Avanza Education

How to Get Into a Top U.S. University

Avanza Education

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Chapter 1

Introduction

When I was in high school, I had high aspirations of attending Princeton University, the #1 university in the United States according to the U.S. News Ranking. I remember looking at college brochures in 9th grade and falling in love with Princeton's academic offerings and campus community. I had so many doubts: Am I smart enough to get in? What do I have to do now to build an exemplary application? Am I taking the right courses? Should I apply to summer programs? How do I choose my extracurriculars? All of those questions highlighted an important truth about my college admissions journey: I needed to learn the system and become knowledgeable about it.

That's exactly what I did. I watched countless YouTube videos, read college prep books, and combed through university ranking websites. One of the biggest challenges I faced was earning a competitive SAT score. I self-studied for the SAT and took it three times. I also took the ACT. My prep journey lasted about a year, and I remember waking up every Saturday morning to take a practice test under real testing conditions and time. Before submitting my applications, I spent hours reviewing and editing my personal statement and supplemental essays. I was admitted to both Princeton University and Columbia University with generous financial aid. The day I got my acceptance letter from Princeton was, quite possibly, one of the best days of my life. All of my hard work paid off! At Princeton, I majored in History with a minor in Entrepreneurship. I fell in love with writing, research, and thinking outside the box through entrepreneurship. I traveled to countries like Russia and India, fully funded by the university. My four years at Princeton were challenging but very rewarding. They shaped me into an analytical leader and ignited my passion for education.

After Princeton, I applied to Master's programs in Management. I was accepted to The London School of Economics, Georgetown, and Cornell. I chose Cornell, where I received a $35,000 merit scholarship. My time at Cornell complemented my undergraduate degree with a solid foundation in the business world.

I started Avanza shortly after graduating from Cornell, with the dream of helping every student get into their dream school. My own educational experiences have helped me support hundreds of students in achieving their goals.

So far, Avanza has worked with 600+ students. I hope this free guide helps you navigate the complexities of the U.S. college admissions process.

600+

Students in 7 countries and 61 high schools

96%

top-choice placement rate

+$10M

In scholarships and financial aid

Most American families assume that a top U.S. university is for someone else: the kid in Manhattan with private tutors since middle school, or the cousin whose parents already went there. It isn't. Every year, students from small towns in Iowa, public schools in Texas, magnet programs in Atlanta, and suburbs in Ohio sit in seminar rooms at Princeton, Stanford, and Penn. They didn't get there because they were superhuman. They got there because someone showed them a map four years before the application was due.

This guide is that map. It is not a sales pitch. It is what we, as counselors who have walked this road with hundreds of students, wish every family knew before 9th grade.

A few things to set up front. Top U.S. admissions are competitive but not lottery-style. There is a logic to them, and that logic rewards families who start early. Cost is rarely the deal-breaker people think it is, especially at the wealthiest schools, which is why we'll spend real time on financial aid.

And finally, the high school you attend matters far less than what you do with the four years you spend there.

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Chapter 2

The Timeline: From 9th Grade to 12th Grade

The biggest mistake we see is families starting in 11th grade. By then, half the leverage is already gone. Not because the student is behind academically, but because the most compelling profiles are built over years, not months. Here is what each year should actually look like.

9th Foundations

This is the quietest year, and the most important. Grades from 9th grade count on every transcript a U.S. university will see. Two students with identical 11th-grade transcripts but different 9th-grade transcripts will have different profiles.

- **Academics:** take rigorous courses and earn strong grades. "Rigorous" means honors, AP, IB, or dual-enrollment courses where available.
- **Reading and writing:** the students who thrive in college are the ones who learned to read carefully and write clearly in 9th and 10th grade — not the ones who crammed for the SAT in 11th. Build the habit now.
- **Activities:** try things broadly. Sports, debate, music, robotics, theater, volunteering. We are looking for exposure, not commitment. Get to know what you actually like.
- **Family conversations:** start talking openly about cost and ambition.

10th Direction

By the end of 10th grade, the student should be able to point at one or two activities and say, "This is what I care about, and here is what I want to build with it." That doesn't mean choosing a major — it means showing direction.

- Take the PSAT in October if your school offers it. It is practice and does not count for admissions, but a strong score as a junior qualifies you for National Merit recognition.
- Deepen one or two activities. Start your passion project, take a leadership step, or push your skill level visibly.
- Visit a few U.S. universities — in person if possible, virtually if not. Most offer free tours and information sessions. The point is to start forming opinions about size, location, and culture.

