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## College Application Insight for Third Culture Kids

**Plan well in advance.** Students should not let college applications consume them, especially not to the point that it overwhelms their schoolwork and social lives. But TCK's who apply to US colleges may have to abide by a longer time horizon. They may have fewer chances to visit campuses, take standardized exams, meet with counselors, secure teacher recommendations (ideally from 11th grade teachers), and conduct other research. You do not want to let a deadline catch you by surprise. This goes double for students who might apply to colleges in several countries and who apply Early Decision/Early Action (Nov. 1 deadline).

**Keep track of paperwork.** For students who move frequently, paperwork such as transcripts can get lost all too easily. Make sure that you have official, sealed copies on hand if needed. And try to get a sense of how responsive your school's (or schools') registrars are. You don't want an application to be delayed by a late transcript.

**Conduct extensive research on colleges.** A student growing up in Los Angeles or Manhattan doesn't need to do much research on, say, USC or NYU. Students in Wisconsin grow up knowing intuitively what it means to be a Badger. But students growing up overseas may know much less about US colleges. They might not even know much about certain US cities or regions. TCKs may want to look at big-picture issues, such as the generic differences between big state schools and small liberal arts colleges. Beyond that, they may have to work harder to find out about schools' reputations -- not just their academic offerings but their cultures and people's attitudes towards them. Campus visits are often crucial for many applicants, and that may go double for TCKs. Even though college rankings (i.e. US News & World Report) are often well publicized overseas, the best strategy is for students to ignore those rankings entirely and find the colleges that fit their interests and personalities best.

**Schedule standardized tests well in advance.** Just as the number of applications from overseas has risen dramatically in recent years, so has the demand for SAT and ACT seats. Unfortunately, the College Board cannot always keep pace, in part because they need to carefully monitor testing centers. Students should therefore schedule their testing well in advance to ensure that they can get the place and date that they want (though many can take exams at their own schools).

**Understand the role of standardized testing.** The role of the SAT and/or ACT in college applications is often exaggerated -- and that can go double for students overseas. Students from countries with national exams, such as A-Levels (Britain), Gaokao (China), or Tawjihi (Jordan) often assume that the SAT wholly determines a student's fate in the US. That is far from the case. The SAT is, however, important, and students do not want to overlook it. Students should pay attention to the average SAT scores of the colleges that appeal to them and try to assess where they stand. Students overseas may face certain challenges that American students do not (the use of American vocabulary on the Critical Reading section, for instance) and may therefore need to take more time to get comfortable with the exams. It's important to note that some colleges don't require SATs, especially for international students, but strong scores can still enhance applications to those schools.

**Test preparation.** Many students seek professional test preparation in order to maximize their SAT and/or ACT scores. Test preparation should be approached well in advance, and with reasonable target scores in mind, so students have time to understand the material and develop their skills. In the US, students have vast options for test prep, but those options can be limited overseas. ArborBridge, for instance, works with students online, and brings students customized preparation whenever a student wants and wherever a student may be. No matter what option a student chooses, it's important to bear in mind that students' performance in school should always be their top priority.

**Extracurricular activities and studies.** TCK's who attend schools outside the US high school system often worry that they are at a disadvantage because they don't have access to certain classes or extracurricular activities. This can sometimes be true, especially because American colleges place more weight on extracurriculars than do colleges in other countries. But it's important for TCK's to seize whatever opportunities are available and to cultivate their interests as best they can. If an activity isn't available on campus, then it may be worthwhile to initiate it or to seek it out in the local community.

**Treat TCK status with care.** The mere fact of being a TCK is, often, a dominant component of TCKs' applications. It's important for TCKs not to "label" themselves as such but rather to focus on the substance of their individual experiences in other cultures and countries. In particular, they shouldn't gloat and shouldn't come off as tourists. This means that students who live in exotic places, be they Paris, Riyadh, Bangkok, or anywhere else, should not expect to get extra "points" merely for living abroad. If they write about their host countries, they'll want to write deeply and thoughtfully so that the readers learn something new about those countries' cultures, economics, politics, etc.

**Read books.** For all the complexities of education and college applications, there's no substitute for simple reading. Literature and good nonfiction give students the chance to engage deeply with ideas that interest them, and hopefully for them to have fun in the process. The benefits range from higher SAT Critical Reading scores to topics for college essays to finding academic passions that lead students to their majors, grad schools, and careers. No matter where a student lives or how much he or she travels, great books (not just magazine articles or websites) can and should accompany them always.

**Application Guidance.** Many schools overseas have incredible college counselors who are well versed in the application systems of different countries. Other schools do not. At some schools, teachers pitch in with applications to schools in their home countries. It's important to have candid conversations with school counselors to find out what they can and cannot do. That way, students can seek other sources of guidance (from private counselors, nonprofit groups, publications, websites, and others) if needed.

**It's a difficult process....** for everyone. While TCKs may feel particular strains or face logistical issues, they should rest assured that they are not alone in feeling challenged by the application process. In some ways, this challenge is good—it compels students to think deeply and work hard. TCKs should keep in mind that they are it in with millions of students around the world and that are in good company as they experience their frustrations and triumphs.

**Discuss the process as a family.** As with any other major life event, the college application process is best with robust, open communication among family members. That goes double for TCKs. It's impossible to anticipate where all of these conversations might go, but support, candor, and empathy--from parents, students, and siblings alike--are key ingredients for successful applications and happy kids!

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#### **About Josh Stephens**

Josh Stephens, Director of International Development for ArborBridge, graduated from Princeton University with a degree in English and did his graduate work at Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government. Josh taught at the Archer School in his native Los Angeles and thereafter served as lead editor for Application Boot Camp's college counseling workshop and online application essay guidance, working with ambitious high school students across the United States and around the globe. Josh can be reached at [Josh@ArborBridge.com](mailto:Josh@ArborBridge.com).

#### **About ArborBridge Test Prep & Tutoring**

A pioneer in online test preparation for international students, ArborBridge is now working with students from 15 countries on five continents on US college entrance exams such as the SAT, ACT, and Subject Tests. ArborBridge's exclusive curriculum and expert tutors -- available to any student, anywhere, at any time -- has helped students increase their scores by upwards of 300 points on the SAT, which is scored out of a total of 2400. On the strength, in part, of these increases, ArborBridge students gain admission to college including Stanford, Cal Tech, NYU, and Columbia. [www.ArborBridge.com](http://www.ArborBridge.com)