

GLOSSARY OF COLLEGE ADMISSIONS TERMS

Your guide to all the terminology and lingo used in higher education.

Types of Post-Secondary Options

College

Smaller institutions of post-secondary learning. Includes community colleges, liberal arts colleges, and technical schools. The term is also used generally to apply to all post-secondary education.

Trade School

Refers to any post-secondary educational institution that offers training for a specific career path.

University

Larger institutions of post-secondary learning, offering both undergraduate and graduate programs, including advanced and professional degrees.

Vocational School

Much like trade schools, a vocational school offers education in a specific career field, but differs in that they offer broader programs that cover various aspects of a career path instead of specific programs.

Types of Degrees

Associate Degree

A two-year degree that is typically awarded by community colleges and technical schools.

Bachelor's Degree

Academic degree awarded to someone after completion of their undergraduate studies. This degree is earned at four-year colleges and is typically attained in three to six years, with the average being four years. The degree earned is either a Bachelor of Arts or a Bachelor of Sciences, depending on your area of study. Some majors may be offered with two separate paths.

Certifications

Can be done alone or in addition to a degree to enable someone to work in their preferred field. Can be earned at different types of institutions (e.g. community colleges, four-year institutions, etc.).

Master's Degree

A master's degree is the next level after completion of a bachelor's degree. It represents study demonstrating a high level of understanding in a specific field of study. The degree earned is either a Master's of Arts or a Master's of Sciences, depending on your area of study. Some programs may be offered with two separate paths.

Professional Degree

A professional degree prepares someone to work in a specific profession, practice, or industry. Often includes meeting the requirements for licensure or accreditation. The M.D., or Doctor of Medicine, is one of the most well-known examples of a professional degree.

Doctoral Degree (PhD)

A doctoral degree is the highest level of academic degree awarded by universities, representing advanced knowledge and expertise in a specific field.

Application Types

Coalition Application

A college application platform that is accepted by 170+ distinguished colleges and universities across the U.S. It emphasizes increasing access to higher education for students from diverse backgrounds.

Common Application

A standard application form accepted by all colleges that are members of the Common Application association. You can fill out this application once and submit it to any one — or several — of the nearly 1000 colleges that accept it.

Holistic Review

The process where admissions counselors evaluate applicants by considering a wide range of factors beyond just academics or another single factor. This includes taking into account the context about where a student lives, attends school, and their fit for that college.

Institution-Specific Application

An application specific to individual colleges or universities, typically found on their official website.

QuestBridge (QB)

A special application process for first-generation and low-income students. It has an earlier deadline (late September), and almost all partner colleges operate QB admission as a binding process. If selected, students have all college costs covered, but the match process means that students may not be matched at their top choice college.

Application Deadlines

Early Action (EA)

An option to submit your applications before the regular deadlines. When you apply early action, you get admission decisions from colleges earlier than usual. Early action plans are not binding, which means that you do not have to enroll in a college if you are accepted early action. Some colleges have an early action option called EA II, which has a later application deadline than their regular EA plan.

Early Decision (ED)

An option that gives special consideration to a student who applies for admission by a specified date, usually in early fall. Early Decision is binding, meaning students are obligated to enroll if admitted, and to withdraw applications from other institutions. If applying Early Decision, you will need to complete a Net Price Calculator to be sure that the cost of attendance is affordable. This option requires commitment, often before you get your financial aid package from the college.

ED I

A binding option that typically has a deadline in November and signals your absolute first choice.

ED II

Another binding option with the deadline a little later, usually around January.

Guaranteed Admission

A direct pathway to admission based on criteria specific to the college or university.

Regular Decision (RD)

The normal process by which students apply by published deadlines, with the promise of receiving admissions decisions by no later than April 1.

Restrictive Early Action Decision (REA)

Another non-binding application option, yet you can only early apply to one private college. Applying REA indicates to the college that they are your number one choice, and it can significantly increase your chances of acceptance. If you are admitted, you are not required to enroll at that college or university. Some REA colleges have exceptions for merit scholarship deadlines at other private institutions.

Rolling Admission

An option that considers each application as soon as all required information (such as high school records and test scores) has been received, rather than setting an application deadline and reviewing applications in a batch. Colleges that use a rolling admission policy usually notify applicants of admission decisions quickly.

