

The Ten Biggest Mistakes

International Students Make When Applying to U.S. Colleges



Every year, **ATHENA MENTOR** sees perfectly talented and capable international students apply to U.S. colleges—and shoot themselves in the foot.

Furthermore, many other international students are intrigued by the idea of studying in the U.S., but are discouraged by lack of information or downright disinformation about the process.

You are not alone in your frustration!

Preparing for college is a complex, but not impossible process. We'd like to help you get off to a good start—earlier than you think!—and avoid the following pitfalls.

Mistake Number 1. Assuming you are sure to be accepted at Harvard, because European secondary education is far superior to that offered in the United States.

“When I first came to Athena Mentor, I thought I was pretty great. In fact, I thought any American university would be glad to have me.”
—a Munich International School student

When people claim that German schools are academically superior, they are thinking only of the top tier. In fact, only a small fraction of German teenagers attend *Gymnasium*. They are not aiming at practical employment or the trades, but are training strictly to enter a German research university.

When French students study at a renowned *Lycée*, they may well be dreaming of one of the *grandes écoles*, the pinnacle of French university education.

The United States has a different political approach to education. The U.S. does not triage students at age ten, earmarking only a small percentage of students for studies leading to a degree that qualifies them to attend university.

However, the United States is a big country. It *is* true that only a tiny fraction of U.S. high school graduates will attend the prestigious colleges to which international students typically aspire.

A fair comparison would therefore be with the small percentage of American students who are pursuing a demanding course of academic studies, with the intention of applying to the most competitive colleges. These American students typically take Advanced Placement classes, which are college-level classes, while they are still in high school. That curriculum is comparable in rigor to the curriculum leading to the German *Abitur*, French *baccalauréat*, or International Baccalaureate.

Here at ATHENA MENTOR, we are well informed and neutral when it comes to national educational systems, and we can help you figure out where you stand in the competition for a place in the global educational market.

And by the way, the acceptance rate at Harvard last year was 6.9%. Read on for our advice about applying to the Ivies.

ATHENA ADVISES When making comparisons across different school systems, make sure you're not comparing apples and oranges! Our founder and director, Dr. Corcoran, spent two years at the *École normale supérieure* in Paris and holds an Ivy-League Ph.D. She has held research appointments at Harvard, Princeton and Brown, as well as Wolfson College, Oxford and the Centre national de la recherche scientifique in Paris. She has taught at the *Hochschule für angewandte Wissenschaften München* and knows the International School system well.

Mistake Number 2. Counting on grades alone to get you in.

“Why am I only applying to Stanford? Because it’s the best—and I’m first in my class.”

—a Munich student

Apparently, this student thought that all he needed to do was let Stanford know he was coming. It’s easy to see where this particular fantasy comes from. Admission to British universities is made largely on the basis of a single number: the score a student is predicted to get upon completion of the International Baccalaureate program, with Oxford and Cambridge requiring somewhat more evidence. A single competitive exam determines entrance to each of France’s *grandes écoles*, and students take this national *concours* after—customarily, two years after—finishing secondary school. Most degree programs at most German universities admit anyone with an *Abitur*.

U.S. colleges are different. Their mission is to educate the whole person. This is what makes them so attractive, and also what makes admission such a complex procedure.

ATHENA ADVISES Organize your entire dossier to showcase who you are and what you really care about. Apply to colleges that share your style and your goals. Carefully craft your application essays to bring out points of convergence between your strengths and theirs. Convince each of your chosen colleges that you are a match!

Mistake Number 3. Waiting until twelfth grade to begin the application process.

Please don't do this! We know all too well that UCAS applications to U.K. universities are due only in the fall of twelfth grade; and German universities won't even look at you until you have already graduated with an *Abitur*. But U.S. colleges are different!

Most students in the U.S. begin their college preparation by taking a practice PSAT (Preliminary SAT) in the fall of tenth grade. This is a great wake-up call! It's also a chance to mobilize for the PSAT they take in the fall of eleventh grade. That's the score that counts for the National Merit Scholarship Qualifying Test; which is why that test is called the PSAT/NMSQT. It is of course also great practice for the big SAT in your future!

In eleventh grade, you may want to take the ACT (American College Testing exam), which is a more content-oriented test accepted by many U.S. colleges in place of the SAT. This will give you a sense of which test—the ACT or SAT—you find more congenial.

You should also take SAT Subject Tests as soon as you have completed the highest-level course you plan to take in a given subject. For example, if you finish your sequence of Spanish classes in eleventh grade, take the test then!

