THE ULTIMATE GUIDE TO STUDYING ABROAD

BY SOUNDARYA BALASUBRAMANI

Some sample examples in this book are fictitious. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

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This guide is a chapter from my book, ***Admitted****, originally published in August 2020. Hope you enjoy reading it as much as I enjoyed writing it :)*

* The chapter and page numbers referenced correspond to the printed edition of **Admitted**.

Chapter

03

CHOOSING

THE UNIVERSITIES

Time to become a satisficer and shortlist universities

We're back to decisions again. Think back to the most recent decision you made in your life. It doesn't have to be a significant one. It can even be a trivial decision of purchasing a Classmate Octane Premium gel pen over a Pilot Retractable Premium gel pen. How much thought did you put into making this decision? Did you consider all possible factors: the tip type, material, color, grip type, weight, price, popularity? Did you assign weights to each factor and pick the pen that was mathematically the more optimal one? Unless you were conducting extensive research on developing a new pen for your company or writing a thesis on the effects of one over the other, chances are you calculated a few pros and cons in your mind, such as cost and comfort, and picked the one that *satisficed* you.

That word is not a typo.

Not only is that word not a typo, it will be the guiding principle as you go through the ordeal of choosing universities.

SATISFICER, SIMON & SELECTING UNIVERSITIES

The term **satisfice**[1], **a linguistic blend of satisfy and suffice**, was coined by Herbert Simon[2] in 1956. Simon coined the term to strike a distinction between classical and behavioral economics.

Classical economics posits that we are all *maximizers* who strive to get the very best out of every decision we make. However, this assumes that we are rational and armed with the information needed to make that *optimal* choice. Simon proposed that this is rarely, if ever, the case, due to the limits of human cognition[3].

Rather, he suggests an alternative route wherein the "*decision makers can satisfice either by finding optimum solutions for a simplified world, or by finding satisfactory solutions for a more realistic world*." In both cases, the satisficer is happy to walk away with a *good enough* solution that meets a certain threshold set by them as opposed to the best possible one. And research[4] has shown that the satisficer is also *happier* on average than the maximizer, especially in situations where the available options are abundant and personal freedom is championed.

Why is this important?

Once you begin entering the rabbit hole of comparing universities, you will soon find the need to draw a boundary between being a satisficer and a maximizer. You will also tend to associate great importance to this decision and increase your stress levels by going over too many factors, always fearing that you haven't done a thorough enough job. Using the time and energy in your hand as a constraint, we will help you pick the factors that we believe are important to consider while choosing your top universities, but ultimately, the decision is in your hands.

So at this stage when you're beginning to narrow down universities to apply to, we want you to be a satisficer. Not a maximizer.

However, once you begin receiving admits from the places you apply to, you can turn to be a maximizer. But more on that in Chapter 13. For now, keep telling yourself to be a satisficer.

Well, the first thing to keep in mind about first instincts is that they are almost always wrong.

> Your first instinct in choosing universities might be to skim through a ranking website, note down the universities listed at the top, and begin applying. But before you fall into that trap, let's take a step back to **understand the mechanism** behind these ranking sites.

Based on a preliminary google search, you will notice that there are three ranking sites that grab the top spots: QS World University Rankings[5], Times Higher Education World University Rankings[6], and Academic Rankings of World Universities[7]. Taking National University of Singapore as an example, based on the most recent data, it ranks 11th according to QS, 23rd according to THE, and 85th according to ARWU. Why? Because the methodology used and data input for the ranking sites are significantly different. There is a weighted bias towards specific factors when the overall scores are measured.

METHOD TO THE MADNESS

Let's peek behind the curtains of each rankings site.

QUACQUARELLI SYMONDS (QS) WORLD UNIVERSITY RANKINGS

This is an annual publication by Quacquarelli Symonds, a British publication. According to Alexa Internet, an American web traffic tracking company, it is

the most widely viewed university ranking worldwide[8]. QS partners with Elsevier to provide the rankings across 48 subjects and also across regional areas such as Asia, Latin America, Europe, and more.

QS collects feedback from over 100,000 academicians, who are all asked to nominate the top 30 universities (and cannot vote for their own)[9]. This subjective feedback is given a weightage of 40%. The other performance indicators include the faculty-student ratio, citations per faculty, employer review, international student ratio, and international staff ratio.

TIMES HIGHER EDUCATION (THE) WORLD UNIVERSITY RANKINGS

This is an annual publication by the Times Higher Education magazine. Interestingly, until 2009, THE collaborated with QS to jointly publish the annual rankings. However, they turned to Thomson Reuters for a new ranking system in 2010 and later signed another deal with Elsevier in 2014[10]. Their rankings are also independently audited by the professional services firm PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC).

