Setting up your Common Application

What is the Common Application?

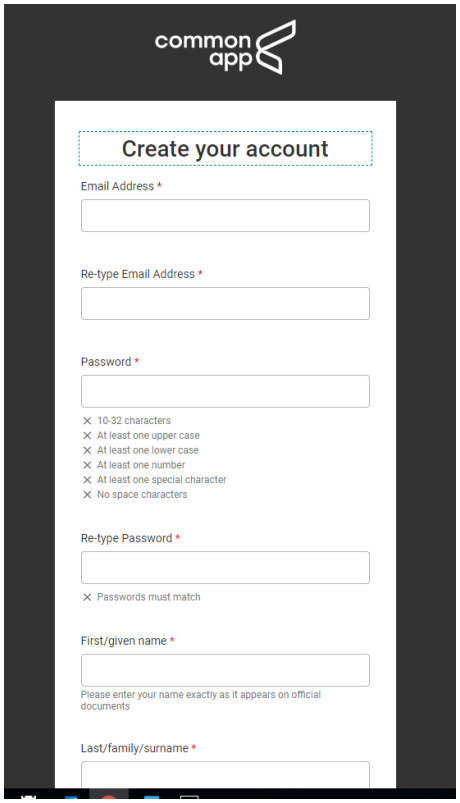
The Common Application is used by over 600 American universities. It is somewhat akin to UCAS, in that you will save time by being able to complete information and essays that you can submit to multiple universities. However, bear in mind that approximately two-thirds of universities ask for supplemental information and/or essays.

You can access the Common Application Online for more information on the Common Application, fees, deadlines, definitions of terms and their requirements. In addition to the guidance provided in this document, you may also find it useful to look at the resources on the Common App YouTube channel at https://www.youtube.com/user/CommonAppMedia. Here, you can find some very informative videos about the application process for undergraduate study in the US, including tips and advice from Admissions Deans and Directors. Please be aware though that these videos are targeted primarily at US applicants and their schools so some of the information provided may not be relevant for international students and teachers.

We will provide guidance for how to submit your application next month. For now, please follow the steps below to set up your Common Application and become familiar with its components. While the following screenshots should be used for general guidance, the website may have been updated and may vary slightly from what you see here.

DO NOT SUBMIT your Common Application at this point. Once you submit, you cannot make changes.

1. Registration The first step to completing the Common Application is registering with the Common Application website (www.commonapp.org).



When registering, use a professional email address (example: hotguy85@hotmail.com would not be appropriate; JWFulbright@hotmail.com would be appropriate) as universities will be able to see it.

Don’t use dashes or spaces. Leave State/Province blank if you live outside of the United States. (The system allows you to use postal codes to do an address search. However, you should delete the post code column before clicking “Next” as UK post code with return as invalid.).

2. Email Confirmation

Make sure to write down your username (i.e., the email address you used to create your account) and password, as you can sign in and out of the Common Application as many times as you like, saving your work each time. After registering, you will be sent a confirmation email, but this password is not included.

Tip: Keep a list of logins and passwords related to all your US applications.

3. Instructions

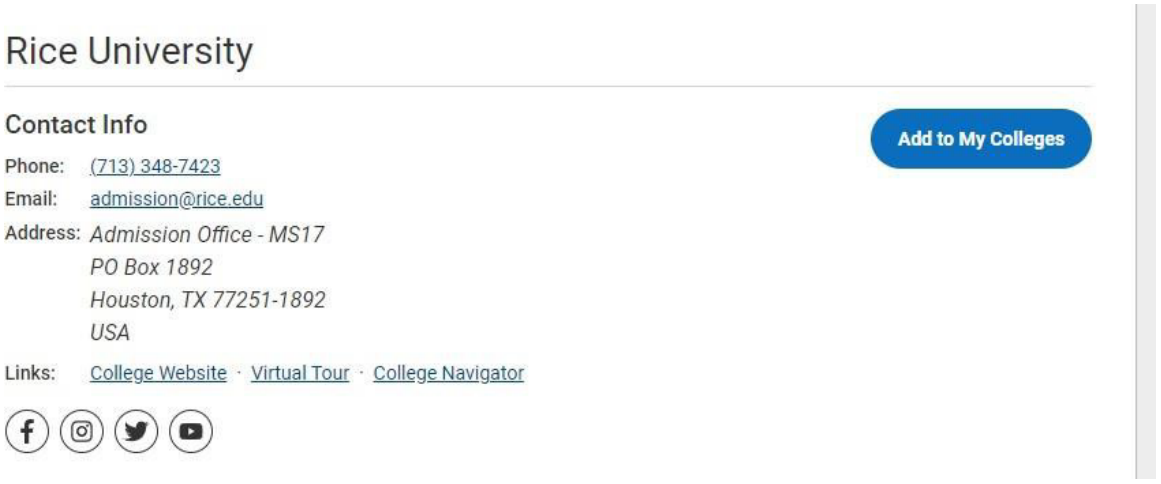
After logging in, be sure to explore the Instructions and Help toolbar along the right-hand side of the home page dashboard, which has helpful information on how to complete your application. If you click the search sign on the top right corner, you can type specific questions or browse all help topics on the Student’s Solutions Center Website. You can also use the Live Chat function on the Student Solutions Center to troubleshoot with a digital assistant or send an email for support.
Familiarise yourself with the Common Application website and use the tabs along the top of the screen to move between sections.

4. Find your colleges

Under “College Search” you will find and select the college to which you will apply. Remember that the words “college” and “university” both refer to places of postsecondary education in US English. To populate the “My Colleges” section as well as see your applications on your Dashboard, you will need to select the colleges you wish to attend using the “College Search” tool.

