QUESTIONS & ANSWERS

Here is a selection of the questions we are asked most frequently, with brief responses. Please call or write us if you have additional questions or need further explanation.

ADMISSIONS

What admissions criteria does Harvard use? There is no formula for gaining admission to Harvard. Academic accomplishment in high school is important, but the Admissions Committee also considers many other criteria, such as community involvement, leadership and distinction in extracurricular activities, and work experience. We rely on teachers, counselors, headmasters, and alumni/ae to share information with us about applicants' strength of character, their ability to overcome adversity, and other personal qualities — all of which play a part in the Admissions Committee's decisions.

Are there secondary school course requirements for admission? There is no single academic path we expect all students to follow, 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.

Is it to a student's advantage to take advanced, accelerated or honors courses? Yes. Although schools provide different opportunities, students should pursue the most demanding college-preparatory program available.

Must a student have certain grades or marks to be considered for admission? The Admissions Committee recognizes that schools vary by size, academic program, and grading policies, so we do not have rigid grade requirements. We do seek students who achieve at a high level, and most admitted students rank in the top 10-15% of their graduating classes.

How familiar is the Admissions Committee with secondary schools? their rigor? what marks mean in a particular school or educational system? We have worked hard for many years to learn about schools in the U.S. and around the world. Our careful study of different schools, curricula, and educational systems benefits, too, from information we receive directly each year from schools, extensive personal communication we have with school personnel, and the interview reports we receive from our alumni/ae, who meet thousands of applicants to the College each year. We can always learn more, so we welcome information students think might be helpful to the Admissions Committee in understanding their accomplishments in their school communities.

Does Harvard rank secondary schools in the U.S. and abroad? No. While we understand there are differences in the overall strengths of secondary schools, we are most interested in how well applicants have taken advantage of available resources.

What if a student has attended more than one secondary school? We ask students to provide Secondary School Reports from the college counselor of each school they have attended in their last two years of secondary school.

Does Harvard consider non-required test results, such as Advanced Placement, International Baccalaureate, Abitur, or GCE A-levels? Yes. We value any information that helps us form a complete picture of an applicant's academic interests and strengths.

Which standardized tests does Harvard require? Harvard requires applicants to submit the results of either the SAT I or the ACT. All applicants, however, must also submit the results of three SAT II Subject Tests. For information about the SATs, consult www.collegeboard.com; for the ACT, www.act.org.

Are there minimum required SAT I, ACT, or SAT II scores? Harvard does not have clearly defined, required minimum scores; however, the majority of students admitted to the College represent a range of scores from roughly 600 to 800 on each section of the SAT I as well as on the SAT II Subject Tests. We regard test results as helpful indicators of academic ability and achievement when considered thoughtfully among many other factors.
Which SAT II Subject Tests should students take?
To satisfy our application requirements, applicants must take three SAT IIs, and students may choose any three subjects, with the exception of the English Language Proficiency Test (ELPT). Applicants may wish to convey the breadth of their academic interests by taking tests in different subjects.

Does Harvard consider scores from previous administrations of the SAT I, ACT, or SAT II?
Yes.

If a student takes the required tests more than once, which results does Harvard consider? We consider a student’s best test scores, but it is generally our experience that taking tests more than twice offers diminishing returns.

Which teachers should write recommendations?
Teachers who know the applicant well and who have taught him or her in academic subjects (preferably in the final two years of secondary school) most often provide us the most valuable testimony.

Should students send supplementary recommendations? 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.

How important are extracurricular activities in admissions decisions? Each case is different. Harvard seeks to enroll well-rounded students as well as a well-rounded first-year class. Thus, some students distinguish themselves for admission due to their unusual academic promise through experience or achievements in study or research. Other students present compelling cases because they are more “well rounded” — they have contributed in many different ways to their schools or communities. Still other successful applicants are “well lopsided,” with demonstrated excellence in one particular endeavor — academic, extracurricular, or otherwise. Some students bring perspectives formed by unusual personal circumstances or experiences. Like all colleges, we seek to admit the most interesting, able, and diverse class possible.

Who reads applications? Most applications are read by two or more members of the Admissions Committee, and are considered very carefully in a series of committee meetings where a majority vote is required for admission. The entire process requires several months.

