

10 Steps to Swimming and Studying in the USA

Michael Oberdries | Roskill Swim Club | December 2017

This commentary is a summary of one parent's learnings from trying to make sense of the NCAA college athletics program in the United States. The views, thoughts, and opinions expressed in the text belong solely to the author, and are not necessarily those of the Roskill Swimming Club, its Committee or its membership.

The application process has been summarised as 10 discreet steps, as follows:

- 1. Understand the NCAA Division System*
- 2. Consider the Recruitment Pathways*
- 3. Shortlist your Study Interests*
- 4. Decide on what TYPE of University you want to attend*
- 5. Decide on WHERE in the United States you would like to study*
- 6. Enrol and Study for SAT Testing*
- 7. Compile a University Shortlist*
- 8. Investigate Financial Aid and Scholarships*
- 9. Build Relationships*
- 10. Start preparing your Application early*

The National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) is a non-profit organisation which organises the athletic programs of many colleges and universities in the United States and Canada, and helps more than 480,000 college student-athletes who compete annually in college sports. The NCAA generates almost a billion dollars (mostly from basketball) which is then distributed back into various organisations and institutions across the United States

Team sports with more than 1000 athlete participants include Basketball, Baseball, Soccer, Football, Lacrosse, Ice hockey, Volleyball and Water polo.

Individual sports with more than 1000 athlete participants include Track (outdoor), Track (indoor), Cross Country, **Swimming & Diving**, Golf, Tennis and Wrestling.

1. Understand the NCAA Division System

The NCAA runs a three-tier system of Division I, Division II and Division III.

Division 1 is subject to further divisions of 1-A, 1-AA, and 1-AAA.

Each Division is made up of several "Conferences" for regional league play.

Generally, larger schools compete in Division I and smaller schools in Divisions II and Division III.

Under NCAA rules, Division I and Division II schools can offer scholarships to athletes for playing a sport. Division III schools do not offer any athletic scholarships.

Division I and Division II scholarship athletes can lose their funding if they do not perform in their chosen sport or if they are deemed to have a poor attitude. Similarly, athletes that excel may be targeted as transfer students by better performing schools in subsequent years.

Many Division III schools accept that from time to time academic commitments may override training and racing commitments and are happy to work with students to find a workable balance.

All student-athletes across all divisions are expected to meet minimum academic standards. Those schools with higher academic standards may place significant value on the scholarships of their student-athletes.

2014 STATS	Participation	Academics	Financial Aid
Division I	176,000 student-athletes across 346 colleges and universities	Graduation Success Rate: 83%	56% of all student-athletes receive some level of athletics aid
Division II	118,800 student-athletes across 306 colleges and universities	Graduation Success Rate: 71%	61% of all student-athletes receive some level of athletics aid
Division III	187,800 student-athletes across 439 colleges and universities	Graduation Success Rate: 87%	82% of all student-athletes receive some form of academic grant or need-based scholarship

Those swimmers targeting Division I and Division II schools will need to get an **NCAA Clearinghouse ID** here <https://web3.ncaa.org/ecwr3/register/CERTIFICATION>

Even at Division III, swim coaches will still have qualifying standards that student-athletes will need to meet. These will vary from university to university, for example a top Division III school may have qualifying criteria as difficult as some Division I schools. To be a credible candidate, swimmers should be targeting 3 events with qualifying times (yards) close to those listed in the table below (source:

<https://www.athleticscholarships.net/swimmingscholarships.htm>). These times are only guidelines, so another good option is to check a team’s website to see what times their swimmers are posting at meets.