THE collects feedback on 1,400 universities worldwide across 13 performance indicators that are grouped into five categories: teaching, research, citations, international outlook, and industry income[11]. Teaching, research, and citations each get a weightage of 30%. Their most recent academic reputation survey garnered over 21,000 responses and Elsevier examined over 77 million citations to arrive at the research influence.

ACADEMIC RANKING OF WORLD UNIVERSITIES (ARWU)

Also known as Shanghai Ranking, this is published by the Shanghai Ranking Consultancy, an independent organization focusing on higher education[12]. ARWU is regarded as one of the three most influential lists of university rankings, alongside QS and THE.

ARWU ranks over 1,800 universities out of which the top 1000 are published. ARWU seems to take a different approach[13]. They give 20% weight each to the following four indicators: staff winning Nobel Prizes or Fields Medals, highly cited researchers, papers published in *Nature* and *Science* journals, and papers indexed in Science Citation Index-Expanded and Social Science Citation Index. The rest is spread across alumni reputation and per capita performance.

Below is a table that puts this all together to give you a big picture view.

Category	Performance Indicators	QS	THE	ARWU
Academic & Research Reputation	Survey of academicians	40%	33%	-
Research Influence	Citations received globally	20%	30%	40%
Staff & Student Ratios	Various ratios across staff and students	20%	15%	10%
Staff & Alumni Reputation	Nobel Prizes and Fields Medals won	-	-	30%
Research Productivity	Papers published in top journals	-	6%	20%
Employer Reputation	Survey of employers	10%	-	-
International Outlook	International students and staff	10%	7.5%	-
Income Received	Externally received income for research	-	8.5%	-

> Do note that since we combined all the ranking methodologies into a single table, **a lot of the nuance is lost**. For example, although both THE and ARWU have weightage for research productivity, it means different things. THE calculates it based on papers published across all journals indexed by Elsevier's Scopus. On the other hand, ARWU *only* looks at papers published in *Nature* and *Science*. Hence, **we highly recommend looking at each of their methodologies** to get a better understanding.

All that data and information is to highlight a few points.

- First, when you're looking at these ranking sites, understand that the rankings mentioned are for the *entire* university and are not degree specific, meaning your program's ranking might be significantly different from the university's ranking. Take the case of Dartmouth College. It currently ranks 207th in the world according to the QS, but is an Ivy League with one of the top Engineering Management programs[14]. Even for the university level, both QS and THE rely on *subjective* data to compute it, which has its own biases.
- Second, all three ranking sites look at the citations received by a university on a global level. While this might be a good indicator for domains like biomedical sciences that have a *publish or perish* culture[15], it isn't a good representation of non-science majors that publish less by trade. Adding on to that, the ranking sites also don't take into account the non-English institutions.
- Finally, even if you choose to follow one of these sites, they still don't take all *your* factors into consideration. Ironically, these are the factors that have a direct impact on your day-to-day

experience, such as resources provided for networking, classroom amenities, quality of courses, quality of food and housing, to name a few[16].

You don't choose whether to buy a mac or windows laptop just by looking at the share prices of Apple and Microsoft, do you[17]? Sure, it's helpful to know they're doing well and still at the top of their game, but your need requires a lot more granular information.

No, we are not discrediting these ranking websites completely. You would still need them to pick universities since there is too much noise out there. Use these, but *only* as a starting point. Beyond that, we need to go deeper into the factors that will truly define your experience.

THE QUADRANT FRAMEWORK

When you're purchasing a new house, you don't just look at the price of the house. You also look at the location, mortgage, down payment, number of bedrooms, quality of furniture, and more. All of these factors will affect your experience after you move into the house. Your graduate school follows the same analogy.

Although it is easier to choose a university solely based on its rank, that is not an indicator of your experience, good or bad, once you join.

Below is a table with all the factors that we thought you should be looking at while evaluating the universities to apply to.

Requirements	Academia
CGPA GRE TOEFL IELTS Tuition	Courses Research areas STEM Certification
Career	**Miscellaneous**
Top Career Paths Average salary Internship & Placement Statistic	Ranking Location Personal Dealbreakers

- **Requirements:** Most universities try to reduce the applicant pool size by specifying the minimum *scores* that you must have to even apply in the first place. These scores allude to your CGPA, GRE, TOEFL, and IELTS exams. Apart from the scores, we placed the tuition fee in this section since that should be considered a limiting factor to apply as well, since it could range from $20,000 for a university like Texas A&M all way to $80,000 for a university like Columbia (not counting for scholarships or assistantships).

- **Academia:** Once you validate that you satisfy the requirements, this should be the second most important quadrant to look at. On average, you will spend about 25% of your waking hours in classes, 50% on assignments and research, and the rest on job search and leisure activities. So the courses you take and research you conduct will define the largest chunk of your graduate school experience.

