

Esteban Aguas:

Hello, everyone. Welcome to Meet Princeton, a podcast to introduce prospective students and their families to Princeton University, brought to you by the Office of Admission. I'm your host, Esteban Aguas. I'm an assistant dean of admission and a Princeton graduate from the Class of 2019, and I want to thank you all for tuning in today.

For many students in the United States, the process of applying to college is a familiar one. Personal statements, extracurricular lists, and letters of recommendation are buzzwords that are omnipresent in college counseling offices across America. College-ready seniors spend their four years of high school laying the groundwork to be prepared to eventually put together an application for the colleges and universities they wish to attend. But for students who have completed their secondary schooling outside of the United States, applying to an American university can be an unfamiliar and daunting process to understand and navigate.

For example, the holistic review process that has become common practice within American college admission is very different from how many institutions abroad operate. Oftentimes they focus on academic performance metrics and scholarly specialization when making admission decisions. So in today's episode, we're going to talk about international recruitment and admission at Princeton to help clarify and demystify our application process for international students.

I'm joined by my colleague Justin Parsons, who is our new associate dean for international recruitment. Justin has been in our office for six years and was promoted this summer to his current position where he oversees strategy and the selection process for our international applicants. So welcome to the podcast, Justin.

Justin Parsons:

Amazing. Thank you, Esteban. I've been listening to the podcast for a few years now and happy to join you for the first time here.

Esteban Aguas:

Wonderful. Today we're going to talk about international recruitment and admission at Princeton. I'm sure we get many questions every application cycle from our international applicants specific to their situation, because it's obviously very different applying to college as an overseas student to the United States versus a domestic student. So I think a good place to start is just by breaking down the application process itself and how it might be different, but in many ways similar for an international student applying to Princeton. Justin, in what ways is the application process similar for our international applicants?

Justin Parsons:

It's similar in that we're looking for the same type of student. We're looking for students that are academically exceptional: students who will come to Princeton and are going to be really excited about our learning and research process, students that we think will take advantage of the resources that Princeton has to offer, and students that we think will make a good roommate. I'd say the other similarity, and one of I think our favorite things about working for Princeton, is the wonderful financial aid that we have here. We're one of the few universities in the US that offer the same financial aid program to all students regardless of citizenship, citizenship status or their ability to pay for the cost of attendance. So I think those similarities are definitely clear between the two applicant pools.

Esteban Aguas:

Yeah, that's a great point. And I think when students are looking at the application checklist of the required materials that we need them to submit to have a complete application, our international applicants will notice that the items are exactly the same for them as it would be for a domestic student. So they're going to have to submit things like their transcript that has the record of their academic performance and the courses that they selected, letters of recommendation, and so forth. Are there any differences in the way that we look at those materials for international students versus domestic students?

Justin Parsons:

I think [there are] a few things in particular for international applicants where we get the most questions on. First, of course, is English proficiency testing for students who maybe their native language or the language spoken at home is not English. And so the benchmark that we set is that if a student has not been in an English-taught curriculum for three years or more, we are going to ask for an English proficiency test, and we currently accept the TOEFL, IELTS or the PTE academic. And when I say English-taught curriculum, what I mean is that the majority of the student's classes are taught in English, save for maybe a language outside of English, such as a foreign language class specifically. So that's one [difference] that certainly comes to mind and that we get a lot of questions about.

Letters of recommendation certainly do come up a lot too as a question from prospective students. And for our application, we're looking at a few different avenues for letters of recommendation. One of them is from teachers—we're looking for a teacher from a core subject. And I think usually our international applicants are able to meet that requirement through classroom teachers or advisors. I think where [international] students may struggle a little bit more is with the counselor letter because at US schools, many have a college counselor or some sort of a guidance counselor that's able to help them through this process. For our international applicants, that may not be the case. And so oftentimes what I'll see from international applicants is that if they don't have a counselor at their school, maybe another administrator—say a head of school, principal, or a form teacher—might serve as that administrator to submit the portions where we're asking for a counselor letter and a school report.

