines.

**Note:** Degrees in Law and Medicine/Dentistry are not offered at the undergraduate level in the US (with one or two exceptions in the case of Medicine) and are completed after earning a bachelor's degree. Please note, however, that admission to Medical School in the US as an international student is extremely competitive and students are strongly advised to pursue their medical degrees in Kenya if they are deeply interested in the field.

## **IS AN AMERICAN EDUCATION GOOD FOR YOU?**

The United States is the most preferred study abroad destination in the world. It has more institutions of higher learning than any other country in the world. The American tertiary education system is also generally considered the best in the world: American institutions consistently dominate the top ranks of the world's best universities. Moreover, these universities are at the cutting edge of innovation, generating quality research that informs global trends.

American universities are amongst the best funded in the world, allowing them to offer an unparalleled selection of courses and degrees (majors). This gives students the opportunity to pursue study in fields as diverse as African History and Russian Literature to Astronomy and Nanotechnology. The opportunities for practical training and research related to one's field of study are also vast. Because of the level of funding available to universities and the various partnerships universities forge, students are normally able to pursue cutting-edge research in advanced laboratories even as undergraduates. In many cases, these opportunities are not available anywhere else in the world.

The very best American universities also offer scholarships and financial aid to lure top students globally to their campuses. American colleges and universities are therefore able to maintain a relatively large diversity even in their pool of international students. This makes it especially easy for Kenyan students to acclimatize to the new [foreign] environment should they choose to study in the US. In addition, many top US learning institutions recognize the value of a global education and allow even their international students to 'study abroad' (i.e., out of the US) for academic credit. This offers a more comprehensive and global curriculum to meet new and emerging global trends.

As advantageous as an America education maybe, it might not be the best thing for everyone. It will be important that each student applying to college there asks themselves if it will provide the kind of environment they are looking for.

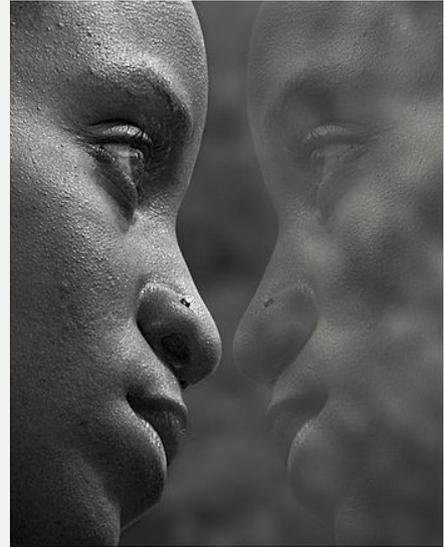
## SELF EVALUATION

### **Strengths, achievements, what matters to me, what motivates me, which subjects do I enjoy and why**

First, take several hours to think about yourself as an individual. Keep notes.

Consider, from primary school onwards, who you are, what makes you an individual, which the key aspects of your character are, what examples you can provide that express them:

DON'T think of one example for each section then stop. Try and think comprehensively of all possible experiences/examples, to then help you select the most appropriate example for each situation.



Background:

e.g. Where did you grow up? In a small village in Kericho, or on the edge of Nairobi?

How many brothers and sisters do you have? Are you the oldest, the youngest, in the middle?

Are your parents alive? How do they earn a living – are they peasant farmers, have a duka stall or accountants?

Who were the important people and role models in your life when you were growing up? E.g. my grandmother who would tell us stories by the fire each night, and tell me she looked to me to become a great success and provide for her in her old age;

Are there other challenges in your life – do you have a disability, were you an IDP, were you brought up by your grandmother, did you grow up in a slum, or is your village very isolated or with very few people who are educated?

Schooling:

Where did you go to school (at primary and secondary level)?

If you were allocated a place at national or provincial school were you able to take it up?

Which subjects have particularly stimulated you and have you performed particularly well in?

Which examples can you give of pursuing your interest in these fields (e.g. researched project on xyz for National Physics Competition; co-ordinated Maths Club for fellow students, setting and marking problems; taught class of 40 students Chemistry/Biology for two terms to cover teacher absence)

Have mentored, coached or taught other students during your studies? For how long? What did this involve?

Extracurricular activities and responsibilities & what have these involved:

How have you spent your time alongside your studies?

(e.g. keeping chickens to pay for my studies; athletics (long distance runner), including competing at regional level; peer counseling, offering guidance to 40 fellow students in my year on issues such as homesickness, bullying, depression; Presidents Award, leading camping treks, eventually being selected as National Assessor)

Which positions of responsibility have you taken on?

(e.g. Laboratory Prefect, supporting the Chemistry teacher by preparing and clearing away all experiments; Peer Counsellor; Chair of Catholic Students Society, the biggest society in the school, with 400 active members, involving facilitating discussion groups, chairing meetings, coordinating voluntary activities through the year.)

Now think beyond your school. Where else have you been active (in your church or mosque? In your community? With local organizations? With your own business?) How?

At work

What work have you been doing in your workplace? What are your achievements there?

What have you learnt, about the tasks, and about yourself?

Next Steps

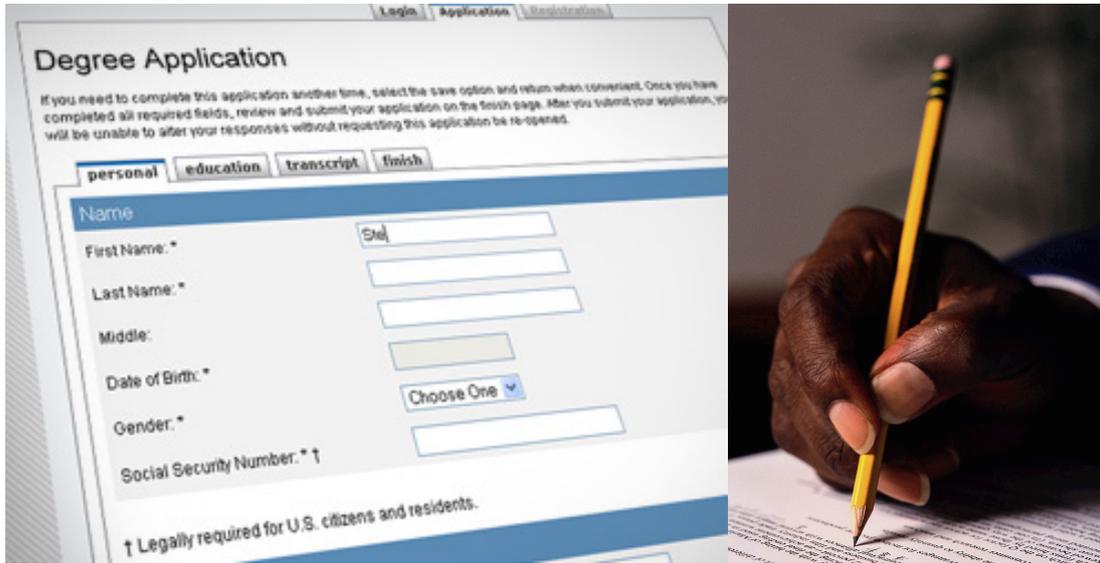
What subject would you like to study at university? What interests you about this?

If you are weighing up a few subjects, which are they? What do you see as the similarities between them? The differences?

What profession/job do you think you would like to go into after graduation? What do you know about this field? How have you found out more? Which skills that you have do you think will be key?

How do you think that studying in USA will help you reach this ambition, more than studying in Kenya? (e.g. are there subjects on offer at your chosen colleges, of relevance to this work in Kenya, which are not offered at the parallel Kenyan university? If so, what are they?)

**NB: Make sure you have researched the options in Kenya. Study in USA is not for everyone. In particular if you want to work as a doctor in Kenya – as Medicine is studied as a postgraduate in USA, and is very very competitive – you should think very carefully before opting to study in USA.**



# PARTS OF AN APPLICATION

Students applying to study in top tertiary institutions in the US are required to submit an applications package that comprises the sections listed below. The requirements will be described in more detail in later sections of this guide, including information on the various forms that universities/colleges require applicants to fill.

## 1. General Information:

This form collects basic information about each applicant e.g. personal information (name, address, nationality, etc), family information, educational data, academic achievements, extra-curricular activities and work experience. .

## 2. Teacher Evaluations/Recommendations

There are usually two teacher evaluations/recommendations which should be completed by two teachers who taught you in different academic subjects.

## 3. Midyear Report

This should be completed by your school counselor - or the equivalent in your school, e.g., Careers Counselor, Class Teacher, Dean of Studies, Head teacher/Principal, etc – indicating your scores in the midyear exams. However, this is not applicable in case one has already completed high school.

## 4. Secondary School Report & School Counselor Recommendation

This should be completed by your school counselor – or the equivalent in your school, e.g., Careers Counselor, Class Teacher, Dean of Studies, Head teacher/Principal, etc – detailing your performance over your entire secondary school career. It should be sent along with your academic transcript. The school counselor will also write you a recommendation.

N.B. If you have attended more than one secondary school, you have to submit secondary school reports from all the schools you have attended.

## 5. Final Report

This should be completed after you have received your final results e.g. KCSE for most Kenyan applicants. A copy of your result slip should be sent as well.

N.B. If you have already completed your KCSE and received your results by the time you are applying, you need not submit the midyear reports.

## 6. Financial Aid

The best colleges in the US cost more than \$35,000 in tuition per academic year. Most Kenyans wishing to study abroad are not able to raise the amount. However, many schools offer financial assistance to students to allow them to matriculate. To apply for financial assistance/aid, international students will normally be required to fill the Foreign Student Financial Aid Application (FSFAA) form that can be easily located on the school's website. The CSS (College Scholarship Service) profile available on the College Board website is also required by most schools.

## 7. SAT Scores

Most American colleges require you to submit results of SAT standardized tests as part of the application package. Most schools require SAT Reasoning Test scores (the SAT includes writing, mathematics and critical reading sections). Most top schools also require one to sit at least two subject tests as part of SAT Subject Test. (The SAT Reasoning Test is popularly referred to as the SAT1; the SAT Subject Test as SAT2).

## 8. TOEFL Scores

The Test Of English as a Foreign Language is meant to test one's proficiency in English, and thereby guarantee the applicant would be able to take their required coursework in the university/college they matriculate in. Most schools will waive this requirement if an applicant performs exemplarily in their SAT Reasoning Test. One must, however, confirm each school's regulations concerning the waiving of TOEFL

## 9. Personal Essay

This personal statement helps colleges become acquainted with you in ways different from courses, grades, test scores, and other objective data. It demonstrates your ability to organize your thoughts and express yourself. The personal essay helps the colleges know you better as a person and as a student.



# MANAGING YOUR APPLICATION

## CHOOSING WHERE TO APPLY

The US offers more than 3,500 potential study institutions. Selecting the appropriate college/university to apply to will therefore be both time consuming and tiring. One will need to consider many factors, ranging from career choice to affordability. Most students, understandably, choose to apply to universities/colleges offering good financial aid to international students.

We have provided a table listing some top schools that offer need-based financial aid to international students at the end of this guide. A few schools that offer good merit-based aid to international students are also included. Several columns are included that describe the extent of the school's generosity in terms of financial aid – both in general, and to international students in particular. One important thing to notice is that most colleges that are generous with financial aid are among the most selective with very competitive admissions. To maximize chances of admission to these top schools, we recommend that applicants apply to several, including, reliable schools, target schools, and lottery schools.

- Reliable schools (accept 50% of applicants OR your SATs in the top of their range)
- Targets (you are comfortably within their midrange SAT scores OR 30% acceptance rates)
- Lottery schools – are turning away thousands of qualified candidates, which could include you. Harvard, for instance, admitted 6.17% of applicants (2011), rejecting 32,800 qualified applicants (93%)

Marks and ranking at KCSE are clearly part of this. A straight A student at KCSE who is ranked 1st in Eastern Province might well choose to apply to two or three lottery schools

as well as four target schools, where they should feel fairly sure of success. A student with B+ might be better advised to put in an application to one lottery school and several target and reliable schools. However, beyond rankings and SAT, strong extra-curricular activities or a compelling personal story can and make one a strong applicant to lottery schools.