Is there a personal interview? When possible, we try to arrange for applicants living in the U.S. to meet with alumni/ae in or near their school communities. This allows students to learn more about Harvard. Our alumni/ae also add valuable information to applicants’ files. Interviews are available to candidates living abroad where and when possible. No candidate is at a disadvantage if an interview cannot be arranged.

Is there a wait list? Yes. Our wait list includes the strongest applicants whom the Committee was not able to admit but might still wish to consider for admission if spots in the entering class open later. The wait list is not ranked. In some years, we have admitted no one from the wait list; in others, we have admitted more than 100 candidates.

May admitted students defer their matriculation at Harvard? We encourage admitted students to take a one-year deferral to travel, pursue a special project or activity, work, or spend time in another meaningful way — provided they do not enroll in a degree-granting program at another college.

Does Harvard admit students to start the spring semester? No. All students begin study in September to benefit from special programs designed for freshmen.

Are there quotas for certain kinds of applicants? The Admissions Committee does not use quotas of any kind.
Are a student’s chances of admission enhanced if a relative has attended Harvard? The application process is the same for all candidates. Among a group of similarly distinguished applicants, the daughters and sons of Harvard and Radcliffe Colleges alumni/ae may receive an additional look.

Is there a separate admissions process for prospective athletes? No. We encourage students with athletic talent to contact our Athletic Department for information about any of Harvard’s 41 varsity athletic teams, about which you can read more at www.athletics.harvard.edu.

Are a student’s chances of admission enhanced by applying Early Action? No. There is no strategic advantage to applying to Harvard Early Action (or Regular Action for that matter). The higher acceptance rate under our Early Action program reflects the remarkable strength of this self-selected applicant pool. Early Action candidates have, on average, significantly stronger admissions credentials than those who apply Regular Action. That strength is reflected also in the good number of applicants deferred under Early Action who were subsequently offered admission through the Regular Action process — about 100 to 200 students in each of several recent classes. For additional thoughts on our application programs, consult adm-is.fas.harvard.edu/Eareg.htm or the statement “Exploring Options for Early Admissions” in the application materials.

Are students admitted Early Action obligated to attend Harvard? No. Early Action is a non-binding, early notification program. A student admitted Early Action has until May 1, as do all admitted students, to accept his or her spot in the entering class.

May students apply to other early programs if they apply Early Action to Harvard? Harvard’s Early Action Program allows students to apply to other colleges at any time and use the rest of the senior year until May 1, the national Common Reply Date, to compare admission and financial aid offers and make their final college choices. Although we place no restrictions on our Early Action applicants, it is our hope that students will consider carefully the number and timing of their college applications. Regular Action, which offers full access to admission and financial aid opportunities at Harvard, might be a better alternative for students who are less certain about their college preference; or who want to resist the “pressures” of applying early; or who are applying already to a binding Early Decision college and must withdraw from Harvard (and all other colleges) once admitted; or who would benefit from additional time to enhance their academic credentials and strengthen their extracurricular achievements.

Are a student’s chances of admission enhanced by submitting application materials before other applicants? No. We request, however, that students submit the Common Application and the Harvard Application Supplement as soon as possible, by October 15 (for Early Action) or December 15 (for Regular Action) if possible. Receipt of these two forms allows us to expedite application processing, and to arrange personal interviews more quickly.

Are a student’s chances for admission hurt if there are other applicants from his or her school or community? No. There are no quotas for individual schools, communities, states, or countries. A student’s application is compared rigorously with others from around the globe.

FINANCIAL AID

Does Harvard offer financial aid? Yes. About 70% of Harvard students receive some form of financial aid — grants, loans, and/or part-time work. Our program of need-based financial aid is designed to meet 100% of a family’s demonstrated need. Our financial aid policies apply equally to international students and to U.S. citizens.

Does applying for financial aid affect a student’s chances for admission? No. Harvard maintains a “need-blind” admissions policy for all applicants — including international students. That is, the Committee makes each admissions decision without regard to whether a student has applied for aid, whether a student qualifies for financial aid, and regardless of the amount of aid for which a student qualifies.

Is it easy to qualify for financial aid? Financial aid is more widely available than most families expect. We determine need based on a variety of family circumstances, not income alone. Even families with annual incomes exceeding $100,000 may qualify for scholarship aid.

