

# 8 High School Seniors Share College Acceptance Stories

[usnews.com/education/best-colleges/articles/2018-09-27/8-high-school-seniors-share-college-acceptance-stories](https://www.usnews.com/education/best-colleges/articles/2018-09-27/8-high-school-seniors-share-college-acceptance-stories)

Find out how these Arizona high school seniors got accepted to both in-state and out-of-state schools.



Applying to college is a daunting task for even the most accomplished students. From acing the SAT or ACT and [writing a flawless essay](#) to [touring campuses](#) and figuring out how to pay for it all, applicants have a lot to consider – on top of juggling their homework, sports and extracurriculars. U.S. News visited [Catalina Foothills High School](#) in Tucson, Arizona, in early May to see how eight seniors managed it all and found the right college fit.

Some opted for in-state choices at the University of Arizona and Arizona State University in Tempe, while others are headed across the country and even the globe. Among the public high school's roughly 1,800 students, 60 percent are white, 27 percent are Hispanic, 7 percent are Asian/Pacific Islander and 2 percent are African-American.

## Sarah Cho

The daughter of missionaries, Cho attended an international school in China for 10 years before moving to Tucson in ninth grade. An avid researcher, she familiarized herself with the college application process and focused on city schools with public health programs. She started by consulting the [U.S. News college rankings](#) and followed up by scouring school websites to check their programs and individual requirements.

"Things started coming together," she says, when early in her junior year she stumbled upon QuestBridge, a national nonprofit that matches highly qualified applicants with need to top schools across the country.

After receiving the news in November that she was a QuestBridge finalist, she had only two weeks to get applications submitted to seven partner schools, which included [Dartmouth College](#), [Brown University](#), the [University of Pennsylvania](#) and [Emory University](#) in Atlanta.

She wasn't matched to any of the schools – a binding decision that comes with a full-ride scholarship – so she quickly submitted an application to [Northwestern University](#) near Chicago, but she was denied.

She was rejected at [Boston University](#) and wait-listed at [New York University](#), the [University of California—Los Angeles](#) and the [University of California—Berkeley](#). Her choice came down to financial aid and a visit to GW, where the location and the open-minded people she met impressed her. She'll study international affairs with a concentration in global health.

GPA: 3.94

SAT/ACT: 660 math; 750 evidence-based reading and writing / 32

Extracurriculars: Secretary of National Honor Society, president of HOSA–Future Health Professionals, speech and debate club, church youth group leader

Essay: She adapted her QuestBridge personal statement and described the struggle of living in a two-bedroom apartment with four other family members. But she thinks it may have been too broad for the [Common Application](#), and she wishes she had spent more time improving the focus.

Helpful tip: Get admissions counselors on the phone. Calling was the easiest way to get a straight answer.

Stressor: With parents who don't speak English, Cho was largely on her own to figure out financial documents. Finding supportive friends and counselors to help her along the way was critical.

Cost: Financial aid from GW is covering 90 percent of the \$55,140 annual tuition. She'll take out \$5,500 in loans each year, and the rest will be covered by scholarships and her parents.

Fly-ins: For students with financial need, visiting schools can be tough. She applied to several fly-in programs, which arrange college visits for underrepresented students, and she went on two to [Tufts University](#) near Boston and GW.

Advice: "Enjoy your time in high school and don't do things just for college apps."

### **Inge Pham-Swann**

Undecided on a major, the musically talented Pham-Swann – she sings and plays the piano, violin and ukulele – wanted a change of scenery. She even thought about [going abroad for college](#), but decided she didn't want to be that far from family or complicate the already stressful application process.

Ultimately, she focused on schools in the Northeast and Midwest, mostly based on rankings and what she had heard about them. In early fall, she applied early decision to Brown but was denied. "By that point I was OK with it," she says. "You can't get in everywhere."

The combination of Macalester's small size and urban feel, plus a generous financial aid package, sealed the deal. Planning to minor in music, Pham-Swann also wants to learn French and interpretive dance and generally "try new things."



GPA: 3.8

SAT/ACT: 710 math; 690 evidence-based reading and writing / 32

Extracurriculars: President of concert choir, member of Tucson Girls Chorus, orchestra, HOSA–Future Health Professionals, tutored middle schoolers in algebra I, and taught music lessons to kids

Essay: Being cast as the lead in the musical "Xanadu" despite having had no previous musical theater experience. "I learned what I was, and what I was not," she says. She formatted her essay like a script, describing her experience through numbered acts.

Focus: She made sure to block out time on busy days of schoolwork and choir to focus on apps.

Cost: Financial aid and scholarships are covering \$45,000 of the \$66,500 total cost of attendance each year. She'll also have a work-study job and will take out loans.

Surprisingly helpful: Brown's early application had several short-answer questions, and writing them out helped her formulate a plan for the rest of her apps.