- **Career:** Most of you want to not just study abroad, but also work abroad. We know from experience, as explained in Chapter 1, that getting an internship or a job is not the easiest feat to achieve. It would be wise to choose a university that helps you in this process in addition to teaching you the concepts and skills required for the job.

- **Miscellaneous:** This contains factors such as ranking and location that we couldn't place neatly under the other quadrants. Apart from the ones we've listed above for all quadrants, feel free to add more that are personal dealbreakers specific to your background.

Good question! Funnily enough, the problem isn't that there is *too little* information. Rather, there is *too much* of it.

This phenomenon even has a term: **information overload**. It was coined back in 1964[18] by Bertram Gross in his book *The Managing of Organizations*. As the decades rolled on, the overload only got more and more dire with the advent of the **internet, email, and now social media.**

Now, your task is to find useful information amidst all this noise, rather than just find the information.

Let's find out how we can do it for the various quadrants below.

REQUIREMENTS

The information on scores and tuition will be present in the department's website, although in different formats. Consider the following example: the Computer Science department at Purdue University clearly states that the

past admits all had a *"GPA of at least 3.5/4 or 85/100 or 8.5/10, and total TOEFL scores of at least 100 and subsection scores of at least 22, or IELTS scores of at least 7.5"*[19]. On the other hand, the Computer Science department at Stanford University states that they expect the *"applicants to have "good" English skills"* without specifying the minimum required scores[20].

For situations like this, we have another solution for you: **admits.fyi.**

University	Status	Target Major	Term	GRE				TOEFL
				Q	V	AWA	Total	
University of Michigan, Ann Arbor	Reject	Computer Science	Fall 2019	163	163	N/A	326	110
Stanford University	Admit	Computer Science	Fall 2019	170	159	N/A	329	111
Arizona State University	Admit	Computer Science	Fall 2018	169	150	N/A	319	98
Syracuse University	Admit	Computer Engineering	Spring 2018	158	146	N/A	304	N/A
Georgia Institute of Technology	Reject	Electrical & Computer Engineering	Fall 2016	161	150	N/A	311	100

Two 2015 graduates from BITS Pilani, Pranav[21] and Abdul[22], used their coding expertise and curious minds to build *admits.fyi* with more than 350,000 data points from past admits and rejects. They spent weeks gathering this data from various sources, cleaning it, and building an intuitive user interface for everyone to consume[23]. Every admit and reject has details on undergraduate school, graduate school, CGPA, GRE score, TOEFL score, major, and more. In the absence of a baseline on the department's website, use this as a sanity check *if* there are enough data points (>50). However, know that outliers are always possible.

ACADEMIA

Under Academia, we have courses, research, and STEM certification.

COURSES

Fortunately, every department has a course catalog which lists all the courses you can potentially take during your graduate school. Apart from providing

the course titles, most universities will supplement that with one-paragraph descriptions, instructor names, duration, offered semester, and number of credits. Similar to *Requirements*, this too changes based on the university. For example, Texas A&M lists all its mechanical engineering graduate courses with just a one-paragraph description on its site[24]. University of Washington goes further to create a separate page for each course—detailing your takeaways, syllabus, homework deadlines and more—from its list of courses[25]. Columbia University on the other hand provides you a flowchart of the courses you can take based on the specialization you are interested in[26]. Bottom line?

Course information *will* be on the department website.
If it isn't, you should think twice about applying to that university.

Universities in the U.S. also go a step further to include course evaluations collected from past students. However, these are generally hidden behind an authentication portal, and not accessible to the public. It's worth checking once though.

RESEARCH

Here's some good news for all the computer science graduates out there: a huge chunk of your work in collecting information on research conducted at U.S. universities has already been completed by the creators of **CSRankings**[27]. Below is a good introduction to the website, taken from its FAQ page:

> *Rankings are intensely popular and influential. While we might wish for a world without rankings, wishing will not make rankings go away. Given this state of affairs, it makes*

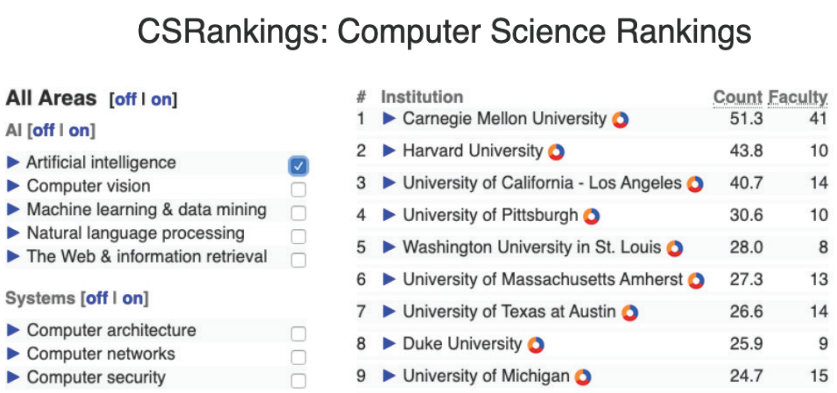
> *sense to aim for a ranking system that is meaningful and transparent. Unfortunately, the most influential rankings right now are those from US News and World Report, which is entirely reputation-based and relies on surveys sent to department heads and directors of graduate studies.*
>
> *By contrast, CSRankings is entirely metrics-based: it weighs departments by their presence at the most prestigious publication venues. This approach is intended to be both incentive-aligned (faculty already aim to publish at top venues) and difficult to game, since publishing in such conferences is difficult. It is admittedly bean-counting, but its intent is to "count the right beans".*

