



ILLUSTRATION: AZRA HUMAYRA

Navigating US undergraduate admissions

WHAT TO WATCH OUT FOR

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Before you start envisioning yourself heartily laughing with your group of very intentionally diverse friends on the freshly cut American grass on a poster-like university campus, I want you to hold your horses for a minute. Unfortunately, unlike Miley Cyrus, it's not that easy to hop off a plane at LAX with just your dreams and a cardigan. If you're an international student, there is a series of steps and obstacles to navigate before you step into the land of star-spangled success.

The application costs

A heads-up I wished someone had given me while waving a big yellow caution sign is that the decision to apply is expensive in itself; nearly every step is an investment for an unpredictable outcome.

Your journey to apply begins by taking the SAT (unless you're going for test-optional), which has a USD 68 base fee and an international fee of USD 43, adding up to USD 111 per exam. Moreover, some universities require an English proficiency test, which increases the cost.

Most importantly, you must note the application fee of each of your chosen universities. The majority of students consider numerous options without realising that they need a bag of cash just to knock on their doors. Most universities in the United States have application fees ranging from approximately USD 50 to USD 90 for international applicants. Therefore, if you're applying to five or six colleges, remember to keep funds aside just to submit your applications. Information regarding the amount of application fees is usually stated in the Common App.

Gap years can affect undergraduate scholarships

The discovery of this rare piece of information made me feel like someone had crushed my dreams with one of the hydraulic presses I see on Instagram reels.

This is a major setback for students relying heavily on scholarships. For instance, universities like the University of Texas (UT) at Dallas and the University of Houston (UH) state that an undergraduate international applicant is automatically considered for scholarships as part of their admission application.

However, the main catch, which even the Common App fails to mention and is buried within the website, states, "Be admitted to UT Dallas or UH as a first-time freshman applicant for the fall semester immediately following high school graduation." To put it simply, if you take a gap year after your high school graduation, you won't qualify for any merit-based scholarship at universities with this policy.

Granted, there remain countless university options that don't have this criterion and will fully evaluate your admission application for scholarships. To be sure, contact each of your chosen universities at their designated emails to confirm your eligibility.

Know your admission plan

I wasn't too interested in deciphering US application lingo, but overlooking this can be a huge mistake.

Although the terms might seem foreign at first, it's important to familiarise yourself with the meanings of Early Action, Early Decision, Regular Decision, and Rolling Admissions. They basically indicate when you apply and when you receive decisions. Some scholarships are only available through specific admission plans. For example, the University of Southern California (USC) offers merit-based scholarships only if you apply for Early Action for

certain majors. So, you need to keep an eye out to see which admission plan your major follows to maximise your scholarship opportunities.

Application deadlines and scholarship deadlines are not the same

If there's anywhere you should be careful not to mess up, it's deadlines. Some US universities may not evaluate your application for a scholarship if you've submitted past their priority scholarship deadlines. For instance, Texas Tech University (TTU) has a strict scholarship deadline of December 1, 2025, for applicants of the Fall 2026 intake. So, students who are waiting for the application deadline of July 29, 2026, you've unfortunately missed your scholarship train.

Applying abroad, in a nutshell, is a rigorous research project that keeps you up for countless nights, drains your pockets, gets your hopes up, and then cruelly slams you back to reality. Stay alert and informed, and periodically remind yourself: somewhere out there, a five-time national olympiad champion, who is a human calculator and genius who likes to build nuclear reactors as an extracurricular, is competing to take your spot.

References:

1. University of Texas at Dallas (2025). *Freshman Scholarships AES for Prospective Freshmen*.
2. University of Southern California (2025). *Prospective Students*.
3. University of Houston (2025). *Freshman Scholarships*.

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