Advice: "Give yourself more time than you think you will need."

Tirado Flores grew up surrounded by animals. Her dad's family owns two farms that raise cattle and pigs, and watching the TV show "Fetch the Vet" as a toddler sparked her interest in becoming a veterinarian. When it came time to apply to college, Tirado Flores targeted top veterinary science programs.

During a visit to Iowa State in the winter of her senior year, she says, "the snow captivated my heart." A careful planner, she cut down her list – eliminating schools that were too expensive or too selective – to make sure she had time to focus on applications during a busy fall schedule of schoolwork and marching band.

GPA: 3.63

ACT: 24

Extracurriculars: Concert band (French horn); marching band; National Honor Society; junior varsity basketball; Link Crew – a club that helps freshmen get acclimated to high school; volunteer for the AIDS Foundation, the Ronald McDonald House and Tucson Wildlife Center

Essay: She wrote several versions to address the specific prompts for each school, but all centered around a personal battle. One recounted her experience undergoing a half dozen surgeries to treat heart conditions and how her time in the hospital has brought her family closer. Another explained how losing her grandfather when she was 16 "was the hardest thing I've ever experienced."

Big help: Her high school field science teacher encouraged her to pursue the sciences and gave her a list of schools to check out.

Cost: Financial aid, a work-study position and scholarships are covering most of Iowa State's \$35,600 annual total expected cost of attendance. Her parents will pitch in for the rest.

Advice: Start going on visits early. Tirado Flores didn't make her first trip until senior year, and she wishes she had had time for more.



**Nolan Mac Ban**

Nolan was looking for a school that had it all: sports, diverse academic offerings and a lively social scene. He and his twin brother, Shay, navigated the college search at the same time, but after years of what felt like living in his sibling's shadow, Nolan faced a tough decision when they both found the [University of Southern California](#) appealing. He thought UCLA might give him more freedom, but he was "shocked" on his USC visit to discover he loved the school.

He's looking forward to classes in USC's business program and plans to minor in communications with the hope of becoming an athletic director or working in sports broadcasting.

GPA: 4.0

SAT: 720 math; 650 evidence-based reading and writing

Extracurriculars: Student council (sophomore year vice president, junior year president), National Honor Society, Assisteens community service group, varsity basketball, varsity soccer, Young Life – a Christian ministry group

Essay: Often compared to his twin, he wrote about how it felt like "struggling through quicksand" to find his own footing. Student council brought him his own opportunity to shine, and he planned the most successful prom in CFHS's history – raking in a \$20,000 profit.

Plan: Knowing that some California schools required four essays each, he got other apps out of the way early.

Helpful sources: He talked to friends who attended his top choices to get an inside perspective.

Advice: "Go with your gut." It's not all about prestige, but about where you feel you fit.

### **Shay Mac Ban**

With family on the East Coast, Shay always thought he would end up near them. But after tearing his ACL late junior year, he postponed taking the SAT and didn't start on applications until he was fully recovered, causing him to miss the early decision deadline for [Duke University](#) in North Carolina.

"I had to cut down my list a bit," he says. Even then, looking for a large school with a balance of academics, clubs and sports, he sent apps to 10 schools; his top four were USC, the [University of Virginia](#), UCLA and Duke.

He got accepted at USC, UCLA, the University of Washington, [University of California—Davis](#), UC—San Diego and [University of California—Santa Barbara](#), plus the honors colleges at the University of Arizona and Arizona State. He was denied at Duke and UVA.

Ultimately, he chose USC for its highly ranked undergraduate business program, large alumni network and internship opportunities across Los Angeles, plus what he saw as a beautiful campus.

GPA: 4.0

SAT: 730 math; 670 evidence-based reading and writing

Extracurriculars: Student body president; president of Arizona Association of Student Councils, a state network of student government clubs; chairman of Assisteens service group; captain of varsity volleyball team; Catalina Foothills Site Council member

Essay: Be fearless. After the ACL injury and another accident in which he was hit in the face with a golf club, he



wrote about "living life with reckless abandonment" and how he's ready to face college with no fear.

Smart move: "Google Calendar is a remarkable thing and really saved my behind."

Costly mistake: Missing USC's Dec. 1 deadline for merit scholarships. He's taking out loans and planning to sell his car.

Regret: Not answering optional essay questions. If they're there, it's probably for a reason, he says, so you should do them.

### **Rohan Bakshi**

Although excited to start classes at the University of Arizona's Honors College, Bakshi says he has "a lot of regrets" about his college application process. In high school he often settled for a B+ rather than pushing for the best grades, and he admits to procrastinating by submitting his applications only a day or two before the deadlines.

But impressive test scores earned him acceptances to the honors colleges at UA and Arizona State. He was denied at USC, UCLA, UC–Berkeley and Duke.