You can search for the colleges you want either by name or city, while using “more filters” to narrow your search based on criteria such as which state they are in, whether they require standardized test results, etc. Use your Result List to investigate the colleges further. If you click on the university name, you will see the university’s profile, which includes the university’s contact info, application deadlines, and application requirements. You can also explore further aspects of the university using the links to their official website and social media provided on this page.

If after exploring the profile you decide you would like to apply to this university, you must either A) click the ‘Add to My Colleges’ button above or below the profile, or B) go back to your Result List, click the “Add” button to the left of the university’s name. It will now be available in your “My Colleges” section as well as your dashboard. Once you add that university, return to the “College Search” tab to add any additional universities to which you plan to apply.

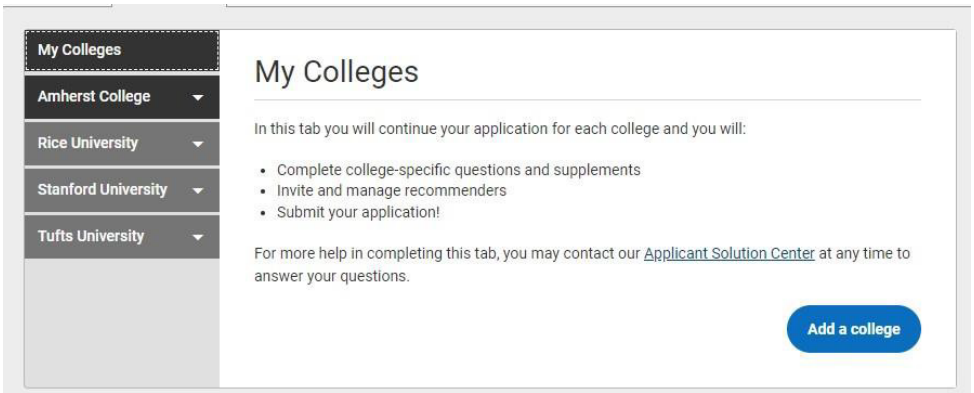


Tip: Add all of the colleges you’re thinking of applying to in order to get email alerts. You can always go back and add or remove if you change your mind.

To further compare the requirements of different colleges, click on the “Application Requirements” button to generate a list that includes the school’s application deadlines, fees, and whether it requires standardized testing score, writing supplements or recommendations. You can see this list for schools you’ve added to “my colleges” only or all schools in the common application system. Once your application process starts, you can check back on this page to keep track of upcoming deadlines and work to be done for each school.

4. My Colleges

Under “My Colleges”, you will then be able to see the colleges you have selected.

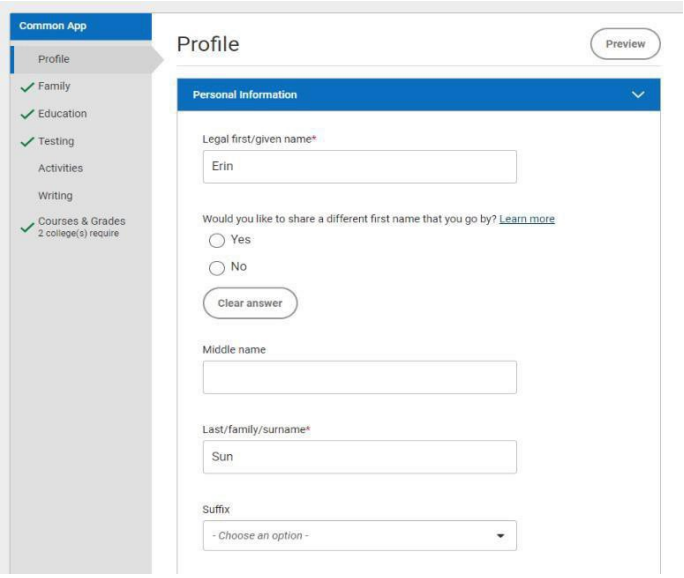


5. Common App tab

Before exploring further into the “My Colleges” tab, you should complete information about yourself in the “Common App” tab. There are seven main sections, which can be found on the left-hand sidebar: Profile, Family, Education, Testing, Activities, Writing, and Courses and Grades. Remember that the benefit of the Common Application is that you will only have to complete this information once for all the universities you want to apply to.

6. Profile

Once you click on the “Profile” section, you will see sub-categories. As you complete each sub-category and click the “Continue” button, a small green check (as shown to the right) will appear on that tab to indicate that you have submitted all required information. In the “Contact Details” subcategory, make sure to enter your mobile or home number with the country code (+44). It would be helpful to put both a mobile and home phone number, therefore if a university is trying to reach you, they have more of a chance of doing so.



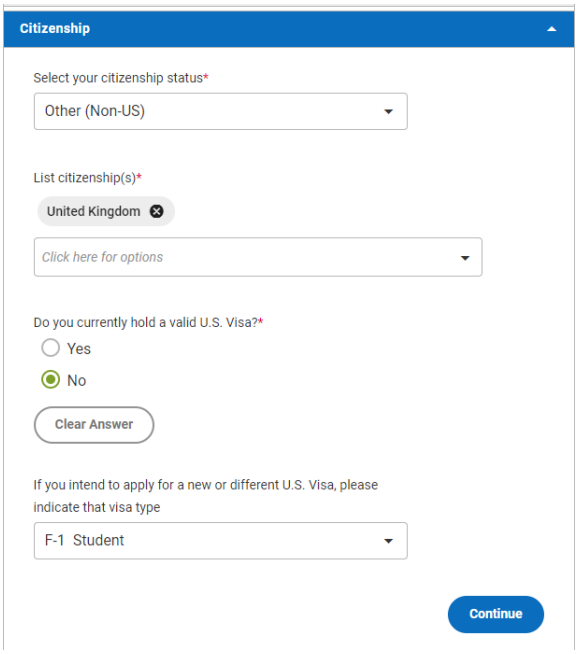
Tip: Double check to make sure all your contact information is correct, as the university may use this to set up an interview.