Other factors a student should consider when choosing where to apply are included in the following focus box. Key to all this, however, is what kind of a person you are. There are no right or wrong answers, just answers which are better for you.

## CHOOSING THE RIGHT COLLEGE

### • **How can I choose a college in US?**

College guidance is not an exact science. We are aiming to help you to identify what matters to you individually, and to research the answers for yourself, so that you can continue the process independently.

#### - **Factors which might matter to the individual**

These might include:

- small, friendly college or large, vibrant?
- large international student body?
- specific religious denomination?
- specific extra curricular activities (i.e. strong track events if you are good athlete)?
- highly academic or more relaxed?
- strong in a given discipline (to which you are 100% committed)?
- close to a major city? Close to an international airport?
- keen to study in US no matter what or preferring to only study abroad if gaining comfortable financial package (e.g. 30,000 dollars?)
- other factors for you... With other African students? Racial diversity?
- atmosphere on campus, e.g., political spread – conservative, evangelical, liberal
- single sex

#### **Additional Factors About the College**

- Subject interests, combinations, modules
- Specialist equipment in your field
- Special features e.g. study abroad? Work on research projects? Consortia?
- FUNDING FOR INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS
- Admissions statistics
- Midrange SAT scores
- Hooks
- DEADLINES & supplements

#### Key websites

<http://educationusa.state.gov/>

<http://www.collegeboard.org/>

For details on SATs and SAT subject tests, and on college admissions in general

<https://www.commonapp.org/CommonApp/default.aspx>

To register for the Common Application Form, to start researching college requirements, to track your applications, to complete form online

Your other key resource will be the websites of the colleges you are researching. Move

beyond the glossy admissions parts. Look at the website of the fields you are most interested in. Take notes. Look at the course guide, which courses interest you and why? What does the course offer?

<http://www.collegeconfidential.com/>

NB: This is a user blog. Use it to form your ideas, but treat it with caution.

2011 admissions data

Applicants, admissions and %success rates

<http://thechoice.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/04/04/admissions-figures-04-04/>

Applications and numbers on the waiting list

<http://thechoice.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/04/27/waiting-list-2011/>

Researching the options

Sources: [www.collegeboard.com](http://www.collegeboard.com), the college website, anyone you know who studied at the college or studied a similar subject at another college, reference guides in Head Office.

KEEP NOTES to help you fill in the application form, and to revise if you are called for a personal interview.

These are prompt questions to get you thinking more widely what interests YOU. Your questions may be very different.

What is the subject that got you interested in this college?

What are the positive differences in the course here to other places you have considered (e.g. leading professor with interest in x, work placement abroad)?

Which modules offered interest you specifically and why?

Are you interested in the flexibility of the course (i.e., that you can study several subjects and choose later on), the teaching methods they describe (which?), or a specialist vocational course (why?) or other?

What other aspects of college life, facilities, campus, resources attract you? How do they build on your previous experience?

Are you applying to a college of a particular religious denomination (e.g. Notre Dame, Earlham) and do you share this religious faith?

If so, how do you demonstrate this (e.g. altar boy, member of Yearly Meeting Youth Committee).

## HOW TO APPLY

Over time most colleges have sought ways to make the college application process less strenuous for applicants. This has resulted in colleges coming up with the 'common application'. As the name suggests it is completed once and submitted to as many colleges as the student wishes, provided the said colleges are among those that accept the common application. There is, therefore, little difference in terms of effort put in between applying to 3 schools and say 6 schools. The common application is available at [www.commonapp.org](http://www.commonapp.org). Students may also choose to use the universal college

application in lieu of the common application. The concept is pretty much the same and most colleges that accept the common application also accept the universal application, and vice versa. The universal application can be accessed at [www.universalcollegeapp.org](http://www.universalcollegeapp.org). In addition to the general form, most universities will require you to fill an additional form, known as the school supplement to the common/ universal college application.

Most colleges accept online as well as paper applications. Some colleges, however, insist that all applications be done online and where this is not possible the applicant must seek approval from the admissions office before submitting a paper application. It is, thus, imperative that applicants carefully review the policies of the colleges they intend to apply to.

### Applying online

If using the common application the student should open an online account at [www.commonapp.org](http://www.commonapp.org). The applicant should then add the colleges he or she is interested in under the colleges tab. This will give you access to the school supplement to the common application for each college you add if at all the college has it. The student can then complete the common application and submit to each school separately. If there is an application fee and one finds it difficult to raise the amount they should use the fee waiver option when asked for the payment. Anyone who uses this option must send a paper application fee waiver request to the individual schools. This waiver request can be found by googling NACAC. Alternatively, you could write a letter requesting a fee waiver and explaining that the required fee would be burdensome to your family. Either way, you will be required to have the request stamped and signed by your head teacher or school counselor.

If applying to a college that does not use common application, any prospective applicant should visit that college's website to find out if they can still apply online.

P.S. Applying online is often cheaper, faster and more convenient for those who have access to the internet.

### Applying on Paper

If the college you are applying to accepts paper applications, one can download the forms at [www.commonapp.org](http://www.commonapp.org), or the college's website – if the college is not a member of the common application consortium - print and complete them. One should then send the completed forms to the college's address.

## WHEN TO APPLY

Effective planning is required when applying for admission in the US colleges since missing a deadline would deny you the chance of enrolment for another year. There are two deadlines by which you can apply depending on when you wish to learn of your admission decision; the early and the regular decision deadlines. It is important to keep in mind what the deadlines are to avoid any disappointments or delays in submitting your application package.

The common applications normally open up in August so you have enough time between then and December to finalize your application. However, despite the amount of time, be careful as there is a lot to be accomplished as well. It is much better to have all your materials ready during the first three months and then polishing them as the deadlines approach instead of rushing at the last minute which may result in stress and panic. You

also do not want to quit the application just because it was too much to handle at the time. Make sure you keep a checklist for every application package to every school to ensure that you do not submit an incomplete application as this may lead to additional costs in postage and increased pressure.

You should be aware of the differences between early decision and early action, before sending in your applications. The exact rules may vary somewhat by college. Check with your college to make sure you understand your rights and obligations.

**Early Decision** plans are binding. You agree to attend the college if it accepts you and offers an adequate financial aid package. Application materials for these colleges are usually submitted early November. However, the deadline varies from college to college. Although you can apply to only one college for early decision, you may apply to other colleges through the regular admissions process. Admission decisions are usually released before regular decisions – often in mid December. If you're accepted by your first-choice college early, you must withdraw all other applications. Usually, colleges insist on a nonrefundable deposit well before May 1.

**Early Action** plans are similar to early decision plans but are not binding. If you're accepted, you can choose to commit to the college immediately, or wait until the spring. Under these plans, you may also apply early action to other colleges. Usually, you have until the late spring to let the college know your decision.

**Restrictive Early Action/Single Choice Early Action** - Similar to early action but the student applies early to one institution only.



# FINANCING YOUR EDUCATION IN THE US

## FINANCIAL AID

This refers to the financial help offered by the school or independent organizations to fund your educational expenses which include, but are not limited to:

- Tuition
- Room and board
- Books
- Health insurance
- Travel expenses
- Personal expenses

Most schools give you an opportunity to work in order to raise some of the funds but make sure you go through the school policy to ensure you qualify for the jobs offered on campus. You may also apply for grants in the school or from the government (although these are normally set aside for the American citizens). Although not advisable due to the high cost of education in the United States, you may also take a loan to finance your studies. You will only be required to pay back after graduation.

Financial aid is made available primarily on the basis of merit (sports, academic, etc) or of financial need. Financial need is the difference between the estimated expenses of college and what the college determines your family can afford to pay. Schools will offer different amounts of need-based or merit-based aid depending on the availability of funds. A few colleges will offer 100% need-based financial aid – which is an undertaking by the college to meet all the “financial need” of an applicant.

Please note that most schools will have different aid policies for citizens and international students. For purposes of this guide we shall concentrate more on international students.

### **What is need-blind admission?**

A college with a need blind admissions policy is one where the decision to admit a student to the university is entirely independent of the decision to fund that student. That is, you are judged totally on your academic and personal attributes, rather than on your ability to pay.

### **Need blind admission + full need**

Similar to a need blind admissions but once a student is admitted the college guarantees to meet the full financial need demonstrated after reviewing the financial aid application. The college first makes their admissions decisions then provides enough financial aid to enable all the students they admit to attend their college.

There are currently only six American institutions - five universities and one liberal arts college - which are need-blind and full-need for all applicants, including international students. These are:

- Amherst College
- Dartmouth College
- Harvard University
- MIT
- Princeton University
- Yale University

### **Need-sensitive admissions**

Some schools will factor in whether or not a student is applying for need-based aid when making the decision to admit international students.

### **Need-sensitive + full need**

Some schools do not have a need blind admissions policy for international students but guarantee to meet the full need of all admitted students.

There are, in addition, merit-based scholarships for specific schools that are available to international students, and we recommend that you have a look at the website of the particular college you are interested in to ascertain what funding options may be available to you.

Most schools will require that you apply for the scholarships each year so that they can assess your financial need and incorporate any changes in your financial situation that may have occurred during the previous year. Make sure you enquire about this so that you do not miss financial aid after the first year. It is always a good idea to also look out for other chances of funding from the school or organizations as this may help reduce your need to work as you study and hence concentrate more on academics. Ask the school officials of such opportunities or visit the financial aid offices for enquiries. They are always willing to help and may sometimes give you information that you may not find outside.

## **APPLYING FOR FINANCIAL AID**

The financial aid application form you use will be determined by the college you are applying to. Most colleges will offer financial aid forms as part of their applications package. Some colleges require that you complete the College Scholarship Services (CSS) profile online, others the Foreign Student Financial Aid Application (FSFAA) and others have college specific forms. If using the CSS profile online, you can complete it once and submit it to all colleges to which you are applying that accept it. There is a charge for submitting the CSS Profile Online. You can pay using a credit\debit card or an

online check. If for any reason you are unable to make this payment contact the relevant college. The college can then give you a payment code to use or direct you to complete the FSFAA.

### Why University of Springfields?

Most universities normally ask why you're applying to join them. These are really tricky questions. You are aiming to explain what they offer which interests you, and in a way which shows you as a committed student with academic interests which would be met at this institution. You want them to think – this is a student who has done lots of research, who knows what she wants, who expresses herself well, and can show a track record of interest in this field.

#### **Tell them not what is in it for me, but what I could contribute to them.**

Show don't tell. Think from their perspective. Rather than telling them that it would be 'the perfect university for you', give them the evidence so they can judge the depth of your research in them and interest:

*(e.g. opportunity to specialise in astronomy, my hobby since I was aged 8; possibility of internship at the observatory in Hawaii, - there are no telescopes of this magnification anywhere in Africa; chance to study with Professor Y, whose discovery of abc, changed perceptions of the field.)*

Demonstrate enthusiasm and evidence of research into such aspects as their courses, additional offering (e.g. internships abroad), successes, involvements, values or teaching staff.

Answers which explain why you are interested in a field of study (briefly) and demonstrate through examples and links to previous experience that you understand what it would involve, are good.

Comments which link your other interests to their offering are also good (e.g. Rather than 'I am also interested in pursuing extra-curricular activities. Given that there are over 400 clubs in the university, I will be able to actively participate in athletics' consider: 'I am a keen medium-distance runner (personal best 1min23 at 800 metres) and am committed to pursuing athletics at university in a top-ranked team. I am also a keen singer (I direct the 200-member gospel choir at our church) and am enthused to learn of the musical offering at Springfields International Concert Hall, and of the ensembles at the college itself'

Use professional, not colloquial, language. E.g. not 'I got to know' rather 'I researched/I identified/directed'. *(Action words in the active voice, make people sound dynamic leaders).*

Do not use abbreviations e.g. UofS, this is over familiar.  
Always capitalize names (e.g. University of Springfields, not university of Springfields).