11th The Heaviest Year

Eleventh grade is the heaviest year. Eleventh-grade grades are the most recent on the transcript when you apply in fall of senior year. You should start preparing for and taking your standardized tests this year. The summer between 11th and 12th is when essays start. Plan accordingly.

- **SAT or ACT:** most students take their first exam in fall of 11th grade and a second or third in spring, summer, or early fall before senior year. Top schools that consider scores expect competitive ones.
- **AP exams** in May, if your school offers them. Strong AP scores can earn college credit and signal rigor.
- **Leadership and depth:** this is the year to be in charge of something — a club, a project, or an initiative you started yourself.
- **Summer before 12th:** this is essay-drafting season. Begin the Common App personal statement in June. Finalize a balanced school list (we recommend 10 schools categorized across dream, target, safety).

12th Application Year

By the time school starts, your child should already have a strong personal statement draft and have started or finalized their school list. Senior fall is execution: writing supplements, submitting applications, and sitting for interviews.

- **Early Decision and Early Action deadlines:** typically November 1 or November 15. ED is binding; EA is not. ED can boost admit rates at some schools, but only commit if the family can afford the cost.
- **Regular Decision:** most deadlines fall January 1–5.
- **Financial aid forms:** the FAFSA opens October 1 and is required at every U.S. university for federal aid. The CSS Profile is required by roughly 250 mostly-private schools to determine institutional aid — check each school's website. Submit by the same deadline as the application.
- Decisions arrive mid-March through early April. National Reply Date is May 1.

Chapter 3

Building a Winning Profile

U.S. admissions officers are not looking for the perfect student. They are looking for someone they can picture contributing to their campus: a real human with intellectual curiosity, demonstrated character, and a track record of doing things instead of just saying things. Here is how to become that person honestly.

Academics: Rigor First, Grades Close Second

Top schools care more about which courses you took than your unweighted GPA. An A or B in AP Calculus BC is stronger than an A in regular pre-calc, especially when your transcript shows you consistently chose the harder path. If your school offers AP, IB, honors, or dual-enrollment, take them. If your school's options are limited, that's okay. Admissions officers read your transcript in the context of what was available, and your counselor's school profile tells them what was available.

Extracurriculars: Depth Beats Breadth

The myth: top schools want a long list of activities. The reality: they want to see two or three things you genuinely care about and pursue at a level that surprises them.

A student who started her own jewelry business and donates 30% of her profit to a local nonprofit is far more compelling than one who has been treasurer of seven clubs. It does not have to be technical or competitive. It can be journalism, theater, environmental advocacy, or running a tutoring program. What matters is that it shows initiative, commitment, and impact you can describe concretely.

Leadership: Initiative, Not Titles

"President of student council" is not, by itself, leadership in the eyes of an admissions reader. Founding a council if there wasn't one, is. Running a coding club for younger girls in your town for three years is. The pattern is what matters: you saw something missing, you built it, and someone's life is measurably different because of you.

Community Impact: Local and Sustained

The needs in your community are real and visible — whether you are in a rural town, a suburb, or an inner city. The question is whether you have engaged with them seriously. A summer of volunteering does not move a reader. Three years of teaching reading to elementary students at the local library does. Authenticity matters: pick something tied to your interests, not something just for your applications.

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Chapter 4

The Application: How They Read You

A U.S. application has more parts than most families realize, and each part is read for a different reason. Understanding the system is half the battle.

The Common Application

Most top schools accept the Common App, which lets you apply to many universities with one transcript, activities list, and personal statement, plus school-specific supplements. You can open an account in the summer before 12th grade. Some schools also accept the Coalition Application or use their own portal (UC schools, MIT, Georgetown).

Essays: The Personal Statement and Supplements

The personal statement is one essay (up to 650 words) used across every Common App school you apply to. The supplements are short, school-specific essays — most often "why us," "why this major," and a community or identity prompt. A student applying to twelve top schools may write fifteen to twenty essays in total. Plan for it.

A strong essay does three things: tells a specific story (not a summary of who you are), reveals something about how you think, and could only have been written by you. The most common mistake is writing a generic essay about a service trip, an athletic injury, or "overcoming" a challenge that was not really one. Your background and identity can be in the essay, but the essay is about what you noticed, did, or learned — not your resume.

Read your draft and ask: could a classmate have submitted this with their name on it? If yes, start over.

Recommendations

Most schools require a counselor letter and two teacher letters, typically from teachers who taught you in 11th grade in core academic subjects. Choose teachers who know you well and can write specifics — not the ones with the most prestigious title. Ask in spring of 11th grade, not fall of 12th.

