

How to get Admission and Full Scholarship from the best American Universities? (as a high school student from Iran!)

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Introduction

Iranian people, especially its hard working students, are very intelligent, as it is reflected in a recent article by [Newsweek magazine](#) titled: “[The Star Students Of The Islamic Republic](#)“. This is not a new fact because Iranian undergraduate students have been shining in top American Universities for years during the [Shah regime](#) too.

Every year, [MIT](#), the [top American university in engineering and science](#), admits a handful of Iranian students into its different programs in which they successfully finish their studies and move on. They are mostly graduate students who have done their undergraduate studies at the top of their class in one the highly rated engineering or science universities in Iran. In some years, there might also be a few second generation Iranian undergraduate students among them who are usually graduated from a good American or Canadian high school.

For more two decades which I have been in touch with the MIT Iranian communities, I had never heard that someone from an Iranian high school apply and get admitted to MIT until last year! It is even more interesting to know that this student is a **female** who has also received a **full scholarship** from MIT which pays for all of her tuition and housing during her 4 years of undergraduate studies!

She is [Anahita Maghami](#) who applied to MIT when she was a high school student in Karaj, Tehran. She confirms that getting into a good undergraduate program such as MIT is NOT only about good grades but also requires that one can show his/her other human dimensions, especially real sense and deed in social responsibility and community service. Anahita who has started her second year in physics this fall, also underlines another crucial factor for admission which is knowing English well.

Anahita continued her social and community activities as soon as she arrived at MIT last year. During this summer, she participated in a program called [Bike & Build](#) where she biked across the US in order to help with building houses for needy people.

There are [over one thousand of colleges and universities in the US](#) and [Massachusetts alone has over 100 of them](#). However, these universities and colleges are not the same at all, and serve different purposes. Anahita recalls how a mediocre college has not even given her an admission (probably because she had applied for scholarship and that college priority had been making money out of its students), while the top engineering

and science school of the US, namely MIT, not only admitted her but also gave her a full scholarship!

Before providing you with Anahita's step-by-step process for getting admission, I would like to share some side notes with you which are, in part, also confirmed by Anahita's inspiring experience.

No matter what you want to do in your life, you should try to:

1. Learn English well because it will open a window to whole new world for you, especially these days which internet has brought down many of the physical boundaries between counties.
2. Get involved in community service not only because it should be the social responsibility of any conscience individual but also due to the fact that it gives you a new human dimension which will help you if you want to continue your higher education abroad.
3. Be proud of your Iranian roots which has a [rich civilization, heritage and culture](#). (Anahita is proud of being identified as an Iranian. For example, while living, and studying in the US, she is still clearly mentioning [Iran as her country!](#))
4. When you get your admission and are heading to a US consulate to apply for your student visa, you should have all the supporting documents which show that you do not have any intention of remaining in the US after finishing your studies. But most importantly, you should believe in yourself and whatever you are saying. US visa officers are trained to act like psychologist and read any sign of doubt in you. Be self confident and for example look straight in their eyes when you are talking to them, as opposed to hanging your head down when you are talking to them!
5. No matter where you are and what you are doing, do not forget your people back in Iran. Stay in touch with them and help them in any way you can. Most importantly by letting their silenced voice to be heard whenever needed because is [life is too short and precious to waste it on selfish games!](#)

Despite being very busy with many academic and social responsibilities, Anahita has kindly accepted to share her valuable experience about the step-by-step process that a high school student from Iran needs to follow in order to get an admission from a good American university such as MIT. As she has underlined, this is not for everyone but she has shown that it is doable!

Many thanks to **Sayeh** from [Shirin Science Center](#) who has graciously devoted his valuable time for translating this article into Persian. You can access/download both articles (English and Persian) from the following links:

[چگونه دانش آموزان دبیرستانی ایران میتوانند از بهترین دانشگاه های آمریکا پذیرش و بورس بگیرند؟](http://shirin-center.org/download/mitAdmissionScholarshipPersian.pdf)
(<http://shirin-center.org/download/mitAdmissionScholarshipPersian.pdf>)

[How to get Admission and Scholarship from the best American Universities as a high school student from Iran?](http://shirin-center.org/download/mitAdmissionScholarshipEnglish.pdf)

(<http://shirin-center.org/download/mitAdmissionScholarshipEnglish.pdf>)

Considering that the authors have done their best to pack all the necessary information in these articles, it is requested to refrain from asking them any question in this regard in person or by email. Instead, please leave your questions and/or comments at the following link so other people can also help out with answering them:

[QUESTION & COMMENT Link about “Getting Admission & Scholarship”](http://shirin.mit.edu/blog/?p=849)

(<http://shirin.mit.edu/blog/?p=849>)

**Process of applying for undergraduate admission and scholarship
(as a high school student from Iran)**

This article is written exclusively for perspective high school students in Iran who are willing to apply for undergraduate studies in an American university. The information provided here is just a personal view and might be different from someone else’s point of view. Some of it might also change over time so please check for updates on the web before using them for any purposes.

