**Deep Dive into Application Process for US Universities**

When it comes to the USA, universities follow a holistic approach in choosing students. They evaluate a student not only through their test and academics scores, but also through their personal qualities and characteristics. Like a student has a personality, a university also has a personality. The university matches the student’s personality with theirs to see whether they can fit in or can bring new experience on the campus. There are over 4000 universities in the USA. Students apply to only a handful among them and then finalize on one. Therefore, it’s important that they find the right set of universities for the student through some serious research.

The application process for the universities in the USA tends to be different from the application process for the universities in India. Students have the option of applying to the colleges in the following ways:

1. Common Application Process (Common App)

2. Coalition Application Process

3. Universal College Application

 4. Applying directly to the Universities. Let us take a brief look at each of these and when the student has to pick one, two, or a combination of the processes.

1. Common Application: The oldest portal or pathway for students to apply to the universities in the USA is the Common Application, or more popularly known as the Common App. It is a standardized online application form accepted by more than 517 undergraduate institutions in the US and used by more than 800,000 students. Through the Common App, a student can apply to a maximum of 20 of the participating colleges at the same time. The student would be uploading all the documents and information required in the application on the portal itself. It has all the usual fields for name, address, school and test data, as well as questions about work experience, personal statement and volunteered activities. This application is then sent to all the universities that the student has shortlisted.

The application is available for both first-year students and transfer students who are applying from another US college or university. Universities can streamline the process further as the member institutions all use the same core application. However, most institutions will request supplemental essays tailored to their university. Each institution may add questions or essays to the basic application, so students have to check what is required before applying.

One of the biggest advantages that students have when students choose to submit their applications by way of the Common App is that they save time! Rather than filling in the same details in 20 different places, the students end up filling it once and sending it across to the colleges of their choice. Another advantage is that the student ends up filling a single format of the application form, as opposed to the multiple formats that would be required if the student is submitting the applications separately. This also avoids confusion caused while handling different applications of different universities.

2.Coalition Application Process:

A relatively newer portal for students to apply to universities in the US is the Coalition Application. This application is for a set of universities which call themselves the Coalition for Access, Affordability, and Success. Since it is a relatively new portal, it has over 90 participating universities that meet the Coalition requirements for membership. Only those universities that have a graduation rate of at least 70% over the last six years would be a part of the Coalition. Additionally, each participating university is committed to providing accessibility to lower-income students. While the public schools do this by offering low-cost in-state tuition to residents of their state, the private universities will meet the full demonstrated need of students! The portal allows students to start building a college portfolio online as soon as they enter high school. Hence, you may think of the Coalition App as a locker that will keep a record of all your extra-curricular right from class 9. The important question that we need to understand is: What to use between Common App and the Coalition App?

The Coalition application, is accepted by only about 10 percent of the number of colleges that accept the Common App. While the Common App has nearly 700 member colleges, the Coalition App has 93 member colleges, but for now, only 60 will actually be accepting the Coalition application.

However, three universities – the University of Florida, the University of Maryland-College Park, and the University of Washington-Seattle – will only accept the Coalition app

The Common App activity section allows students to provide up to 10 activities from their high school resume; the Coalition App first asks for your top two and then allows you to provide up to eight. Also, the Common App allows students to integrate with a school’s guidance office using e -Docs. At the present time, the Coalition App does not provide this option, other than the virtual locker, which students can share with the school counselor

Some of the top colleges accepting the Coalition App include Carleton College, California Institute of Technology, Duke University, Rutgers University (New Brunswick), etc.

3.Universal College Application: Similar to the Common Application and Coalition Application, The Universal College Application is another way in which the student can apply to the colleges in USA. The Universal College Application is a USbased organization which provides college admission applications that allows students to apply to any of the participating colleges. Common App has been the widely available application for use at multiple colleges. It was created in 1975, with 15 colleges in its first year. It still dominates the college application world, and today is used by more than 800 colleges and universities

However, back in 2007, the Universal College Application (UCA) was created, and now serves 18 colleges and universities. The UCA also allows the student to create a centralized college application with the student’s demographic information, extracurricular activities, and grades. The application is then sent to various colleges.

Some of the top colleges such as Cornell, Harvard, Princeton, University of Chicago, etc. accept the Universal College Application.