You mentioned the academic record, the transcript, and I think that varies so much around the world. We often will see some external grades for students who perhaps have testing as part of their curriculum. If an applicant is coming from a system—maybe the A-levels or an applicant from India might be taking the Standard 10—that have leaving exams or external exams of some kind, we're going to want to see those [scores] if that is part of the student's curriculum. If a student is getting internal grades in addition to that, we're going to balance those two, understanding that sometimes we might see progressive or harsher grading in some of those internal grades from systems like that. But really, I think the shorter answer here is regardless of what academic context a student is coming from, our admission officers are going to be experienced with education systems in that region, or in that country, and be able to discern really what we need to move an applicant forward.

And then, finally, I think the last big difference here [relates to] the graded written paper requirement. This is a requirement that I think is maybe a little bit easier for our students in the US to fulfill. There are a lot of details on the website about what this graded written paper is. In short, this is a paper that a student has written for class and has a grade and maybe written comments, but we understand that a lot of education systems around the world may not have an extensive written component like this. And so, in short, I would just encourage a student that's maybe struggling to find a paper like that to reach out with questions, [and] do their best to meet the spirit of that requirement, which is an academic piece of writing.

Esteban Aguas:

I think the flexibility that you're mentioning in terms of the graded written paper is an important point to make, and this is true for both domestic and international students. Ultimately, we're interested in seeing how a student can construct an argument and write academically in a way that we find compelling, and that shows you have a command over the written word. So again, like Justin mentioned, we're really flexible in the kinds of pieces of writing that you can submit as long as it's not a creative piece, just so we can better understand how you're able to write a paper. Ultimately, at Princeton, we do require students to complete a senior thesis in their last year, which is essentially a large-scale work of original research. So being able to come into Princeton with some kind of solid foundation around writing mechanics is super important.

Now, as you mentioned when we first started our conversation, Princeton uses holistic review, and that's true for all the applications that we review no matter which country they're coming from. Now, holistic review essentially means that we're looking at both the quantitative and qualitative pieces of an application within the context of that student's living and learning environment. So how does that territory model or holistic review play into international recruitment, Justin?

Justin Parsons:

Yeah, yeah, absolutely. And by territory model, I'll just expand on that and say our international readers tend to stick with a territory for a number of years, so they become super familiar with the academic and cultural context that applicants are coming from. I'll start with that academic piece because, of course, that's the backbone of any college application—we want to know that you're going to come to Princeton and really thrive in the classroom. And so I think what this territory model does is help us to really understand, okay, what is a student learning within the context of this curriculum and perhaps this specific country or region? How might that curriculum prepare a student for their time at Princeton? And it allows us to be familiar enough with, again, these vastly different education systems to know that within the context of that curriculum, this student is really succeeding and thriving.

I think beyond that, beyond academics, I think of extracurriculars often because this is something that I think we see really vast differences around the world. And if you are researching what a US application might look like and learning about some of the extracurriculars that students might do in the US—things like sports that are tied to your school or student government or academic clubs that we see a lot of in the US—but maybe you're listening to this and thinking, "I don't really have that in my country." I think what the territory management model allows us to do in that space is to really understand what does a busy extracurricular schedule look like in the context of your school or your region. And it allows us to really understand ways that you've been involved, how you've had impacts, and how that might compare just within the context of your school or your country.

And then [there are] cultural considerations. The way we communicate might be different. So if I'm reading a recommendation letter, for example, from one country as opposed to another, I might hear a different voice from that teacher or counselor. And I think the territory management model allows us, as we stick with those countries and regions over time, to maybe understand some of those cultural differences in communication, lifestyle, and the way that a student is talking about their lived experience.

