



$2+2$

How to transfer to a top US university.

By Ross Jennings

Thousands of American and international students transfer from community colleges to US universities every year. It is a great system. Students take two years of university classes at a community college, and then transfer to a university to complete their bachelor's degrees in another two years. Students love the "2+2" system because they can get into better universities than they can as freshmen and also save a lot of money. It is easy to transfer from a community college to a university. Getting into a top US university, however, is not easy. It takes hard work, planning and a bit of luck. Here are some tips to help you get into a top US university.

1. Be a top student – If you're a great student already, become a better one. If you're not, then become one, and make up for the knowledge and good study habits you may lack. There are no short cuts. Your study habits, life style, activities outside class and choice of friends all count. Top universities are looking for not just grades and test scores, but well-rounded, articulate students with high goals, leadership skills and energy.

2. Aim for life, not just school – What you do after university will ultimately be more important than what school you went to. Choose a university that will help you not only learn academic subjects, but develop character. The key is to find your passion – what you really want to do – and let other things, including university admission, spring from that. As a young student, you don't have to have found your life's mission yet, but you should at least be looking. Strongly developed interests are of great value in life, and also help in university admission.

3. Perfect your English – You won't get into a top university without good writing, fast reading with understanding, fluent speaking, and a broad vocabulary. It takes hard work and living in an English language environment. If you spend all your time with your same language friends, you will not learn good English. Remember, too, that academic English and normal English are different. You need both to be a top student.

4. Get the "numbers" – Many top universities require TOEFL or IELTS for transfer, and the Ivy Leagues and a few others also require SAT or ACT (most universities do not require SAT or ACT for transfer). Find out what scores your target universities require and get them. A test prep program might be helpful for this. Top universities also require a high community college grade point average. Get it. The numbers themselves don't guarantee admission, but you won't have a chance without them.

5. Understand rankings – University rankings drive students and parents crazy. University of Washington is ranked 42nd in the US (US News), but 16th in the world (Shanghai Jiaotong). How can that be? Different rankings measure different things. Use rankings to get a general idea about the quality of universities you're thinking about, but don't let rankings be the only factor you use in selecting your target universities. There are many other things to consider.


6. Get inside help – Talk to people from your country who got into your target universities and ask them for advice. How did they do it? Universities have student clubs from most countries; contact people from those clubs. Talk to admissions counselors and department advisors as well. The more inside information you have, the better you can plan your application strategy.

7. Consider outside help – An admission coaching service may be able to help you. Some people like them, some do not. Don't expect too much from such a service, however. Even the best service can't get an average student into Harvard. Avoid unethical "help", such as getting admission essays from the internet. If you can't write a strong essay, you aren't a top university student.

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8. Build your resume – Almost all applicants to top universities have good grades and test scores. The biggest factor that differentiates top students from one another is what they have done with their lives. There is no magic formula for this. You don't have to "save the world". Universities would much rather see one or two long-term activities reflecting a sincere interest than a lot of unrelated activities. Quality here is much more important than quantity.

9. Be honest with yourself – Are you really a top student? Top by definition means the highest 5 or 10%, not just in grades and test scores but in English communication, resume and character as well. You can certainly apply to dream schools, but make sure most of your efforts are directed towards trying to get in to universities commensurate with your actual abilities.

10. Conduct a professional application campaign – If you want to get into a top school, follow all the steps above and make your applications as close to perfect as possible. Start early and don't wait until the last minute. Spend some time on your essay. Write it like a newspaper article, with a hook, a story line and a strong ending. Apply to at least five universities, including a dream school, three "solids" you think you have a good chance to get into, and a "safety" school you would actually attend if it is the only one that admits you. Give references plenty of time to write letters of recommendation for you, and give them your CV and transcript to help them know what to write. Finally, just do your best and accept the result. That in fact is a good rule for life in general. 

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