4.Applying directly to the Universities: Another way in which students can apply to the universities is by directly submitting the application forms to the respective universities. While most of the universities would accept the applications from the application portals such as Common App or Coalition App, some universities (like Penn State University) require for the students to apply to them directly. In such cases it is all the more important that the student has a keen eye on the details that he is filling in as the format of the application form might be different from the portals, and the student has to ensure that all the necessary information has been filled in and the respective documents have been uploaded. A student, in most cases, would be applying to the universities from one of the aforementioned modes. However, if the student shortlists colleges in such a way that some require Common App, some require Coalition App, some Universal, and the others require direct application, the student has no option but to apply in the said manner.

**When to apply?**

Ideally, the process of applying for undergraduate study in the US begins 1 – 1.5 years before enrolment. For most students, this is during the spring / summer of their class 11. Students need not panic if their class 12 year has started and they are just getting started with the application process; they simply need to work at a faster pace. And if they are in the GCSE year, they can get a leg up on the process by starting early.

Beginning the application planning process 18 months prior to the enrolment means that the student has to:

Research various colleges and university programs to see which suits their¬ academic and professional goals.

Register and prepare for required entrance exams: Students planning to¬ apply for undergraduate studies should register and prepare for the TOEFL and SAT exams. Once the students get their SAT scores, they can shortlist the universities which can be considered for application. Students can also sit for the PSAT, which is like a primer or a trial run to the SAT exams, in classes 9 and 10 to determine what level of score they can reach and then improve it in the actual SAT exam. This will help them in listing some universities based on their score

**Application Deadlines:**

There are certain deadlines for the applications submitted to the US universities. We will now discuss the different types of applications and their deadlines.

Most schools allow students to apply early in one of two ways: Early Decision or Early Action.

**Early Decision**: Early decision application is a type of application in which a student applies to a university or college. If the university or the college accepts the application, the student has to withdraw all other applications which he or she might have sent to other institutions. In other words, the student is now committed to the said university.

As the name of the application suggests, universities in this case, decide very early whether to accept the student’s application or not. This is beneficial for the students, in a way, because they will know whether they are accepted or rejected, much earlier before the usual application deadlines.

In case the applicant is not accepted, they will either be rejected or deferred. In case of rejection, they can apply to other universities when the normal application process starts. However, the student cannot apply to the same college (from which he got a rejection in the early decision) in the normal application cycle. In case a student is deferred in the early decision application, it means they will be reconsidered in the normal application process.

During this period of deferment from Early to the Normal application deadline, students are free to send additional supporting documents to strengthen their application like updated mid-year scores, additional recommendation letters, etc. They are also free to apply to other universities.

**Early decision deadlines often fall in November**, **and students are typically notified of the decision in December. There are two early decision deadlines:**

ED 1 in November¬ The slightly less common ED 2 in January¬

These are more common at private **liberal arts colleges**. Like early action, ED 1 students typically apply by 1st November in anticipation of an admissions decision by 15th December.

Early decision applications are binding. Students should think very carefully before applying to a university in the early decision cycle. Students, their school, and their parents will have to sign an early decision agreement certifying that they understand the terms of early decision which are:

The early decision university should be the student’s first choice (worldwide) and if accepted, they will withdraw all other applications (worldwide) and attend that university.

The only exception is if the student applies for financial aid and does not¬ receive sufficient aid to take up the offer.

Students can submit only one early decision application in the ED1 and/or¬ ED2 rounds.

It should also be known that if a student decides to cancel an early¬ decision obligation to a university, it is unlikely that another competitive institution will accept them.

 Students can seek release from an early decision obligation on the¬ grounds of financial hardship, if the financial aid package they are offered is genuinely inadequate; however, the burden of proof in these cases is on the student. It means that students will have to provide sufficient proof for this claim.

By the way, an important drawback to early decision admissions is that they leave applicants with no leverage to negotiate a better financial aid package — the university knows you can't go anywhere else.

Early decision applicants are expected to submit only one early decision application to one school. They can submit applications to other schools under normal application procedures, but agree that they will withdraw all those applications if they are accepted to the early decision school.

Again, students should keep in mind that they are not just being asked to indicate a school preference; they are being asked to forego all other options and to commit themselves to spending four years (and tens of thousands of dollars) at a particular institution. That's a big decision for anyone to make. It should only be taken with the best possible information and advice, and without undue deadline pressure.

Early Action Application:

Early Action Application is non-binding. This means a student is not obligated to attend a university if accepted. They may also apply early action to multiple colleges. Early action deadlines usually fall at the same time as the early decision applications. The obvious advantage of early action over early decision is the opportunity it gives students to apply to universities and ultimately compare financial aid packages between different institutions. If a student is accepted in an early decision application, they risk missing the admission deadlines of other schools while waiting for their award package to arrive. If that award is not great, they are left with very few options.