You are aiming for a focused response. This answer for example is redundant.  
*My curiosity was augmented and I did more research. Hitherto, I had been convinced that the (U. of S.) -as it is commonly referred to- is a good university. That is all water under the bridge as I established that the University of Springfields is a great university.*

E.g. this response is telling us the process you have gone through, and praising the

institution. We only want to know the results of your analysis. *The issue is not so much that you think University of Springfields is great, but what in your research shows you this, and just as important, what can you offer which shows us that you would be great for us.* Don't praise the institution (e.g. great, good) this sounds a bit fake and needy. You are a very good student, set out your case for why you belong at a world class institution, as an equal.

Don't offer opinions which you can't justify with evidence. E.g. not I am convinced that upon graduation I will be the most qualified. (This also sounds boastful).

Or not: In the long-run I will develop myself into a well-rounded individual. This second one could however be rewritten with evidence: *'Studying at University of Springfields would offer an opportunity to combine studies in my field of long-standing interest, economics, with particular focus on economics of the developing world, with further exploration of my leisure interest (astronomy) at an advanced level.* (This gives us the evidence that you would develop yourself into a well rounded individual, but allows us to judge and assess what that means for you, and which concrete elements interest you.)

Try to think what is unique about the institution (and about yourself), and also about what is common to most US colleges. *(Aspects such as 40 bed residential dorms and lots of green space would not be unique. It is fine to mention them, but towards the end of your answer, having first focused on what is key for you in the academic offering.)* E.g. mentioning key aspects of the nearby city (e.g. the concert hall if you are a keen musician, the cycle paths by the river if you cycle or enjoy wildlife) is good – but draw links to yourself.

You are seeking to build a case for yourself at this institution by telling us more of who you are and what matters to you.

While everyone understands that the financial scholarship package is key, as is the reputation of the institution, DO NOT MENTION THESE. It is ok to mention the reputation of an institution in a special field which you are keen to study (IF you can back this up with some evidence of what it is that interests you.) But beware of it sounding too focused on what is in it for you, rather than what you can contribute to the community (with evidence). Mentioning e.g. creating networks which can be of help later, is also inappropriate. This could be rewritten as *e.g. the value of studying in such an international, cosmopolitan student body, and learning from peers both formally and informally.*

*Examples of possible research:*

Have you researched the business courses at Stanford? How are they taught? Which modules do they offer (check the course catalog which will be online on their website)? What do you know about the publications of the famous professors in this field there? What is the difference between studying business at Stanford and the other choices of college you have made? Are they offering the chance to work in a business abroad? Which other courses (outside business) interest you? Do they have clubs in extracurricular areas you are good at and want to continue? What about the location, would that give you a chance to pursue other interests?

## So in brief,

What makes Stanford a good place for you?

This answer needs to be based on **your research on Stanford, on the courses which interest you, the relevant facilities, and the choices you have made.** What have you learned about Stanford, and what are the critical aspects for you?

**Don't write a broadbased generic answer. This answer needs to draw on evidence. Make the link personal to you, your academic interests, etc.**

**Half of the answer should be**

**-what is it that attracts you about Stanford,**

**- and half about,**

**what have you already done/do you plan to do that makes that of relevance/interest to you?**

**a) Why Yale? What in particular about Yale has influenced your decision to apply? Limit your response to the space available.**

Good answers will go straight to the point. They will draw your research & on analysis of the heart of the Yale experience for you.

-What **in particular** from your research [that other colleges don't offer]?

- What difference does that make for you? [ie why is it important for you]

*Bullet point answers are fine when space is so limited.*

**Don't mention either the reputation or the financial assistance.**

### In Summary ....

Analyse what is being sought

Prepare your case

Draft with evidence

Edit

Check spelling, use of language, capitalization of 'I', grammar

Get feedback



# WHAT COLLEGES LOOK FOR

While an admission decision based purely on test scores and grade point averages is easier to explain, such scores seldom reflect an applicant’s intellectual curiosity, creativity, originality and love of learning. Applicants can distinguish themselves for admission in a number of ways. Some show unusual academic promise through achievements in study or research that place them among the best potential scholars of their generation. Most are “well rounded” and have contributed in various ways – academic and non-academic – to the lives of their schools or communities. Others are “well lopsided” with demonstrated excellence in a particular endeavor—academic, extracurricular or otherwise. Still others bring perspectives formed by unusual personal circumstances or experiences. The energy, commitment, and dedication it takes to achieve the various kinds and degrees of excellence is revealed not by test scores, but by students’ activities outside the classroom, the testimony of teachers and guidance counselors, and by alumni/ae and staff interview reports.

## **ACADEMIC**

Most colleges identify academic achievement and potential as the most important factor influencing admission. Truly brilliant students will usually be admitted if they appear to be of good character. However, school grades and test scores are not always reliable indicators of real brilliance and schools will look for signs of intellectual curiosity, creativity, originality and a love of learning. For instance, is there evidence of original work such as writing, poetry, mathematical or scientific research? Did the student participate in competitions, contests, symposia and [science] congresses? Are there unusual factors such as poor school resources or personal difficulty that may give a context to an applicant’s intellectual ability and promise? Applicants may also demonstrate their potential to contribute academically by achieving high marks in a

challenging program of study or by making most use of resources available to them in their school/community.

## EXTRACURRICULAR

This will include an applicant's participation in life outside the classroom, including significant contributions to the life of their school or community in athletics, music, art/drama and student leadership. In addition to school extracurricular activities and athletics, students can describe significant community, employment, or family commitments. There are many who spend a great deal of time helping to run their household, preparing meals and caring for siblings or making money with a part-time job to help the household meet expenses.

Schools have no preference for one activity over another, but they look most favorably upon those students who have committed themselves to their chosen activities over a period of time and who have shown energy, discipline, and enthusiasm in working with others. They also recognize that some schools may not have a full range of extracurricular activities and they take this into account while evaluating applicants. Admissions Committees are concerned most of all to know how well students used the resources available to them. Extracurricular activities need not be exotic — most are not — and substance is far more important. A student who has made the most of opportunities offered by their secondary school is much more likely to do so during college and beyond. This applies to academic life as well as extracurricular activities.

## PERSONAL

Personal qualities and character provide the foundation upon which each admission rests. Some personal qualities like maturity, character, leadership, self-confidence, warmth of personality, sense of humor, energy, and grace under pressure are essential for someone to thrive in an unfamiliar and competitive environment thousands of miles from home. Some applicants, on the other hand, may have an unusual attractiveness of personality that would enrich the college community, including unusual concern for others or desire to make a difference. However, any candidate about whom there is evidence of serious weakness of character is rejected.

Most college graduates often report that the education they received from fellow classmates was a critically important component of their college experience. The education that takes place between roommates, in dining halls, classrooms, research groups and extracurricular activities depends on selecting students who will reach out to others. The admissions committees, therefore, take great care to attempt to identify students who will be outstanding “educators,” and would contribute towards a great college community.

### Who is reading the application & what are they seeking?

‘But the truth is that essay readers are nothing more than bright, curious, conscientious people – frazzled by the pile of folders ahead of them, perhaps, and probably a little sleepy, but basically open to what the kids have to write. They don't want to have to spend a lot of time unmixing metaphors and trying to guess who the writer really is. They want writers who will speak to them directly from personal experience. (..) The real you. That is your voice.’

Bill Mayher, College Admissions Mystique

### **They seek evidence**

of good academics & academic initiative

of extracurricular activities

of leadership & impact

'beyond the numbers, of who you are, of what you add'

### **And wonder "Would I like to share a bedroom with this person?"**

They reject on:

- arrogance (boasting)
- bigotry (prejudice)
- signs of trickery, dishonesty, lying, unfair play

but also on dull essays

### **And also try to understand what you have achieved in your context**

- 71% of those applying through Common Application last year had at least one parent with a Bachelors degree
- Are you the first in your family to attend university?
- To finish high school?
- One of few in your village to go to high school?
- The first in your high school to apply abroad?
- How will the admissions officer know this?

### **Therefore, in telling your story – think, analyse, provide others with the information to help them help you**

School profile – where do people go on to university in last three years, how many went to university, which subjects, where is it ranked – if high ranked, show you had good teaching, if low ranked show you did well

Guidance counsellor reference – family background, how many children, both parents alive, live with grandparents, IDP, parents' jobs – peasant farmers

School resources – how many computers, how many books in the school library

Teacher references

### **Managing the information**

Thinking what does the admissions officer need to know about me/my life?

What strengthens my application?

Focus & selective, not every details

Who is the best person to tell them (teacher, headteacher, me in essay)? Avoid duplication.

How can I help this person to provide accurate, compelling information?

### **Academics and Academic Initiative**

'interested in learning for learning's sake'

The key issue ahead of extracurricular & leadership/impact – but on its own not sufficient

Vocal member of class? Someone who asks interesting questions?

Intellectual potential, love of learning – how have you developed your interest?

Academic initiative – e.g. a teacher of lower classes, coordinator of maths club, district/regional awards, independent research,

### **Extracurricular activities**

What do you spend your time doing besides studying?

What excites and motivates you? Follow your interests.

What do you add beyond the figures (your SAT scores)?

Very impressive would be e.g. significant commitment to one or more activities, usually with regional or national recognition, leadership or dedication

BUT overcoming extreme challenge to attain high level of leadership/involvement seen as most impressive

### **Leadership and impact**

Positions of responsibility

– at school? (\*\*Did you teach lower classes?)

- at work?

- at home, as carer, wage-earner, for livestock?

- in community, church, President's Award, scouts?

How were you selected? What does it involve? What was the feedback from people who worked with you?

Do you initiate things, or do you follow behind?

### **Work Experience**

What have you been doing at your work place?

How can you show the challenges, dedication, the integrity needed?

Have you been involved in other roles apart from your standard assigned roles?

### **However, college admissions is not an exact science...**

It isn't a predictable and equitable process

Warmest congratulations if you get in

But if you don't, it truly doesn't say anything about you, your capacities, your potential to study abroad next year or in five years

"We aren't looking for well-rounded individuals, we're looking for a well-rounded class"

### **To maximize chances, aim to STAR in applications**

One of the frameworks we use to help ensure that relevant details are included on applications is STAR 'aim to star on forms and in interview'.

It stands for Situation, Task, Action, Result.

### **E.g. Situation (half sentence on context):**

As a student volunteer once a week at a mental health mobile outreach clinic, Kamili, in Kangemi, one of Nairobi's low cost housing districts

**Task (what you as an individual were responsible for):**

I was responsible for welcoming sometimes highly distressed potential clients and their families to our mobile clinic, helping them to complete necessary administration and referring them on to our volunteer psychiatrists.

**Actions (3 bullet points on significant points in how you go about doing this, to give a sense of the range of the actions):**

This included supporting individuals who had sometimes walked from as far as Lake Victoria, some 150km away, in search of affordable medication; identifying and recording relevant details from often highly confused narratives of patients suffering from untreated schizophrenia and other mental illnesses; and maintaining a calm yet purposeful atmosphere in the clinic while scores of patients waited for hours for assessment and treatment.

**Result (the outcome, potential learning for the individual, any feedback or statistics):**

The clinic's director noted in my end of year review that 'Without Jane's positive and pragmatic support it would have been difficult to maintain Kamili's outreach services in this initial year.' During the year we supported over 140 patients, such that some, who previously had been isolated and highly disturbed, burying food and tearing their clothes, were, with the help of our medication, able to dig their shambas and contribute to supporting their families. I have learnt what a difference such low cost interventions as this may make to overstretched and vulnerable families, and I am committed to return to work in this field, were I to qualify as a psychiatrist in the US.



## SAT AND TOEFL

The Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) is the standardized test used by most US colleges and universities to evaluate students for college enrolment. Many schools require applicants whose primary language is not English to take the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) test to demonstrate their proficiency in the language. Many schools will, however, waive the TOEFL requirement if an applicant performs exemplarily in the SAT tests.