SHORT-COURSE YARDS	Male (DIV I)	Male (DIV II)	Male (DIV III)
50 Free	< 22.0	< 23.5	< 24.0
500 Free	< 4:45	< 5:00	< 5:05
100 Back	< 55.0	< 57.0	< 59.0
100 Breast	< 1:01	< 1:04	< 1:06
100 Fly	< 54.0	< 57.0	< 59.0
200IM	< 2:01	< 2:05	< 2:08
SHORT-COURSE YARDS	Female (DIV I)	Female (DIV II)	Female (DIV III)
50 Free	< 25.0	< 26.5	< 28.0
500 Free	< 5:06	< 5:18	< 5:32
100 Back	< 1:00	< 1:02	< 1:06
100 Breast	< 1:12	< 1:15	< 1:17
100 Fly	< 59.0	< 1:02	< 1:07
200IM	< 2:10	< 2:16	< 2:24

**** Use a smart-phone app like “Swim Converter (by Squish Logic)” to convert NZ short and long course METER times into YARD equivalent NCAA times.**

The table above provides a selection of times only. NCAA meets will typically swim the full schedule of events familiar to New Zealand club swimmers. For yard-based meets the 400 meter event is typically replaced with 500 yard event and the 800 meter event is typically replaced with 1000 yard event.

2. Consider the Recruitment Pathways

Many student-athletes seeking a university placement will engage the services of a third party recruiter or agent. While these service providers are often well connected with individuals schools and their coaching staff, the cost of their services can be as high as NZD\$10,000. For those targeting sports scholarships at Division I schools, direct connections like these may be the difference between success and failure.

Notwithstanding, it is entirely possible to manage the recruitment / application process yourself if you are prepared to put the time and effort in. A great place to start is the BeRecruited web portal which can be found here <https://www.berecruited.com>

BeRecruited is a portal that connects student-athletes with coaches and colleges. A prospective student-athlete can create a swimming specific sports profile of their best times, academic achievements and personal interests. This profile is then visible to US swim coaches who can choose to “follow” an athlete or approach them directly via email. Similarly, student-athletes can search and “follow” colleges of interest to them. For an additional one-off subscription of around USD\$100 the site will also provide you with the direct access to coaching staff at the schools you are interested in. The BeRecruited college search facility allows you to search by a range of useful criteria to identify those school that best fit your needs – once found these schools can be added to a saved shortlist.

Many universities also manage their own individual recruitment portals. The problem with these is that you have to keep each one of them updated when race times improve and this can be tedious. A better option is to make your BeRecruited profile “public” and share the link to it directly with any direct email exchanges with coaching staff.

3. Shortlist your Study Interests

The US academic year is aligned to the seasons in much the same way it is in New Zealand, with a long summer break. This means the academic year starts in “Fall” which is August and students only get a short break over the Christmas period. While it is possible to start the US academic year half way through in January, this is not the norm.

There is a plethora of online information ranking universities nationally or in specific subject domains – see https://www.timeshighereducation.com/rankings/united-states/2018#!/page/0/length/25/sort_by/rank/sort_order/asc/cols/stats. If a student athlete has a specific area of study in mind it should be relatively simple to identify those schools that excel in those areas.

Additionally, most schools are very adept at self-promotion and have comprehensive websites. Look for website links with things like “alphabetic academic listings” and “undergraduate majors” to inform your research.

In New Zealand universities are slow to adapt to the changing workforce demand and some of the emerging job specialisations in fast changing areas like information technology are often only catered to at postgraduate level. In the US many of these same options will be available to you as mature well-structured degree offerings at undergraduate level.

4. Decide on what TYPE of University you want to attend

The terms “college” and “university” are generally interchangeable, and I will sometimes refer to them collectively as “schools”.

Public versus Private: Private institutions typically cost more but they also have more discretion and latitude in how they can distribute their financial aid. For that reason they should not be discounted as they may be the cheaper option in the long run. The staff to student ratio in Private schools also tends to be better, sometimes as low as 10:1. This means smaller class sizes and more individual attention.

Large versus Small: In New Zealand our universities would be considered medium to large, for example Otago University has around 20,000 students. There are many private colleges in the US that may have as few as 2000 students. Most of these are extremely well resourced and many are top performers in the NCAA as they have the financial means to target and recruit top athletes. At the other end of the spectrum are the large Public institutions which may have as many as 45,000 - 70,000+ students. Many are also top performers both in the NCAA and academically.

Urban versus Rural: Many college campuses reside on gifted land often with park like campus environments. For this reasons many are located on the outskirts of the urban centres or in more rural environments. Over time small university towns have grown up around them. If your desire is for an urban campus within a large city then these too exist but you need to target them. Urban campuses often come with higher living costs.