In our view, early action applications are a better deal for most applicants. They give students the benefits of early notification without the obligations of early decision. Even if accepted, students are free to apply to other schools and to compare financial aid offers.

The most common deadlines for early action are November 1 and November 15. The most common notification is in mid-December, which means that the student would find out about the status of their application (accepted, denied, or deferred). Deferred application would mean that the application pool received by the university was very competitive due to which the student’s application was pushed to the normal application cycle. In case an application has been deferred, the student has the opportunity to send in additional documents that would make the student’s application stronger.

**Single Choice Early Action (SCEA):**

This application specifically requires students not to make EA applications to other schools, although they are free to apply elsewhere under the regular admissions round. In recent years, several of the country's most selective universities (including Yale and Stanford) have adopted non-binding early admissions programs.

In other words, Single Choice Early Action means students have to apply to only one university on an early action basis, and the institution is aware of this. That’s good, because colleges like to have a high percentage of accepted students who actually end up attending from the early action applicant pool.

Applying to a US university single choice early action signals that the student really wants to go to that university, which in turn is more likely to admit the student. Like early action, it’s non- binding and the deadline is usually November 1st. Single choice early action is recommended if:

Students know which university they want to attend;

 If they think their junior year grades are strong enough to get them an¬ admission;

 They are not sure if the university’s financial aid package will be good¬ enough and affordable for them.

Usually, students need to confirm by May 1st whether they will be attending Their Single Choice Early Action University or not. By then, they will have heard from all the other universities they have applied to, so they get a little time — though not much — to weigh their options.

May 1st is also termed as the International Acceptance Deadline, because students have to declare their joining decision to their respective universities.

**Restrictive Early Action:**

Restrictive early action is another type of application which is quite similar to the Single Choice Early Action application. The difference lies in the policies of the universities where a student is applying. For example, many universities like Harvard, Princeton, Stanford, and Yale specify this type of application and state certain rules which differ from the previously seen applications. Like early action, students typically apply by 1st November in anticipation of an admissions decision by 15th December. This type of deadline is non-binding.

There may be exceptions in the university policy (check on their admissions page) such as allowing students to apply early to state universities with a non-binding, rolling admissions policy; or to universities where the university application is considered for scholarships must be submitted earlier than 15th December.. We now come to the normal type of application.

Regular Decision Application:

Students typically apply by 1st January in anticipation of an admissions decision by 1st April. This type of deadline is non-binding and non-restrictive. Students may apply to as many universities in the US as they choose under regular decision policies.

The deadline for regular decision applications is normally between January 1st and February 1st, depending on the college. If a student wants to apply through this type of application then, they should get the bulk of their essays done and confirm who will write recommendations in November itself.

The regular college application deadlines are late enough so that the first semester grades of their senior high will be considered.

**Rolling Admissions**: This is yet another type of admissions in which students can apply over a set period of time (typically August to Spring), and the admission decisions will be made on a rolling basis. It means that the university authorities will keep reviewing the applications as and when they receive them. There will be no deadlines for applications or for decisions. However, it is still suggested that applicants still apply early (October/November) if possible. This type of deadline is non-binding and non-restrictive. Transfer applicants generally have a deadline of around May 1st to submit applications for the following fall semester. Universities with rolling admissions policies — looking at applications as they come in, until all spaces in the class have been filled — also, in most cases, have deadlines as late as May 1st. Some may continue to accept applications even later, depending on how many open slots remain. However, virtually all rolling admissions schools recommend that you get your application in by March 1st or earlier to have the best chance at being accepted.

**Benefits of Applying Early:**

Early Action and Early Decision applications allow students to apply early to US universities and receive admissions decisions well before the usual spring decision date, which means either by December or January. The advantage of Early Action and Early Decision is that the competition is lesser and students are more likely to be accepted if they have the required credentials. Still, applying early is not for everyone. It depends on how sure they are of the colleges they want to attend. If a student is sure about which college they want to attend, early decision or early action might be the best choice for them. If they are not sure, they should keep in mind that some early application plans require them to commit early. Therefore, students must consider all options.

**Application Requirements:** 1. Application Form; 2. Academic Documents- such as report cards etc.; 3. Test scores — of IELTS/TOEFL, ACT, and SAT etc.; 4. Essays; 5. LOR or Letter of Recommendation; 6. School Forms; 7. Activities List; 8. Other documents/requirements (universities may require — interview, portfolio, audition for talent based courses) etc.