Ultimately, he was sold on UA's management information systems major, where he'll take classes on using cutting-edge technology to solve real-world business problems. The business curriculum is flexible enough that he could try classes outside of the major to graduate with "a unique perspective."

GPA: 3.73

SAT/ACT: 770 math; 710 evidence-based reading and writing / 33

Extracurriculars: Varsity basketball, varsity volleyball, saxophone and steel drums in band, student council vice president

Essay: He laid out his personality by writing a direct dialogue with each school. Pinpointing specific activities he wanted to be involved with at each place, he showed his interests and what he would be bringing to campus.

He also addressed his shortcomings head on, writing that "mediocrity is not an option" and assuring admissions counselors that he had ambitious goals for himself in college and beyond.

Cost: He received UA's Wildcat Excellence Tuition Award, which will cover \$10,000 of the \$12,400 in-state annual tuition per year. His parents will shoulder the costs of room and board.

Lifeline: Talking with teachers and supportive friends throughout the process. "Having peers doing it with you makes the process much less stressful."

Rohan Bakshi (left) and Jorge Garavito (right) (Deanna Dent for USN&WR)

Regrets: He wishes he had tried harder in classes and in finding an activity that interested him – and sticking with it – instead of prioritizing hanging out with friends.

### **Jorge Garavito**

Garavito started playing soccer at age 4 and practically never stopped. His talent and dedication on the field earned him the title of captain for both his club and school varsity teams, but he says he never considered himself a leader until he had to write about it for his college applications.

Growing up in Nogales, a small Arizona city on the border with Mexico, Garavito thought he would finish up at CFHS and help run his family's small insurance business. Now he's planning on a biology major and going premed.

His leadership, solid grades and extracurricular involvement got him accepted to all four schools he applied to: [Pepperdine University](#) in California, the [University of San Diego](#), the University of Arizona and Arizona State. At the latter's honors college, Garavito found a community and challenging classes within a big university that has Division I sports, Greek life and a large alumni network.

GPA: 3.89

SAT/ACT: 620 math; 600 evidence-based reading and writing / 25

Extracurriculars: President of Spirit Club, captain of varsity soccer team and a club soccer team, student council, Link Crew, Young Life

Essay: Based on the quote "You get the heart of your father and the brain of your mother." Growing up without a father, he had to grow a "synthetic heart" through his activities and accomplishments – with a college acceptance being the final step.

Influencer: His mom didn't attend college in the U.S. and couldn't give much hands-on help, but "her moral support, trust and proudness" kept him going.

Good move: Diligent in his planning, Garavito put together a detailed spreadsheet with essay prompts, due dates and recommendation letter deadlines. He also finished all essays weeks early to leave plenty of time to edit.

Proudest achievement: Being the guy who takes initiative. As founder of the Spirit Club, he organized school pride activities and was always "the guy screaming his head off" at athletic events.

Option: He considered trying to play soccer for a Division III school like [Haverford College](#) near Philadelphia or [Johns Hopkins University](#) in Baltimore, but he felt those schools were a bit too small.

College visits: Generous financial aid and a strong biology program made USD tempting, but after a trip to campus, Garavito felt the place wasn't the right fit. "Don't believe it until you see it," he says.

### **Talya Rezetko**



Rezetko's family moved around a lot when she was growing up – spending time in Mexico, where her mother's family resides, and the Netherlands and Scotland for her dad's work as a professor – before ending up in Arizona to be with family on both sides.

Still, she didn't consider heading abroad for college until December of her senior year. The more she pictured what she wanted her life to be like, the more her thoughts drifted back to her time in Edinburgh and the possibility of being near friends and family there.

From the start, though, she knew she wanted a school in a midsized city where she could study both business and psychology. She cast a wide net: In the U.S., she was accepted at the University of Arizona, Arizona State and Northern Arizona University; she was denied at the [University of Minnesota—Twin Cities](#), the University of Massachusetts and [Temple University](#) in Philadelphia.

Her decision was made after hearing advice from her older sister, who attended school in England and had good insights on U.K. schools. She gave Aberdeen a strong review.

GPA: 3.34

SAT/ACT: 540 math; 520 evidence-based reading and writing / 20

Extracurriculars: Varsity tennis and cross country

Essay: Her experience living among different cultures, each with its own "levels of freedom." In Holland, she could explore on her bike wherever she wanted, whereas in Mexico she restricted her schedule to home, school and sports.

Research: Rankings mattered to her with [schools in the U.K.](#) For U.S. schools, she was more concerned with location, preferring something in between a big city and a small town.

Bonus: Her dad is a writer and editor, and he went through her essays closely with her.

Biggest strength: Being independent. Her twin sister is attending Northern Arizona University, and Rezetko thinks heading abroad will help her continue to be her own person. She is "excited to start something new."

