

Top Ten Tips for Applying to College in the United States

By Joanne A. Davidson, EducationUSA Advisor

With the number of Irish undergraduate students going to the United States to study increasing last year, you are probably facing questions from students about how they can actually get in to college in the U.S. and find ways to fund their education.

EducationUSA is the official advisory service for students who are considering studying in the U.S. and we are here to help you! Based in the Fulbright Commission in Ballsbridge, Dublin, and supported by the U.S. Department of State, EducationUSA can provide your students with the information they need to successfully apply to college in America.

The next time your students or staff come to you with questions about applying to college in the U.S., review these top ten tips to make their transition from secondary school to studying in America a successful one.

1. **Start Early:** The application process for colleges in the U.S. is significantly longer than in Ireland, with students taking up to 18 months to complete a full application.

It is recommended that students begin thinking about college in the U.S. as early their fourth year of study. Many students in Transition Year have the flexibility to explore other areas of interest during this period, making it an ideal time to find out more about their college options.

Once students reach fifth year they will need to begin the process of researching the right schools for them and studying for the SATs. By beginning this process early they will be well-positioned to submit their applications during the Autumn/Winter of their sixth year.

2. **Get Help:** American college applications may initially be daunting to those who have never experienced the process before, so students, teachers, and guidance counsellors should reach out to EducationUSA for advice. As the only official advisory service in Ireland, EducationUSA is uniquely positioned to help students, along with their parents, teachers, and guidance counsellors, to successfully plan for applying to college in America.

Joanne Davidson, the EducationUSA Advisor in Ireland, can be contacted by emailing educationusa@fulbright.ie or ringing 01.660.7670. Information on applying to college in the U.S. can also be found on www.fulbright.ie.

3. **Research College Options:** There are almost 4,000 undergraduate schools in the United States, so students should spend some time thinking about what they want from their college experience.

When it comes to selecting a college in America it is more than just about choosing a major, which is the name for the student's main area of study. Students should consider things like size of school (some colleges can be under 1,000 people, while others can be closer to 40,000), location (proximity to international airport or weather), and the university's culture (religious, single sex vs. co-educational, or historically black, for example).

Students should be encouraged to select approximately four to six colleges to apply to. There are fees of about \$50.00 USD to apply to each school. It is important to ensure a student applies to enough schools, as well as a wide-range of colleges, in order to give them a few options but not too many so that it is cost-prohibitive.

4. **Study for the SATs:** The SATs (pronounced S-A-Ts) are a standardized test that the majority of college applicants take. This test consists of reading, writing, and math. They are typically taken during a student's fifth year, but can be repeated during sixth year. Some universities will require the SAT Subject Tests, so it is essential that students check their schools' requirements and ensure these exams are also taken within the application deadline.

In Ireland, the SATs can be taken in three locations: St. Andrew's in Booterstown, Dublin, St. Conleth's in Ballsbridge, Dublin, and St. Augustine's in Dungarvan, Waterford. For all exams, no matter which date or location, students will apply online at www.collegeboard.org by the early application deadline.

It is recommended that students study for these exams. There are free practice exams on the College Board website, along with study tips.

5. **Complete the Applications:** College applications in the U.S. will require much more time than just completing the CAO. Although approximately 450 schools are subscribed to the "Common Application," many of these schools will still require supplemental materials. It is essential that students check the application deadlines and requirements for each school, as they will vary. Many colleges will have deadlines before the holiday season, so students need to look at deadlines early in the summer between their fifth and sixth years to ensure they know what schedule they must work to.

Universities in the U.S. will complete a holistic review of each student's application, so students should be encouraged to share their achievements and extracurricular involvements on the application form, which will be similar to a CV. In addition to the test scores and grades, students will also be asked to respond to approximately three personal statements. These personal statements

are an opportunity for students to really showcase their personality and why they want to attend that particular school. Time and care should be taken with these statements, as they can be very important when differentiating between two close candidates.