Most top colleges require the applicant to submit results of the SAT Reasoning (SAT1) exam as well as results from two SAT Subject Tests (SAT2). There are options ranging from Biology, Chemistry and Physics, to languages such as French and German, to Literature, World History, US history, and Math. Most Kenyans usually choose from Mathematics, Physics, Chemistry, Biology, French or German.

Some colleges have specifications about the subject tests that they require you to do in order to be considered for admission into the school or to particular programs. Again, it is always a good idea to carefully study the instructions for the colleges you're applying to. However, where the college you are applying to does not dictate the SAT2 subjects tests you should take, pick those subjects you feel you can perform the best in, even if you think they do not correspond with your intended major.

Most schools will waive the TOEFL requirement if your score in the Writing and Critical Reading sections of the SAT Reasoning exam is good enough. If the college that you are applying to requires that you sit for TOEFL, you can register at any time to take the internet based version at Frise Holdings, the official representative of College Board in Kenya (the address for Frise is given under the "Obtaining Registration Forms" section below). The cost is about Ksh. 16,000.

Please also bear in mind that you need to indicate your college choices when registering for SAT tests so that your grades can be sent to the colleges you are applying to. You can subsequently change these college choices when sitting the SAT exams for free. The College Board website also offers a chance for one to change their college choices

for free. The deadline for making these changes are normally a few days after the SAT exams. Afterwards, applicants can order additional SAT scores to be sent to their schools of choice at a cost of around 800 KSh per additional college. When sending these additional score reports, College Board normally sends all previous SAT (1 & 2) exam results to the same college unless the candidate specifies otherwise.

### **Preparation**

It is highly advisable that you study for the SAT and TOEFL. While you may be an outstanding student, you will still need to familiarize yourself with the format of the test as well as with some content that may not feature in the Kenyan syllabus. You can find practice tests on the internet from such sites as [www.collegeboard.com](http://www.collegeboard.com) or just googling 'SAT practice tests'. There are also quite a number of books one can use to prepare for the SAT e.g. Princeton Review and Barron's. One can get the books at the Text Book Centre in Sarit Centre, Nairobi, and Book Point along Moi Avenue, Nairobi, among other places.

It is very essential that you prepare for the SATs since, contrary to common beliefs, the SAT is challenging even for top students. The SAT Reasoning Test's Critical Reading Section is especially challenging for most students as it requires the mastery of advanced vocabulary. The Mathematics sections are relatively easier for most students though it still requires a lot of practice and familiarity with the test. The SAT scores form a huge part in deciding your college admission and should thus be taken with utmost seriousness.

The SAT Reasoning Test contains Writing, Critical Reading and Mathematics sections. It is easy to scoop an 800 in the Math section as long as you prepare well and are very fast and accurate in the exam. Most non-native speakers of English find the Critical Reading and Writing sections more challenging. The Critical Reading section, for instance, contains long passages with difficult vocabulary. It will therefore be necessary for a candidate to learn as much vocabulary as they can in order to tackle this section. The SAT preparation books give strategies on how to learn new vocabulary and how to acquire other important test-taking skills.

### **Score Reports**

SAT scores are usually available online – on [www.collegeboard.com](http://www.collegeboard.com) – within 3 weeks of the test date. Paper versions of the same are delivered to the students through Frise Holdings, after about 6 weeks.

### **SAT Percentiles**

Your SAT score report will indicate your percentile in every section. This is a measure of how well you performed in relation to other students who have sat for the SAT for entry in college in the same year as you (not those who sat for the test on the same day as you only). If for instance your percentile is 99, it indicates your score was better than 99% of the test takers. The higher your percentile the better.

### **Mid 50 SAT Percentiles**

Most colleges will usually publish the mid 50 SAT percentiles for the average incoming class. This represents the scores of the mid 50 percent of students admitted to the college (it excludes the top and the bottom quarters). For example in an entering class of 1,000 students the mid 50 SAT percentile would be range of marks between what the 250th student scored and what the 750th student scored.

## Obtaining the Registration Forms

### IN NAIROBI

Frise Holdings Ltd.  
Professional Centre  
2nd Floor, Office LH12  
Ngong Rd.  
Nairobi  
Tel: 0719-648129; 0731-377265  
Email: friseinfo@frise.co.ke

### IN MOMBASA

The Aga Khan Academy, Mombasa  
Mbuyuni Road  
Kizingo Mombasa  
KENYA  
Mailing address:  
P.O. Box 90066  
Mombasa  
KENYA  
Tel: (+254) 041 2225298, 2230930, 2226837, 2229859  
Fax: (+254) 041 2227982

### IN ELDORET

Genesis overseas links have been appointed by Frise Holdings to receive registrations from candidates in the Eldoret area. They have agreed to charge an upcountry registration fee of only Ksh200/= per registration over and above the cost of the SAT registration to cover administration and shipment costs.

Their contact details are:

Genesis Overseas Links  
2nd Floor, Tabain Plaza, Ronald Ngala St, Eldoret  
PO BOX 4969, Eldoret 30100  
Tel: 0532031241 Cell: 0726633463 EMail: genesislinks@yahoo.com

### IN KIJABE

Rift Valley Academy

Postal Address:  
P.O. Box 80  
Kijabe 00220  
KENYA

### Telephone

(020) 3246-243  
From outside of Kenya, try 254-20-3246- 243  
FAX 254-20-3246-111

## Registration Requirements

If you are taking the tests in Kenya you will have to pay for them in cash – either Kenya Shillings or USD. The costs are:

SAT 1 -Ksh. 6,400

SAT 2 - Ksh. 6,100 (2 subjects)

Ksh. 6,500 (3 subjects)

TOEFL- Ksh. 16,000

### **Note:**

- You can't do both SAT 1 & 2 on the same day so you don't have to register for both at the same time.
- The SAT tests can be taken in any order: one may choose to schedule SAT Subject Tests before the SAT Reasoning Test
- At Frise holdings any questions regarding the registration will be answered.
- The directions for Frise Holdings give their actual new location. Some websites may not have this updated information.
- Its advisable to register as early as you can to avoid last minute rash and the long queues as people rush to beat the deadline on the last day.
- There are test centres in major towns such as Nairobi,Edoret and Mombasa. In the registration forms fill in your most convenient centre. A list of the test centres is provided at the registration centre.



# TEACHER RECOMMENDATIONS

This is one of those parts of the application which many Kenyan applicants routinely fail to take seriously. Given that recommendations do not play any role in the Kenyan college admission process, many Kenyan teachers may not be aware of what constitutes a good college recommendation. Any applicant must, therefore, make every effort to ensure they brief those writing their recommendations on what it should entail.

You will need to obtain at least three recommendation letters to complete your applications package. In the Common Application, used by most top US schools, these come in the form of two Teacher Evaluations and one in the form of the School Report. Please select only teachers who know you well to write your recommendations. Generally, these would be teachers whose classes you took, and teachers who also had a chance to interact deeply with you outside of class. Such teachers are therefore able to share broad and deep insight about your academic vitality, extra-curricular accomplishment and personal qualities. However, do ensure that the college admissions committees will be able to learn about you and your experiences as broadly as possible through your recommendations. It does help, therefore, to have each of the recommendations focus on a separate aspect of your experience in school. The college admissions committee will therefore have multiple ways to know and understand your background and experience. Since most teachers may not have prepared recommendations for US colleges before, please take time to explain this requirement to them. It is also important to give them adequate time – at least several weeks – to write the recommendations. Especially avoid the last minute rush. Preparing recommendations often requires reflection that benefits tremendously from an adequate lead time.

By reading the recommendation, the admission officer should have an idea of a student's academic achievement, intellectual promise, quality of writing, creativity, original thought, productive class discussion, respect accorded by faculty, disciplined work habits, maturity, motivation, leadership, integrity, reaction to setbacks, concern for others, self-confidence, initiative and independence. The above must be supported with

specific anecdotes/examples. For instance, Ben’s recommendation may read: “Ben is a very creative and proactive young man; once he learned the complexities of creating a bio-energy generator, he led a team of classmates in designing a simpler yet more power-saving version to use on his science congress project.” Good recommendations are detailed and will always be at least a page in length.

Colleges are also interested to know how you spend your time away from school. Some applicants may have been involved in substantial extra-curricular activities with their church, youth group, etc, either during the school term or during the school holidays, while others may have been in employment. Getting recommendations from mentors, patrons, or employers who worked with you in such activities may give additional invaluable insight about you.

The recommendations should be typed or printed on school letterheads and signed by the teacher. The teacher may photocopy it for each school, so long as they certify each of the copies as “True Copies of the Original”. One is also required to prepare a school profile (explained in the focus box below) and a transcript legend which should accompany the School Report. Both should similarly be printed on the school’s letterhead and signed by the relevant teacher. If your school doesn’t have a pre-prepared school profile you may draft one for your school to review, endorse and print.

Finally, do WAIVE your right to access the Teacher Evaluations and School Reports. Waiving your right to access the recommendations implies that your referees did not feel an undue pressure to write about you in a positive light – as they often would if they knew you’d be able to view their recommendation. College Admissions committees therefore assign more credibility to your recommendations if you waive your rights to access them.

### On writing a comprehensive school profile

#### What colleges need to know about your school

Here are the crucial elements (according to college representatives and high school counselors) of a high school profile that is both comprehensive and that accurately portrays the uniqueness of your school.

#### School name, mailing address, web address, and phone and fax numbers

- Include names, phone numbers, fax numbers, and email addresses of the principal and all counselors.
- Provide school’s URL where applicable.

#### Community and school information

- Include a description of the school community and the school that depicts the socioeconomic and ethnic mix, as well as information about the educational level of the parents, major employers, and other features of interest. Also, remember to include history, mission, and admission guidelines.

e.g. school references might note, briefly, e.g. a.% of cohort who drop out from one year to the next for lack of school fees;

b. typical professions of majority of parent body;

c. number of books in school library or computers accessible to the student body;

d. % of graduating class progressing to university in Kenya

e % from graduating class who attend university abroad (and which)

- Provide information on students who are particularly vulnerable (e.g., % of school body who are orphans, IDPs, scholarship programs, free or reduced cost education), which is also helpful in defining a school.
- Include accreditation, institutional memberships, and special recognitions and honors e.g. school's national ranking, or that it isn't currently ranked nationally, in extra curriculums, sports (Kikapu High School has been the basketball national champions for the last four years.), science congress.. etc.

Clear information that the school has chosen to focus on academic results and so does not participate in district extracurricular competitions, or does not facilitate extracurricular activities can also be helpful if this is the case.

### **Curriculum**

- Describe the available academic programs e.g. all students are required to take courses in leadership and community service.
- Detail the enrollment policies (open or selective) – e.g. as a national school, the school takes the top x% nationally on the basis of KCPE results taken at age 13; e.g., the number of students in the school.
- List graduation requirements. E.g., In order to graduate, students are required to have done a community service project for at least two months

### **Grading and ranking procedures**

- Explain grading and ranking procedures, especially any weighting system used.
- Include appropriate explanations any grading or ranking that maybe unique to your school that appear on the transcript.

### **Additional suggestions**

- Include information or data that helps differentiate a school and/or its programs from others.

### **Acknowledgements:**

Information thanks to [www.collegeboard.com](http://www.collegeboard.com) and additional insight from Equity Foundation Scholars

### **Practical Tips for Writing Letters of Recommendation**

Amended from <http://www.accepted.com/college/LettersRec.aspx>

Pass these tips on to your recommenders to save them time and to improve your letters of recommendation.

## 10 Tips for Recommenders

**1** Review a copy of the applicant's personal statement or application essays so that your letter of recommendation can dovetail with — not conflict with or duplicate — the rest of the application.