Standardized Testing: SAT and ACT

Many schools have test-optional or test-flexible policies, but the practical reality is that a strong score still helps, and a missing score is read in the context of your school. After the COVID-19 pandemic, several universities reinstated SAT/ACT requirements. As of 2026, the following universities require the SAT or ACT for admission: Harvard, Yale, Princeton, MIT, Stanford, Brown, Dartmouth, Cornell, University of Pennsylvania, Caltech, Georgetown, Purdue, and many others.

SAT scores: what top US universities actually expect

Most highly selective universities publish a "middle 50%" SAT range: meaning 25% of admitted students scored below the bottom number, and 25% scored above the top. Aim for the upper half if you want to be competitive.

University	SAT Middle 50%	ACT Middle 50%
Harvard	1500–1580	34–36
MIT	1520–1570	35–36
Yale	1500–1580	34–36
Stanford	1510–1570	34–35
Princeton	1470–1570	34–35
Columbia	1490–1570	34–35
University of Pennsylvania	1500–1570	34–35
Brown	1500–1570	34–35
Cornell	1510–1560	34–35
Duke	1490–1570	34–35

A few notes: Brown, Dartmouth, Yale, Cornell, and UPenn have reinstated required testing. Columbia remains test-optional, and UChicago uses a "no harm" policy — submit only if your score helps. If your score sits below the 25th percentile of your target school, you are an outlier; consider skipping submission where it is optional.

University	SAT Middle 50%	ACT Middle 50%
MIT	1520–1570	35–36
Stanford	1510–1570	34–35
Caltech	1530–1570	35–36
Georgetown	1410–1550	32–35
Notre Dame	1470–1540	33–35
Georgia Tech	1370–1510	31–34
Purdue (Engineering)	1290–1480	28–34
University of Florida	1310–1470	30–33
Florida State	1270–1390	28–31

How Admissions Officers Read Your File

Files are usually read first by a regional officer who covers your state or region. They know roughly what "rigor" looks like at the top high schools in their territory — Stuyvesant, Lowell, Walnut Hills, Thomas Jefferson, BASIS Scottsdale — and at the local public school down the road that maybe sends one or two students to top schools per year. They are reading for: a transcript that pushes the limits of what your school offered, a profile that reveals you in your context, and evidence that you can thrive academically and socially in a demanding college environment.

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Chapter 5

Financial Aid and Scholarships: What Is Actually Available

Cost is the topic families avoid until it is too late. Don't. The full cost of attendance at a top U.S. university is roughly $80,000–$100,000 per year as of the 2025–26 academic year. Almost no family pays that sticker price. The question is which schools are best positioned to help yours.

Need-Blind Admissions That Meet 100% of Need

Most of the top private universities are need-blind for U.S. students — meaning your family's ability to pay does not factor into the admissions decision. These schools also commit to meeting 100% of demonstrated financial need with grants (not loans). The list includes Harvard, Yale, Princeton, Stanford, MIT, Penn, Brown, Columbia, Dartmouth, Cornell, Duke, Northwestern, Notre Dame, Williams, Amherst, Pomona, and many more. A family with $60,000 in income can be admitted on the same terms as a family with $600,000 — and the school will fund the gap.

Merit Aid at Strong Schools

The Ivies and their peers do not offer merit scholarships — they distribute aid based purely on need. But many excellent universities do, and a strong applicant can receive substantial merit packages at schools like USC, Vanderbilt, Emory, Tulane, Washington University in St. Louis, Boston College, and most flagship state universities outside their home state. If cost is a real factor, build merit-friendly schools into your list early.

The Forms

The FAFSA (Free Application for Federal Student Aid) is required at every U.S. university to access federal grants, loans, and work-study. It opens October 1. The CSS Profile, administered by the College Board, is required by roughly 250 mostly-private schools to determine institutional aid. It asks for far more detailed family income, assets, and expenses than the FAFSA. Begin gathering documents in the summer before 12th grade.

External Scholarships

Outside scholarships exist but rarely fund a full U.S. degree on their own. Worth pursuing alongside institutional aid: QuestBridge (for high-achieving low-income students applying to top private schools), the Coca-Cola Scholars Program, the Gates Scholarship, the Jack Kent Cooke Scholarship, the Ron Brown Scholarship, the Hispanic Scholarship Fund, and state-specific merit programs (Bright Futures in Florida, HOPE in Georgia, the Cal Grant in California). National Merit recognition can also unlock significant aid at certain schools.