CSRankings ranks universities based solely on the number of papers published and the venue of those publications.

Since a paper published in a tier one journal is not the same as a paper published in a tier three journal, the code takes this into account by only considering the conferences which are among the top in the respective domains. For example, only papers published in CVPR[28], ECCV[29], and ICCV[30] conferences are considered in the Computer Vision domain. It also uses an *adjusted count* when there is more than one contributing author so that the credit is divided equally among everyone (ergo more authors does not equal more value). The creator, Emery Berger[31], who is a Professor of Computer Science at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, used data from Google Scholar[32] and DBLP[33] to create this system.

When you navigate to the website, we recommend reading the FAQ and the advice[34] they have for aspiring graduates before looking at the rankings.

Even then, understand that the default rankings are based on *all* domains under computer science. You should deselect them all to then choose the domain of your interest on the left pane and see the results.



Look at the faculty under each university and navigate to their home pages to see the research being conducted.

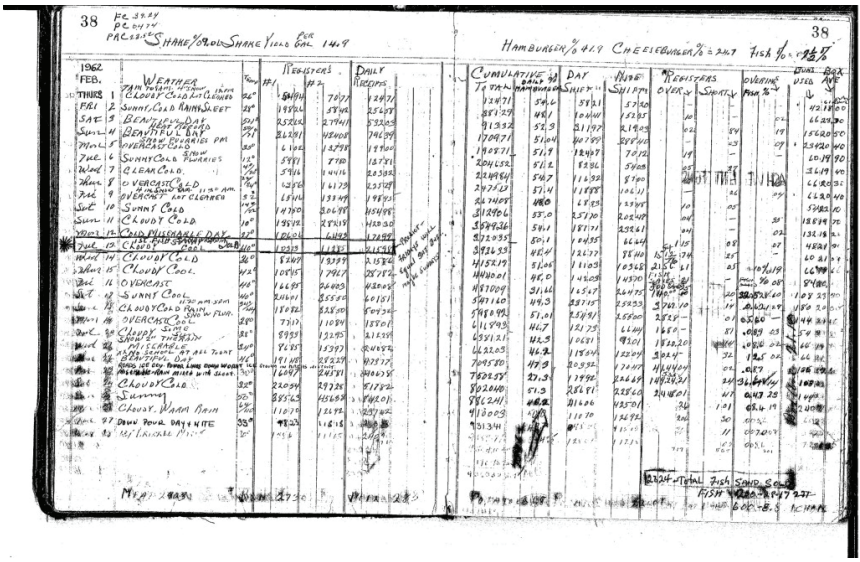
CSRankings is a great tool; but not a flawless one.
As you use it to narrow down your universities, understand that it was still created by people who have biases.

TIME TO DIY

We know this still doesn't answer the question for all of you non-computer science graduates out there. Fret not. There are always different layers of solving an issue.

You might be using novel digital tools today to perform calculations. But have you ever wondered what people used to use before Google Sheets came into the picture? Or Microsoft Office? Or VisiCalc?

Just paper[35].



Good old, plain white paper.

It wasn't pretty, but it got the work done.

Although there isn't a ready-made solution available, you're just a few hours of research away from getting what you need. CSRankings built the ranking system based on data from sources such as Google Scholar and DBLP, which are readily available for you to view. So if you were to do it yourself, first identify the professors whose research you find interesting from your department's research page. From there, you can navigate to the pages of these professors on the aforementioned aggregator sites to gain insight on their present and past work.

STEM CERTIFICATION

Last but not the least, if you plan to pursue your graduate studies in the U.S., please check if your major is STEM certified.

Glad you asked.

Every eligible graduate student in the U.S. gets a **12 month period post degree completion, called Optional Practical Training (OPT)**, to work with an eligible employer and learn on the job[36]. Here comes the best part: If you're an F1 student earning a degree in science, technology, engineering, or mathematics (STEM), you are eligible for a **24-month extension** on top of the 12 months received by everyone.

