

# What it takes to get into top US universities

## Insights and advice from Bangladeshi students who got into Harvard, MIT, and Columbia this year

The shower of confetti that covered my laptop screen as I clicked “status update” on my Harvard application portal felt surreal. Was it a glitch? A dream too good to be true? It was only when the delivery man handed me a crimson red package with “veritas” engraved on it did it truly sink in – I had gotten into Harvard!

### MAHPARA FAATIN

Similar showers of confetti had overtaken the screens of multiple other Bangladeshi students this year, signifying their acceptance into the world’s most prestigious universities. These are some of the world’s most selective universities, where even perfect scores and top grades do not guarantee admission. So, what does it really take to get in? We sat down with students who made it this year, sharing their journeys and well-earned wisdom.

A prerequisite to gain admission into any university is good grades – not just in your board exams but consistently throughout high school from ninth grade. This should be accompanied by your SAT score, preferably above 1500. But while academics open the door, what really makes applicants stand out from a pool that keeps getting more competitive over time are extracurricular activities and compelling essays.

#### What activities do top universities look for?

Some of the most impactful activities you can pursue are academic Olympiads –especially by representing Bangladesh on an international stage. Compared to local interschool competitions, Western admission officers are more familiar with international platforms as they act as a more legitimate proof of excellence and passion.

“I think what made me stand out as an applicant for MIT (Massachusetts Institute of Technology) is my Informatics Olympiad journey, which resulted in the first gold for Bangladesh at the IOI (International Olympiad in Informatics),” says Debojoti Das Soumya (HSC 2025) from

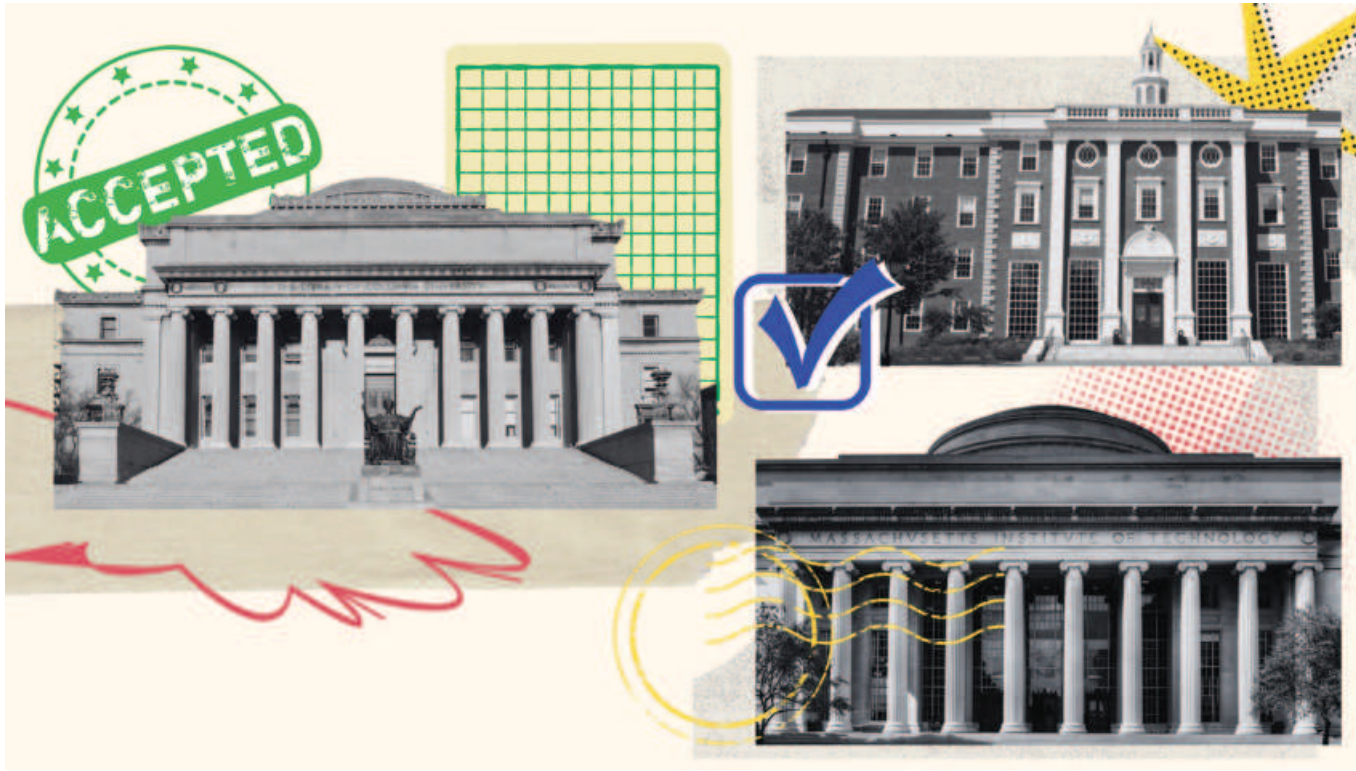


ILLUSTRATION: ABIR HOSSAIN

Jalalabad Cantonment Public School and College.