**2** Ask the applicant to supply you with additional information like a resume or activity list.

**3** Describe your qualifications for comparing the applicant to other applicants.  
*I have been teaching high school drama for fifteen years and have taught form four English for the last five years.*  
*I have personally overseen the Science Club for the last five years – three of which when James was President - and have accompanied it to the National Finals in the last three.*

**4** Discuss how well you know the applicant.  
*I had the pleasure of directing plays in which James starred during each of his three years at ABC High School.*  
*Over the last three years I coached Jane as she worked her way up from the reserve team to the main team and to the national championships.*

**5** Choose two to three qualities that you observed in the applicant.  
*Jane has a rare blend of steely determination, incredible self-discipline, and great teamwork skills.*  
*The combination of tenacity, leadership qualities, and good communications skills found in John is truly unique.*

**6** In discussing those qualities, support your statements with specific instances in which he or she demonstrated those attributes. Be as concrete and detailed as possible.  
*John's discipline and dedication were extraordinary — not only did he never miss a practice; he came early to warm up and always worked out for an additional hour after school.*  
*Jane not only participated in every rehearsal; she also made herself available to other actors and actresses for impromptu rehearsals and practices, thus inspiring the rest of the cast to even greater efforts and success.*

**7** Try to quantify the student's strengths or rank him or her vis-a-vis other applicants that you have observed.  
*He was in the top 10% of his class.*  
*She has the best analytical skills of any high school form four student I have ever taught.*

**8** Avoid generalities and platitudes.

**9** Include some mild criticism, typically the flip-side of a strength.  
*The only fault I have encountered in him is his retiring nature. His modesty sometimes hides a young man of remarkable strength and broad interests.*

*Occasionally, her fortitude and persistence can turn into stubbornness, but usually her good nature and level-headedness prevail.*

10

Close with a ringing recommendation and endorsement of the applicant's ability.

*I enthusiastically recommend Mr. Doe to your university. This well-rounded student will be a fine asset to your student body.*

*With her exceptional leadership, writing, and quantitative skills, Ms. Smith will be an outstanding credit to the college she attends.*

11

BE HONEST AND TRUTHFUL IN EVALUATING THE APPLICANT

What would it also help to explain about this individual to an American who doesn't know Kenya?

- one of how many children in family & family position (e.g. eldest of 7)
- family background (e.g. mother sells produce by side of road from family smallholding, both parents graduated from high school, neither parent attended high school)
- challenges overcome or still being struggled with (e.g. orphan, IDP, childhood kwashikor caused by malnutrition, one academic year was not enrolled at high school due to family finances insufficient to pay school fees)
- attitude to learning, (positive) comments from teachers on their performance in class and outside – descriptions of individual projects undertaken etc.
- Very important. IF THEY TAUGHT OTHER CLASSES, OF HOW MANY PUPILS, HOW MANY YEARS BELOW THEM, FOR HOW LONG, IN HOW MANY SUBJECTS, FEEDBACK IF ANY FROM PUPILS, in particular evidence of likely ability to manage transition to independent learning at college in another country
- Validating achievements claimed on form, expanding on responsibilities and nature of achievement (e.g. school captain at time of post election violence, took on role of reassuring scared children by eating with them each evening, one of team at national finals)



# EXTRACURRICULAR INVOLVEMENT

As much as the academics are important, they are not the only thing that matter as the school considers your application. Most colleges aim for diversity and the more you have to offer, the better your chances of getting an admission. Make sure you detail your extracurricular involvement in your former schools and give specific details of how you made a difference in your school. Mention the kind of voluntary work you may have engaged in and what that meant to you as a person and the contribution it made to your character and attitude growth. Leadership is also a major factor that will help you gain favor with the admission officers. They want people who are self-driven and who are not afraid to say what they think and stand criticism. Be neither modest nor arrogant but state your achievements like you own them; because you do. You may also want to highlight those activities you feel you can continue to pursue in your new college. It is all about what you will be bringing to the school. Market yourself; make your brand as fancy as possible while keeping it simple and realistic at the same time.

## **In describing your experiences, think first ...**

- What is the heart of this experience?
- What details can I add to this experience, so they can see the challenges?
- What details can I add to show how I acted, planned, assessed, made an impact?
- What evidence can I add to show this isn't just my opinion, not shared by anyone else?
- How have I used my space?
- What is less relevant? What can I cut?

What is the point you are trying to make?  
Which are the details you need, which do you not need?  
What does a foreigner need to know, to understand?  
Give the most space to the most important aspects – in the mental health one, the situation for the patients and the impact of my support.  
On extracurricular form won't be able to put whole STAR, but put enough of the task (what you were responsible for), enough details of tasks/outcomes

### Brief guide to filling in Common Application Questions and Supplements

Preparation is key to success. When faced with a tricky question, many of us reach straight for a pen to start writing on the form..... **first research yourself, research the college, analyse what is being sought, prepare your case, draft with evidence, edit, check spelling & use of language, get feedback.**

**Before** turning to the form are you sure you have set other people off doing what needs to be done to ensure you have a complete application?

Have you understood what is needed and given them detailed instructions? If you are not sure what they should be doing, they will be even less clear.

Check on [www.collegeboard.com](http://www.collegeboard.com) against the colleges to which you are applying.

Have you got a plan for getting all the requirements in time?

#### References:

Remember: It will be far more difficult to collect your references – or to ask your referees to add additional details - once schools have closed in December. Do NOT leave this too late.

Have you asked and confirmed with 2 teachers that they are willing to write you references, and passed them the relevant information (about the college, yourself and how to fill in the forms) and forms? It is advisable to select one teacher from a Humanities subject (e.g. English, History) and one from a Science subject (e.g. Mathematics, Chemistry, Physics).

**Most important: Kenyan references and US references are very different. To enter a US college you need your teachers to give honest feedback and examples against each of the criteria on the form, in particular on your performance in class, intellectual curiosity, etc.**

**The time and effort you take to brief your referees will have a major impact on the quality of your references. Please read the section "Teacher Recommendations" until you really understand it, and can advise your referee, then share the Teacher Evaluation forms with your referees.**

And arrange for completion of your School Report (counsellor reference) probably by your headteacher, housemaster, dean of studies, class master, etc. And ask them to fill in the fees waiver request?

Considered whether a third referee from outside school might say something very different to your teachers which would considerably strengthen your case? E.g. this could include an athletics coach (fill in the athletics supplement) if you compete at regional or national level in a sport; a manager from voluntary work (if you did something independent and interesting e.g. tour with a theatre troupe in Turkana presenting plays on HIV transmission; peer counseling)

Identified which evidence will be needed from your parents for the financial form? This can include bank statements, pay slips, etc.

**Presentation of references:**

Your references may be either emailed in directly by the referee or sent in by mail by you.

Your references should be typewritten and signed by the referee. Each copy should be in an individual envelope for the different colleges (to show it is private). It is fine for the references to be photocopied, but they must then, individually, be signed by the referee, and hold an original copy of the school stamp. The envelope should also have a copy of the school stamp over the flap, to prove that you have not opened it again.

**Read the student guides to filling in applications on**

<http://www.collegeboard.com/student/apply/the-application/23626.html>

**Read all instructions and supplements for your college choices on**

[www.commonapp.org](http://www.commonapp.org)

**Additional Tips and Examples:**

- Academic awards – highest first e.g. ranked 15th in country ahead of top student in class
- ‘Please see attached’ if too many to fit on
- Or ‘Because of the intense competition at my high school, the administration does not assign any academic awards within the school.’
- Activity list – depth of commitment & leadership; possibly add additional sheet with brief explanation: e.g. Key Club three hours of community service a week at local children’s hospital

Activity list – not a shopping list, don’t add everything –  
Length of commitment (e.g. more than two years is impressive) one off visit is not

- Please briefly elaborate on one of your extracurricular activities or work experience in the space below:

Expand on one of your activities to show your level of dedication.

E.g. ‘For the debating team, we practically live together while researching a topic for the national tournament. Last year, our team went to the national finals and I won third place for my efforts. After spending an average of twenty-five hours a week discussing the assigned topic with the brightest people from my high school, how can I not call it my most meaningful subject?’

Shows dedication, effort, stimulation in working on ideas. Again, show dedication, effort, stimulation in working on ideas.

**Weaker answer to same question**

‘I like football because of the camaraderie. I feel really close to the people on the team, since we’ve been through so much together. I hope to play in college.’

Why is this weaker?

Opinions not evidence

No sense of drive or dedication

No sense of the achievement level, not clear this person would make an impact on campus



# THE PERSONAL ESSAY

Although the A in your KCSE and excellent SAT scores are very important, they say little about your character, drive, determination, and other personal qualities. Through your recommendations and your personal essays the admissions officers are able to know you in greater depth than your test score results can reveal. You should therefore use your personal essay to give the officer a clear image of your person. Once they read your essays, you would want them to wish to meet you. It sounds easy, but telling someone all about you in about 500 words is rather limiting. You therefore have to learn to get straight to the point and capture the details that define you while making your story interesting enough to hold the reader's attention. Remember, they have thousands of applications to read and anything boring would just put them off.

The best way to approach your personal essay is to imagine that you have five minutes with someone from the admissions committee. How would you go about making the best case for yourself while holding the listener's interest? What would you include and omit in your story? Figuring out the answer to these questions is critical to successfully writing an effective essay.

## The Personal Touch

All essays submitted as part of your applications package must focus on your person. Whether you are writing about the environment or about your hero, an admissions officer must gain a deeper insight about your person by reading your essay. The essay doesn't need to be a creative story, a tragedy, an epiphany or be autobiographical: any topic will often do and will always give you a chance to offer a perspective into your life. This guide will discuss some strategies you may use to pick a topic to write about, and also offer tips on how to write a 'personal' essay given an essay prompt.

As much as big words look impressive, and the fact that you'll know so many of them after your SATs – avoid them! Resist the temptation to use them! They will introduce a professorial tone that will mask the personal touch your essay seeks. Leave the labyrinthine sentences, abstract rumination and sophisticated vocabulary for college.

Keep it simple. Write clearly and personably. No one wants to keep wondering what you mean, neither does anyone have the time to look up words and decipher abstruse thoughts as they read your essay. However, watch against being too informal. The admissions officers would wish to know that you take the process seriously.

## ESSAYS 1: CHOOSING A TOPIC FOR AN AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL ESSAY

**Who are you?** It might be that you have done something that you are very proud of, which sums up deeper truths about you. E.g. standing up for a friend in a fight, and how that got you into mediation work.

DON'T choose an academic achievement (e.g. doing well in KCSE), all the applicants will have done well academically.

DON'T write a philosophical essay which is just about your thoughts or your research, and not about you, your growth, your actions. Try to include lots of concrete examples rather than general comments on your perspective on life. We want to know concretely why you think as you do, linked to experiences and actions.

**What matters to you?** What key experiences (they could be very small) evoke this experience for us, your readers?

**Imagine the other students**, from USA, and around the world, applying to your chosen college. What in your experience is different from theirs? What could you choose to write about (it could be very small) which could make your essay and experience stand out.

For example, most applicants will come from families where both parents went to university;

Most applicants will live in town or cities;

Simple essays for example about experiences which mattered to you in your village, or things you do in Kenya which people don't do in Europe (e.g. keeping chickens, smoking bees out of trees, mentoring fellow students with HIV, negotiating a price at the mitumba) – any of these can make your essay stand out.

**It doesn't have to be a deep and private story of your life.** What it does need to do is sum up one aspect of yourself that you are proud of, or a relationship which you feel deeply about or some kind of growth or learning in your life. **It needs to give us a chance to get to know you better and feel involved in your life and the way you see and act in the world.**

## ESSAYS 2: COLLEGE ESSAY TIPS

### Opinions vs evidence

'I'm a caring and effective leader' vs

'As elected school captain of the 400-strong Precious Blood School, I took a lead in supporting homesick new boarders in their first term. I coordinated an evening rota of prefects, initiated a programme of activities so that newcomers had less time to worry and made sure that I ate with the form one pupils at least once a week so

they could chat informally. Feedback from them was very positive 'I'd heard such bad things about the first term, but really, I felt at home here almost immediately'; and the headteacher commended my actions in the end of term assembly.'

If you give opinions (caring and effective leader) we don't know what you're judging against so can only give low marks. Say 2/5. We need the evidence, so we can decide our own opinion.