Why apply to an American university?

There are in fact many advantages in studying as an undergraduate student at a college in USA. American colleges are so different from each other so the information I provide here is just about MIT (www.mit.edu), although a lot of it might also be applicable to other top colleges.

The first thing is about the educational system. In a typical American college you get many chances to choose a major and also the courses required for the major. For example at MIT, all freshmen declare their major at the end of the second semester. So they have a year to take any courses they want to explore other fields and find their favorite field of interest. Also, the grading system helps this process a lot. In the first semester, freshmen just need to pass the classes and there are no letter grades. If a freshman fails a class nothing will be recorded in their transcript. In sophomore year, students can take up to two exploratory subjects with no letter grades just to get to know other majors. Furthermore, there are lots of other events planned for freshmen to help them decide. Many people enter MIT with a completely different interest from the one they will eventually choose as their major.

After declaring the major, students get so many choices as requirements for their major and also so many electives. The flexibility of the program makes many students able to double major or add a minor. Also, there is a special focus on humanities which requires everyone to concentrate on a humanity subject by taking at least four courses in that field.

Besides academics, lots of extra-curricular activities go on around the campus. At the first place, MIT requires student to fulfill their physical education requirement by taking at least four sports classes. (You cannot graduate without passing a swim test!) There are also more than 360 student groups at MIT that make lots of opportunities for students with any sort of interest to get involved in some of them. These groups include sports teams, art groups, religious and cultural groups and many other kinds.

The most important thing is that you get to know so many ambitious and enthusiastic people around. The college life is a great opportunity to learn about the world and people. The more you get involved in the campus life, the wider your perspective of the world becomes. Undergraduate students, unlike graduate students are supposed to get involved in other activities besides academics. An undergraduate study at an American college like MIT can bring you a unique life and lots of valuable experiences.

Now, let's see how it is possible to apply for undergraduate studies. First of all here are a few facts:

- Undergraduate applications are *different* from graduate applications.
- Usually the main problem for undergraduate applicants from Iran is the lack of resources.
- Undergraduate application is so risky especially if you are a Pish-daneshgahi student. It is really time consuming, so please think carefully about Konkur before you start to apply.
- Undergraduate applications are *not* just about academics.
- Getting admission with financial aid from an American college for undergraduate studies is *not* impossible.

Yes, it is not impossible, though you might find it so tough. I would say the very first step is to start learning English. I would like to emphasize that once more: PLEASE LEARN ENGLISH! You really need to learn English very well. Then you need to have access to the internet. Almost any information you need is on the web and to take the most out of it you need to know English. The better you know English, the easier *everything* will be. Yes, this is actually true! Here is what you need to do:

- 1- Go online and search for universities. Go to universities websites and look at their programs and get a general view of each university.
- 2- Go to www.collegeboard.com or www.USnews.com and search for colleges. These websites are very useful and should be two of your top websites for choosing your favorite university.
- 3- Look at the links about “undergraduate applications”, “international admissions”, “perspective students” or anything of this kind. Look at the requirements and make sure you know what they are about.
- 4- Always keep in touch with the admissions office. Email the admission office and ask *any* questions you have about the requirements or the application process.
- 5- Get ready to fulfill the requirements!

What do I need to do for applying?

Some of the requirements are:

- TOEFL
- SAT
- GPA
- Essays
- Recommendations
- Interview

TOEFL

As I said the most important thing for an applicant is English. Try to learn English very well. TOEFL is a test to examine your English skills. There are different formats of it. Currently iBT (internet Based TOEFL) is held in Iran mainly by Sazman Sanjesh. iBT is an internet-based test which has four parts: Reading, Listening, Speaking and Writing. Each part has 30 points and the whole exam has 120 points. Most colleges require a minimum of 20 for each skill. A college like MIT recommends 100 in total. Although this is not concrete and you might still get admission with a slightly lower score. A good TOEFL score can significantly increase your chances for getting admission. Not just because of the grade itself but knowing English in that level is really crucial for filling out the application forms.

