



STUDYING IN THE U.S.

A Short Guide for
Prospective International Students.

By Adish Rai

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Introduction

First of all, thank you for taking the time to read this. This book is for students considering to pursue their higher education in the United States of America. My name is Adish Rai. I am an international student from India. At the time of writing this book, I am a student at the University of Massachusetts – Amherst in Amherst, Massachusetts.

The contents in this book are more relevant and geared towards prospective Undergraduate students. However, I have tried my best to frame things in such a way that even students planning on pursuing higher levels of education such as Masters, will find it useful. There is a decent amount of overlap in the process, and some of the key insights I share are relevant and useful at any level of education.

I chose to write this book because the application process to American universities is very different than most universities around the world. There are a lot of things you need to learn and familiarize yourself with, and this can be really overwhelming. I noticed that there is a lack of organized information available online, and the stress of trying to figure things out on your own eventually scares away a lot of people from pursuing their dream education. I was one among hundreds of thousands of students who spent countless valuable hours online trying to familiarize themselves with the whole process and the minor details. Hours that really should have been spent on test prep and productive application work. When it comes to this, a little guidance really goes a long way.

Over the last three years I have gone through the application and visa process, won scholarships, studied here in the US, worked here, dropped out, re-applied, changed majors and pretty much done it all. Now when I look back on my journey I realize that things didn't really have to be that confusing and stressful. If I just had someone who could give me a general idea of things at the right time, I would have done a lot better. My goal is to try and be that person for you. My goal is to take all the experience I have gained from my successes and failures, and present it in a simple, organized and useful manner to try and pave a smoother path for you to achieve your educational goals. Although I have tried to pack as much useful information as I possibly could into this book, it does not necessarily cover everything you need to know. However, it will give you the right foundation and framework to work off of. The understanding of the whole process you will gain from this book, combined with hard work and due diligence on your side, will put you in a good position to achieve your educational goals.

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1. Why I Picked the US

The first and most important step in your journey of becoming an international student is choosing what country you want to study in. Some of the things you should consider while choosing a country are: scope for the field of study you want to pursue, the type of education system you want to be in, the culture you want to be a part of, the amount of money you are willing to spend, and so on. First and foremost, let me introduce you to something I call the “Bank on the rank” syndrome. Most prospective international students place way too much importance on the ranking of the university, and I was guilty of this too. Although ranking is important, it should not be the be-all and end-all of your decision. You have to understand that you are going to LIVE in this country for FOUR years! That’s a long time! So, don’t just go off on the ranks and then decide the country. I will touch upon this point more in the next chapter. But for now, just remember that ranking isn’t everything.

The typical destinations for prospective international students are the United States, Australia, the UK, Switzerland, Germany, Canada, France and so on. I personally was accepted into universities in Australia and the US and ultimately decided to go with the US. I had two main reasons behind this. The first being entrepreneurship. Entrepreneurship has been my passion since I was five years old. Learning how to launch and successfully sustain a business was my number one priority with university education. And what better place than the epicenter of entrepreneurship, the US. Not that other countries are necessarily bad in this regard, but I knew I would have way more opportunities and meet more like-minded people in the US. Secondly, I am not fond of theoretical education. And by that I mean education systems which are more centered around theoretical learning and exams. Now this is not necessarily a bad thing, in some fields I guess it would make sense. But it wasn’t my preference. I learnt through a friend and some personal research that the US had a more hands on and practical approach to education. Whereas countries that follow the British education system such as India, Australia, the UK and so on, have a much more theoretical and exam oriented way of learning.

All in all, it just made sense for me to go to the US, and I’m glad I did. In a similar fashion I recommend you list down your priorities, and then research the countries you are considering. Talk to people who live there, reach out to students who’ve studied there. Don’t be shy to reach out to people. Trust me, people love to help out when it comes to such things because they know how hard and stressful it can be when you are in this situation.

2. Choosing Universities

The second most important decision you will have to make would be deciding what universities you are going to apply to. This is very important and there are some generally accepted and sensible ways to go about it. You don't want to apply to too many universities, like I did. I know it's easy to get carried away and not be able to decide between universities. However, you have to remember that the more number of applications you have to fill, the lesser time you will be able to give to each individual application. It's no good if you've applied to 20 universities and all your applications are rushed and sub-par. At the same time, you shouldn't apply to too few either. No matter how sure you are about getting into some universities, you never know what could happen. Maybe your application gets delayed, or the university received a surprisingly high number of highly qualified applications, or they changed their criteria. You never know what could happen, so why take the risk? The key is to find the right balance.

The way I recommend you go about this is to apply to about 9 universities. And you divide them into 3 groups of 3. The three groups are Reaches, Matches and Safeties.

Reaches are universities that are pretty much among the best in the world. These are universities that have low acceptance rates but deep inside there's a voice inside you screaming "What's the harm in trying?" And I say the voice is right. You don't want to regret down the line for not applying to your dream university be it Harvard, Stanford or MIT or whatever.

Matches are universities with which you know you have a good shot at getting accepted. A good way to figure this out is to research the average test scores of the incoming class in the previous year and then compare those scores to yours. Also look at the acceptance rates, and more specifically the acceptance rates for international students in the past years. Researching forums online can also help you get a general idea of the caliber of students the university has accepted over the past years and where you stand in comparison to them.

Lastly, Safeties are universities that you are sure you will get into. "Hope for the best, prepare for the worst" should be your motto when you pick universities. And sometimes, as deserving of a candidate you think you are, you might end up in a situation where you don't get into any of the universities in the above two groups. Which is why you have to apply to some universities that you are pretty sure you can get into. Don't get me wrong, these aren't necessarily going to be bad universities. They will still provide you with a great education and learning experience. But you have to make sure that your grades and test scores are well above the average for the previous year's incoming class.

And lastly, going back to the “Bank on the rank” syndrome. I cannot stress this enough, DO NOT pick universities solely based off ranks or you will find yourself in some trouble. For example, if you’re a person who absolutely hates cold weather, universities in states like Massachusetts and New York may not be the best fit for you.

If you can afford to visit the universities you are considering, then I highly recommend you do so. But if you are in the same position I was in, and can’t really afford that, then don’t worry. Try to research each individual university to the best of your ability and try reaching out to students who live there to get a better idea of things.