In the **"Demographics"** sub-category, these questions are for statistical purposes and to demonstrate diversity. It is okay to leave them blank if you're uncomfortable filling them in.

In the **"Geography and Nationality"** sub-category, select "0" for the "Number of years you have lived in the United States" if you've never lived in the USA. For the "Number of years you have lived outside of the United States", select the number that corresponds with your age. As you proceed through the sub-categories, you will notice that the tips provided under the Instructions and Help toolbar will change according to the section you are in. For example, in the "Language" sub-category, you are asked to list the number of languages you are proficient in, and the Instructions and Help provides an answer about what proficiency means for the Common Application purposes.

In the **"Citizenship"** sub-category, you will be asked to provide information about your background.

If you are a UK citizen, select this option. If you do not hold a valid US visa, select no. Note that an ESTA is not a visa.



When asked if you intend to apply for a US visa, select F1- Student visa.

If you are not a UK citizen, select your country of citizenship. If you hold a current B-2 visa, select this as an option.

Common App Fee Waiver

In the final sub-category of the Profile section, you will be asked whether you are requesting a Common App Fee Waiver.

A fee waiver lets you apply to a college without paying an application fee. The Common App Fee Waiver waives application fee of any college you apply to through Common App.

To apply for this fee waiver:

1. Answer "Yes" to the fee waiver statement.
2. Select all the indicators in the list that apply to you
3. Enter your signature to certify your request.

Your counsellor will approve your fee waiver. They will have to log onto their Common App login and approve your request (to the best of their knowledge).

It is important that before you apply to universities you speak with your schools directly and make sure they have logged in to approve it. It is not their responsibility to check whether you are eligible for a fee waiver, they should only approve to the best of their knowledge. You will not be required to provide them with any documentation.

Keep in mind that if your counsellor has not approved your fee waiver request, you will be asked to pay a fee to submit your application. For this reason, you MUST communicate with them to ensure they have approved, so everything can be submitted in time for the deadline. You may also want to ask your counsellor and teachers if they can provide you with a personal number or email address for you to contact them during half term in case there is an issue.

The Common App Fee Waiver isn't the only fee waiver available to you. Many colleges also offer their own application fee waiver, specific to their school. Be sure to check with each college to understand their own fee waiver policies.

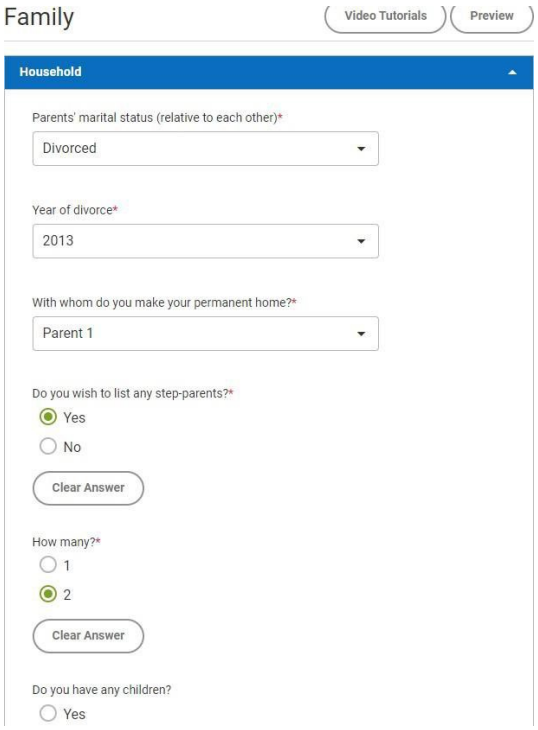
If you do not request a fee waiver in your Common Application, you will submit and pay online using a credit or debit card.

UStrive

At the end of the Profile section, you will be asked if you wish to be connected to a UStrive mentor. UStrive is a non-profit organization that connects aspiring college students with free, one-on-one, online mentoring, however keep in mind that EducationUSA advisors have expertise in advising international students, which UStrive does not.

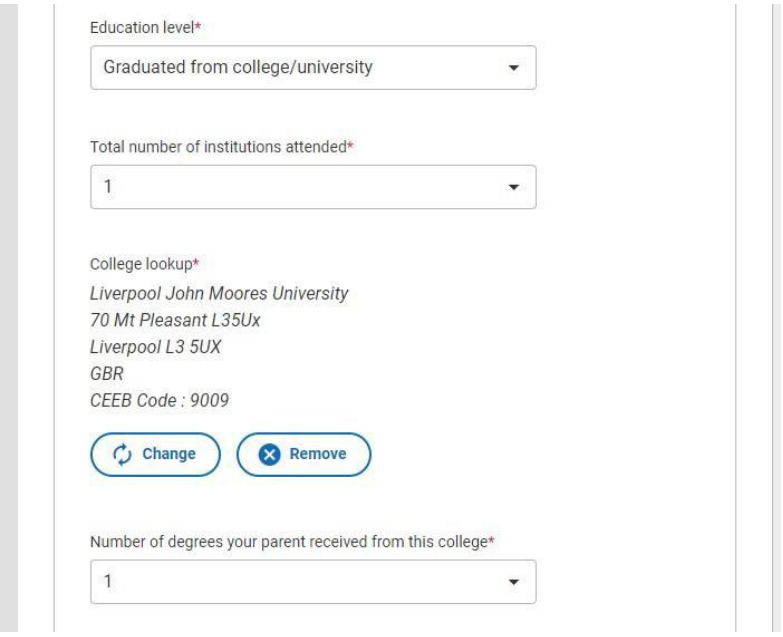
7. Family

In this section you will be providing information on your family and their education. As you know, the US admission process is holistic, taking into account a range of factors in addition to your academics. This information will provide some context about your background for the admissions office. The first sub-category in the Family section (pictured below) is about your household. This section allows you to categorise the relationship your parents have. You will then provide additional information about your parents individually in the next two sub-categories.



