



EMPOWERLY

A Parent's Guide to US College Admissions

Part 2



Introduction

“This may be a good time to talk about what you actually get when you get a college education. There is of course the acquisition of knowledge. [...] Another thing you can get at college is a lifelong network — friends, business contacts, maybe a romantic partner. You’re also taking advantage of what are called peer effects, surrounding yourself with other smart, ambitious, disciplined people. And there’s one more thing you’re getting: status. [...] Fewer than 40 percent of U.S. adults have a bachelor’s degree; and if you have a degree from a well-regarded university, that puts you in even more rarefied air.” – **Stephen J. Dubner, Freakonomics Radio**



Every year, the higher education system in the United States becomes increasingly competitive. Not only are more students applying for the same number of spots, but colleges are requiring more from their applicants than ever before. Teenagers today are taking on enormous amounts of coursework and extracurricular commitments in an effort to stand out. Even top students—students with a 4.0!—struggle to stand a chance of gaining admission to the university of their choice.

In this guide, we'll get to the bottom of the matter. We'll review the statistics, and what they mean for college hopefuls of today. We'll also ask the experts what trends they notice over their time in admissions, and what advice they have for families.

Taking proactive steps to understand and plan for the reality of college applications already puts you ahead of many others, so let's get started! This guide is designed to help you understand the trends and statistics that are affecting the college application process.





Top Student Mindset

“But there was one question that answered itself: why would the parents do this? The answer is that slots at these top schools are incredibly scarce — and incredibly valuable.” – **Stephen J. Dubner, [Freakonomics Radio](#)**

First and foremost, we'll address a **top student mindset**. What does that mean? A top student by nature is someone resilient, driven, and committed to working through challenges. It may seem like platitudes, but it matters for parents, too: helping your student keep the right mindset as they work toward college can make a tangible difference in their academic and personal performance.

The competition and pressure are indeed fierce during 12th grade. At times, the college admissions process feels like a desperate race to stay ahead of the pack. We empathize with that level of stress.

You're not alone in this. As a parent, here's what you can do: gather enough information to make wise choices about their future, and encourage them to remember that there are multiple pathways to success. If you need extra support, Empowerly is here to help you make empowered decisions and overcome obstacles in your way.



Dropping Admission Rates

"The elite schools, meanwhile, have set new records for applications: Harvard was up 42 percent last year [2021]. [...] Even so, they admit only a tiny share of the students who apply, and these tiny admittance numbers become part of their appeal." – **Stephen J. Dubner, [Freakonomics Radio](#)**

"With many U.S. colleges opting to make SAT or ACT scores optional over the past two years, the number of applications has jumped, leading to record low acceptance rates. [...] 'Students who normally would self-select out of the admissions pool — they would look at the average SAT score and not apply — those kids are applying.'" – **Aimee Picchi, [CBS News](#)**

"[T]he pandemic led to thousands of more applications—and to thousands more rejections... [One high school counselor] put it this way: 'Some of my cream-of-the-crop students are greatly disappointed. [...] The demographic blip on the way may alter the crush of rejection, but the [top schools] will continue to be in demand—even at very high prices and ridiculously low admit rates.'" – **Scott Jaschik, [Inside Higher Ed](#)**

To be realistic about your student's odds of admission, you can look at past years' acceptance rates for different colleges you are targeting. Sometimes colleges also offer information about each incoming freshman class or average accepted student statistics. At first glance, many of these statistics are discouraging. However, it's critical to have a genuine idea of what the competition is like so you can adequately prepare.

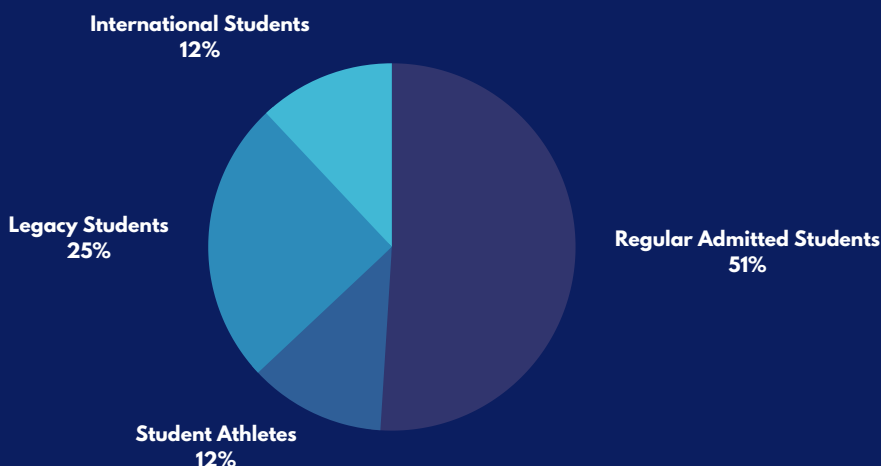
Wondering what to do with this data? Empowerly uses past student data to calculate the [Empowerly Score®](#), which students can compare to the universities on their college list. The Empowerly Score® highlights areas for improvement and how to close the gap between your current student profile and your targets. Not only does this simplify the information you need to keep track of, but it also makes customized recommendations to help your student work efficiently.