What are SAT Subject Tests, you ask? They are one-hour exams that test your knowledge of a specific subject: chemistry, for example, or French. Many U.S. colleges ask for two SAT Subject exams. Harvard requires three.

Later in your eleventh grade year, take the SAT itself. This is such a big topic that we'll treat it separately below.

If your native language is not English, get the TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) over with now!

ATHENA ADVISES How many and which exams you take is a delicate calculation. Don't put it off, or you'll get overwhelmed trying to do everything at once! Let us help you formulate a strategy that

leverages your skills and schedules your exams in a reasonable sequence.

Mistake Number 4. Not realizing that grades count—beginning with ninth grade.

Think you can slouch through four years of secondary school, wake up in your senior year, graduate in a burst of glory—and leave for Princeton? While it's true that in some national systems, your final grade is everything, that's just not true for U.S. colleges. They'll ask to see the entire record of your grades, beginning with ninth grade. An upward trend is always good, but colleges will also ask for the Big One: your cumulative GPA.

GPA stands for "Grade Point Average." It's the sum of each grade you got in an academic course, divided by the number of classes (or class hours). You can calculate your GPA for a term, a year—or for your entire secondary school career, beginning with ninth grade. The bottom line is your cumulative GPA: your Grade Point Average for every academic course you took, beginning with ninth grade.

Now let's do the math. Suppose you eased through ninth grade with equal numbers of Bs and Cs (2s and 3s on a 4-point scale). Your GPA was therefore 2.5. In tenth grade, you got all Bs. That brings your cumulative GPA up to 2.75. In eleventh grade, you get straight As! Hurray! A 4.0 average for that year is yours!

Wait a minute. What's your cumulative GPA? Not even a B+.

ATHENA ADVISES Take grades seriously—soon. The international representative on the college admissions committee will be familiar with the scale in your secondary school system, so do not worry about converting the scale. The idea is to aim for the top of whatever scale is used at your school—beginning in ninth grade!

Mistake Number 5. "I'm bad at math."

At ATHENA MENTOR, we believe *You're Great at Math!* That's the title of our own math workbook, which is designed to quickly bring you up to speed with the math you may have glossed over, or not quite got back in the year when, for whatever reason, you didn't like your math teacher.

We love math, and chances are excellent that you will like the math trainers you meet at ATHENA MENTOR. Our head math coach uses math to build buildings. Another math trainer is a theoretical physicist, who uses math to explore the nature of the universe.

Did you say you're planning to study business? Math is simply *crucial* to success in business school. In fact, now would be a good time to check the entrance requirements for courses of study in business at the bachelor's and master's (MBA) level. You may be surprised at how much math is required.

ATHENA ADVISES *You're Great at Math!* Really, you are! Our detailed special report about how math figures into your college preparation will appear in the summer of 2010. Email us to be put on the waiting list for an advance copy: athena@athena-mentor.com



Mistake Number 6. Underestimating the SAT.

One of our clients had done well in his IB program, and he got the highest SAT score at his international school: a 650. Little did he know that at the Ivy League schools to which he aspired, at least a quarter of the successful applicants have perfect 800 scores.

That's right: perfect scores.

Are you thinking that you're sure to do well on the test? Great! Be sure to check this belief by taking a full-length practice test. It's a good idea to ask a parent or other adult to let you know when the time for each section is over. The test is almost four hours long.

Next, take the official SAT the very next time it is offered.

ATHENA ADVISES You may find that it's one thing to answer a couple of practice questions correctly; and quite another to maintain your concentration and confidence over several hours. A full-length practice test will provide a reality check! If you find you need help—and virtually everyone does—why not enroll in the **ATHENA MENTOR** SAT training program especially designed for international students? It includes our daily verbal training program, based on stories about students just like you!

Mistake Number 7. Thinking you don't have to take the TOEFL.

Unless your native language is English, almost every U.S. college will insist that you take the TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language).

This is true even if you attend a secondary school where the language of instruction is English.

Frankly, we have seen some pretty shoddy writing that apparently was good enough for international schools. We've even heard the excuse, "Well, what do you expect? I'm bilingual."

You may be thinking that studying for the SAT ought to be enough to prepare you for the TOEFL. However, the tests are very different. The SAT is academic, while the TOEFL tests your ability to get by in practical situations. The test may not be as difficult as the SAT, but that only means you should aim for a perfect score!

Also, the format of the TOEFL is quite different from that of the SAT. You don't want to be taken by surprise on test day! The TOEFL tests your skills in reading, writing, listening and speaking.

Yes, speaking! Our international clients often find that this is the part of the test they most want to practice at ATHENA MENTOR. They want to be prepared to reply, quickly and cogently, when the clock starts the two-minute countdown on a speaking question.