I'm an energetic athlete – could have been herding goats since you were 5, running marathons and to school and back – or could be a very lazy teenager, for whom getting out of bed is a trial. Show, don't tell.

SHOW DON'T TELL

### Thinking about your college essay

'What does she offer us besides numbers?'

The essay is where they hear your voice.

Key: what do I have to say to these readers?

NOT, what do they want to hear?

Tone: speaking to an acquaintance you want to become better friends with.

Familiar, informal, NOT like a school paper – an inspired conversation, scrubbed clean of hesitations, repetitions, vagueness. Natural. Personal.

#### Do's

Aim to entertain, engage.

Be willing to take risks.

Don't feel you should write something solemn or serious to be 'safe'.

You're looking for significant details. These appear in the humblest and most ordinary things you do each day, usually in a more interesting way than they do in the Big Moments (e.g. being elected school captain, winning the football match).

Do use active voice verbs. Overuse of the passive voice makes prose seem flat and uninteresting.

Before: The lessons that have prepared me for my graduate studies were taught to me by my mother.

After: My mother taught me lessons that will prove invaluable as I pursue my research interests.

#### Avoid

- Sweeping banalities e.g. in a trip

'I had to adjust to a whole new way of life. The first thing I noticed was the food, which was very different, as were all the customs; my adopted family's habits were quite different from anything I was used to, but by the end of my stay, I had come to accept them. I realised that neither I nor they were wrong but simply different.'

Instead, what were the **small but significant details** that you saw, tasted, smelt, noticed.

## Show, don't tell.

### **Don't: tell us what to think of you**

- 'I honestly believe that I have the discipline, determination and diversity of interests to succeed at whatever I do.'

Dull.

Show (your determination, diversity of interests), don't tell.

### **Anecdotes (small stories) are useful**

- As introductions to grab attention
- As final notes
- Or as details in the main body of the story.
- But DON'T squeeze a story to finish with the moral of 'marvellous me' or 'how I triumphed'. Finish with dialogue, or with an action you took.

### **Don't**

- Finish with a moral

NOT 'That summer taught me more than ever the importance of learning to get along with different kinds of people and the necessity of self reliance. I believe these qualities will be essential in college.'

Dull. Finish with dialogue or action taken.

### **Tone**

- Don't boast. 'I've made myself a better person recently. I know how to handle challenges.'
- Don't whine.
- 'I have some teachers who are mean.'
- Don't plead.
- 'I think Amherst is a great school and have wanted to go there for as long as I can remember.'
- This sounds too needy.

### **Beginnings**

Aim to nudge the reader into the rest in an interesting way.

'As I write, highly civilised human beings are flying overhead, trying to kill me.'  
[we wonder, why?]

George Orwell's essay on UK during World War II.

'In Moulmein, in Lower Burma, I was hated by large numbers of people – the only time in my life that I have been important enough for this to have happened to me.'  
George Orwell again.

## NOT

- 'Hello I'm Jane and this is the story of my life.' Boring
- 'In the following essay I hope to show..' – just do it.
- 'Have you ever thought about bee pollen?' - sounds false

## Endings

- Speaks to the beginning
- An anecdote?
- Dialogue?
- An action taken? (show don't tell)
- NOT a moral. NOT telling us what to think.

## Seek Feedback

- Seek Multiple Opinions. Ask your friends and family to keep these questions in mind:
- Does my essay have one central theme?
- Does my introduction engage the reader? Does my conclusion provide closure?
- Do my introduction and conclusion avoid summary?
- Do I use concrete experiences as supporting details?
- Have I used active-voice verbs wherever possible?
- Is my sentence structure varied, or do I use all long or short sentences?
- Are there any clichés such as "cutting edge" or "learned my lesson?"
- Do I use transitions appropriately?
- What about the essay is memorable?
- What's the worst part of the essay?
- What parts of the essay need elaboration or are unclear? The essay should not have any loose ends, unexplained assertions, or overly complicated reasoning.
- What parts of the essay do not support my main argument?
- Is every single sentence crucial to the essay? This must be the case.
- What does the essay reveal about my personality?

## ESSAYS 3: Analysing Essay Prompts (With Samples)

*Evaluate a significant experience, achievement, risk you have taken or ethical dilemma you have faced and its impact on you.*

What are the key parts of the answer you'd be expected to write about here?

Analysing questions:

Evaluate a significant experience, achievement, risk you have taken or ethical dilemma you have faced and its impact on you.

What are the elements you'd be expected to write about here?

Evaluate – find or judge the value of – think beyond the superficial

Some time setting the situation/task

Some time describing the risk/dilemma – why was it a risk, what were the consequences, what were you thinking, how does it clash with your values, what were your options, what did others suggest [how do you go about dealing with dilemmas, do you behave

professionally]

At least half describing your actions and results of your actions – its impact on you. You are a THINKER – what did it lead you to think then. What did it lead you to do differently next time? Your explanation of you, not your description of your values.

50:50 or 33:33:33 (risk, evaluation, impact/resolution/result)

Use your space well you need to have at least a third of it on the positive outcome.

Beware, the dilemma/risk mustn't be too daring. E.g. not drugtaking, theft, corruption. Ideally if e.g. achievement, not about the achievement but showing the effort, getting up early for years, to get there (this is transferable & transformative)

*A range of academic interests, personal perspectives, and life experiences adds much to the educational mix. Given your personal background, describe an experience that illustrates what you would bring to the diversity in a college community or an encounter that demonstrated the importance of diversity to you.*

How would you tackle this one?

Analyse your competitors – financially stable, privately educated, white, children of professionals, college educated,

- What from your experience might inform them of the experiences of the majority of the world? Or of your personal, different experiences?

Have you ever been the outsider and managed to speak from that experience, to broaden the insight of the majority?

e.g. I am a Quaker, a member of a pacifist church. We don't bear arms. Spent time at national assembly of German Quakers, 60 years after end of WW2. People getting elderly, reminiscing very painfully on experiences during war – loneliness in prisoner of war camp, in a concentration camp for speaking out, as child refugee, all of whose family died. Back home, children's school, studying Second World War. Teacher suggested a party at end of term where all come dressed as soldiers. Difficult to protest at school, can rebound on children. I protested – church school, Jesus pacifist, but also experience of children in war is to lose families, to be in concentration camps, to flee homes. Don't want to glorify it for our children.

Describe an experience which is different for you than from the majority and how you have articulated it before (bring to the diversity) – i.e., having the experience and staying quiet isn't bringing....

### **Examples taken from essays by Kenyan candidates and suggested improvements.**

#### ***How would studying in the US help you achieve your educational goals?***

Why would i prefer to study in the USA rather than study in Kenya? That was the first question that came into my mind. First, i considered the educational goals that i have. Then i analyzed the Kenyan education system and what i discovered was not good at all. So in order to be sure that i was making the right decision, i decided to compare the American and Kenyan education systems. And what i found out was both shocking and disappointing.

(..)

Studying in the USA is the best decision for me to achieve my educational goals and be the transformational leader that i want to be in my country.

*(Uncapitalised I.*

*Don't criticize another system broadly – unless it is an uncontested fact. Fine to talk about the benefits of US but don't criticize Kenya. It is fine, however, to mention specific things about the Kenyan system that won't work for you.*

*No evidence for us to assess. E.g. no details of educational goals, no details of what was concrete and disappointing. These are opinions not assessments – if you give us the evidence we can share your feelings.*

*Assumption it is her decision – this is a competitive situation, it is for you to convince the reader.*

I want to be the best there can be in Electrical Engineering or any other field that I may decide to study. (..) The education offered in USA is in a global aspect as opposed to focusing on the geography of a certain course, furthermore most US colleges are accredited thus after finishing my studies in US I can use my credentials to obtain a job anywhere in the world.

*Ok thoughts, but expression poor. Need simple clear messages – is it electrical engineering or something else (this blurs message, and makes it sound unrealistic fantasy.) Second sentence very muddled – long words but what does it mean, simply. Think of the 40th application. Also two ideas in one sentence. Use short sentences, one idea per sentence. Most colleges – again blurs your idea.*

My goal is to be an all rounded globally ranked aeronautical engineer: not just skilled in my own field but also with knowledge from other unrelated fields like art and design. Studying in the US will give me an opportunity to not only get excellent professional experience in my chosen career. It will also help me to minor in the other courses of interest to me. Above all, I will be able to network with people from different backgrounds and cultures, which is necessary in today's living.

*Clear, simple, direct. Wakes me up. Has a concrete goal. Has a voice.*

*Would be strengthened by: what have you done already towards aeronautical engineering/ or other interests. (track record of combining both). Or networking with others of different cultures.*

*Concrete details from research*

*All about what you want, not what you offer. If they are only taking 8 of 100 they need to know what you offer.*

'Being somewhat a 'career chameleon' (I have changed my career choice quite often) this is a great opportunity to settle on a field that suits me.

*I like this. Her voice comes through. She links the choice to her personality and nature.*

***Please describe your principal extracurricular, community, volunteer and family activities and hobbies in the order of their interest to you. Include specific events and/or major accomplishments such as musical instruments played, certificates earned, positions held, or honors won.***

1. Was vice-chair of both the mathematics and student science clubs in our school and vice chair in the District Student council in 2009/2010.
2. Was awarded certificate of merit for being second best in the student conferences.
3. Was recognized as the best dancer at the local full gospel music awards in xyz district.
4. Participated in dancing and singing for the school choir.
5. Was a member of the scouts club.

6. Played handball and participated in triple jump.
7. Was a member of the school athletics club.

(Good range but lack of detail. Factual, no analysis. Check usage of proper nouns)

Community activities – I was head girl in high school for a year. I saw this as a service to my school since I had to maintain order by seeing to it that things run smoothly. I also took part in community service that was organized by the church that involved visiting a children's home and cleaning up their compound.

*(Excellent experience of leadership but too brief. How chosen? Of how many in year? What did she have to do? 'I saw this as service – your opinion, what can we assess on?' What things? Give biggest space to biggest things. Second experience much less wide ranging, and no information on for how long, what YOU did.)*

Religious movement involvement. Being the chairman of the Seventh Day Adventist society, a Christian movement. I held responsibility for organizing rallies, availing character building opportunities for students and representing it before administration. Through our zeal and determination we were noted as the most disciplined group in the school worth emulation.

*(Good example. But more detail needed – of the school, the town, how many members, what was a rally what did you do, don't tell us they were character building, tell us what you did. Zeal and determination etc – these are opinions, we need to see breadth and depth)*

'Nothing was more calculated to ennoble the mind, broaden and elevate the thought than the art of song. 9.) For example, in the two choirs I sang, we spent several hours into the night practicing and synchronizing our voices to produce a harmonious blend of music. Though one voice can produce sweet music, there is a need for other voices to give the piece more life, beauty and an overall pleasant effect. No voice can do without the others; cooperation is required else discord abounds.

*(These are your opinions, you are telling not showing. Which music did you sing, led by whom, what did it feel like, what would we hear, what do you want us to know/assess you on.)*

I come from a small community of Kenyans set in the Taita Hills, where most of the young people are uneducated or do not see the point of education at all and the levels of poverty are appalling.

*(Great start. Showing. Would be strengthened by description of the young people – where many young people are illiterate, and stop schooling before the age of 10. Poverty is such that xyz.) Evidence not opinions.*

## Essays

### Intro

'As human beings we are bound under mutual obligations. No man is independent of the other. We are duty-bound to mind the things of others and esteem them better than ourselves, however contrary this is to our human nature. With this in mind, I have endeavoured to serve humankind especially the disadvantaged, the weak and vulnerable. Such a class of people invariably exist in each community. However social position or wealth should not alienate us from these people. They are as much human

as we are.’

*Sentiments laudable but general. Anyone could have written this so boring introduction. Telling us what you think, not showing us your experience. Your essay may be assessed by someone with a very different value system. Grab their attention with a story showing you doing this.*

‘With a kindly, self-sacrificing spirit and a steadfast purpose’

*This is your opinion. We don’t have the means to judge. We want to see your actions so we can assess this as this, by our standards. Be concrete.*

‘I have had to sacrifice my time, resources and energy for his sake. I had to take time off from my studies to attend to him. In the morning I had to teach him to bathe himself and to brush his hair.’

