College Admissions Glossary



COLLEGE Compass

AN INITIATIVE OF THE UVA ALUMNI ASSOCIATION

ACT, CSS Profile, open admission, TOEFL, safety schools—*what?*

We're willing to bet that, despite the terms and acronyms coming up all the time, no one has actually explained what any of these college phrases mean or how they relate to each other. Read on for College Compass' glossary of common words, phrases, and acronyms used in the college admissions process.

ACT

The American College Test (ACT) is a standardized test that estimates a student's readiness for college coursework. It covers four academic areas: English, mathematics, reading, and scientific reasoning, with an optional direct writing test. The maximum score that can be earned is 36. Learn all about the ACT.

AP CLASSES

Advanced Placement (AP) courses are college-level courses and examinations offered in some high schools. Exams are rated on a 1-5 scale. High scores on AP exams can often earn college credit for introductory university courses.

CLASS RANK

A measurement used by some schools to compare the academic achievement of students in the same grade from one school. Class rank is typically determined using the student's GPA.

COMMON APPLICATION

An undergraduate college application that allows students to apply online to over 1,000 colleges and universities in the United States and select international schools. If you want to dig deeper, here are some insider tips on tackling the Common App.

CSS PROFILE

The CSS profile, short for the College Scholarship Service Profile, is an online application used by many colleges so that students may apply for nonfederal and institutional scholarships and financial aid.
Check out this list of participating institutions.

DEFERRED ADMISSION

When an admission decision is put on pause by a college or university until a later date. This usually occurs when a student applies to an earlier application round and they are "deferred" to the regular decision application pool to have their application reviewed again with updated grades on the high school transcript.

DEMONSTRATED INTEREST

An action taken by an applicant to show they have sincere interest in attending a school they are applying to. This may include attending in-person or virtual tours and information sessions, applying binding Early Decision (ED), interviewing, and corresponding with an admissions representative. UVA does not account for demonstrated interest, other than applying Early Decision.

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DEMONSTRATED NEED

An application factor that consists of the cost of attendance for a school minus the expected family contribution. Schools attempt to fill that gap with grants, loans, and work-study.

DUAL ENROLLMENT

Dual enrollment courses provide students opportunities to take college classes in high school, ultimately exposing students to the academic rigor and expectations of college-level work. UVA and other institutions award credit for dual enrollment courses completed based on the their transfer equivalencies.

EARLY ACTION VS. EARLY DECISION

Both allow college applicants to apply earlier and find out admission results sooner. Remember to check the policies for individual schools regarding their different application cycles. Check out our article on navigating the difference between the two.

EARLY ACTION: Allows students to apply to multiple schools (in most situations), and is non-binding.
EARLY DECISION: Requires students to enroll at the college if granted admission.

FAFSA

The FAFSA, short for the Free Application for Federal Student Aid, is a form that students and their families complete to apply for federal grants, work-study funds, and low-interest loans. It can be completed for each year a student attends college.

GRADE POINT AVERAGE (GPA)

A number that represents overall academic performance in high schools, colleges, and universities. It is computed by assigning a point value to each grade a student earns. It should be noted that GPAs are calculated differently at different schools and are not always the best way to compare students' academically. *See also: Weighted Grade Point Average.*

IB CLASSES

International Baccalaureate (IB) classes are college-level courses and examinations offered in some high schools. Exams are rated on a 1-7 scale. High scores on IB exams can often earn college credit for introductory college courses.

LEGACY APPLICANT

A college applicant with a relative (usually a parent or grandparent) who graduated from that college. Some colleges give preference to legacy applicants (also called "legacies"). UVA defines a legacy as a student whose parent, step-parent, or adoptive parent has a degree from UVA.

NEED-BLIND ADMISSION

A policy of making admission decisions without considering the financial circumstances of applicants. Colleges that use this policy may or may not offer enough financial aid to meet a student's full need.

OPEN ADMISSION

A nonselective admissions policy in which any high school graduate or GED holder is accepted. Almost all two-year community colleges have an open-admission policy. However, a four-year college with a general open admission policy may have admission requirements for certain programs.

PLACEMENT TEST

Placement tests are tests given in core subjects like math and English to assess the academic skills of new students so they can properly place them in the appropriate courses.

REACH SCHOOL

A college or university in which you personally have a less than roughly 25% chance of admission based on your grades, coursework, test scores, and any other factor used in the school's application review. A school that accepts fewer than 10% of its applicants would be considered a "reach" for all applicants. *See also: Safety School and Target School.*

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REGULAR DECISION

The traditional timeline for college admissions. For regular decision, most schools require prospective students to apply by early January so applicants can hear back by March or April. This application timing allows students to apply to multiple schools and gives them plenty of time to compare financial aid packages, however they receive their admissions decisions later than the early application rounds.

ROLLING ADMISSION

Admissions departments who work on a rolling deadline evaluate applications as they come in rather than using a distinct deadline. Schools continue to review applications until all their spots are filled for the incoming class. Students often find out their admission status within 4-6 weeks.

SAT

The Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) is a standardized test used widely for college admissions and its purpose is to assess a student's readiness for college. It is split into two sections: Mathematics and Evidence-Based Reading and Writing. Most students take the SAT during their junior and/or senior year. The maximum score that can be earned is 1600. Learn all about the SAT.

SAFETY SCHOOL

A college or university in which you personally have more than a 75% chance of admission based on your grades, coursework, test scores, and any other factor used in the school's application review. *See also: Reach School and Target School.*

SCHOOL PROFILE

A document created by a high school that explains the school's grading system, course offerings, graduation requirements, and more. Admissions officers use the documents to provide context for a student's transcript and application for admission.

TARGET SCHOOL

A college or university in which you personally have between a roughly 25-75% chance of admission based on your grades, coursework, test scores, and any other factor used in the school's application review. *See also: Safety School and Reach School.*

TOEFL

The Test of English as a Foreign Language is the standardized English test for non-native speakers of English applying to American colleges and universities among other institutions.

TRANSCRIPT

The official record of your course work and grades at a school or college. Your high school transcript is usually required for college admission and for some financial aid packages. Transcripts are evaluated in context of the high school's school profile.

WAITLIST

Admissions status that is neither an offer nor rejection. The review of the waitlisted student's application is complete, and they may be accepted to the college or university at a later time if there is space in the incoming class.

WEIGHTED GRADE POINT AVERAGE (GPA)

A grade point average that is calculated using a system that assigns a higher point value to grades in more academically rigorous classes. For example, some high schools assign the value of 5.0 (instead of the standard 4.0) for an A earned in an AP class. A weighted GPA more accurately compares students based on not just their grades, but the rigor of their classes.