The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) states that[37]:

> *To qualify for a 24-month STEM OPT extension, an F-1 student participating in an initial period of regular post-completion OPT must:*
>
> - *Have a degree in an eligible STEM field from a Student and Exchange Visitor Program (SEVP)-certified school that is accredited when the student submits their STEM OPT extension application to USCIS.*
> - *Pursue their STEM OPT extension through an employer that is enrolled in USCIS's E-Verify*

employment eligibility verification program.

- *Select a STEM OPT employer that provides the student with formal training and learning objectives.*
- *Work a minimum of 20 hours per week per employer.* ”

At this stage, you should only be concerned about point (a) that says your degree must be in an eligible STEM field from a school that is SEVP certified. If you're wondering how to get that information, you can easily find it on the DHS website[38]. This list is curated by the U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). This isn't a list set in stone however. They keep updating it and even mention that you can request for a degree to be added by emailing SEVP[39].

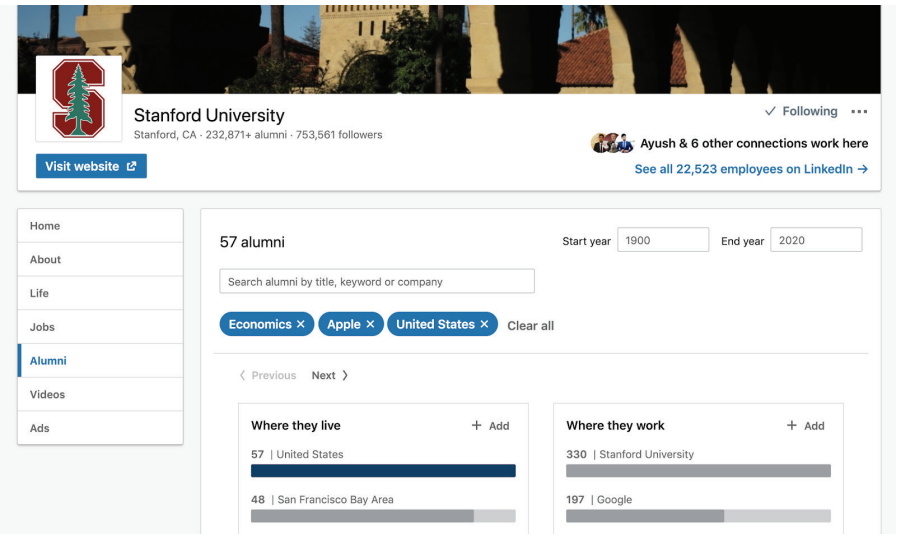
CAREER

In an ideal world, universities would publish information on every alumni's job role, company, and salary in a massive database that can be queried. But in reality, this information is not available to the extent you would want since universities that don't have a great history tend to obfuscate this with less important data. For example, the Management Science and Engineering department at Columbia University does a reasonably good job of giving you all the numbers you need[40]. On the other hand, we couldn't find the data at all for the Computer Science department at Virginia Tech[41]. Nevertheless, your first layer of research should once again begin with your department's website.

Apart from spending time on the department site, we recommend resorting to platforms that pool this information. The professional networking site LinkedIn is your best bet here. We will detail best practices in creating a LinkedIn profile in Chapter 17, but for now, use it to collect data on the alumni.

LinkedIn lets you look at the alumni of any institution and glean some basic categorical information on **where they live, what they do, and what they majored in (among others)**[42]. You can also filter on these fields to, say, look for students who majored in economics at Stanford University and are currently working at Apple in the U.S.[43].

Using LinkedIn, you can reasonably answer the question, *what are some of the common career paths a student follows after graduating from [university] with a degree in [major]?*



To find out details on the salary of a role, you can either use the inbuilt feature in LinkedIn[44] or resort to other platforms like PayScale[45] and Glassdoor[46] that also have this information.

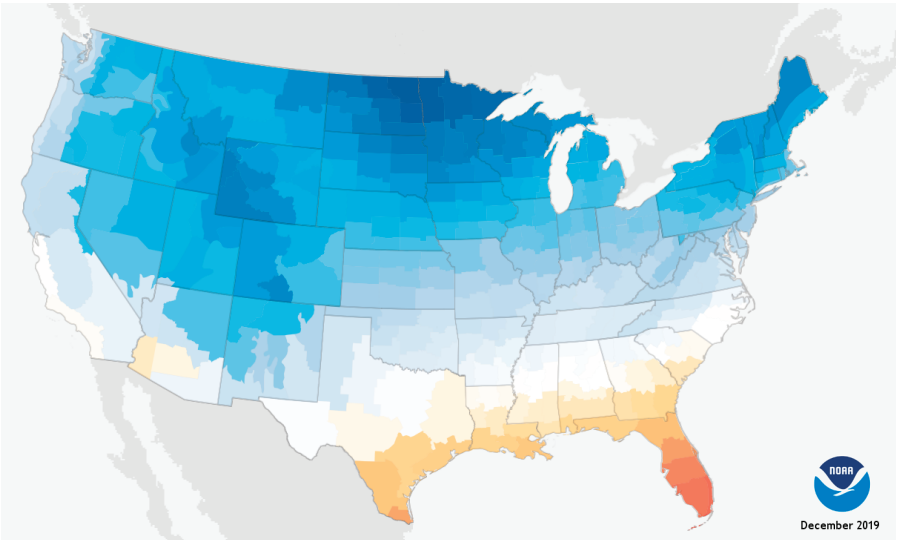
MISCELLANEOUS

This could mean anything. But the most common factors we recommend you look at are the ranking, location, and living expenses.