**Letter of Recommendation:**

Letters of Recommendation or LOR’s are one of the most important documents in the whole application process. LOR’s play a vital role in helping the university officials in understanding a student. Every US University requires at least 2 to 3 Letters of recommendation, preferably one from a counsellor and the other two from relevant subject teachers.

Submitting LOR’s is quite simple. Students have to provide the email addresses of their teachers or counsellors. An automated mail will be sent on that email addresses which will contain a link or URL where they are required to submit the LOR. Teachers or counsellors then have to submit the MS word file of the LOR on the said link.

**Essays:**

Essays are basically articles or write-ups which universities ask students to write. The topic is often determined by the university. Usually Mostly, students are asked to describe their cultural background, other life experiences, academic interests etc. or their aims in an essay. Essays play a very important role in the admission process and are often the reason why a student is accepted or rejected.

Admission essays serve to highlight the intellectual capabilities of a student and provide an insight into his/her writing abilities and thought process. Essays serve as evidence that a student can support ideas with logical arguments in addition to providing insights into the personality of the student.

Students will be asked to respond to two or three essay questions per application. Each university will set its own questions, as well as desired length for the response. However, most universities will ask for similar types of essays (i.e. one about the student as a person, one about their academic interests, etc.). The typical length is 500-750 words per essay. Essays also help universities to understand a student better to know if their personality, matches the personality of the university

**Some realities about admissions in US universities:**

More often than not, when many people try to avail a certain thing, there are many myths and misconceptions that surround it. So is the case in admissions to US universities too. A major one of them is the thought that a good career can be attained only by studying in the reputed universities. Because of this misconception, many students miss out several good universities just because they are not popular. Just look at this pie chart and you will understand it better:

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The universities and colleges in USA are divided according to the percentage of the applicants that they accept. You see the tiny part in blue? Those are the universities which accept only 2% of total applicants. In other words, if 1000 students apply to them, they will accept only 20 of them.

Then there is a slightly bigger part of those universities whose acceptance rates vary from 25% to 49.9%.

And finally there is the huge part in green which are those universities which accept more than 50% of total applicants. The best part is: a lot of students apply only to the first two types of universities and just ignore the other 85% universities where the acceptance chances are much, much higher

The Institute of International Education releases an annual report called OPEN Doors. This report provides information about the international students studying in the US. According to this report 69% of the international students are clustered over 5% of the US universities.

So, just over 200 universities in US host a majority of students attending school in USA.

It’s true that we should encourage students to aspire/aim high and apply to those very selective schools in the USA if they are a good fit to them. But we should not ignore the biggest piece of the pie that has many other university options that the students can consider.

So it all depends on the students: what they choose to do, whether to fall in the bracket where the admission process is very high or to explore all options and then apply to the good fit universities where the admission process will be stress free. Remember, there is no difference in the quality of education among a most popular, private, or a state university. The education standard is evaluated, updated and implemented to generate similar student experience across all universities.

USA Application Timings:

The admission process in US universities takes considerable time. Admissions to the fall term typically begin in August and the deadlines can arrive as early as November, a full 9 months before the students actually begin their studies. Not all application deadlines are as early as November, but different universities would have different deadlines which can be anywhere from

December to February. This will again be several months before students begin their studies. This means students will be in their final year of their secondary studies i.e. in class 12. So students from India will be applying to the universities before their final class 12 exams, without their annual reports. Therefore, they will be asked to submit the predicted scores and latest midterm results for application decisions. Universities release their admission decisions at all different times. Depending on when they have applied, students may receive the reply as early as December, or by March end, or early April. The first half of April is the final limit of receiving reply from a university, no matter when a student has applied.

The same goes for the replies on financial aid if applied. Financial aid is usually a package, which is offered to students along with the admission offer or after the admission offer.

So essentially, the students will receive a reply from the universities by early April so that they can prepare themselves for the big Day i.e. 1st May which is called as the Candidate’s Reply Date or the Acceptance Deadline to choose the university they would like to attend.

In case the students cannot meet the timelines to apply for the fall term, then they can choose to apply for the next intake which begins in January. This intake is also called as the winter term by universities that follow the quarter calendar or spring semester by universities that follow the semester calendar. An important factor to keep in mind when applying for the January admissions is that not all universities offer this intake. The universities that do offer this intake, do not offer all programs/majors. So, if a student is planning to apply for the January admission, it is necessary to do proper research before applying. They should also know that applying for the January intake means fewer options of majors and less number of universities would be available for consideration.