Note: If you live with only one parent, be sure that the information you provide for this parent matches up with the answer you provided in this “Household” section.

You will be required to select each parent’s occupation and highest educational level from a dropdown menu. Note that “trade school” means vocational certification or equivalent in the UK,

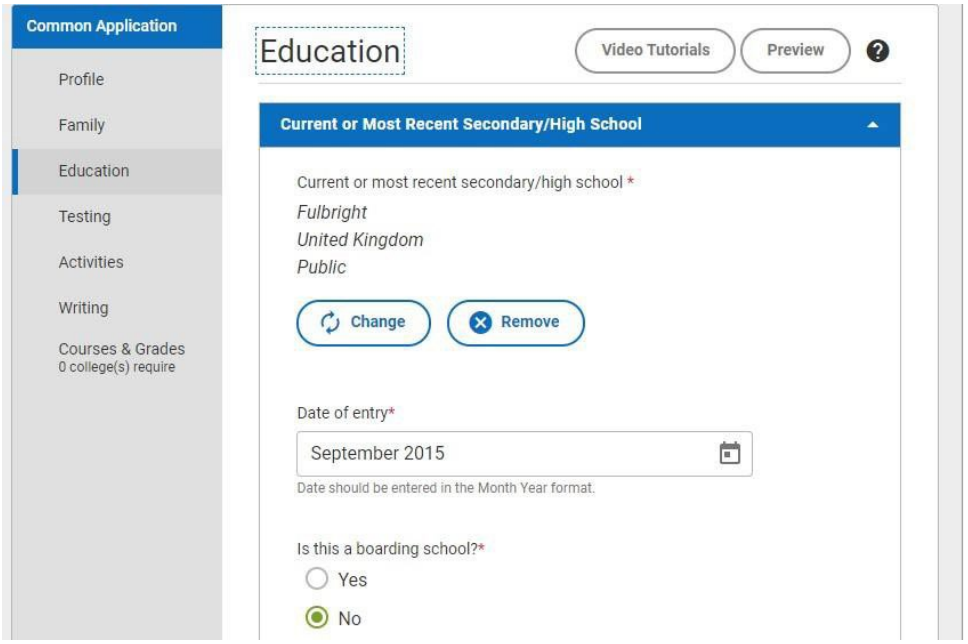


If you indicate that your parent was educated to college level (university), you will then be asked questions about that university. Note that many universities outside of the US are not on the provided list. You can still manually enter the information for those.

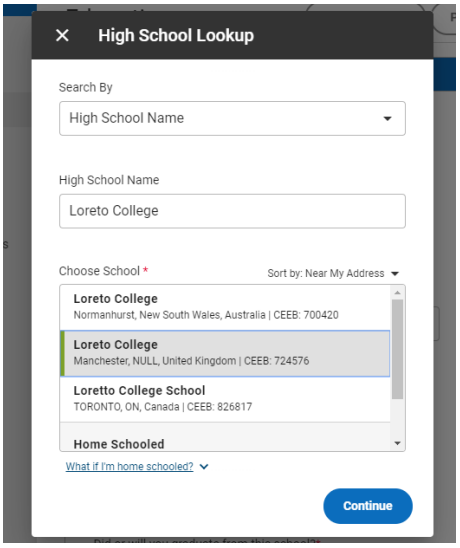
Complete the rest of the section for both parents/legal guardians and any siblings

8. Education

For the first sub-category of this section (“Current or Most Recent School”, you will submit information about your current school or sixth form college.



As before, when you click on “Find School,” a new screen will pop up that allows you to search for the institution by name, address, country, or city.

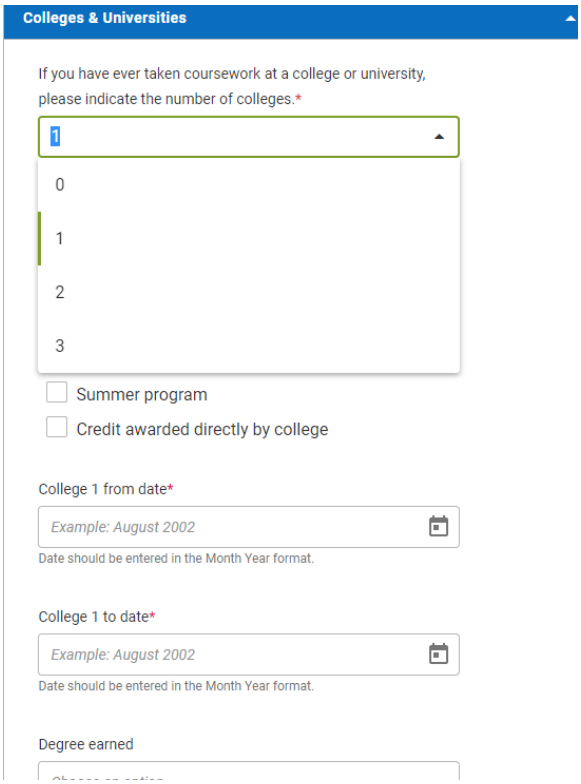


If your school is not already on the list, you can select the option that says, “I don’t see my high school on this list”, and you will be able to manually input your school’s information.

Please note, if you are inputting your school’s details, the American term “public” is equivalent to the UK term “state school,” and “charter school” would be most like an “academy” or “free school” in the UK.