Ivy League Schools: While on the surface it may seem like a good idea to target the schools with the most prestigious reputations, it is a far better idea to pitch to schools at your academic level. Unlike New Zealand, schools in the US each have defined academic standards that students must generally meet to gain admission. For example, admission into schools like Stanford, MIT, Princeton, Yale, and Harvard require the very best academic records and even then the acceptance rate may be as low as 6%. A far better option is to target schools at your academic level – this means you will end up studying with a cohort of students with like abilities.

Curriculum: All undergraduate programs tend to be 4 years in duration. First year students are called Freshman; second year students are called Juniors; third year students are called Sophomores and final year students are called Seniors. In New Zealand a first year student embarking on an undergraduate degree program typically declares their major very early on and every subject they enrol into contributes to that degree, for example, a BCom majoring in Marketing has a clear prescription for what papers must be completed in what years for a student to be awarded that degree. In the US nearly all schools require students to complete a core set of papers which sit outside their major. For example, if you are a Math and Science major you may be required to also complete prescribed History and English papers in your first 2 years. The thinking here is that the role of US schools is to create well rounded individuals with a broad academic understanding. Many institutions, some quite prestigious, are further classified as Liberal Arts schools. These schools seem to place an even higher emphasis on a general arts education over all else, with specialisations

to come later on either in the workplace or through additional graduate study. There is a small group of schools that operate in a similar fashion to New Zealand Universities where there is no core curriculum requirements and students are left to decide for themselves the papers they wish to take – for example, the University of Rochester in upper New York state.

Research Schools: Many schools in the US have extensive and well-funded research programs. For those students with postgraduate and/or research aspirations this should be a consideration. These schools often have on-campus internship opportunities for undergraduate students during the holiday periods.

Resourcing: Not all schools are equal, both in an academic sense and in terms of the resources they have at their disposal. Many Private institutions have large endowment funds and tuition costs can vary markedly for Public and Private institutions and from state to state.

Networking: Many US schools have very close links with business. This can be very beneficial in terms of work experience through internships and for job placements come graduation. Many of these companies are global in their reach which means these links can also benefit international students.

5. Decide on WHERE in the United States you would like to study

Each State in the US tends to have its own cultural identity and this is also reflected in their colleges and universities.

Seasonal changes in weather throughout the year are very more pronounced than those we experience in temperate New Zealand. Expect big variances between summer and winter and very cold conditions during winter in many states.

Aside from the states of California, Colorado, Texas and Florida most of the well regarded universities are to be found on the East Coast of the United States. In the north the States immediately below the Great Lakes also have universities that are well regarded but expect anything north of New York State to be very cold in the winter. On the west coast anything south of North Carolina will be very hot and humid in the summer.

The other location dependent consideration is flights back home to New Zealand. Auckland to New York is a far more expensive proposition than Auckland to San Francisco.

Most students are accommodated on campus for the duration of their studies but this can vary in some urban campuses. The quality of the campus accommodation and the food options can be quite different from one school to the next.

6. Enrol and Study for SAT Testing

The SAT is a standardised test undertaken by senior high school students and widely used for university and college admissions in the United States.

The SAT is administered by 'The College Board' which states that the SAT measures literacy, numeracy and writing skills that are needed for academic success in college. The SAT attempts to assess how well the test takers analyse and solve problems, however, the test is administered under very tight time limits to help produce a range of scores.

The SAT has four sections: Reading, Writing and Language, Math (no calculator), and Math (calculator allowed). The test taker may optionally write an essay which, in that case, is the fifth test section. The total time for the scored portion of the SAT is three hours (or three hours and fifty minutes if the optional essay section is taken).

Two section scores result from taking the SAT – (i) Evidence-Based Reading and Writing, and (ii) Math. Section scores are reported on a scale of 200 to 800. A total score for the SAT is calculated by adding the two section scores, resulting in total scores that range from 400 to 1600.

A good Merit-Endorsed New Zealand NCEA student might expect to sit in the 1150 to 1250 SAT range.