Ranking, as we saw before, is not the best metric to measure your experience. However, it would be naïve on our part to suggest not looking at it. We recommend triaging your information by looking through the multiple ranking sites mentioned before: QS World Rankings, Times Higher Education Rankings, and the Academic Ranking of World Universities. Rather than looking at the overall ranking of a university, search for the ranks pertaining to your department wherever available.

Location is an important part of your experience. If you're used to living in the city all your life, filled with bustling restaurants and theaters, it would be a difficult transition to study at a university that is situated deep in a rural area, such as Dartmouth College. On the flip side, someone who cherishes peace and quiet would be unnerved with the city that never sleeps, a.k.a New York.

> Another good reason to check the location would be to understand the weather. The weather can go to extremes during winter in the U.S., as seen in the map below for the month of December, created by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration[47]. Note that the temperatures are in Fahrenheit, not Celsius.



December 2019

Average Temperature (°F)

0 50 100

Climate.gov
Data: NCEI

Finally, you can get an estimate of your living expenses by using an online website calculator. At a first glance, the increase in the cost of living will certainly alarm you. In fact, it took me more than a year to stop converting USD to INR every time I purchased food or groceries. We can't stop you from going through that phase, but we can tell you that you don't just have a higher cost of living in the U.S., you will also have a higher salary and benefits. Eventually, it will balance out the cost. For example, there seems to be a 566% increase in the rent from Hyderabad to Seattle for a modest studio spanning 480 sqft[48]. While that estimate is true, it doesn't take into account the difference in average salary between both locations (which is in the order of 400%).

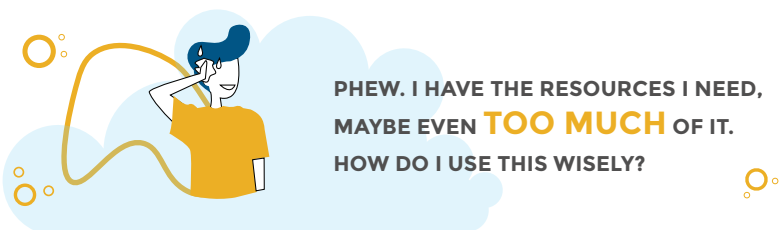
The U.S. is indeed a more expensive country to live in; but not as much as you would think from a first glance.

OTHER RESOURCES

For all the quadrants above, the best way to get qualitative data is to reach out to your seniors and friends who've tread this path already. While reaching out to these individuals, always be respectful of their time. Rather than sending a LinkedIn invite and asking for a 30 minute phone call out of the blue, create a Google Doc with the list of questions you want to ask them and send over the link *after* they agree to help you out. This way, you get your questions answered at a time of their convenience without going through the hassle of scheduling a call (not to mention the ordeal of different time zones).

Because you want to be a satisficer, talk to no more than two current or past students per university at this point.

Another less personal but more time-saving option is to comb through answers on Quora[49] and Reddit[50] which have dedicated spaces for past students to write about their experiences.



We totally get it. Collecting all of these resources sounds like too much of a hassle to apply to universities. You're thinking, *can I not just apply to the top ten universities from QS Rankings for my major?* But remember, we want you to be a *satisficer* right now. We don't expect you to go through every course description in detail and look at all alumni from a university.

All the resources should be used as a way to *eliminate* universities rather than *select* them.

Let's switch back to the example of buying a house. In the beginning, you don't go through every single listing on Zillow in detail and note down the features. Rather, you're simply browsing through dozens of listings to eliminate the ones that *don't* meet your minimum requirements. Which means you first need to create your set of minimum requirements. For a house, that might be the following: *I'm looking for all options that are under the budget of $500,000, have two bedrooms and two bathrooms, and accept a down payment of 15%.*

We humans have gotten really good at making decisions as we evolved, because rather than looking at every single factor involved and optimizing for the best possible outcome, we opt for an approach that only looks at a few factors we deem to be important and attaches appropriate weight to them. Let's do the same for narrowing down universities.

INTRODUCING YOUR BEST FRIEND

Your best friend throughout this journey is not this book. Rather, it is a google sheet titled ***Dream Tracker*** that resides in the Resources folder we gave you access to. You will be using this sheet a *lot* as you read these chapters, so now is a good time to open it and explore the different components inside.