Esteban Aguas:

Those are all great points. And now pivoting to a topic that has really impacted higher education as a whole: the pandemic. It obviously had many ripple effects throughout higher ed not only to the student

experience—the learning environments in high schools around the world—but also to the admission process itself. So how has international recruitment changed since the pandemic?

Justin Parsons:

For Princeton, we used to do more larger programs. For example, we used to be on the road a bit longer in the fall. Since the pandemic, at least in recent years, we have been back to traveling, just maybe a little bit of a lighter schedule in terms of length of trips. I think we've certainly embraced Zoom, as many of us around the world have, to really be able to interact with students. We typically do some virtual open programs that may be specific to particular regions or open to any international student who's interested in learning a bit more. Of course, we have really robust virtual programming on our website for information sessions and virtual tours and things like that. So I think we've stuck with some of those lessons from the pandemic about connecting virtually while still getting back on the road to connect with students and counselors. And I think that's important as we ask students to travel around the world and be with us for four years, that we continue to be in these communities internationally.

Esteban Aguas:

Yeah, I think we definitely found some efficiencies within the virtual space. I think that's true across even domestic recruitment as well within higher ed. But I think what you mentioned is the most important part of it all—that relationship building piece and making sure we're still connecting with students and counselors no matter where they're coming from to make sure that they feel supported in this process and are well-informed to then make those decisions along the way.

And then, what are some trends perhaps in where students are applying from within international admission overall? How has that changed now in the years since the pandemic?

Justin Parsons:

Yeah, it's a great question and I think with international applicant trends in the US overall, [application numbers] certainly dropped significantly during the pandemic, but we are really back in terms of [international] applicants applying to the US. The Institute of International Education releases something called the Open Doors Report every year, which really tracks international student mobility to the US. And the most recent report, which just came out in November, showed that in the most recent year, actually the most international students applied to US institutions in history. So we're really not only back to pre-pandemic levels but surpassing pre-pandemic levels.

I think in the Princeton applicant pool, we definitely see that a bit. We've seen an increase in international applications. Over time, we've seen an increase in the diversity of where students are applying from. We're seeing more lived experiences. I think we're seeing in the US and at Princeton in general, the rise of India and students applying from India, from the African continent, from Central Asia. So I think we're seeing increases overall and also a few regionally specific increases over the last few years.

Esteban Aguas:

That's super interesting to learn about and hear. It's nice to see that our international pool is back up to those pre-pandemic levels as well. An international high school student deciding to apply to college in the US is a big step, and I think it shows a lot of courage and bravery on their part to decide to want to go to a completely different country for college. And obviously, once they then are admitted to Princeton and decide to attend our university and move in the fall, that's a big transition to make. And

we want to make sure that our international students feel welcomed and supported on our campus. What are some of the support services available to our international students once they matriculate?

Justin Parsons:

I think we are really fortunate at Princeton to have a super active and super involved international center on campus. It's called the Davis International Center. And really, once a student is admitted to Princeton and decides to enroll, they start hearing from the Davis Center, along with other campus offices related to residential life and academic advising. But I think the Davis Center in particular is one that our international students will really see a lot of benefits from, starting with things like visa support and assistance. Students who are studying in the US need to be often on a student visa. They need to get a document called an I-20. It's just a lot of complicated immigration steps to take and the Davis Center does a great job of supporting our incoming admitted [international] students. For current students, once a student is here, [the Davis Center] is able to help quite a bit as well with specific one-on-one immigration advising, even virtual drop-in hours for current students. So there's a lot of flexibility in meeting about some of those hard-hitting immigration questions.

But I would say in addition to that, anytime a student is moving to a different country, they're going to face things like culture shock. They're going to have a lot of steps to take to really functionally be set up in a new country from maybe setting up a bank account, to a cell phone, to connecting with health services. And the Davis Center helps with that as well, starting with international orientation that happens over the summer leading into when the majority of students are coming onto campus. So for our admitted students, that international orientation is really a key time to be on campus to get the lay of the land and connect with some of those resources. They're going to help students early on.