Ivy League US universities expect scores of 1500+ and many students submitting admissions to these schools have perfect (1600/1600) scores.

US based high school students take these exams seriously and may have been studying practise exams for several years. By comparison New Zealand students are not as invested in the program and this can be reflected in their scores. Many schools recognise this and the SAT score is just part of what is looked at in evaluating an admission application.

Most US schools will also be interested in your most recent academic results and may even recognise the New Zealand academic programs like NCEA, Cambridge and International Baccalaureate.

My recommendation for any prospective New Zealand student would be to sit the SAT half way through year 12 and then twice more in year 13. The year 12 SAT results will give you an indication of where you sit, which will give you insights into what colleges you can apply to. With work a diligent student can expect to lift his or her first SAT score by as much as 100-150 points.

SAT exams are hosted in Auckland 6 or 7 times a year and test dates and locations can be found here <https://collegereadiness.collegeboard.org/sat/register/find-test-centers>

Each SAT test costs around US\$100 to sit.

Results are posted around 2 weeks after the test.

For each SAT test result, up to 5 universities or colleges can be nominated (for free) to receive these results directly from The College Board. Additional schools can be nominated but there are fees associated with this.

Test results provide a comprehensive breakdown of the student's strengths and weaknesses. Free study websites like the 'Khan Academy' can then link to these results enabling students to study those categories of questions which they are weak in- see Khan Academy here <https://www.khanacademy.org/sat>

For those families that want to invest in one-on-one SAT tutoring, these service are available in Auckland and can result in some good gains. Being successful in an SAT test is often as much about test strategy as it is about knowledge and tutors often have good tips and tricks in this regard. Consider this link if you are looking for an Auckland based SAT tutor https://auckland.universitytutor.com/auckland_sat-tutoring

7. Compile a University Shortlist

By now you should have a sense of:

- Which NCAA Division you will be targeting
- Your study interests
- Where in the US you would like to study
- Where you sit academically in terms of your SAT score

You are now in a position to start putting together a shortlist of candidate schools. Which are a good match for you.

Ideally you would want a shortlist of (10-15) schools sorted by the time your son or daughter is ready to start year 13. This then gives you 8-10 months to refine your selection down to those (3-5) schools you will end up making applications to.

If you are targeting a Division I school then coaching staff and school sports competition rankings may be important to you. If you are targeting a Division III school then academic considerations should probably be your highest priority.

A great place to start filtering out the schools that best match your target profile is the NCSA Men's and Women's Swimming Scholarship websites, which let you filter by US State and Division:

<http://www.ncsasports.org/athletic-scholarships/mens-swimming>
<http://www.ncsasports.org/athletic-scholarships/womens-swimming>

This list can then be further refined using the BeRecruited website described in Step (2) above. This site lets you further refine your searches using key-word searches, US state searches, student-body size searches, and area of study searches.

From here you can start to review your shortlisted university websites directly.

In refining your shortlist, you can start to look at the individual university website course curriculums and you can look at links to their swimming programs – this will include information about coaches, swimmers on the team (roster), meet results and school records.

There are also a number of websites that specialise in collating crowd-sourced student reviews of most US schools. These are particularly interesting because they rate individual schools in areas as diverse as Academics, Diversity, Athletics, Professors, Dorms, Student Life, Value, Campus, Party Scene, Location, Campus Food, Safety. My particulate favourite is this the ‘Niche’ website which collates many hundreds of reviews across nearly every school – for example <https://www.niche.com/colleges/university-of-rochester/>

Searching YouTube videos for swim teams at specific colleges can also be a great way to see first-hand the swimmers and coaching staff in action. YouTube is one of the few mediums that gives you insights into the culture and team dynamic of a specific swim-team which can be valuable.

8. Investigate Financial Aid and Scholarships

Let’s be clear, unless you are a Division I swimmer on a great scholarship, studying and swimming in the US is probably going to cost you more than studying and swimming in New Zealand.

What is harder to place a value on is the benefit an experience like this will have in shaping your son or daughter’s life and in influencing their options and choices after university. Many who have been through the program use phrases like “horizon changing” to describe how it’s affected their lives and options.