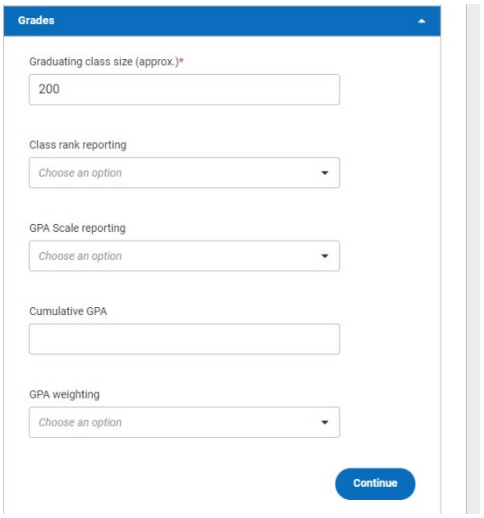
Graduation Date: Enter the date you will receive (or did) receive official results for A-levels, IB, Highers, etc. Under question “Please indicate if any of these options will have affected your progression through or since secondary/high school”, if applicable, choose all the options that applies to you. And then provide a detailed clarification in the box below. This is only for students who have repeated a year, taken a gap year, or else had other significant interruption to their schooling. If you have not had any interruptions or delays in your education, select “no change in progression”. Note that GED is a US High School equivalency exam.

You will then be asked for the details of your Counsellor recommender. Remember that your guidance counsellor will submit a school profile, transcript, and evaluation on your performance in a broader manner through the School/Final Reports. We recommend that you use your Head of Careers, Head of Sixth Form or Head Teacher as the counsellor. Make sure to inform them in advance, and make sure that the email address you submit is correct. Login information for the forms will be sent out to them via email through the Common App system (you do not have to send the forms to them yourself), so it is vital that you have the correct information.



For the “Other secondary/high schools” section, please complete information for any secondary school you have attended since Year 10 in the UK. If you have not changed schools since Year 10, select “0” to indicate this. For the “College & Universities” section, keep in mind that the American term “course” is the equivalent of “classes” or “modules” and that the American term “colleges” is used to mean “universities.”

Also note that ninth grade is equivalent to Year 10 in the UK.

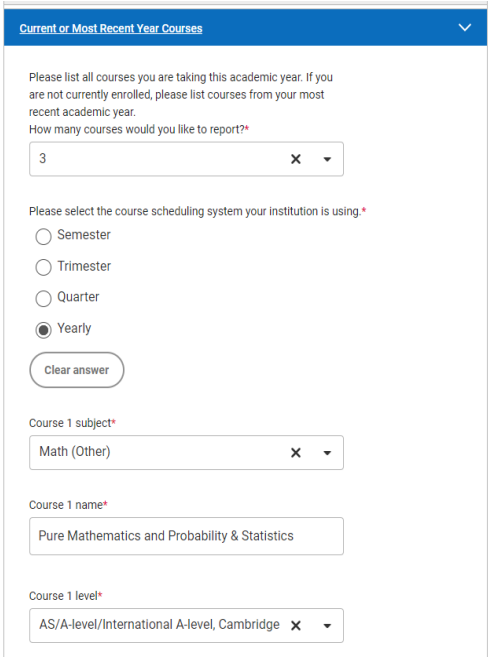


Grades

In the grades section, most students will select ‘none’ for ‘class rank reporting.

You should also select ‘none’ for GPA Scale reporting and leave the ‘Cumulative GPA’ section blank. Please do not try and convert your GPA.

Current or Most Recent Year Courses



Under “Current or Most Recent Year Courses” (qualifications and subjects), for “How many courses would you like to report?” you should first select the number of courses (i.e. subjects) you will receive results for in Year 13/S6/Year 14, such as A-levels, Scottish Higher/Advanced Higher, BTEC, Pre-U, IB or the equivalent. If one of your courses has a level designation that is not included in the choice list, please include the level as part of the Course title (for example: “A-level French”).

For IB, note which subjects are Higher and Standard.

For selecting the course scheduling system your institution is using, there is the option of either “semester” or “trimester.” Trimester is another word for “term” - most UK schools will be on a trimester/term system. Please check with your institution if you are unsure. For “course level”, select AS/ A-Level/ International A-Level/ Cambridge AICE, or International Baccalaureate based on your chosen curriculum. For “Course 1 Schedule”, if your subjects will be the same all year (most likely), tick the option for “Full Year”. If you will change through the year, select the appropriate term length for each course you report.

Honors

Under “Honors,” submit information about any academic honours you have received. When filling out this section, please note that Grade Level 9, 10, 11 and 12 will correspond to English/Welsh Year 10, 11, 12 and 13 (GCSEs and A-levels), Northern Irish Year 11-14, and Scottish S3-S6 (aka the last 4 years of secondary school). You can report up to five honors in this section. and will be able to click more than one box if the honours are recognized at more than one level.

Community-Based Organizations

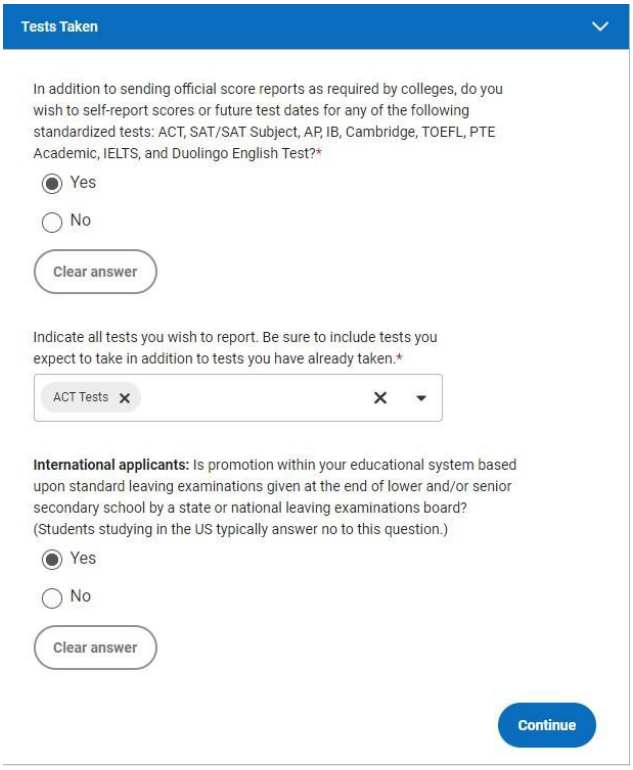
Community-Based Organizations are non-for profit organizations and college access programs that help students become college-ready. They can include charter school networks, local education foundations, federal, state and local programs that aid students from low-income families. Students who receive free college preparation support from a CBO can include those details in this section. You can include up to 3 organizations.