*Good experience, supporting someone. But tone poor – sounds like a victim. Always try to sound active – not have had to ... but chose to. Together we have.  
What impression do you want us to have? Or if it is about feeling you have no choice, then talk about this, about the pressures and impact.*

Getting a rod to the ground with our index fingers:

‘At the beginning we were telling each other what to do, and shouting the names of those who were not co-operating. I was frustrated that the seemingly easy challenge turned out so hard. Seeing this, the instructor gave us five minutes to re-strategise. We stepped aside, and each of us had a chance to air their views on how to get the rod harmoniously to the ground. We chose the tall people to be at the ends and to give instructions as we lowered the rod. The rest of us would be keen and listen. No more shouting and pointing fingers. None was to start celebrating before we had completed the task, distracting the rest.

*Simple. Straightforward. Shows us what the author sees as important. A good teamplayer. Full of life. Example of rethinking strategy.*

### **College Sample Essays**

You want to present a compelling essay that puts you ahead of the applicant pack at your target colleges. But how can you do so – without spending tons of time writing? We are sorry to disappoint you. While some students are able to produce a great essay at the first attempt, most will only come up with a great one at the fourth or fifth attempt and even then require as many additional drafts to produce a great final draft.

### **We are providing sample essays to stimulate your creative juices and provide varied examples of essay excellence.**

As you read them, note the individuality that flows from each one. Also observe the effective use of a clear theme, an engaging opening, and a conclusion that ties up each essay. When you finish reading them, you will feel a tiny bit like you met someone, maybe even someone you would like to meet again. That’s the feeling that can cause admissions committee readers to think “Accept”:

**Essay 1** — The Turn

**Essay 2** — Please Listen, It’s for Michael

**Essay 3** — We No Longer Count the Stars

You may also find additional sample essays online to illustrate the breath and variety of ideas students have explored on their admissions essays.

## College Sample Essays: The Turn

I gazed at the article with incredulity. If I was the author, I would have definitely entitled it “Man and his Insensible Adventures” or “The Culmination of Scientific Stupidity”. The article was about eighteenth century scientists who were amazed by Ben Franklin’s discovery that lightning was actually electricity. Some scientists set out to prove the viability of this discovery and decided to hold long iron rods pointed to the sky in lightning infested areas. This kind of “experimenting” stopped after one scientist had died after being struck by lightning. Surely, even toddlers know that lightning is electricity!

It was getting late and I had to get out of the library. Electricity had always fascinated me. For the past few weeks, I had decided to do an intensive research about it, - its origin, current applications and potential applications in the future. When I reached at home, I was welcomed by a power blackout. Exasperated, I started criticizing the local electric supply company: it was ridiculous to pay for services which were not being delivered efficiently.

“I think there is a problem with our fuse in the main meter, can you check it out?”

My dad’s concerned voice cut my train of thoughts.

I knew all about the fuse. It was a sacrificial over-current device with a small diameter, high resistant wire in the middle. When there was an overload in current, the wire melted and stopped the flow of electrons. This protected the device connected to the fuse. I was proud that I had such an in-depth theoretical knowledge about the fuse but then the fact that I could not use it to repair it hit me.

“Dad, I don’t have the right equipment. Moreover, that would be very dangerous”

My mind then wandered back to the article that I had read that day in the library. I always esteemed science and innovation. As a scientist, I always dreamt of inventing a gadget that would impact on my society greatly. The early scientists held on their dreams with a fiery passion. They were undaunted by setbacks and challenges. The immense amount of knowledge that exists today in science is a combination of many little contributions by these hardworking people. If I was John Dalton’s friend, I would have probably dismissed him as a schizophrenic after reading his findings about the atom. If I was a classmate to Lord Rutherford listening to a lecture by JJ Thompson, I would have wholly believed that electrons were enmeshed inside a lump of protons unlike Rutherford who went out experimenting and discovered that electrons encircled a nucleus composed of protons and neutrons. Great names in science surfaced in my mind. Isaac Newton, Albert Einstein, Archimedes, Michael Faraday, Ben Franklin all risked being sidelined by the society by having a free mind and daring to challenge widely accepted beliefs. They were ready to risk, even with their lives; this lay the pillar of technological advances. It now made sense to hold a pointed iron rod and wait for lightning to strike you. Undoubtedly, if such risks were not taken, we would not be having vast knowledge in the field of science.

“Trevor, you are so quiet.” My dad woke me up from my reverie.

“Dad” I sprang up from my chair, “I will check on the fuse!”

This time if anyone was to read an article about invention and risks, I wanted my name, Omangi Trevor, to be in it. I had discovered that it is only through idiocy, ignorance and risks that noble scientific discoveries have their foundation on.

## College Sample Essays: Please Listen, It’s for Michael

Have you ever approached someone for help and before you even utter two words they walk away? Or worse they ask you:

“Do you think I am a charity organization child? People work for their money, they don’t beg!”

*Well I have and not once or twice but severally.*

*I vividly recall standing on the streets after yet another disappointment; the sun searingly hot against my forehead. Sweat, now dripping down my face mingled with the stream of tears that found its way down my cheeks as I watched yet another respected member of society walk away. I recall that sickening feeling in my stomach; that feeling that maybe, just maybe if they spared their time to listen to me they would understand .They would understand that I wasn't begging for money for myself but for a greater purpose. I wanted so badly to turn and walk away but a something was holding me back. My mind wandered back to a time in my past.*

*“Nikuendeshe na ndege yangu?” (Do you need a ride in my plane) he asked so softly it could pass for a whisper. I noticed the drawl in his words as he spoke and could see the pain in his eyes with each word he pronounced yet he continued to speak. On closer inspection I noticed that the sores on his lips extended to the inside of his mouth. He was decked in faded blue jeans that were torn at the knees and a wrinkled old red t shirt that clung to his body portraying the picture that it was a size too small. Yet he continued playing seemingly unaware of his condition.*

*They called him Michael, just Michael. He was HIV positive as was his mother who had left him for dead at a dumpster in Mathare, a slum in Nairobi, Kenya. A passerby took him to the Nyumbani children's home and he had found a home there ever since. He was only seven and wasn't expected to live to his eighth birthday.*

*We were there visiting as members of the Pontifical Missionary Society. A society set up by children to help other children by availing to them food, clothing and occasionally visiting them to make them feel as if they belonged to greater family.*

*“Sawa, utanipeleka wapi?” (Okay where will you take me?) I asked as I settled on the edge of the bed.*

*“Nyumbani” (home) he answered as he went on to tell me of his grand dreams: he dreamt that he would finish his education and become a pilot; he dreamt that he would own so many mansions and take his friends to live there; he dreamt of a world without any pain or suffering, where his weak friends (he showed me a couple of them lying in bed) could play all they wanted.*

*Abruptly he turned and looked at me straight in the eye. The look piercing through to my very soul and for a moment I felt shiver. Then he smiled and for the first time his features softened and I saw him for whom he was. Past the sores and the blemishes of healed wounds that tainted his beautiful skin, past the slur of his words, past the drab garments he wore, I saw him and I don't think I have ever seen a prettier child than he was. He must have noticed my stare for he finally added “You can come over if you want to.”*

*“I would love to” I answered and he smiled again.*

*Michael passed away September of the following year and though I only saw him once he changed my life. I hope he found the lovely mansions he so fondly spoke about and that his friends who followed in his escape from this world are also playing without pain or suffering.*

*But I still kept wondering what happens to all the other Michaels. Do they find good children to help them or are they simply forgotten like Michael's mother did to him? Do I stand and listen to that child on the street who is trying to make case for Michael? Or do*

*I turn and walk away pretending I did not hear and in so doing condemning Michael to a life of solitude? Why do I say that he changed my life if I do not try and change his life too? Why didn't I give him a chance to have his dreams come true?*

*Well I changed. Despite the many phonies out on the streets to con people by begging I always found one who did actually need help. I have met many Michaels and I believe every one of them has changed me; they have given me a greater self awareness of myself and of humanity in general. But above all they have taught me to listen to others so I may also be listened to.*

*With a knot in my throat every time I was shunned away I now really understood why I kept walking on to the next stranger: I would look back to my past and I would meet Michael all over again. I would remember the reason I was in the sun; for Michael and in that moment I knew I could face the hardest of times just to see the smile on his face again. And so with that conviction I walked on to the next stranger  
"Excuse me....."*

### **Sample Essays: We No Longer Count the Stars**

*Nostalgic memories of my childhood often fill my mind. I especially remember the evenings. That was before my uncles moved out of dala, my Grandpa's homestead. Luo culture dictated that the eldest son would build his house to the right of the father's house, the next son to the left, the other to the right, ad infinitum. The plan left us with a wide sort of amphitheater in which we would while away our evenings as our mothers cooked in open fireplaces on either side.*

*We would roll gleefully on the rank grass with an occasional "Ouch!" – the result of treading the path of an ant. But the stars would fascinate me the most, especially those nights the falling stars would streak across the sky. We all wished we would one day get hold of a fallen star. It was rumored that a certain man who lived nearby had found one such, and that the government, sirikal, had paid him colossal amounts for the same. Such dreams would often be interrupted by our mums' calls to dinner. We would then reluctantly turn our gaze from the bewitching sky, peel our backs off the warm evening earth and trudge towards the fading embers of the night's cooking.*

*I was actually reminiscing such moments this evening. As I watched a meteor streak across the sky and fizzle out, fond memories of those moments of ignorance flashed through my mind. But now with the insatiable desire to learn more, more so since I read Einstein's Theory of Relativity. I suppose Einstein must have had long spells gazing at the sky before it hit him that light's behavior was more peculiar than previously thought. I think that it is in such moments that "Relativity" had root, and not in some secluded laboratory, less still in an observatory.*

*This evening, the rank grass was almost entirely replaced by hard, bare earth. The "amphitheater" is also almost non-existent, as my uncles have since moved to build their own homesteads. Further still, most of the cousins we played with have been married off (I had more girl cousins), having run away from school (what does school have to offer when there's clearly no jobs?).*

*Painfully still, it no longer rains well, leaving crops stunted and the cows emaciated. The chicken house now stands like a long-legged bird, the chicken having been depleted by stray dogs and some petty chicken thief.*

*I also have to rush into the house when I see two lights flashing by our gate. You see, it was only last week that robbers raided our home demanding money dad had got from selling some eggs. Thank God they never made use of their machetes whose edges glistened in the weak lantern light.*

*This time it's just Dad and a friend of his.*

*"You've never tired of watching the stars?" he asks. As I make a last gaze outside, I respond, forlornly:*

*"Dad, I will be a great economist and astronomer. Then, I shall enjoy counting the stars again!"*



# PERSONAL/ALUMNI INTERVIEWS

Personal interviews with college alumni give applicants the best opportunity to bring their applications to life. The interview mainly seeks to appreciate the energy, enthusiasm, passion, and commitment you bring to your interests and aspirations. The interview also gives the college a deeper insight into your personal qualities – your warmth, integrity, maturity, and motivation – which are important aspects of the admissions decision. For many colleges the personal interview is optional and is usually determined by the availability of interviewers.

The personal interview may not be the determining factor in the admissions process for some colleges but a lack of coherence between the report your interviewer files and the rest of your application could call the integrity of your application into question. The most important preparation for the interviews is therefore to ensure that your college application genuinely reflects your personal qualities and profile. You must be able to project the same individual described in your written applications in the interview.

Most personal interviews are not expected to answer any specific questions and interview questions will vary substantially and depend on an interviewer's preference and style. The most effective preparation strategy is therefore similar to the preparation for essay-writing. You should give much thought to yourself, your experiences, and your goals, and thereby formulate an interesting and persuasive presentation of your own personal qualities, whatever topic the interviewer steers the discussion into. You must ask yourself why you are interested in a top-tier education and what attributes, experiences, insights or goals qualify or prepare you for the challenge of such an education.