School	Major	Link	Application Deadline	Status	SOP	LOR
School #1	Engg. Management	Add link to the application form for easy access.	dd/mm/yyyy	Not Started	Not Started	In Progress
School #2	Engg. Management		dd/mm/yyyy	Not Started	Not Started	In Progress
School #3	Industrial Engg.		dd/mm/yyyy	Not Started	Not Started	In Progress
School #4	Industrial Engg.		dd/mm/yyyy	In Progress	In Progress	In Progress
School #5	Computer Science		dd/mm/yyyy	In Progress	In Progress	All Received
School #6	Computer Science		dd/mm/yyyy	Almost Comp	In Progress	In Progress
School #7	Mechanical Engg.		dd/mm/yyyy	Almost Comp	In Progress	In Progress
School #8	Mechanical Engg.		dd/mm/yyyy	Submitted!	Complete	In Progress
School #9	Creative Writing		dd/mm/yyyy	Submitted!	Complete	In Progress
School #10	Creative Writing		dd/mm/yyyy	Submitted!	Complete	In Progress

We know it gets chaotic very soon as you begin this process. To alleviate some of that, **we built a tracker** that you can use for various parts of your application: keeping track of applications, letters of recommendation, finances, scholarships, networking, estimating the loan amount, *and* choosing your universities.

If you open the *Choosing Universities* sheet in there, you will see a lot of columns with pre-populated numbers. We pretty much created a column for all the factors we went through so far in the chapter and assigned some dummy values. Now, your job is to turn these dummy values into meaningful scores that will help you make the decision.

		Requirement Satisfaction (Yes/No/NA)			Academia (1-5)			Career (1-5)			Miscellaneous (1-5)			
School	Category	CGPA	GRE	TOEFL	Course Relevance	Research Relevance	STEM Certification	Top Career Paths	Placement Stats	Average Salary	Ranking	Location	What else?	Total Score (on 40)
	Weights				1	1	N/A	1	1	1	1	1	1	
School #1	Safe	Yes	Yes	Yes	3	3	Yes	3	3	3	3	3	3	24
School #2	Safe	Yes	Yes	Yes	3	3	Yes	3	3	3	3	3	3	24
School #3	Moderate	Yes	Yes	Yes	3	3	Yes	3	3	3	3	3	3	24
School #4	Moderate	NA	Yes	NA	3	3	No	3	3	3	3	3	3	24
School #5	Moderate	Yes	Yes	Yes	3	3	No	3	3	3	3	3	3	24
School #6	Moderate	Yes	Yes	Yes	3	3	No	3	3	3	3	3	3	24
School #7	Dream	Yes	No	Yes	3	3	Yes	3	3	3	3	3	3	24
School #8	Dream	No	No	No	3	3	No	3	3	3	3	3	3	24

THE FIVE STEP ELIMINATION

STEP 1: FIRST ROUND

First, we want you to collect a list of 20-25 universities for your major based on information from various ranking sites, seniors, and general research on Q&A forums.

Go through the *Requirements* for each university and populate *just* those columns in the sheet wherever you can.

Once you're done with that, eliminate all the universities where you don't satisfy the requirements. It's okay to keep two or three that you've dreamed of joining, but be sure to mark this appropriately in the *Category* column.

STEP 2: SETTING PRIORITIES

Now, we've got a list of universities you have a shot at (with a few *Dreams*).

Let's take a step back and think about the *most* important thing that you care about for each factor under the quadrants *Academia, Career,* and *Miscellaneous*. The table below gives you an example.

Quadrant	Factor	What Matters
Academia	Courses	I want to study Computer Vision, Entrepreneurship, and Reinforcement Learning
Academia	Research	I want to conduct research on human computer interaction (HCI)
Career	Top Career Paths	I want to become a Product Manager at an AR/VR company
Career	Average Salary	I want to earn $100,000+ so I can pay back my loan within three years
Misc	Ranking	I want my department to be within top 20 in that major
Misc	Location	I want to live in a metropolitan city

You don't have to strictly adhere to the example above and have a requirement for each factor. You also don't need to treat them all with equal importance. Think about which factor matters more to *you*.

For example, If you have always dreamt of living in Silicon Valley, it makes sense to place a higher weight on the location over the ranking.

So write down what matters most in each of the areas and then rank them according to your priorities. Once you're done ranking them, assign appropriate weights in the row titled *Weights* in the *Dream Tracker*. We gave it all a weight of 1, but you should change it based on your preferences.

STEP 3: SECOND ROUND

Now use all the tools we mentioned in this chapter to gather the data you need. Look over the list of universities you have currently and remove the ones that don't satisfy your requirement for each of the areas. For example, if taking a course and eventually specializing in human computer interaction is very important to you, then look at the course catalog and description of each university to eliminate the ones that don't offer it.