Future plans

For the “Future Plans" section, it’s OK to be undecided about your career interests under the liberal arts philosophy followed in the US system. While there is not an undecided choice, “other” is an option.

9. Testing

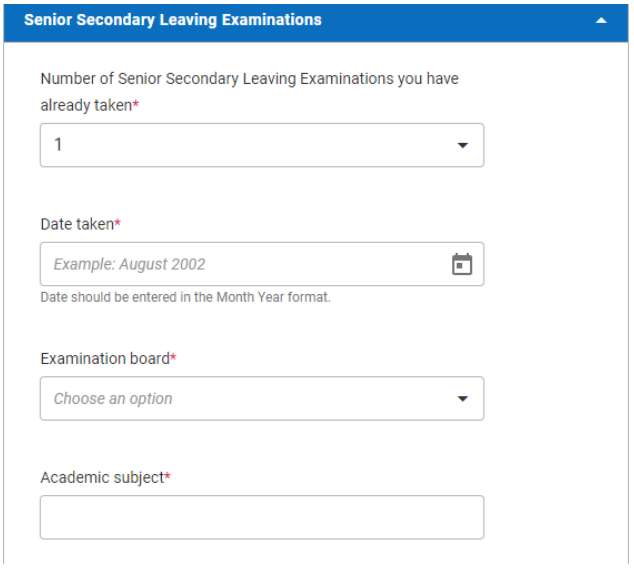
Under “Tests Taken”, you can report your best (super-scored) SAT or ACT scores. If you don’t have your scores before you submit the application, you can enter the date on which you will take the exam. Please note that even though you are entering the scores into the Common Application, you will still need to send your official scores directly from College Board or ACT to the colleges where you are applying. Check with each individual university regarding what admissions tests they require, some universities might be test-optional, which means you do not have to take or submit your SAT or ACT scores.



When you select “Yes” to self-report your standardised test scores, you will be able to select ALL the tests you’ve taken or expect to take from a list. Once you enter a test in this list, a new section will appear at the bottom of the screen with that test’s name. When you click on that section, you will then be able to provide your scores.

For international applicants, an additional question is asked in the “Tests Taken” section. As admittance to university/higher education is normally dependent on A-Level grades, IB Scores etc, most UK students should check ‘Yes’.

For **Senior Secondary Leaving Examinations**, you should only select yes if you have sat an official A-level exam or if you are a student in Scotland, you will report your results from your National 5 Higher exams. We don’t suggest that you report your predicted grades here as it will be reported on your transcript submitted by your counsellor. Do not report GCSE or AS results. These results will be included on your academic transcript.

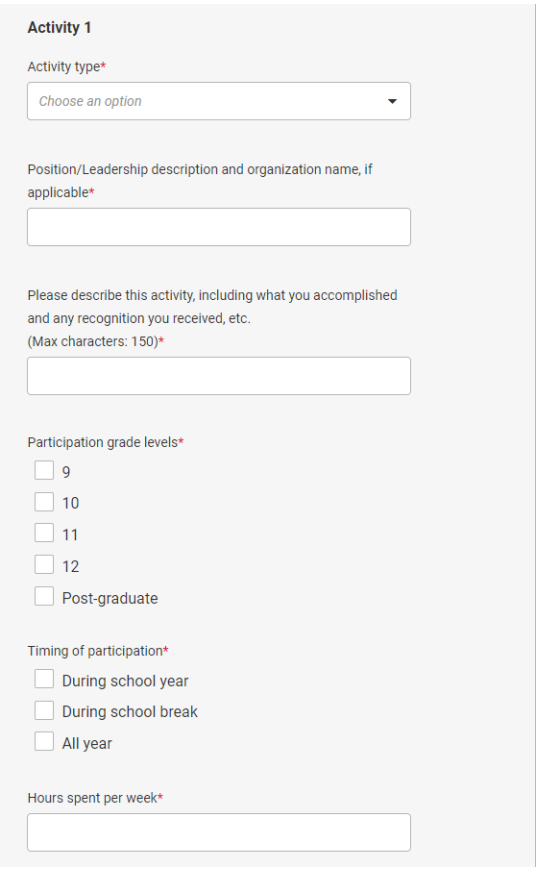


10. Activities

Under Activities, report any extracurricular activities you have completed in school or in your community. You can list up to 10 Activities. A few examples: school clubs or activities, school leadership roles (Head Boy/Girl), sports you participate in at school or recreationally, arts lessons or performances, voluntary service, work experience and internships. In the drop-down menu from which you choose your activity, JV/Varsity means that it was a High School level team (equivalent to the last four years of secondary school in British education) as opposed to a professional or recreational team. If you can't find your activity, choose "Other Club/Activity." Also note that on the application, Grade Level 9, 10, 11, and 12 correspond to British Years 10, 11, 12 and 13 (GCSE years and Sixth Form).