The interviewer is also an important source of information about the college you are applying to. Use the interviews to learn more about the college and its programs. Interviewers will appreciate insightful questions about the college. Do not ask questions that betray a lack of basic research or ask questions out of a feeling of being expected to. In fact, since your interviewer may be the only college-affiliate you'll meet before your admission and/or expected matriculation, the knowledge you gain from the interview may be critical in helping you choose to matriculate in the given college. Approach the interview, therefore, with the same judiciousness of the interviewer.

Finally, do not be scared or intimidated. Most interviewers choose to talk about issues and topics you are interested in or are passionate about and will find ways to make you comfortable. Indeed, the best interviews are normally manifested in flowing

conversations with your 'interviewer'. In this sense, the "personal interview" is more of a conversation rather than a traditional 'interview' in which a given set of questions ought to be answered by the end of the interview. The more relaxed you are, the better you will be able to illustrate your personal qualities. You may also be comforted to know that only few students in Kenya get interview invites. An invite will therefore signify you already stand a strong chance of admission.

If you forget everything else about this article, remember this:  
Know your story well; Relax; Enjoy yourself.

## INTERVIEW SKILLS

**Aim** – to get an impression of the applicant and to answer questions about the college for the applicant

- To confirm impressions elsewhere
- Trying to get a sense of what makes you tick, where your passions lie, how much of an impact you'd have in college, how sharp and interested you are academically

### Golden Rules for Answering Questions

- Be positive
- Be enthusiastic
- Be natural
- Be honest
- Be prepared – ready to take control
- Be friendly and polite
- Be confident

### Preparation

- Start with the college website
- Now look at the website of the departments in which you are most interested. Dig deeper.
- How does it studying your chosen subject(s) here differ from other colleges? What are the positives in this?
- Talk, if possible, to current or former students, or look at visit reports on discussion groups

### Preparation - You!

- Re-read your application form (you did keep a copy didn't you?)
- Try to see interviewer's view point - are there areas that would worry them?
- Look at your life as a series of key events and try to anticipate questions on each
- Try to practice answering questions, but don't learn by rote
- Check you have good examples for use of each of skills on person specification – STARS model
- Practice

### Common Criticisms

- Created poor initial impression
- Didn't sell themselves effectively
- Didn't elaborate on responses to questions
- Dull – lacked spark
- Looked away all the time
- Couldn't discuss things they had put in their application (please note, however,

- that your interviewer will not have access to your application)
- Lacked enthusiasm
  - Appeared not to know anything about the college

Why this might be the case:

- Probably scared, under-researched
- How we actually present very different from how feels on other side table – practice interview with friend – see what feels like to drag more information from them. Then rate them on a scale of 1 – 10:

Outstanding (9 – 10): one in a hundred  
Desirable (6 – 8) : generally strong who should make a contribution  
Acceptable (3 – 5) : has no significant weaknesses, has promise of academic success and personal development but like many others

### **Some practical tips:**

- First impressions matter, smile and shake hands with confidence
- Help the interviewer by guiding them towards your strengths
- Think before you open your mouth
- Nerves are normal - the only cure is good preparation
- The end of the interview is important, ask some sensible questions or mention any strengths that have been overlooked
- It's hard to predict the outcome there and then so behave throughout with confidence
- Ask for the interviewer's card so you can write a brief (professional) thank you card/ email

Research shows, form impressions in first 4 minutes:

- 55% visual impact (including dress, posture, body language)
- 38% tone of voice
- Only 7% what actually say

### **How would you tackle these interview questions?**

These are not trick questions. These are means to allow you to express your passions and interests.

- Tell me about yourself...
- Tell me about your family
- Tell me about your high school, some of its strengths and some of its weaknesses
- Why are you interested in applying to this college?
- What are the subjects you enjoy most? (Elaborate)
- Tell me about any academic interests you have beyond the classroom.
- If you could change something about your high school, what would you change?
- What activities are the most important to you?
- What have been the biggest disappointments or failures in your high school career?
- What did you do this summer?
- Do you have any interesting hobbies or outside interests?
- What teacher has had the biggest influence on you?
- If you had an entirely free day, how would you choose to fill the time?
- How would your friends describe you, your strengths and weaknesses?

- Are there any accomplishments you are particularly proud of, and why?
- What current event has sparked your interest?
- Have you read any interesting books lately?

Notes:

- Tell me about yourself: don't ramble on – snapshot sell self and relevant abilities
- Are you genuinely interested in what you are doing?
- Highly selective colleges are looking for substance, you don't have to be flashy, just be yourself
- They're judging 1/2 on academics (intellectual vitality), 1/2 on extracurricular and personal qualities

## BOOSTING YOUR WAIT-LIST CHANCES<sup>1</sup>

If you are very eager to attend a particular school, you may decide to stay on the waiting list. But first ask about the conditions attached to this status. Students accepted from the waiting list may lose priority housing or financial aid options.

Here are a few actions you can take that may boost your chances of acceptance.

### 1. Fill out and return the postcard.

This alerts the school that you want to remain on the waiting list.

### 2. Send a letter to the admission office.

The school has already determined you have the necessary academic credentials, so nonacademic factors are most likely to sway admissions officers.

- Declare that the school is your first choice.
- Explain why you are a good match for the school.
- Explain why the school is a good match for you.
- Make it personal: describe how passionate you are about the school and state that if accepted, you will indeed attend.

### 3. Stay in contact.

Share new information—such as coming in first in a science fair or getting a poem published in a magazine—with an admissions officer (preferably one with whom you've made contact previously) via email or regular mail.

Give this information in print rather than verbally so it ends up in your file. You may also want to send samples of work relevant to the area you want to major in. Do not just contact the school for no reason. It's annoying to the admissions officer and decreases your likelihood of getting in.

### 4. Visit and request a first or follow-up interview.

Visit the school by mid-April and bring along your most recent grades. Call in advance to set up a campus interview. An interview can give you a personal contact—someone who can check on the status of your application.

### 5. Work hard.

This is no time to slack off. You may be reevaluated based on your third- and fourth-quarter grades. Ask your school counselor to write or call to ensure that the admission office has your most recent grades and records of achievements.

<sup>1</sup> This section is taken verbatim, from the College Board Student Handout.

## 6. Stay involved.

Show admissions officers you're committed to clubs, sports, and other activities.

## 7. Wait.

It's hard to do, but now you just need to wait. The next move is up to the college.

### Action Plan for US college applications

Now write in what deadlines you are setting yourself. Tick items off as you complete them. These are not necessarily in order. You will need to be working on several items at the same time.

**Remember to leave time to get lots of feedback from friends, family, and colleagues, especially on essays and the Common Application forms/supplements. Start early. Don't start just before the deadlines.**

Open your Common Application account [www.commonapp.org](http://www.commonapp.org) REMEMBER your login.

Research colleges. Make preliminary choices.

FIRST READ THE REQUIREMENTS FOR EACH OF YOUR COLLEGES – they may differ.

School profile

Teacher references (2, maybe 3 depending on college)

Transcript & certified KCSE certificate

Counselor Report/School Report (which may be from school guidance counselor/head teacher/housemaster)

Fee waivers for each college from headteacher/guidance counselor

SAT revision, online and through books

Book and pay for SAT1 and SAT2

IF YOU DO NOT HAVE national photo ID you will need a form of photo ID for the SAT tests.

Finance Forms

Check which forms your college choices need you to submit for finance. They may have their own, they may use a standard one. Start collecting information/bank statements/certification for International Student Financial Aid Application (on College Board) and/or individual college websites, and for International Student Certification of Finances. Fill in form.

Common Application Essay.

Supplementary essays and questions for those colleges needing them (check on [Commonapp.org](http://Commonapp.org))

Common Application Form

Download test scores. Consider your college choice against them. Revise college choice.

Arrange to send test scores to colleges

CHECK your application is complete. Get it checked by someone else too.

Post all documents to colleges and/or submit online.

Prepare for interview if invited.

Write thank you letter.

If waitlisted, write update letter when submitting postcard.

# NETWORKS OFFERING FREE COLLEGE ADMISSIONS MENTORSHIP

## **ZAWADI AFRICA**

The Zawadi Africa Education Fund is a program designed to provide scholarships to academically gifted girls from disadvantaged backgrounds from Africa to pursue higher education in the US. The Zawadi Africa Education Fund is based on the highly successful Kennedy/Mboya Student airlifts of the 1960's, through a partnership with individuals and institutions with an interest in creating leadership opportunities for girls in Africa. It is based at Hazina Towers (16th floor). The program aims at helping the applicants forward their application forms to the universities in the US and also advises on how to appropriately apply for financial aid. The students are also engaged in various change and leadership conferences to prepare them for life abroad. After admissions, the students are networked with other Zawadi girls in their schools for easy adaptation to the school environment.

Zawadi Africa is open to all girls who have completed secondary education provided they scored a minimum of B+ in the KCSE and can demonstrate financial need. To join Zawadi, pick the application forms at their office in Nairobi and complete them. Applicants are required to write their autobiography as part of the application process. After submitting the application one is invited for a personal interview. A selection committee reviews the applications and communicates its decision to the applicant.

Contact Information:

Rose Adhiambo

Program Administrator

P.O.BOX 59949-00200

Nairobi

Hazina Towers

16th Floor

ICRI Office

Monrovia Street

Nairobi, Kenya

Cell: 0722580596

Landline: 0202305655

Website: [www.zawadiafrica.org](http://www.zawadiafrica.org)

## **KENYA SCHOLAR ATHLETE PROJECT (KENSAP)**

The Kenya Scholar-Athlete Project helps bright students from an underserved region of Kenya gain admission to elite colleges in the United States. The Project selects its students—about a dozen each year—primarily on the basis of their performance on the Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education (KCSE) examination. The Project’s target region is the western Rift Valley Province. During selection, considerable weight is attached to the students’ family background, with strong preference given to those who have demonstrably overcome adversity. A large majority of the Project’s students come from peasant farming families; many are first-generation high school, nearly all are first-generation university. On the day the exam results are announced, Kenya’s national newspapers list the names of the 100 top scorers in the country as a whole (300,000 test takers) and in each of the eight provinces. Students from the Project’s target region whose names appear in these newspaper lists are sent invitations to apply for admission to the program and to attend a tryout. The application form is quite detailed and requires several essays; the tryout consists of a brief interview and a 1500-meter run.

Contact Information:

Website: [www.kensap.org](http://www.kensap.org)

## **EQUITY AFRICAN LEADERS PROGRAM**

As part of its CSR Equity Bank picks the top male and female students in the Kenya Certificate of Secondary Examination (KCSE) in every district where it has a branch. These students who are so picked are offered paid internships in various sectors of the bank and assisted in applying for admission to the best institutions of higher learning in the world.

# CONCLUSION

It's now time to get your best shoes on and get to work. You cannot afford to be stingy when it comes to your dreams and your future. You may be thinking 'what a mouthful of information?' but believe me when you get down to it and look back, it will be worth every minute of your time and every penny spent. It's a worthwhile investment. There will be days when it seems too big a cost to bear, but the best things in life do not come easy. You have to work for it.

Find someone who is pursuing the same goal and work together. It is always awesome to have someone who keeps you accountable. Give each other deadlines and make sure you follow yours. There is nothing more fulfilling as having done what you set out for at the beginning of it all. Having a partner also helps you realize that you're not alone. You may also need to keep in touch with your mentors abroad so that they can give you information that may be vital for your application.

Time management is key to a successful application and the earlier you start, the better it will be for you as you will have enough time to diffuse the pressure and work at your packages in a healthy pace. It is better to have all your papers ready and waiting for submission than to rush everyone and getting angry when they don't deliver the best at the last minute.

Finally, remember it will not make sense unless you want it bad enough. Dream it until you own it. See yourself in the school of your dreams and let nothing stop you. Hopefully, this guide will act as a porch light to help you as you go along your path to excellence and goal achievement.

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