Similarly, another MIT admit, S M A Nahian (HSC 24) of Dhaka College, had previously earned Bangladesh two bronze medals at the International Math Olympiad (IMO). Elsewhere, Adnan Bin Alamgir, a Harvard admit from Dhaka Residential Model College, obtained a silver and a bronze at the International Olympiad on Astronomy and Astrophysics (IOAA).

Even national-level recognition boosts your profile. For instance, I ranked third nationally in the Bangladesh Biology Olympiad (BdBO) and made it to the national debate team right before the application deadline.

Another powerful way to stand out is through passion projects – it may be research work or a project related to your intended career.

“I believe my activities were the most crucial part of my application,” says Ryem Nabi Anwar, an incoming freshman at Columbia University and a fellow classmate of mine from Mastermind School.

“From volunteering at the Hope Field Hospital for Rohingya women, starting my own non-profit which helped more than 300 families, and crafting a research paper on dengue vaccination, I showed my commitment to healthcare through action while also ensuring I was genuinely interested in the work I did,” he adds.

Nahian also conducted research on Graph Theory under Professor Wayne Hayes, an associate professor of Computer Science at the University of California, Irvine. Apart from formal research, students can read books on advanced topics and discuss their findings in their essays and supplements.

Universities in the US value diversity and thus, prefer people who are deeply involved with their culture. Referencing Bangladeshi tradition, food, or customs in your essays helps create a unique identity. Additionally, involvement in performing arts can amplify this effect. By the time I applied, I had studied classical music for 11 years and trained in Bharatnatyam and Manipuri dance for four years.

You can even upload performances in your art portfolio. After the decisions were released, my Harvard admission officer personally reached out to me and told me how much she enjoyed watching my performances.

“Apart from having national and international accolades in Biology olympiads, I was able to highlight my passion for singing, particularly Indian classical and Rabindra Sangeet, which led me to perform live on national television,” Ryem echoes.

One of the other things my Harvard admission officer mentioned about my profile was how hard I worked to organise my school’s first intraschool debate tournament as well as the first-ever robotics workshop.

#### What strategy works best?

Admission officers sift through millions of applications. They can tell when students are pursuing activities just for the sake of it, which is why Nahian believes it is important to love what you do.

“It may not be easy to succeed at something right away but if you genuinely don’t enjoy it, even small failures can be demotivating. But passion keeps you going,” he says.

Dedicating five or more years to an activity is a great way to prove commitment. Focus on doing a few meaningful

activities – quality always trumps quantity. In fact, most top universities tend to look for a “spiked” profile which is a concentrated area of excellence rather than a jack-of-all-trades. Without specialising, it is unlikely that you will have the time to excel in any of your activities. More importantly, your endeavours should all intertwine to tell a cohesive story about you. Your accomplishments probably won’t help in your applications if you cannot present them properly. It is also worth noting that the Common App limits how much you can write about each activity, so every character matters. Use globally recognised short forms like ‘intl’, ‘yrs’, and the ampersand.

Try to use numbers as well; they may just be your holy grail. For instance, you can quantify how many people you’ve directly managed to help through a volunteering project or use terms like “ranked 3rd/10,000+” to show how competitive an event was.

It helps to write your descriptions in a document first so you can actively track the character count and use shorter synonyms where possible.

“Many colleges, including Columbia, now ask for a supplementary academic paper, so having an independent research paper will allow you to further highlight your academic interest,” adds Ryem.

“This doesn’t have to be laboratory research work and can be a review research paper based on existing findings that can later be reviewed by a professional. I believe my research paper on dengue vaccines was extremely crucial, allowing me to further highlight my interest in molecular biology.”

Even if you accomplish something after the deadline, do not be afraid of updating the university on your success through their portals.

Universities care about yield – whether a person would choose to commit if given an offer. This makes it very



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important to show genuine interest in what the university uniquely offers its students. Researching your top choices thoroughly is, therefore, a must.

“Optional materials and supplemental essays often portray what qualities a university is looking for. So, use it to demonstrate your interest,” Adnan explains.

You can talk about the research of a certain professor that you’d like to know more about or even university traditions and clubs that pique your interest. I, for one, talked a lot about how much I’d love to perform for the Harvard Ghungroo.

All this truly encapsulates how much you wish to study at a university.

**If you could go back in time, what would you have done better?**

All five of us share one major regret – not starting sooner. The final years of high school are extremely busy and exhausting, so it’s important that you give yourself time to write your essays, take multiple SATs if needed, and research universities and scholarships.

“More than anything, I would have dealt with my procrastination,” Adnan comments on his Harvard application. “It may sound a bit cliché, but giving yourself as much time as possible to craft your application is absolutely vital. In the end, the entire process may not take up as much time as one would expect but giving yourself proper space to gather your thoughts and ideas can be the make-or-break factor.”

Starting early makes the process a lot more stress-free and allows you to enjoy your final school days with no regrets.

*Mahpara can’t wait to make Elle Woods her entire personality, minus the chihuahua. Share your favourite Legally Blonde quotes to mahparafaatin@gmail.com*



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