

Applying to US Colleges and Universities – Ten Insights

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As an SPCC alumni and an education counselor on US higher education, I am honored to be able to share my perspectives on applying to US colleges and universities with members of the SPCC family. I have been an advisor and mentor to SPCC and other Hong Kong students for many years and started up an education consultancy (www.maplewood-edu.com) in 2004 to provide counseling services on higher education in the USA. I had attended and graduated from MIT and Princeton University in the USA after finishing F7 at SPCC in 1975. I was trained in chemical engineering, but have worked in diverse fields including direct marketing, application software, IT services, management consulting, and now in education. I am the beneficiary of a broad, liberal studies-based US undergraduate education as well as an in-depth, research-oriented graduate education. My US education has prepared me well with life-long learning, creative thinking and problem solving skills, which I can apply in my career and personal life. I understand the aspirations of many students in Hong Kong to go for a higher education in the USA. Reflecting upon my own experience, which I cherish much indeed, I'd like to share below 10 key insights on applying to US colleges and universities - the very first step towards reaching your US study goal.

1. **Ask why the US.** Studying in the USA should be an active decision. It's also an important decision not just by the student, but by the family too. Do you want to go because of the reputation of the schools, because of your academic and career aspirations, because of a better prospect in our "globalized" economy with a US degree, because of your understanding of and belief in the US school system, because you can afford the costs, etc.? Ask yourself why USA and identify which factors are truly important to you. Once the decision is made on clear reasons, put your plan into action and with your best efforts.

2. **Understand the US higher education system.** The US system is different from the ones that most of us are familiar with - the Hong Kong or the British university system. There is more emphasis on a well-rounded education no matter what your major is, and the curriculum is more flexible. You have more independence in designing your own program of studies and fulfilling your own interests. However, not all students may benefit from this type of education system. Understand the types of schools and programs available, and choose the right schools to apply to.

3. **Know the application process.** The US college application process is complex, perplexing and even mysterious at times. The top schools build their best and diverse student body; they select students they want rather than you choose which school to attend. Different schools might have specific application procedures to follow. You need to prepare yourself well for each and every step for each school in order to get in the best possible school of your choice. Familiarize yourself with the entire process; take all the standardized tests early and get all the required forms, documents, and recommendations ready; develop an action plan and follow it. Most students have a chance to apply to colleges only once in their entire life. Do it right this only time and get into the best possible school.

4. **Know the important and critical success factors.** Your academics - grades, class rank, and a strong school curriculum (such as the one at SPCC) - are clearly the most important, but not the only, factor. You also have to perform well on SAT and other standardized tests; you have to get good recommendations. You should show an all-roundedness with your activities and services, but you should also show a focus on interests that you are deeply passionate about. A tough one, but also the one area that you can make a difference towards the end of the application process, is to show your true personal qualities through a convincing college admissions essay and your personal statement. Again, you need to plan and allow ample time for these write-ups.

5. Prepare well ahead and use all available resources. For each step of the application process, you need to plan ahead and execute precisely and meet the school's deadline. Set your own deadline weeks before the actual one. The whole application is at least a half-year long project. Be resourceful and have all your essential information and resources readily accessible. They may be books, guides, web info, recommendations and tips from teachers, counselors, parents, friends and schoolmates. But don't just understand what resources are for what purposes. Use them.

6. Focus on your studies at school, always. Your academics are always the most important factor, and that counts for the years from F3 or F4 and up. Show a progressive improvement in your academic achievements, if not a steady and consistent performance. Demonstrate your responsibility as a student in completing the HKCEE or the HKAL curriculum with admirable results. Show your scholarship and ability to take up the challenges of more demanding curricula such as honor courses, AP tests, or equivalents through self- or summer studies.

7. Get support from your family, teachers, counselors, friends. Talk about your plans, your dreams. Ask questions, share information and experience throughout the application process. The lengthy application process can be strenuous and emotionally draining, and you need the best support on all fronts. It's also a good idea to ask people who know you well to read and comment on your essays and statements to make sure they are truthful and believable.

8. Read up on US college life, culture, and history. Whenever you have some spare moments in your high school years, read up on the schools you are interested in applying to, go on to chat rooms on college life, college application and learn what others have to say. You plan to live and study in the US for some years. You might as well start learning about its culture and history beyond just knowing about the Disneyland, McDonald's, and the iPod.

9. Be reflective upon yourself. Identify what you are passionate about; participate in activities and community services - preferably of your own choice, not prescribed by parents or teachers - and gain something solid out of them. This soul-searching process will come in handy when it's time to write up your college application essays and personal statements. Be able to write about yourself and your unique experiences, not turning in something that anyone else can write about.

10. Relax and enjoy the application process. You don't need to be uptight about the process. You don't want to say, why is this so tedious, or, why should I bother? Treat the application as an important school project and don't do a rush job. A good college application will reveal your sense of purpose, self-confidence, perseverance, and even originality, which are all part of what the top schools are looking for in a good candidate. Think of it this way, even if for some reason you decide not to go to the US for college afterwards, you will grow and mature tremendously out of this intriguing application process.

11. Bonus insight: how about one on education from college dropouts? Bill Gates and Steve Jobs were both college dropouts. You may say they had no choice after dropping out and then became successful entrepreneurs. Maybe so, but we know they certainly never gave up learning and education on their own with strong passion. We all know Bill's story. Steve, who just addressed the Stanford University graduation class on June 12, 2005, said his real education had started when he "dropped in" on whatever classes interested him - including calligraphy. An understanding of the painstaking attention to detail in calligraphy carried him through in his mastering the design of fonts used on the Apple Macintosh computer, and certainly to this date in designing his latest iPod consumer products. Think broad, be open-minded, and even if you do not get into a dream school, you still can follow your passion and make the best out of attending a US college, or not attending at all.

There are certainly more things to be aware of in applying to US colleges and universities. For more information on the US college application process and resources, you can start at: <http://www.maplewood-edu.com/links.htm>. Let me sincerely wish all those who aspire to study in the USA every success in their endeavor.