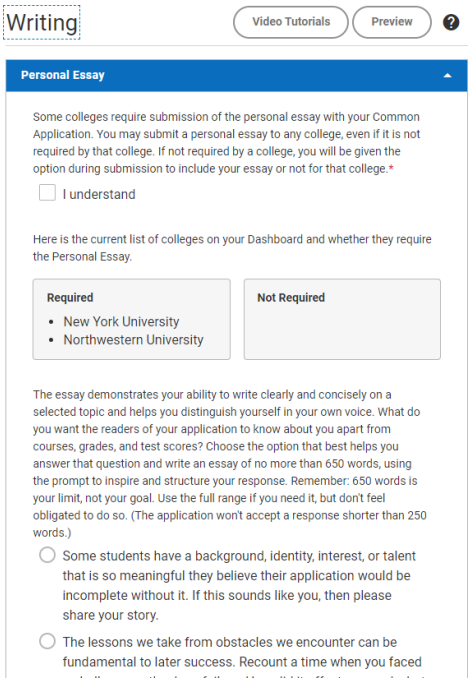
Your response in the 'Position/Leadership description and organization name' section will be limited to 50 characters. Your character limit for "please describe this activity, including what you accomplished and any recognition you received, etc" is 150 characters.

In choosing to add more activities to your applications (you can include up to 10 activities), you may wish to re-order them at the end in order of importance, with the most important as Activity 1. You can do so using the Up and Down arrows in the top right corner of the activity box.



11. Writing

In the “Personal Essay” section, you will have a personal essay to complete that will be sent to all the universities that you apply for through the Common Application. Do not make your personal essay specific to one college as you will be able to do that in the supplements.



The Covid-19 question

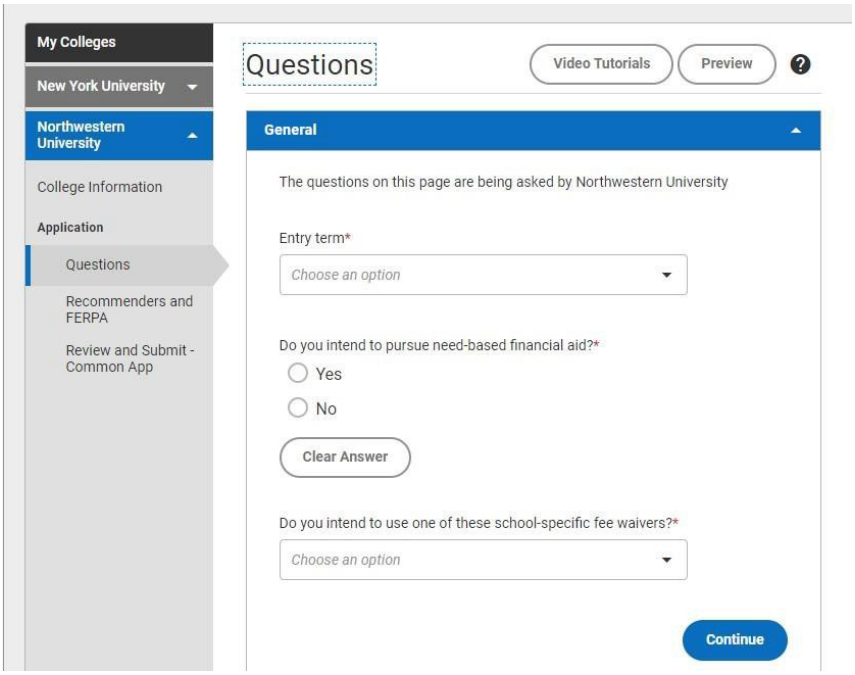
We suggest that you only answer this question if the pandemic has affected you extremely negatively on a personally level. General circumstances such as classes being moved online, or exams being cancelled do not need to be addressed here. If you feel like your situation is too complicated to be explained within 250 words, you might also consider addressing it in the larger “Additional Information section”. Ask staff for guidance before you choose to do either of the above.

12. Courses and Grades

Some universities now required students to fill out this section. Since most students in the UK do not have a year-by-year transcript starting Grade 9 (Year 10), we advise you to choose “No” for “I can access a copy of my transcript(s) or official grades” instead of trying to manually enter all your grades, which will be in your final transcript.

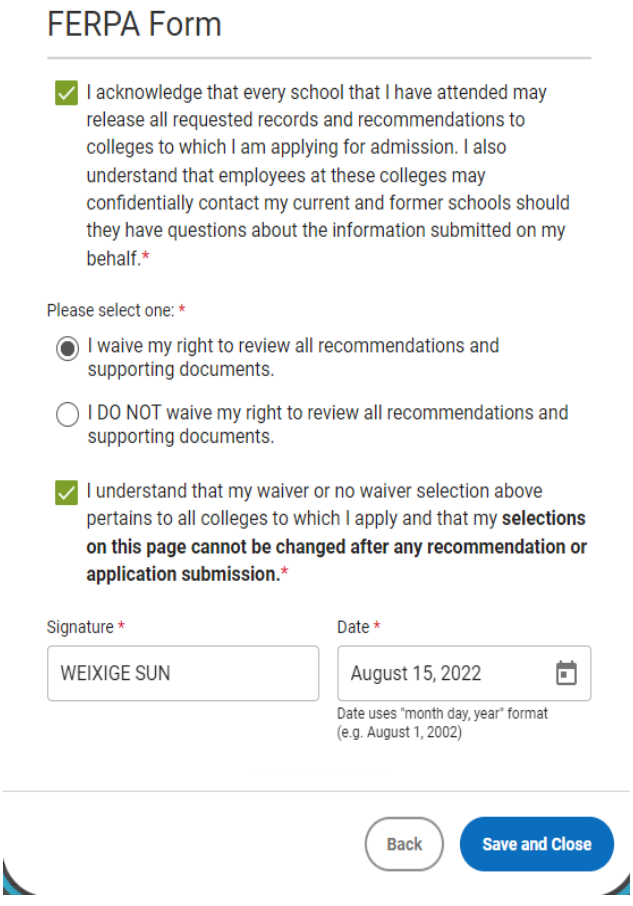
My Colleges (continued)

In order to submit your application, you must first complete the university-specific questions and assign your recommenders for each college. You may also be required to complete a university-specific supplement for those that require them. In the “My Colleges” tab, select “Questions” from the panel on the left side of the college from your list that you are applying to.



