

# FOLLOWING THE AMERICAN DREAM

The admission process is on full swing for those applying to the US. Kavita Mehta & Kimberly Wright Dixit, co-founders of The Red Pen and authors of *Acing Admissions – The Indian Student's Comprehensive Guide to US College Applications*, give us some important tips to remember





**T**he US college experience is quite unique. Most colleges in the US subscribe to a broad-based philosophy of 'liberal education' - an approach to college learning that empowers individuals and prepares them to deal with complexity, diversity and change. This approach emphasizes broad knowledge of the wider world (e.g., science, culture, and society) as well as in-depth achievement in a specific field of interest. Preparation and planning are the keys to success in the complex and competitive US admission process.

### BASIC EDUCATIONAL PREREQUISITES

Colleges use 'data' as a starting point to assess whether an applicant can handle the academic rigour of the curriculum and fit in at the college. Data includes marks, grades and exam scores in high school (right from standard 9), as well as scores from standardized tests such as the SAT, ACT, SAT Subject Tests and TOEFL. Colleges analyze the data to identify trends and patterns to draw conclusions about the student over time.

### THE IDEAL TIME TO PREPARE

Students and their families can begin preparations as early as class 8. The more familiar you are with the admissions process, the better equipped you are to be flexible and meet the various requirements that arise throughout the process.

- Have an equal focus on academics and talent-building: In general, faculty at US colleges worry that Indian students become overly focused on academics and are too competitive. College is about collaboration and preparation for a future in the workplace. It is not about winning or getting the highest grade in the class.

- Familiarise yourself with the kind of writing, analysis and critical thinking colleges are looking for: Many Indian students find that these writing skills were much more difficult than expected. Look up student support services and avail of the free help they offer to students with writing and other curricular weaknesses.

- It's important to have an open mind, culturally: If you decide you're not going to attend parties or events for fear of experiencing something out of your own comfort zone, then you will be the one missing out. Nobody likes to befriend someone who is overly opinionated or judgmental; so be yourself, but let others do the same.

For current year applicants, it is best to start applications at least six months prior to the deadlines. For undergraduate applicants, this generally means June 1. If you have been thinking of applying but you haven't made much headway early on, you can still get your act together by November, in time for the January deadlines.

### TAKING A YEAR OFF

In our experience, gap years are best for students who cannot or do not want to manage the pressure of a rigorous 12th grade curriculum and extra curriculars along with SAT and application preparation. It is a lot of work! We also recommend a gap year if you need time and exposure to something new or to enhance an existing interest through internships or short term programs. For Indian students, there are a few that offer interesting training and exposure, such as Volunteers India and Magic Bus. Another interesting choice is the Study at Sea Programs and West Island College International - Class Afloat. Though these programs are expensive, they help students earn college transfer credits while providing exciting travel and learning opportunities.

### HOW MUCH DO I HAVE TO SPEND?

Education in the US is expensive. As of August 2014, the annual cost of attending college in the US was approximately US\$50,000 to \$60,000 (Rs 30 to 36 lakh). That is a whopping

quarter-million dollars over four years. While this estimate does cover tuition (college fees), living expenses and insurance, travel to and from India and domestic travel within the US may be extra. And if a student elects to attend a summer term or do an extra year, the expenses just increase. However, there is a lot of financial support available to students who are willing to attend colleges where they are academically above the average, of two kinds:

- Need based awards are given to those families who can demonstrate financial need through their CSS profile. Colleges typically identify themselves as conforming to either a 'Need Blind' or 'Need Aware' admissions policy for international students.
- Merit Based means they are offered money based on their academic or extracurricular performance. These awards range from full scholarships, covering tuition and living expenses to smaller token amounts. The awards can be given for all four years or only for the first year.

To know more about scholarships offered by external organizations, check out the US India Education Foundation (USIEF: <http://www.usief.org.in/Mumbai.aspx>).

The best practice is to keep an open mind and treat every experience as a learning opportunity. While it's true that there are tremendous cultural differences between the US and India, most campuses also host a significant number of international students. 