Fewer Spots Available than you Might Think (Legacy and Athletes)

While the numbers alone can be difficult to conceptualize, they don't even tell the whole story. Putting the acceptance rates in context illuminates exactly how coveted spots at top schools like Harvard and similar institutions are.

"There are about 25,000 high schools in the United States, which means 25,000 valedictorians and 25,000 salutatorians; but Harvard only admits 2,000 students a year, which implies that they **reject at minimum 98% of valedictorians and salutatorians.**" – **John, Account Executive, Empowerly**

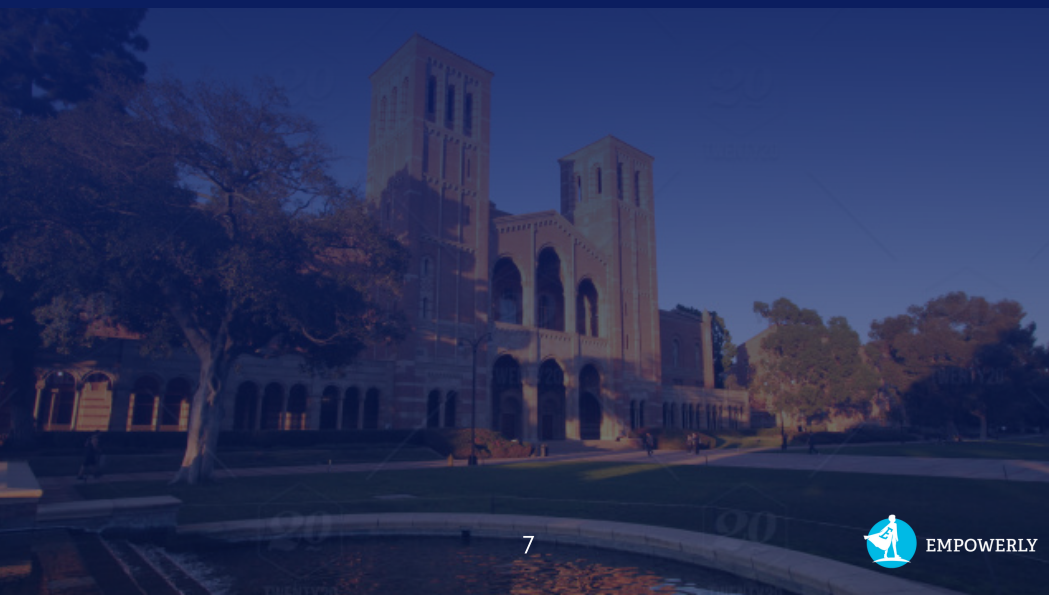


"The 2,000 seats are not available for general students as around 12% are [allocated for] athletes, 10-12% are international, and 16-25% are [legacy students], **so the actual seats available are a lot less than 2,000!**" – **Amit, Counselor, Empowerly**

"I have scratched my head more than once at some of the quirky who-got-in and who didn't decisions. In the end, admission to a given college is **far less about the student** than the student and families want it to be and **far more about the college's institutional needs—including legacies, athletes, development cases, etc.** The disappointment of not being admitted stings profoundly. I remember one exceptional student asking, 'What did they want? Why wasn't I good enough?' The reality was and still is, **most of the applicants are good enough.**" – **Scott Jaschik, Inside Higher Ed**

These are all reasons why excellent, stand-out students might get rejected from competitive universities. After all, an institution with a 3-4% acceptance rate can't be considered a sure bet by anyone, even with a perfect-on-paper application. The odds are simply not in the applicant's favor.

That doesn't mean you shouldn't aim for your dreams. If you strongly believe that you would thrive and succeed at one of these elite universities you'll need to put in the work. Receiving individual professional college admissions counseling to expedite this process is a good idea. And, remain open-minded to opportunities outside those top schools. As a parent, it's highly encouraged to remind your child not to pin all their hopes on one specific college.





Balancing your College List

"If you look outside [the same top 30 to 50 colleges], there are wonderful hidden gems." - Aimee Picchi, CBS News

When building your college list, one of the most important steps you can take is to ensure you have a balanced list. What does that mean, exactly? Well, as we've discussed, colleges have different application rates, depending on the exclusivity or difficulty of the school itself. When you and your student finalize the list of schools you will be crafting applications for over the next few months or years, take some time to ensure you have [included a range of schools to increase](#) your chances of scoring those admission letters.

You can read more about a [balanced college list](#) on our blog. Most of all, you should feel empowered to include some reach schools that you want to work for, as well as a healthy range of match (or target) schools. You'll want to spend time researching your safety schools.



Knowing When to Ask for Help

Whether you notice that your student is having a difficult time juggling all their commitments, or simply want to avoid fighting with your child about getting their college apps done on time, there are times when it makes sense to ask for help. Parents who recognize when they need support to guide his/her child to success ultimately help their child the most.

For more personalized advice, Empowerly College Counseling is here to help. Our experts have decades of experience in the college admissions space as Admission Officers, readers, interviewers, and more. Our guided experience, supplemented by the Empowerly Portal and its suite of digital resources, is here to support you 24/7. Working towards your goals with a great support system is the best way for students to find success in the college application process!

If you have any questions about your college readiness or would like to inquire about Empowerly's services and packages, reach out to enrollment@empowerly.com. You can also [book a free consultation](#) to talk it over on a video conference call. We can't wait to meet you.