I'd say, in addition to that, we have a wonderful center on campus called the Carl A. Fields Center for Equality and Cultural Understanding. And within that center, they do a lot of really wonderful programming and support services including housing some of our affinity groups, so students that might identify with different lived experiences and identities can join these affinity groups and connect with other students. But I would just encourage really any student coming from anywhere to remember that when you're coming to a college campus, if you're feeling like, wow, there's just so much adjustment, so much to do, maybe there's a bit of anxiety about fitting in and finding your group once you're on campus, to remember that every student coming to campus is going through the same process in some ways. While there are functional differences, I think every student, regardless of where they're coming from, are going through some of the same changes.

Esteban Aguas:

That's a great point. I think an additional layer of support that's just built into the Princeton experience is through our residential college system. I mean, this is true for all of our incoming first-year students where they'll be randomly placed into our residential colleges. And that's essentially a micro community with built-in support structures to make sure that every student is feeling welcomed and ingrained into the Princeton community. And so that means our international students are living with domestic students and students from all walks of life are living and learning together. And so I think that just creates a community where everyone is uplifting each other and making sure everyone feels included.

So with that, to wrap up our conversation, do you have any parting advice for sophomores or juniors abroad as they're preparing to apply to universities like Princeton in the United States?

Justin Parsons:

Yeah, I think two things come to mind for advice for sophomores and juniors, and one is if you've gotten this far—you're connecting with our podcast—you're likely familiar with our website. Most universities are going to have contact information to reach out readily accessible on their website. And I think, especially for international students, as you're going through that application checklist or application timeline, if you have questions, don't hesitate to reach out. And especially at Princeton, you're going to connect with an admission officer like me, like Esteban, and most of us start out in this field with a title similar to admission counselor, right? I want to emphasize that word, *counselor*—that part of our professional responsibility is to counsel students through this process. I just say that to really encourage you to reach out with questions. That's why we're here. That's a big part of our job.

I think the second piece of advice that comes to mind, and maybe I'm just getting sentimental, Esteban, since I have a young baby at home, and so I'm feeling a little sentimental these days, as you know, and I share pictures of him throughout the office. I would just encourage students to remember that in the US admission process, we're really asking students to be super self-reflective about what they want out of a university—not just the university in terms of classes and major, but what kind of lifestyle do you want over the next four years? What are you looking to get out of the next four years? What type of community do you want to be in and what kind of person do you want to be? And I think those are big questions that we ask that maybe if you're applying to other universities in other countries, you may not be asked to reflect on those things. And I think that's something that's special about the admission process in the US: we are going to ask you those things. So I just would encourage you to lean into some of those big questions because I think this is one of those few times in life that you really get to sit down and be reflective about what you want out of the next stage of life.

Esteban Aguas:

Great. Thank you for that, Justin. I think those are two great nuggets of wisdom for students to keep in mind as they're preparing for applications to places like Princeton. Thank you so much for joining me today, Justin, and for talking more about international recruitment and admission at Princeton.

Justin Parsons:

Absolutely. I appreciate the time and always nice to chat with you. And again, I encourage students to reach out with any questions.

Esteban Aguas:

We hope you enjoyed our discussion about international recruitment and admission. As I said earlier, this podcast was created with prospective students and their families in mind. So I'd like to direct all of our listeners to our admission website at admission.princeton.edu. There you can watch, read, and learn more about our university. Also, if you have any questions about anything admission related, please write into our mailbag found on the Meet Princeton webpage of our website.

Meet Princeton's audio engineer is Nick Donnoli of Orangebox Pictures. Mary Buckley and I, Esteban Aguas, are executive producers. We'd also like to give a special thanks to today's guest, Justin Parsons, for his great contributions to this episode, and to our listeners for tuning in. Thank you so much for listening, and we hope you'll join us next time on Meet Princeton.