If you end up having to eliminate almost all the universities, then revisit the factors and only use the top two or three to eliminate. At the end of this exercise, you should be left with a list of approximately ten universities, give or take two.

STEP 4: ASSIGNING SCORES

Finally, you can begin assigning scores to all the universities under each column. This is part objective, part subjective.

Taking the example of courses once again, dive deeper into the catalogue offered by each of the universities. Read the description, syllabus and takeaways if present. If the university offers specializations, then look through them and find out the ones that resonate with you.

> ! As you're assigning the scores, here's an important tip: **stay away from 3**. Generally when a 1-5 scale is used, the most common response would be 3, since it's an easy way out when you're in a dilemma. However, it will also dilute your response. So, as much as possible, avoid assigning 3.

STEP 5: FINAL ROUND

You have the pre-final list of universities, the weights, and the scores. What is

left is for you to categorize each of the universities as *Safe, Moderate* or *Dream*. This should be assigned based on the requirement specified by the university along with its reputation and general knowledge. We all know MIT is better than Miami University.

Once the categorization is complete, pick the top six to eight universities with a split of 1:2:1 (or close) with the *Safe, Moderate,* and *Dream* tag. For example, if you wish to apply to seven universities, then apply to the top two *Safe* ones, top three *Moderate* ones, and top two *Dream* ones.

We recommend not applying to more than eight universities.

Why?

First, finishing an application takes a significant amount of time and effort. Having to do this amidst your already busy life should be taken into consideration. Second, if you picked your universities and chances right, you wouldn't *need* to apply to more than a few to know that you will get into one. Picking fewer will also let you allocate more time per university. Finally, each application carries a fee between $50 to $100. That could add up to over $1000 if you don't limit yourself in this step.

Yes, just one final note! Each university you apply to expects you to submit either two or three letters of recommendation. On average, professors don't give out more than three letters. We will talk in detail about this in Chapter 8, but keep in mind the number of letters you would need as you apply to more universities.

With that, we've reached the end of one of the longer chapters in the book. We will revisit some of the concepts you learned in this chapter once again in Chapter 13 when you're tasked with making that final decision. You will then be immensely grateful to your past self for putting in the work right now. So begin the work needed to make the life of your future self a lot easier.

CONCLUSION

Narrowing down the list of universities is difficult not because of a lack of information, but because of too much of it. This is why you need to follow the role of a satisficer, someone who settles for a *good enough* solution that meets a pre-set threshold. You can be a maximizer when the time comes to pick your dream university.

It is tempting to use ranking as a deal breaker while choosing universities. But, it is *not* a good representation of your experience. There are a plethora of other factors to consider. First, we divided these into four quadrants: requirements, academia, career, and miscellaneous. Next, we gave you the resources needed to obtain information for all these quadrants. And finally, most importantly, we walked you through a five step framework that you can use to do a pretty good job of narrowing down the universities from over 25 to under 8. The most important step here is to write down what matters the most to *you* in each of the factors and assign appropriate priority among them. This entire process should be thought of as one of elimination, rather than one of selection. We will revisit some of these concepts once again in Chapter 13 when you are tasked with picking your dream university.

With so many options out there, you will find it hard to reach a point when you feel the work is complete. That is why it's important to begin with a threshold on the number of applications, either based on financial constraints or other personal factors. If you've followed the structure we've detailed in the chapter closely, we can assure you that you can't go wrong.

A LITTLE REFLECTION

- When was the last time you were a maximizer? A satisficer?
- What are the top three factors that matter the most to you during your graduate school experience?
- What are the top three factors that matter the least to you during your graduate school experience?
- Who are five seniors you can reach out to from different universities to get valuable insights?

🎁 Congratulations on finishing this guide!

If you found this helpful, I've created more guides on a few related topics that you might find useful.

📌 **A Guide to Landing an Internship in the U.S.:** As an international student, landing an internship in the U.S. was one of my toughest challenges as I had to learn everything from scratch. This guide breaks down the strategies that helped me succeed.

📌 **List of 30+ Scholarships For Studying Abroad:** Curated over 50+ hours, get access to a list of 30+ scholarships to apply to that could help provide funding to make your study abroad dream come true.

📌 **A Guide to Getting Your First Interview:** It took me 8 months to get my internship offer at Salesforce. In this guide, I break down all the strategies I used to land a Product Manager role at a Fortune 100 company.

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🖋️ About the Author

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She graduated from Columbia University in 2019 and worked at Salesforce as a Product Manager for 2.5 years before quitting to become an author & founder. She is the recipient of the O-1A and EB-2 NIW extraordinary visas along with 12+ awards, including a $50,000 Emergent Ventures grant, Cargill Global Scholarship, and S.N. Bose Scholarship.