

College Admissions for Homeschoolers

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The college admissions process is a stressful one, but the good news for homeschooling students (and their parents) is that the procedure has recently become easier and simpler.

Historically, homeschoolers have struggled in the battle to get an equal footing in the process. Changes to the Higher Education Act in 1998 made it easier for homeschoolers to enter college, yet the guidelines issued by the federal government made it unclear to universities how their eligibility to receive federal funds would be affected by admitting homeschoolers. Few colleges updated admissions policies because of the ambiguity.

In November of 2003, the U.S. Department of Education sent an official letter to all universities, which stated that the admission of homeschooled students to college would not jeopardize federal assistance. The letter also clarified the position on compulsory age and self-certification of completion of secondary education.

In the two years since, higher education institutions have updated their admissions policies and made them much more inviting for homeschoolers. Today, a majority of colleges in America evaluate homeschooled applicants using the same requirements as those for traditionally schooled students.

A sampling of three major universities across North America shows a consistent welcome environment for homeschooling students. Harvard University, Purdue University, and the University of Texas are all homeschooler friendly and impart some good advice for anyone interested in attending their school.

Marlyn McGrath Lewis, Director of Admissions for Harvard College says "We receive a good number of candidates every year with all or part of their education from a homeschool background. Homeschooling is broader than some people realize. We are looking for the strongest candidates in the world and we find some of those among homeschoolers."

Harvard University uses the same requirements for homeschoolers and traditional students. Harvard requires applicants to submit the results of either the SAT I or ACT standardized test and the results of three SAT II Subject Tests, which applicants may take in different subjects to demonstrate a mixture of academic interests.

"There is no single academic path we expect all students to follow," according to their Website, "but the strongest applicants take the most rigorous secondary school curricula available to them. An ideal four-year preparatory program includes four years of English, with extensive practice in writing; four years of math; four years of science: biology, chemistry, physics, and an advanced course in one of these subjects; three years of history, including American and European history; and four years of one foreign language."

Traditional applicants can supply a letter from a teacher who knows them well and who has taught him or her in academic subjects (preferably in the final two years of secondary school.) However, McGrath Lewis says, "While we can make careful evaluations with required recommendations, we are happy to read helpful letters from people directly familiar with applicants' lives outside the classroom. Such letters are not necessary, however, and it is generally advisable to submit no more than two or three."

In addition to academic standing, Harvard is looking for well-rounded individuals who have participated in personal development outside the institution.

McGrath Lewis offers this advice: "Follow the passions you have and develop them. We are looking for non-academic criteria: maturity, facility, and non-academic talents, which is the same range as for traditional students."

"It is not harder or easier for homeschoolers to get in. It is difficult for anyone to get in."

Mitch Warren, Senior Associate at the Director Office of Admissions at Purdue University confers that his school is also welcoming to homeschoolers.

"Admissions for homeschoolers is handled exactly the same as for traditionally schooled students," says Warren. According to Purdue's Website, admission is based on academic quality, including the strength of your academic program, trends in academic achievement, and test scores (SAT or ACT.) Other criteria include subject grades, rank in class, and grades in relevant courses.

"We will look at your preparation in core courses related to your intended field of study," says Jo Anne Brown, also a Senior Associate Director at the Office of Admissions at Purdue. "For example, for nursing students we look at English and lab science classes, for engineering students it's math and science."

One question that homeschoolers frequently ask is whether they will be hurt by not having a class rank. According to Warren, the answer is no. "Some students come from large schools but others come from very small traditional schools and some traditional schools do not issue a class rank either," he says. "The class rank is only one criterion."

Brown cautions though that, "If you are missing some of the criteria used in selection (such as class rank) it puts more emphasis on the other factors, such as standardized test scores in addition to the other criteria."

Purdue does not require letters of recommendation but both Warren and Brown note that letters from a supervisor from a part time job, or religious leader are as welcome as a letter from a teacher in a traditional school.

"I would give homeschoolers the same advice as other applicants," says Brown. "Be involved in outside activities, either in the community, or in connection with a school. Have strong academic credentials and take the SAT or ACT twice, first in the spring of your junior year, and again in the fall of your senior year. Purdue uses the better score on the tests -- whatever helps the applicant the most."

"Apply early and visit the campus," continues Brown. "Use our Website to get as much information as possible about the university and make contact with somebody at the institution. Pay attention to deadlines for housing, financial aid, and scholarships and follow through."

Warren also has some advice. "I would suggest to anyone looking at larger institutions that is coming from a small setting, including homeschoolers, to visit the campus to make sure a larger setting is comfortable for them."

Kedra Ishop, Associate Director of Admissions at the University of Texas says "We certainly do accept homeschoolers. We have a growing number of homeschool applicants and those that choose to apply to our institution generally fair well in our process."

Homeschoolers do not have any additional requirements from traditionally schooled students. As a matter of law, public colleges and universities in Texas can not require more of students from non-accredited high school backgrounds than they do of students from traditional schools.

"I recommend that homeschoolers give us a complete picture of who they are," says Ishop. "Because their out-of-school activities are sometimes non-traditional or are so much engrained in their schooling, I find that those that apply to us sometimes short change themselves by not giving us all of their activities, honors, awards, hobbies, etc. This is an integral part of our application process."

"I also encourage home school students to submit any and all academic credentials that they can get or have. We don't require any additional testing or credentials other than our standard requirements, but UT Austin admissions is a very competitive environment. The more robust their academic credentials, the more strongly they can compete."

Ishop continues. "Admission to the University is competitive. To help us make informed decisions, we consider a number of factors that help us to get an accurate view of your educational progress and academic abilities. Since you won't be able to submit a class rank (one of the University's major admissions factors), the Office of Admissions will look at other indicators of your academic competitiveness. Some indicators are SAT I (or ACT) and SAT II scores; the curriculum used in the homeschool environment; awards and honors you may have won in competition with traditionally schooled students; grades you earned in college courses taken in conjunction with home schooling; and other indicators that might be available to you."

"To help us make a decision about your admission, the Office of Admissions will review your file looking for evidence that you excelled both academically and personally. That's why it's critical for you to include as much information as possible to help us place you properly within the applicant pool. Include information about what and how you studied, how you enhanced your learning experiences, and the activities that you participated in during your high school years. Reviewing the list of factors we consider for all applicants may help you to determine what relevant information to include as part of your application."

Requirements for admission vary by institution but common requests may include a high school diploma, a parent's transcript, or GED, class rank, SAT, ACT or SAT II test scores, portfolio review, written essays, interviews, and/or entrance examinations.

Most colleges accept equivalent documentation for items not available to the homeschooled student (such as a letter from a teacher) or place more emphasis on other criteria when one is missing (such as class rank.)

Your best approach is to check with the admissions office to determine the specific requirements of any schools you are interested in and to be sure they do accept homeschoolers. The good news is the answer will generally be yes.

College Resources

Harvard University

Contact: Marlyn McGrath Lewis, Director of Admissions for Harvard College

Purdue University

Contact: Mitch Warren, Senior Associate Director Office of Admissions

Jo Anne Brown, Senior Associate Director Office of Admissions

UTexas

Contact: Kedra Ishop, Associate Director of Admissions