Our biggest tip: *Schedule your TOEFL exam well in advance.* Test centers can be backlogged for weeks.

Use that time to train for the quirks of the TOEFL with one of ATHENA MENTOR's native speakers. We'll quiz you on the specific question formats and unusual situations that regularly appear on the listening and speaking sections of the TOEFL.

ATHENA ADVISES Accept the fact that, unless your native language is English, you will almost certainly have to take the TOEFL exam. Leave plenty of time to schedule your exam, and study for the special format of the TOEFL.

Mistake Number 8. Clinging to the notion that weekends and vacations are for hanging out.

Europeans tend to take holidays very seriously. They're a big topic of conversation. People jockey for prestige by boasting about how far they travelled or how hard they partied. "I deserve to lie on a beach and do nothing," they claim. "After the way I worked all year (snicker), I deserve a vacation."

U.S. colleges think differently. They are looking for people who are sufficiently talented to complete a school year without completely collapsing.

ATHENA ADVISES Start thinking of the time you do not spend in school as time to grow intellectually, or to volunteer in service of a cause to which you are committed. You don't have to study in the same way you do at school, but give yourself a chance to discover how much fun learning can be! Let us help you choose a summer

program that will help you discover who you are and what you really care about.

Mistake Number 9. Thinking that admissions officers will be really impressed by your holiday travels.

Admissions officers cringe at reading the thousandth essay about Your Fabulous Vacation. Think about it: they're up late, reading and reading, straining their eyes, trying to give every applicant a fair chance. Here comes an essay by Ms. or Mr. I.B. Applicant, gushing about the sunset over—spare us.

I remember the mother who confided, “Not every child is as well travelled as my Jonas. He’s not like those American kids. He’s seen the world.”

The problem is that Jonas & Co. have done little or nothing to earn those vacations, and the essays tend to focus on the wonders of the world, not Jonas. The admissions committee wants to know about Jonas!

Similarly, if your community service involved a trip to Africa organized by your school, it’s unlikely to tell us about *you*. On the other hand, if you really made a difference—say, by choosing a new project, raising the money, galvanizing your classmates and forever changing our minds about how to solve the problem of world hunger—by all means, tell us all about it!

ATHENA ADVISES If you must write about faraway places, put yourself in the picture—and consider choosing a community service project that does not involve burning gasoline.

Mistake Number 10. Applying to every Ivy League college, and nowhere else.

“She applied to every Ivy League school.”

I heard this again this year—once again, about a student who was not accepted at any single one of the Ivy League schools.

ATHENA ADVISES The eight schools of the Ivy League are a “league” in that they play football together. It’s also undeniable that every school in the Ancient Eight ranks among the best universities in the United States.

Nevertheless, the schools of the Ivy League are rather different from one another: academically, as well as in tone and setting. Unlike in the U.K., you are welcome to apply to any Ivy League school or schools you choose. But to compete successfully, you had better tailor each application to the individual college in question.

When you get down to it, you’ll probably realize that not every one of these colleges is for you. **ATHENA MENTOR** can help you perfect your applications to schools—whether Ivy League or not—that truly match your qualifications, interests, learning style and personality.

If you're aiming at the Ivies, it is essential to begin early. Eighth grade is not too soon! We'd be happy to hear from you.

The Next Step

There are over three thousand colleges and universities in the United States. Just because you can only name three does not mean that there aren’t a couple of hundred very well-respected colleges—some of which will be perfect for you.

But where should you begin? How can you find out which colleges are right for you? Which are worth paying for? And how on earth do you get in?

Be assured that college applications are complicated even for U.S. citizens. Gone are the days when students from the best U.S. prep schools were virtually assured of getting in to Harvard: "In 1950, for example, the products of 12 top boarding schools were accepted at a rate of 88 per cent (246 of 278), only a modest decline from the 95 percent rate in 1930 . . . " (Karabel 598).

Today, those statistics are reversed. And many parents will confess their fear that if they had to apply to their alma mater today, they would never be accepted. How do people cope?

Many applicants in the United States benefit from the services of a private college admissions counselor. You may have already have considered such services, but wonder whether someone so far away could understand your child's experiences and share your international perspective.

ATHENA MENTOR specializes in international students. Email us (athena@athena-mentor.com) or call us (+49 89 3888 9575) for the free white paper, "Families We Serve." It will give you a sense of the very personal interest we take in every student we mentor. Let's see if you're ready for us--and if ATHENA MENTOR is right for you.

Jerome Karabel, *The Chosen: The Hidden History of Exclusion at Harvard, Yale and Princeton*. NY: Houghton Mifflin, 2005.