What if a family’s financial situation changes while their student is attending Harvard? We adjust individual financial aid packages to accommodate significant changes in a family’s financial situation. Students apply for financial assistance each year.
Does Harvard award merit scholarships? No. Harvard is firmly committed to allocating resources to sustain our policies of need-blind admissions and need-based financial aid. Our unusually talented student population — chosen in a very competitive admissions process — would, in any case, complicate the equitable distribution of merit-based awards. However, students last year brought with them to Harvard about $11 million in scholarships from outside sources, thus enhancing their own financial flexibility during their college years.

Can students find jobs on or near campus? Yes. There are always plenty of jobs available. We assist all students in securing part-time employment, should they choose to work during the academic year. Employment opportunities range from dining hall duties to work in the University’s libraries, laboratories, and offices. Students have also earned money on campus as bartenders, teaching assistants, sportswriters, computer programmers, lifeguards, and research assistants. Working on average six to eight hours per week, most students find that they can work, excel academically, and participate in a range of extracurricular activities. Read more at our Student Employment Office web site: www.seo.harvard.edu.

Is there a work-study program? Yes.

ACADEMICS

What percentage of faculty members teach undergraduates? Virtually 100%.

Is it possible to talk with and get to know professors? Yes. In addition to professors’ weekly office hours, students spend time with their professors before and after class. There are also many occasions when professors take meals in Harvard’s residential dining halls; attend gatherings in the residences of House Masters, who are themselves Harvard faculty members; and participate in other programs and special events.

Are there required freshman courses? Harvard requires all freshmen to take Expository Writing, a one-semester course. Otherwise, freshmen may enroll in any courses in which they are interested and for which they are prepared.

Must students register for courses before attending class? No. Students enjoy a week-long shopping period at the start of each semester during which they visit classes and compare curricular choices before registering for courses.


How large are courses? Some introductory courses as well as several very popular courses have large enrollments. Yet, of the 900 courses offered on average each fall, more than 600 of them enroll 20 or fewer students.

How strong are Harvard’s science and engineering programs? Science and engineering have long been priorities at Harvard. There are more than two dozen state-of-the-art facilities for science research at Harvard, and new computer science and chemistry laboratories. Moreover, our science faculty has won 29 Nobel Prizes. About half of recent entering students intend to major in the natural sciences, engineering, computer science, or mathematics. Read more about engineering and applied science at www.deas.harvard.edu.

How easy is it for students to change majors (“concentrations”)? About a third of undergraduates change fields after declaring their concentrations at the end of their first year. Students simply change fields in consultation with departmental advisers. For information about the breadth of Harvard’s academic programs, consult www.fas.harvard.edu/academics/departments/all.html.

Can students fulfill academic requirements with previous coursework? Students cannot receive credit for coursework completed before matriculation, but Harvard offers an Advanced Standing Program to entering students who meet certain specific standards on the College Board Advanced Placement (AP) or comparable examinations. Read more at www.fas.harvard.edu/~fdo/advstd.html or on page 31.

What is Harvard’s graduation rate? Harvard graduates 97% of its students, the highest of all NCAA Division I institutions last year. We are certain that everyone admitted to Harvard has the ability to complete all academic requirements successfully. In fact, three-fourths of students graduate with honors.
OTHER QUESTIONS

Is on-campus housing guaranteed? Yes. Harvard guarantees housing for all four years. First-year students live in one of the 17 dormitories in or adjacent to historic Harvard Yard. Self-selected groups of students are assigned to one of 12 residential Houses for the final three years of undergraduate study. About 350 to 500 students live in a House, and each House includes its own dining hall, library, and advising staff, among other resources. Read more about first-year dormitories at www.fas.harvard.edu/~fdo/dorms.html; read more about Harvard’s Houses at www.fas.harvard.edu/~physres/houses.html.

Must students live on campus? Students must live in Harvard housing their first year at the College. A very small percentage of students choose to live off campus as upperclassmen. Many students and alumni/ae, however, consider the House system one of the hallmarks of their Harvard experiences. Considering the diversity of student backgrounds, interests, and talents, Harvard’s residential program enhances the degree to which students — among our most powerful educational resources — learn from one another.

What is the climate at Harvard for gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered students? Harvard’s gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered community consists of an active, visible, and diverse group of students, staff, and faculty. Organizations, support groups, colloquia, and political and social events provide a range of opportunities for gay students and their friends to become engaged in the life of the gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered community according to their own preferences for involvement and openness. We strive to create an inclusive environment that supports the well-being and dignity of every student.