The other reality is that the New Zealand swimming club scene does a great job of retaining swimmers while they are at secondary school but many fall away from the sport when they leave school. In part this is because they may no longer have a core group of training partners at their level and for those going on to University there are no inter-university competition programs to keep them focussed.

The New Zealand student loan scheme does not extend to studying in the US other than for shorter term exchanges where New Zealand universities that have reciprocal exchange arrangements. The duration of these exchanges is always less than one year.

In the NCAA not all sports are treated equally in terms of Division I and Division II scholarship funding. NCAA sports like basketball are huge revenue generators and they accordingly receive the lion's share of the scholarship funding. Minority sports that US student-athletes are good at like water polo receive far less funding which mean only exceptional international student-athletes with contacts get considered. New Zealand tends to do well in securing scholarships in men's and women's soccer as this is a sport on the rise in the US and the New Zealand student-athletes are still good enough to make the grade.

Men's and woman's swimming (actually designated in the NCAA as "Swimming & Diving") sits somewhere in the middle. Only the very best New Zealand age groups swimmers who medal at Nationals are likely to be credible candidates for Division I scholarships and probably only the best of that groups are going to get what is termed a "free-ride". A free-ride is where everything is paid for (tuition, accommodation, food), but not international travel home. The balance of students will likely receive part-scholarships only, leaving the student-athlete to come up with any funding shortfalls.

As stated previously, sports scholarships are not available for Division III student-athletes so they must explore other options. For the strong academic performers there are many scholarships available – these are called Merit scholarships and any New Zealand Excellent-Endorsed NCEA student would be a strong candidate for one of these. US schools also offer "needs-based" funding which is financial aid based upon what you can afford as a family. Often international student are not be eligible for needs-based funding at Public universities, but a number of Private universities will consider international students for needs-based funding.

Be aware that some Private universities may offer Merit scholarships for students of Pacific Island decent.

Eligibility for needs-based funding is determined by University Admissions based upon your completion of an International Financial Support Form known as the CSS Profile. This is administered by 'The College Board', and while detailed in its requirements, you only need to fill it out once and can then share it across multiple application submissions. See <https://cssprofile.collegeboard.org/>

Needs-based funding is both means-tested and discretionary to the university. If an international student-athlete is able to build a strong relationship with a coach in advance of their application submission then it is common practise for those coaches to endorse applications and those endorsements may influence needs-based funding support as well.

In New Zealand the true costs of attending university is hidden. For example, a first year BCom student from Auckland attending university at Otago may pay NZD\$14,000 in accommodation (hostel) fees and a further NZD\$7,000 in tuition fees. The reality is that 80% of those tuition fees are actually subsidised by the New Zealand government. In the US the actual cost of tuition is fully exposed and the

numbers can be quite intimidating. What you need to remember is that nearly every student receives some level of needs-based funding. These numbers are widely publicised as averages based upon family income and as a rule-of-thumbs most eligible students can expect to receive maybe up to half of their tuition fees subsidised through needs-based funding. Talented student-athletes from less financially able backgrounds in some cases can receive needs-based funding for 100% of their tuition fees. Having said that every university is different and in many cases international students will not be eligible for needs-based funding

9. Build Relationships

Once you have refined your short-list you should then start reaching out to the coaching staff at your chosen universities. Don't be shy in asking them specific questions around whether your best-times meet the standards they are looking for. If they are interested in you, most are happy to respond to your inquiries.

Coaching staff are potentially also very important in the evaluation of your admissions application. Their support and endorsement can change a marginal application into a strong application, so the value of developing relationships here should not be underestimated.

If you are able to undertake a campus visit in advance of any application submission this too could be very valuable. This is what the US student-athletes are doing on a regular basis so it is important to get known. The next best option would be to set up a Skype interview with someone on the coaching staff and keep in regular contact via email when you have news to share. We opted for the Skype interview approach and it seemed to work well.