FERPA

In this section, you will authorise your school to release your academic information. We **strongly recommend** that you waive your right to access in the Privacy Notice to maintain credibility of your recommendation letters in the eyes of the university. Then you will e-sign and date the form.



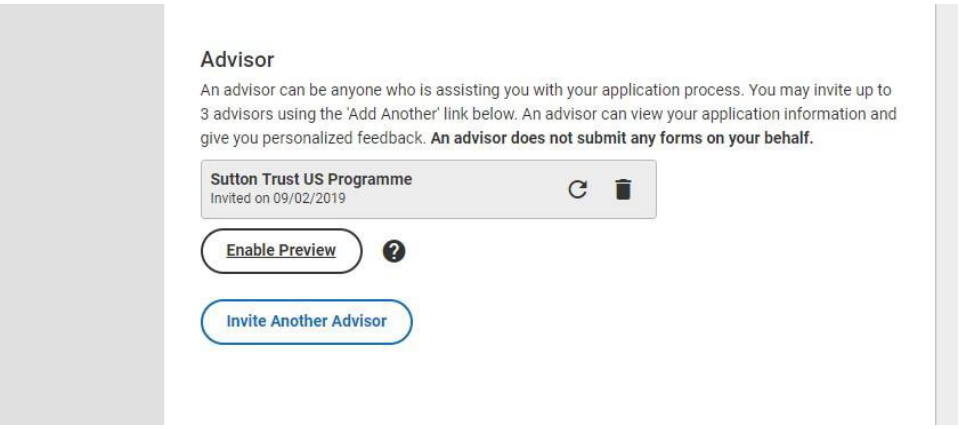
Adding an advisor

In this section you can select to add an advisor. An advisor is a type of recommender for your Common App. If you receive support from advising and community-based organizations, you will be able to work with those counselors just as you work with your school-based counselors and teachers within the application.

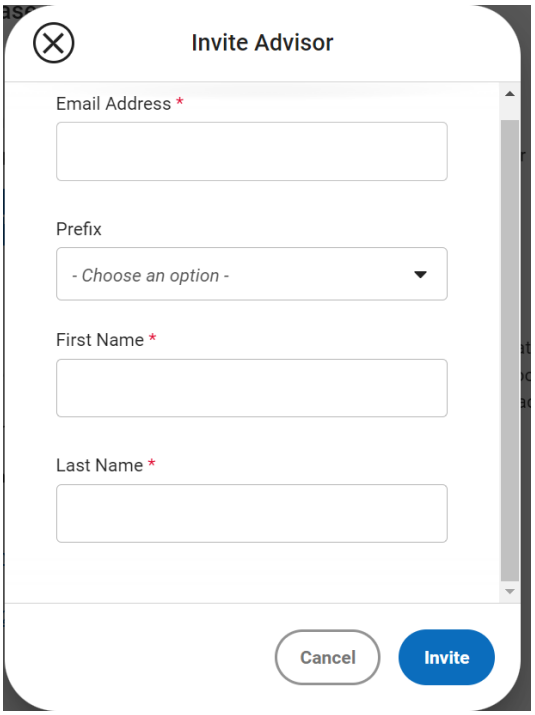
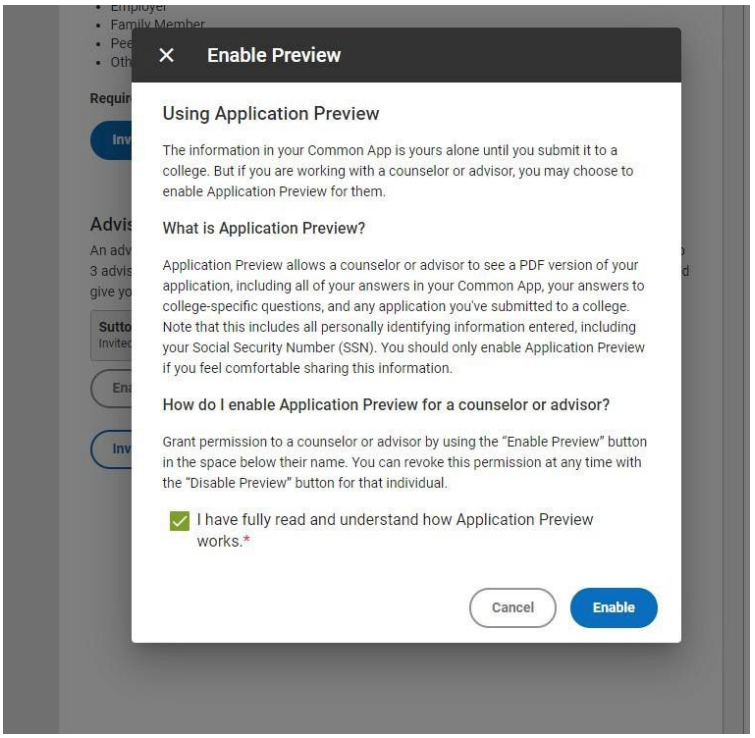
Advisors will then be able to manage their caseloads and view student progress within the Common App recommendation system. You can invite up to 3 individuals to be an advisor and they do not need to be from your school or have a special address. You should consider inviting those who are helping you manage and complete your college application process. In addition, if you wish to do so, you will be able to share a view of your in-progress application with your school counselor, advisor, or mentor.

The advisor cannot make any changes to your application, they can only view the answers you've provided. If you choose to invite an advisor, that action will remain private. The advisor invitation and profile information will not be visible to any of your colleges or any other invited recommender.

At the bottom of this page, you will see the advisor section.



Enter their details in the box.



Enable the preview function.