You can easily find many resources for studying for TOEFL in Iran. There are also many resources online. The books that I recommend are “[Barron’s iBT](#)” and “[1100 words you need to know](#)”. You can also join the online yahoo group “applyabroad” which is currently moved to: applyAbroad.org. Many applicants post their questions about different issues there. Although most of them are graduate applicants, you can still get good information about common things like TOEFL. The official TOEFL website is: www.ets.org

SAT

SAT is another required test for almost all colleges. There are two types of it: SATI or Reasoning Test and SATII or Subject Test. Both of them are four-hour-long and each part has 800 points. SATI is made of an English part and a Math part. SATII is more flexible. You get to choose between MathI, MathII, Physics, Chemistry, Biology and some other subjects. Normally colleges require two of them but it is better that you take three which is the maximum you can take in a day.

The English part of SATI can be really tough for international students since this is the same test as native speakers take. Try to get a good grade but do not be upset if you couldn’t get a very high grade. Usually colleges realize that as an international student, your TOEFL score, which is specially designed for non-native speakers, is much more important than SATI score. The Math and science parts of the tests are really easy. You just need to know the special scientific words in order to understand the questions.

There are two main difficulties with SATs. The first one is that SATs are not held in Iran and secondly, there are no specific books available in Iranian book stores to study for the

exam. You need to take them in a nearby city abroad like Dubai, Istanbul, Ankara or any other city that provides the service. Registration is through www.collegeboard.com. Check it out for all the information about SATs.

Some colleges like MIT do not require SATI for international students, if you take TOEFL. However, since most of them do require it, it is better that you take both of them unless you want to apply only to MIT. A grade over 700 in each part is good enough to present to good colleges.

GPA

GPA or **Grade Point Average** is the equivalent of “Moaddel”. GPA is calculated out of 5. **DO NOT DIDVIDE YOUR MOADEL BY 4!** Simply have your sealed transcripts translated officially. Also, contact the university you are applying to. Describe your situation and ask them if they accept your officially translated transcripts as GPA. Always ask before doing anything.

Essays

In all undergraduate application forms, there is at least one (usually 2-3) essay. The essay asks you to write on a topic provided. Essay is one of the most important parts of your application. Essay is where you get a chance to present yourself and show that you are more than just a TOEFL and SAT score. Start writing your essays early. Give it at least a month. Look at essay samples online. A good website can be like: www.essayedge.com. Have your essay revised by someone who knows English better than you. It is important that you make no major grammatical mistakes or typos. Note: Please do NOT under any circumstances plagiarize all or part of your essay. If you do so and the admissions office finds out, your application will be immediately thrown out.

Recommendation Letters

This part is probably the most complicated part for Iranian undergraduate applicants. Simply because it is not up to you! Yes, you need to ask your teachers and counselors to write the recommendation letters or fill out the recommendation forms. As far as I know almost no high school teacher has ever heard of such a thing. So you need to talk to the person who you want to write you the letter. Explain that colleges are looking for something unique in their applicants and only a phrase like: “This student is the best student I have ever seen!” is not really helpful. Make them to explain your intellectual abilities through some anecdotes or some more descriptive phrases. Usually your recommender is asked to fill out a form. In the form, your recommender is asked to evaluate your personality and things like care for others and sense of humor. So keep this in mind again: Undergraduate applications are about YOU, not just your grades and academic achievements.

Recommendation letters have to be written in English. This can be a real problem for you if your recommender does not know English well. One thing that you can do is to ask them write in Farsi and then have their recommendations translated. Again, ask your university about it and make sure that they have no problem with this.

Interview

Interview is not usually a requirement and some universities do not even offer such an option. However, if there is an interview option, please go ahead and do it! It can be really stressful but this is another special opportunity for you to again present more aspects of yourself. Talk about your passion for getting admitted and show that you are really interested in that particular university. Go online and search about the university. Try to know as much as possible about the university and come up with some good questions. A good interview is not the one in which you are asked a lot of questions. A successful interview is like a friendly conversation. They understand that you might be anxious. So don't panic. If possible, collect some information about your interviewer. For example if they are alumni ask them about their college experience. Try to make the interview a happy and informative time for both of you. You probably need to do it in English. So please work on your English speaking skills!

Also, check this out: [Thoughts on MIT interview](#).

Application form and time line

Application forms differ for each university. What was said was just some of the common parts. You will be asked about so many other things, too. If you don't understand a part ask the university right away. Try to make your application as neat and precise as possible. Remember: Application form is the only thing that the university has about you. It presents you. So present yourself correctly!