Honest Note on Cost

A merit-based scholarship at a strong school ranked 60 may end up cheaper than a need-based offer from a school ranked 40. And your in-state flagship public university is almost always the best value if cost is a hard constraint. Build the school list with cost in mind from the start, not as a Plan B in April of senior year.

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Chapter 6

Common Mistakes Students Make

These come up constantly. Avoid them, and you are already ahead of most applicants.

Starting in 11th grade

By 11th grade, the rigor of your transcript is mostly set, and the activities that will appear on your application are mostly chosen. Starting earlier is about giving yourself room to do real things.

Optimizing for prestige instead of fit

Harvard is not the best school for everyone admitted to Harvard. A student who would thrive in a small liberal-arts environment with deep faculty access will be miserable in a large research university where freshman classes have 400 people. Build the school list around how your child learns, not around brand.

Filling up the activity list

The Common App allows ten activities. Many students fill all ten with shallow entries to look impressive. A list of four activities at meaningful depth looks stronger than ten at the surface. Quality is visible to anyone who reads applications professionally.

Generic essays

Three essays we read every year and wish we did not: "What I learned from my service trip," "My injury made me stronger," and "My grandparent's wisdom shaped me." These can be made specific and great, but the way most students write them is generic. If your essay could be written by any student in your school, rewrite it.

Underestimating writing

The students who thrive at top schools are the ones who learned to write clearly and read carefully in 9th and 10th grade — not the ones who tried to fix their writing in 11th. Don't postpone this.

Skipping the financial conversation until April

By April of senior year, your choices are limited and you are stuck with what you didn't do earlier. Have the family money conversation in 9th grade. Have it again every year. It is the most uncomfortable and most important conversation in this whole process.

Believing prestige equals fit

Every year, students get into top schools and then transfer because the school wasn't right for them. Brand and fit are different things. Prioritize fit.

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Chapter 7

How to Know If You Need Expert Support

This guide can take a motivated family a long way. For some students, it is genuinely enough. With strong school counseling and time to research, families have navigated this process on their own and landed extraordinary outcomes.

You may want expert support if:

- You are the first in your family to apply to top U.S. universities, and there is no clear precedent to follow.
- Your school counselor is overloaded — common at public schools where one counselor may serve 300+ students — and you want one person focused entirely on your application.
- Cost matters, and you need to navigate need-based aid and merit aid strategically across a school list.
- You want personalized help on essays, school list, and timing — from someone who has read hundreds of admitted-student files.

What good support looks like

A counselor worth working with does not promise admission, does not write essays for students, and is honest about fit. They build a school list around the student you actually have. They start in 9th or 10th grade when possible, because that is when their work is most useful. And they are clear about what they can and cannot do.

If that is the kind of partner you are looking for, Avanza was built for this. If this guide has been useful and you want to talk about what your child's path could look like, we are happy to have that conversation with no obligation.

Why Avanza Education?

Most college counseling companies were built by people who already knew the system. Avanza was built by someone who had to figure it out the hard way.

Our founder, Roberto Hasbun, was a first-generation college student who taught himself the U.S. admissions process from scratch. He made it to Princeton ('21) and Cornell ('22), and then built the company he wished had existed when he was applying. That perspective shapes everything we do. We understand what it means to apply as a first-generation student, to translate the system for parents, to navigate financial aid without a roadmap, and to write essays in a voice that is authentically yours and not borrowed from someone else's life.

Coaches who have actually been where you are going

When you start with Avanza, you are not handed a workbook and a checklist. Our enrollment director hand-matches each student with a college coach based on the student's goals, target schools, and personality — not whoever happens to be available. Many of our coaches studied at the schools our students are applying to, so the guidance is grounded in real experience: what the Stanford supplement is actually asking, what Yale readers respond to, and how to write the "why this college" essay without sounding generic.

From freshman-year course planning to senior-year final submission, the same coach is with you the whole way. That continuity is the difference between regular advice and a real strategy.

Results that speak for themselves

- **600+** students guided
- **96%** top-choice acceptance rate
- **$10M+** in scholarships and financial aid secured for our families
- Admits to Stanford, Princeton, Cornell, Rice, MIT, the Ivy League, and top public and private universities

FULL SCHOLARSHIPS

Viviana, St. Mary's Jahir, Rice University Natalia, UMiami Cristina, Bentley

Ready to talk?

Book a free 30-minute strategy call with our enrollment team. We will learn about your student's goals, your target schools, and your timeline. Show you exactly how Avanza can help make it happen. No pressure, no script, just a real conversation.

avanza-education.org | info@avanzaedu.org