May students bring cars to Harvard? Yes, and students may park their cars, for a fee, in designated University lots. Read more about student parking at www.uos.harvard.edu/transportation/student.html. Students do not need a car to get around. Public transportation in Greater Boston is safe, clean, convenient, and inexpensive.

Should students be concerned for their safety at Harvard? The University sponsors a comprehensive public safety program that includes a full campus police force, a walking escort service, a campuswide shuttle service, emergency phones, lighted pathways, and a computer-card key system operating in all freshman and most other dormitories. Read Harvard’s “Playing It Safe” handbook at hupd.harvard.edu/handbook/index.html.

Does Harvard provide services for students with disabilities? Yes. The Student Disability Resource Center (www.registrar.fas.harvard.edu/SDRC) assists students with any impairment limiting their ability to walk, see, hear, speak, learn, or write. Based on each student’s successful strategies, the Center collaborates with faculty and staff to ensure individualized accommodation. Accessible housing and transportation are also available.

Are there exchange programs with other Greater Boston colleges? Harvard students may cross-register in courses offered at MIT, which is a direct, 10-minute trip from Harvard Yard. Students may also enroll in advanced courses at the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences as well as at many of Harvard’s professional schools.

What study-abroad programs does Harvard offer? The Office of Career Services (www.ocs.fas.harvard.edu), besides assisting students with career placement and counseling, helps students organize study in foreign countries through direct enrollment or exchange programs. Students can receive credit for academic work completed abroad, and may have a substantial portion of their educational expenses covered by their financial aid package. On average, nearly 150 students study abroad each year for credit in more than 30 foreign countries.

Are there research opportunities for undergraduates? Yes. Many students find research projects through individual inquiries with departments and professors as well as through the Harvard Undergraduate Research Program and the Mellon Minority Undergraduate Fellowship Program. The Faculty Aide Program links professors to undergraduates interested in becoming research assistants. Read more about these programs at www.seo.harvard.edu/research.

How successful are Harvard students in gaining admission to graduate schools or finding employment after graduation? Our graduates enjoy an extraordinarily high rate of success receiving job offers and admission to graduate and professional schools. Resident tutors in each of the 12 Houses assist students applying to graduate schools and fellowship programs. In fact, Harvard is almost always the best-represented undergraduate institution at Harvard’s graduate schools. The Office of Career Services offers all undergraduates a range of job and internship counseling and placement. Popular careers in recent years include academic life, business, medicine, law, technology, and media.
Do you have quotas for foreign students?
There are no quotas for international students. All students are considered in the same pool, regardless of citizenship or the school they attend. A student's chances for admission or financial aid are not affected by citizenship or by where a student attends school.

Is financial aid available to foreign students?
Yes. Harvard's financial aid policies are the same for foreign nationals as they are for U.S. citizens. All admission decisions are made without regard to an applicant's family financial circumstances.

If a student's curriculum requires more than the 12-year U.S. curriculum, may students apply after their twelfth year?
We strongly recommend that students complete whatever curriculum they have been taking. Applicants who have completed only a year of GCE A-levels or International Baccalaureate study, for instance, are at a disadvantage.

Must students sitting for GCE A-levels or other international credentials submit SAT I and SAT II scores?
Yes. We realize students educated abroad may be unfamiliar with these examination formats, but all applicants must submit the results of the SAT I, or ACT, and three SAT II Subject Tests.

What if English is not a student's first language?
A strong knowledge of English is essential for successful study at Harvard, including the ability to understand and express thoughts quickly and clearly. We require the results of the SAT I, or ACT, and three SAT II Subject Tests for all candidates. Students who are not native speakers of English should take the Writing (in English) test as one of their SAT II tests. The SAT II English Language Proficiency Test (ELPT) is not acceptable for this purpose. Students are not required to submit the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL). Candidates whose native language is not English should not take any of their three SAT II tests in their native language.

What should students know about visas?
All applicants who are not U.S. citizens or permanent residents must submit the Financial Statement for Students from Foreign Countries, whether applying for financial aid or not. Then, we can issue a Certificate of Eligibility (the I-20 form) to admitted students who accept our offer of admission. Students may present this form to the nearest U.S. Consulate to receive the F-1 Student Visa.