Most undergraduate colleges admit students for the following fall. You need to work on the application forms at least one year ahead of time. The deadlines vary a lot. Keep track of all the deadlines for all the universities you are applying to and make sure to arrange everything so that you can meet the deadlines. For example for a typical top college, if you are applying for fall 2009, you need to submit the forms by January, 2009. A suggested time line for say fall 2009 admission is like this:

- Spring 2008: Register for Standardized tests. i.e. TOEFL and SATs
- Summer 2008: Look at the application forms and make sure you understand them.
- Fall 2008: Take TOEFL and SATs and fill out the application forms. Probably have an interview.
- Spring 2009: Wait for the admission results to be released!

Again, I would like to repeat that this process is really time consuming and tiring. It can take all your time in summer and fall. You need to spend a lot of time on the internet. The more you know English, the less painful it would be.

What about the college expenses and Financial Aid?

Financial Aid is something that you really want to consider before you decide to apply to a university. A typical tuition and room and board expenses for a top college is around \$50,000 a year. In other words, it cost about \$200,000 (about 200 million Tomans!) to get your bachelor in the US. Make sure your college offers financial aid to international students if you need it. Some colleges like MIT, Harvard and Princeton are need-blind. This means that when you are applying they do not look at your financial situation and just after you get admitted they give you money so that you can afford the university. If

you are applying to such a college you do not need to be worried about the university costs. However, you still need to apply for financial aids at about the same time as you submit your application forms. Start filling out your financial application forms early. It takes time to collect all those financial documents!

It can cost a lot of money for you to apply. You need to pay about \$60 as an application fee for each university. To register for the Standardized tests you need to pay about \$300. Other main expenses include: mailing fees, traveling abroad, translation fees, books and supplies for studying and internet (this will be a lot!)

What to do after getting admission? (Visa)

Congratulations! Here the challenge starts! You will get lots of forms from the university and you need to fill them all out properly. The biggest challenge is visa. You again need to go to a nearby city abroad with a US embassy in it and apply for the visa. You need to get a student visa (F-1 visa). The visa process normally takes about two months from the time you apply until when you can have it in your passport. The suggested cities are Ankara and Cyprus (I know it is a country!). Before you can reserve a time for interview, you need to receive a form from the university called I-20. The university will send you the form as soon as you can prove you are able to pay for the costs. All the other documents and information are available at the visa section of the US Foreign Affairs site: http://travel.state.gov/visa/visa_1750.html. You can also find a lot of useful information about getting US visa in the yahoo group “applyAbroad” (Currently moved to applyAbroad.org).

The above article has useful general information about studying abroad however it is specifically written for Iranian high school students who want to get into an **undergraduate program** in the US. The following links provide you with other useful information including getting admission for **Masters and PhD programs in the US**.

More Information:

- [Directory of American and Canadian Universities](#) (UnivSource)
- [Ranking of US Graduate Engineering Schools 2008](#) (US News)
- [Ranking of US Undergraduate Universities 2008](#) (US News)
- [America's Best Graduate Schools 2008](#) (US News)
- [Studying in the US and the Green Card Lottery!](#) (Shirin Science Center, 2005)
- [Applying Iranian Way \(for undergraduate admission\)!](#) (Alireza Najafiyazdi, 2002)
- [Applying to Ph.D. Programs in Computer Science](#) (Mor Harchol-Balter, 2004)
- [“The Star Students of The Islamic Republic“](#) (News Week, 2008)
- [Average SAT Scores Hold Steady Across the Nation](#) (New York Times, 2008)
- [An Increase in Female Applicants Seen for Class of 2012 Admissions](#) (MIT Tech, 2008)
- [راهنمای فرایند ادامه تحصیل در خارج از کشور](#) (جمعی از فارغ التحصیلان شریف، نسخه اول ۱۳۷۹)
- [راهنمای فرایند ادامه تحصیل در خارج از کشور](#) (جمعی از فارغ التحصیلان شریف، نسخه دوم ۱۳۸۶)
- [مقاله نیوزویک در مورد درخشش دانشجویان ایرانی](#) (گزارشی از بی بی سی، ۱۳۸۷)
- [معرفی جزوه “چگونه درس بخوانیم؟”](#) (موسسه علمی شیرین، ۱۳۷۸)
- [راهنمای مطالعه و آمادگی برای کنکور دانشگاه](#) (موسسه علمی شیرین، ۱۳۸۴)