Social media can also be a great way to learn more about a specific college program. Using LinkedIn we were able to find a former Kings' Boy who attended one of the colleges we were interested in on a music scholarship. We made a point of meeting up with him when he was back in Auckland on a break – it turned out he was also part of the swimming program for some of his time at university and this all helped our case.

Again, via LinkedIn we also made contact with current and former students who were doing the same academic course that we were interested in. This provided a great platform to get unbiased responses on the inner workings of specific academic programs.

Talking to people who have visited or lived in the area in which you plan to study can also provide some useful insights on things to expect when you get there – often things come to light that you may not have considered.

10. Start preparing your Application early

The formal admissions process begins with selecting one of the following “application portals” - the Common Application (CA), the Universal College Application (UCA), and the Coalition Application (CoA). I opted for the COMMON APPLICATION because it seemed most widely accepted.

These application portals allow you to designate the shortlisted colleges you wish to apply to. Much of the content in individual college applications is “common” (hence the name), meaning you can compile once and share with many. Where there are school-specific differences these get automatically highlighted in the portal so nothing gets missed in your applications.

Each application incurs a small processing fee of around USD\$50 so you probably wouldn’t want to go crazy in terms of the number of applications you plan to make. In our case we made 2 applications with Plan (B) always being to study back in New Zealand if we were not successful.

The application process is comprehensive and you should begin it early, have it peer reviewed, and refine over time. For example, for a student applying for an August (Fall) 2019 intake, the application portal for that year opens in 1-August-2018 and you would be well advised to review the requirements early.

The COMMON APPLICATION portal can be found here
<https://apply.commonapp.org/Login>

There are 3 types of applications that can be made to a university, they are:

- Early Decision: This binding option is intended for students who are willing to commit themselves to the chosen University as their first college choice. Students may apply to only one college as an Early Decision candidate. Applicants contractually agree to withdraw all applications to other colleges and attend the chosen university if accepted. Applications are due 1-November and students are typically notified around 15-December.
- Early Action: Unlike Early Decision, this option is non-binding. Early Action candidates may apply to as many colleges as they wish. Applications are due 1-December and students are typically notified around 1-February.
- Regular Decision: As with Early Action, the Regular Decision option is non-binding. Candidates may apply to as many colleges as they wish. Applications are due 1-February and students are typically notified around 15-March.

Early Decision is a great option for New Zealand students because if Plan (B) is to attend a New Zealand university if unsuccessful it allows them to process the two applications in parallel. Early Action may also fall into this category but it is cutting the timelines tight.

The other thing that is good about Early Decision is that it signals to your chosen university that you are serious about them and that they should be serious about you. Statistics suggest that admission rates are slightly better for Early Action students and

I believe that most schools have a set quota of Early Action first year students that they look to fill, maybe around 25%.

Once you have submitted your COMMON APPLICATION you will likely receive a logon from the university you are making the application to. This logon will let you track the progress of your application and will signal if there are any missing parts to your application that still need to be submitted – for example the CSS Profile discussed in Step (8) above.

You will then be notified (through the tracking portal) of your success or failure. A following 5-15 business days after that you should receive information about your financial aid package (first Merit scholarships results the needs-based funding). It is at that point you will be in a position to formally accept or decline the offer. The cut-off date for acceptance is usually mid-January.

Your SAT scores form part of your COMMON APPLICATION submissions but you should be mindful that the SAT score is only one element contributing toward a well-crafted admissions application. Many schools (less so Public schools) place great weight on the personal essay and you should invest significant time here. Diversity in the student body is often valued very highly by many institutions and being from a distant English speaking country like New Zealand is a positive in this regard.

***FOOTNOTE:** Flynn Oberdries was successful in his Early Decision application to the University of Rochester in up-state New York. This is a NCAA Division III college and Flynn anticipated being there for 4 years, swimming for the “Rochester YellowJackets” and studying business analytics and data science. Unfortunately, in the end we were not able to negotiate a workable financial aid package with the University of Rochester and Flynn will be reverting to Plan-B, the University of Otago. It was disappointing for all concerned to fail at the last hurdle, but if nothing else it highlights the importance of always having an alternative plan to fall back on if required!*