Another thing to note is that if the students are considering the January intake then they would have completed their class 12 and would have their annual results in hand. If students have graduated from school and then wish to apply then they are not at a disadvantage. However US universities would be interested to know what the student has done since graduation. And this plays an important role in the application evaluation. They would expect students to spend this time to improvise and build their skills.

Students could utilize this time to strengthen their English skills, do community service, or even work. Importance is given to how they have spent this time to improve themselves.

Basis of Selection: Universities consider the various factors that were discussed so far. Apart from that, what universities look for in an application can be summed in these two questions:

* Is the student academically/educationally well prepared? And will the student be academically successful?
* Is the student a good fit for the university?

The highly selective universities accepting fewer applicants would have students with higher academic and test scores and would give weightage to other unique aspects that students would have.

On the other hand the less selective universities would focus more on academics. So if the students meet the academic requirements then they are more likely to get an admission in them

Some universities follow the important 5 P’s rule for evaluating the International applicants:

**1.Performance:** Which can be determined from the academic transcripts etc. of the student. .

**2. Program:** Which is determined through rigor of the curriculum that the student has followed in high school, whether APs, IB, A levels and what courses they have studied and whether they have fully utilized what their high school had to offer.

**3. Potential:** Which is determined through SATs and ACT scores of the student.

 **4. Participation:** Which is determined by knowing if the student participated in clubs, sports, after school jobs, community work etc. If yes, then there are possibilities that they will participate in such things at the university as well.

 **5. Personality:** Which is determined through essays, LORS, interviews, or personal meetings with students if the delegates are traveling and get to meet students in person.

There is one more thing that is considered: Institution Priority. Institution priority can be understood by this example.

University of Pennsylvania offers 2400 seats and the applicants are over 35,000. 6000 of them are international students.

Now, apart from all the aforementioned requirements, the university will see what type of students they need in that particular year. If they want good tennis players then they will scan the applications for students who, apart from fulfilling the above requirements, also happen to be good tennis players.

OR

They are looking for female students for a certain programme like in Fine arts. This leads to a certain amount of unpredictability. So, it means that there are things the university will look for which may not be known by the students. Hence, sometimes, there are no such fixed formulas of getting into a specific university

The university will try to put together the best possible combination of class at that moment. So, in such selective admissions each year thousands of students applications are turned down, not because the students were not good, but because the admission officers were looking for something else.

Hence, it can be said that the universities have a set of priorities in mind when they are considering the application forms received by them. The priorities become the deciding factors for the admissions committee to either accept or decline a student. Hence, if a student is not accepted into a university, it does not mean that he or she is not academically qualified enough to enter the university. Rather, it means that the wants of the university are different from what the student offers

**Almost 85% of the students tend to be academically qualified/ competent but what the admission committee additionally looks for is:**

* What would the student be like at the university?
* What kind of experience they want to get from the university?
* What can the student give back to the university and what impact they will have on the university?
* What will be the value addition by the student to the university?

In simpler words, the questions that determine the admission of a student will be: What does the university want?¬ Where does the student want to go?¬ If both their aims and destinations match then an offer is made.

KEY TAKEAWAY

When it comes to the USA, universities follow a holistic approach in choosing students. They evaluate a student not only through their test scores and academics scores, but also through their personal qualities and characteristics.

Application process for USA universities is done through:

1. The Common Application Process, otherwise known as Common App,

2. The Coalition Application

 3. Universal College Application

4. Direct Application to the University.

Ideally, the process of applying for undergraduate study in the US will begin 1- 1.5% years before enrolment.

There are various deadlines and types of applications when applying for universities in US. Students can apply early through the ‘early decision or the early action application. Other types of applications include Single choice early action or SCEA, Restrictive early action and regular application among several others.

While applying, a complete application usually has 8 requirements:

1. Application Form

 2. Academic Documents- such as report cards etc.

 3. Test scores — of IELTS/TOEFL, ACT, and SAT etc.

 4. Essays

5. LOR or Letter of Recommendation

6. School Forms

 7. Activities List

 8. Other documents/requirements (universities may require — interview, portfolio, audition for talent based courses) etc.

**Apart from what has been discussed, what universities look for in a student can be summed up in 2 questions:**

1. Is the student academically/educationally well prepared? And will the student be academically successful?

2. Is the student a good fit for the university?