References will also be required as part of the student's application. Students should be encouraged to only ask those who know them well, such as a close teacher or a boss. If you are asked to provide a reference for a student consider your availability and how well you know the student before committing, as in the American application system the references are seriously considered as part of the application package.

Finally, students will be required to submit a transcript of their final four years of school, including courses taken, grades, and Junior and Leaving Certificate Results. As there are no official conversions for Irish grades to U.S. grades, EducationUSA can help you or your school's guidance counsellor in preparing this document.

6. **Reduce Costs:** College costs in America are significantly higher than in Ireland, with private university fees averaging just over \$29,000.00 (www.collegeboard.org). Covering fees this high can be a major challenge for an Irish student.

There are ways to reduce these fees, however, including looking at different types of colleges. Some students have elected to do what is known as the "2+2." This means that a student goes to a community college for their first two years and then transfers to a four-year institution (a college or university), where they will still graduate with a bachelor's degree after their final two years. With yearly fees at community colleges averaging around \$3,100.00 this is quickly becoming a popular option for prospective college students.

Students should also consider public universities, which are schools that have State funding. Although much more expensive than community colleges, they typically average around \$21,000.00 a year.

7. **Source Financial Aid:** Despite the high fees, many students will be eligible for scholarships and financial aid.

As students are applying to their preferred colleges they should also be completing an application for financial aid, which they can source from the Financial Aid Office's website of their school. This is a separate form to their college application. Students should be encouraged to work closely with their parents or guardians on this form, as it is quite comprehensive and may require information that the students would not typically have access to.

The International Offices at the university or college may also be in a position to help the student with their scholarship search. Some scholarships may not be open to international students, while some

may be specifically open to them as international applicants. The International Office will be best-placed to advise the student what they can apply for.

Students interested in niche or athletic scholarships are encouraged to reach out to coaches or organization leaders early on, as for these speciality scholarships, competition can be fierce. Social media-savvy students should take advantage of these online platforms to showcase their talents and share videos, whether of them playing soccer or singing, with prospective coaches at the school. Students should be careful to note all recruiting policies on the school's website in advance as well.

The EducationUSA website has more information on scholarships at www.fulbright.ie.

8. **Complete Your Visa Interview:** Once the student has been accepted to college in the U.S. they will need to complete their visa application and interview at the U.S. Embassy in Dublin.

Students should hear back from schools in April or May. Once their acceptance letter is received and they have committed to the school they should begin their visa process with the Embassy in order to have their visa processed in time for an autumn start.

All information relating to the visa process can be found on <http://dublin.usembassy.gov>.

9. **Start School:** Congratulations! Your students are now ready to begin one of the most exciting periods of their lives. Having a student from your secondary school get accepted to a U.S. university is a wonderful achievement and the whole school should be very proud of this.

The students will commence their freshman (first) year in August, where they will attend “freshman orientation,” meet their roommates, and begin classes. Your students should be encouraged to stay in touch with prospective freshman at your school, because they may have just the insight and experience needed to help future students along the way too.

10. **Consider A Postgraduate Degree:** For all those who were not quite ready to move across the ocean for an undergraduate degree, there is always the option of doing a masters or PhD in America. EducationUSA can also provide postgraduate advisory services and the Fulbright Commission has funding available for postgraduate degrees. More details on the Fulbright Awards can be found at www.fulbright.ie.

EducationUSA understands that applying to college in the United States is a complicated process but we are here to help you. If you would like more information or to speak with Joanne, the EducationUSA Advisor, you can email us at educationusa@fulbright.ie or ring 01.660.7670 for more details.

About EducationUSA and the Fulbright Commission

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The official global EducationUSA website is www.educationusa.state.gov.

The Fulbright Commission presents Awards on an annual basis to Irish students, scholars, and professionals to undertake postgraduate study and research at higher education, cultural, and related institutions in the United States and for Americans to do the same in Ireland.

More information about the Fulbright Commission and EducationUSA can be found on www.fulbright.ie.

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