Application Options	Deadline	Binding?	When Do You Get a Decision?	Helpful Information
Early Action (EA)	Oct-Nov	✗	Dec-Jan	Apply early, get a decision early, but you're not committed if admitted.
Restrictive Early Action (REA)	Oct-Nov	✗	Dec-Jan	Can't apply early to other private colleges. Non-binding.
Early Decision (ED)	Oct-Nov	✓	Dec	You commit to attend if admitted. It's binding. Often best for top-choice colleges.
ED II	Jan	✓	Feb	Same commitment as ED, just a later timeline.
Regular Decision (RD)	Jan-Feb	✗	March-April	More time to apply and compare financial aid offers
Rolling Admission	Varies (Fall-Spring)	✗	A few weeks after applying	Most often found at public institutions. Allows you to receive an admissions decision on your own timeline

Components of the College Application

Activities List / Resume

A list or document created by you that highlights your extracurricular involvement, leadership roles, volunteer work, work experience, family responsibilities, and other relevant experiences outside of your academics.

Application

Sometimes has a fee. Fee waivers, which means you don't have to pay the fee, are available to students who need it. Check with the college(s) you are interested in applying to.

High School Profile

A brief document created by counselors that provides in-depth information about a high school's environment, its academic offerings, and policies.

Honors and Awards

Highlights various recognitions and achievements that you have received. This includes recognition and multiple levels, such as local, state, regional, national, international, etc.

Letter(s) of Recommendation

Written by someone that knows you and can speak for your academics, qualifications, and character. A letter of recommendation provides insight about you from another perspective. This can be written by a counselor, teacher, coach, or someone outside of school. Most colleges require at least one letter be from your high school counselor.

Mid-Year Grades

An academic report sent to colleges during a student's senior year of high school that includes their first semester grades.

Personal Statement / College Essay

One of the most important parts of the application! This is an essay written in a narrative format that serves as your opportunity to express who you are. It gives the reader a chance to learn more about who you are in academics and beyond and get a sense of your personality.

Supplemental Questions & Materials

Institution-specific components of the application. These vary based on which colleges you apply to and their requirements. Some require you answer additional questions, conduct an interview, show demonstrated interest, submit a portfolio, etc. Check with the college(s) you are interested in applying to.

Test-Optional

A policy in college admissions that allows a student to choose whether or not to submit standardized test scores. You are not penalized if you choose not to submit your scores as colleges who are test-optional do not require that you submit them.

Transcript

The official record of your coursework at a school or college. Your high school transcript is usually required for college admission and for some financial aid packages.

Types of Admissions Decisions

Admit

You applied and were accepted, congratulations!

Unless you applied through Early Decision or QuestBridge (both of which are binding), you are not obligated to attend. You should visit, do more research, and confirm that this college is the right fit for you. Once you have made your decision, you need to confirm your enrollment at one college by the national response date of May 1, then decline your other offers of admission.

If you applied through Early Decision or QuestBridge (these are binding), you must attend that institution. Be sure to note their confirmation deadline, as it may be different than May 1.

Defer

If you applied EA, a college may not be able to say yes yet, but still want to review your application in the next round. This doesn't mean you are denied, just that they need more time to look over your materials. You can submit new information, including updates and your first-term senior grades. In some cases, the college may encourage you to consider changing your application to a binding commitment for better admission odds. Never agree to that unless you've completed a Net Price Calculator and you're sure you can afford the college.

Denial

This means you are not offered admission to the college or university you applied to. While it may not be the answer you were hoping for, it can serve as a guide to find the best fit for you in higher education.

Need-Aware Admission

When a college takes into account your ability to pay for your tuition when making admissions decisions.

Need-Blind Admission

When a college makes admissions decisions without considering your ability to pay for that college. Often colleges keep separate processes between their admission process and their financial aid awarding, which means your ability to pay does not affect your admissions decision. However, you may need to seek outside assistance in order to meet full financial need depending on the financial aid package you receive from the college.

Waiting List

The list of applicants who may be admitted to a college if space becomes available. Colleges wait to hear if all the students they accepted decide to attend. If students don't confirm and there are empty spots, a college may fill them with students who are on the waiting list.

Other Helpful Terms

Credit

Think of them like points that go towards your degree. Each institution determines how many credits students need to successfully earn to graduate. The number of credits that a course is worth is dependent on the difficulty and frequency (i.e. how often class sessions meet and for how long) of the course.

First-Generation Student

A standard application form accepted by all colleges that are members of the Common Application association. You can fill out this application once and submit it to any one — or several — of the nearly 1000 colleges that accept it.

Major

Your main field of study. This is what your degree is in. At some institutions, you may add on additional major(s).

Minor

A secondary specialization or area of study that can complement your major or be entirely separate. Typically requires less courses (credits) to achieve. Not every institution will have minors or certificates.