

The Challenges of U.S. Universities

# Choices and Responsibilities

By BHAVNA MURALI

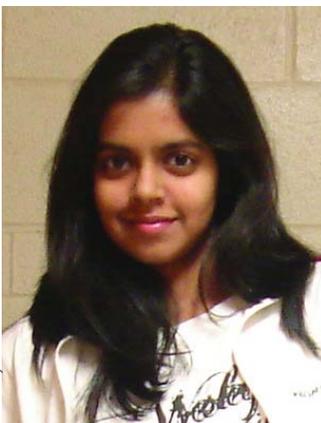
**W**almart and McDonald's are two things you never lose sight of when you're living in the United States. There are two more things one rarely falls short of there—choices and opportunities. Right from the types of donuts to the types of courses and colleges, the choices are bewildering and far too many.

The only way to get to the university that is best for you is to start early and make choices based on your needs, not on others' opinions. The most common mistake students make when choosing their universities is to go solely by the rankings. In fact, it's a good way to start, but not the best way to end.

The disadvantage of applying based only on rankings is that there is always an element of mystery and luck in the admission process. You never know for sure if you would stand out among the pool of applicants. It is therefore always advisable to apply to three kinds of universities—the first being, "This seems like a really tough school to get into," the second, "I *think* I should be able to secure admission in this university," and the third, "I will definitely make it to this college."

Some issues that must be considered in decision-making are: courses offered, competent professors, class size, student body diversity, state schools versus private institutions, and campus life versus city life.

"It's never too late" does not seem to work well in the context of the U.S. university application process. In fact, we could modify it to say, "It's never too early to start." The application process is challenging and very exhausting, but to get the best results, you have to give it all you've got. The



Courtesy Bhavna Murali

*Right: Ohio Wesleyan University's University Hall was built more than 100 years ago and serves as a landmark with its soaring bell tower and peaked roof.*

*Below right: An Ohio Wesleyan student walks in the snow toward University Hall.*

best time to start would be when you are a junior in high school. This is when American students start to research universities and find out about admission requirements and offerings.

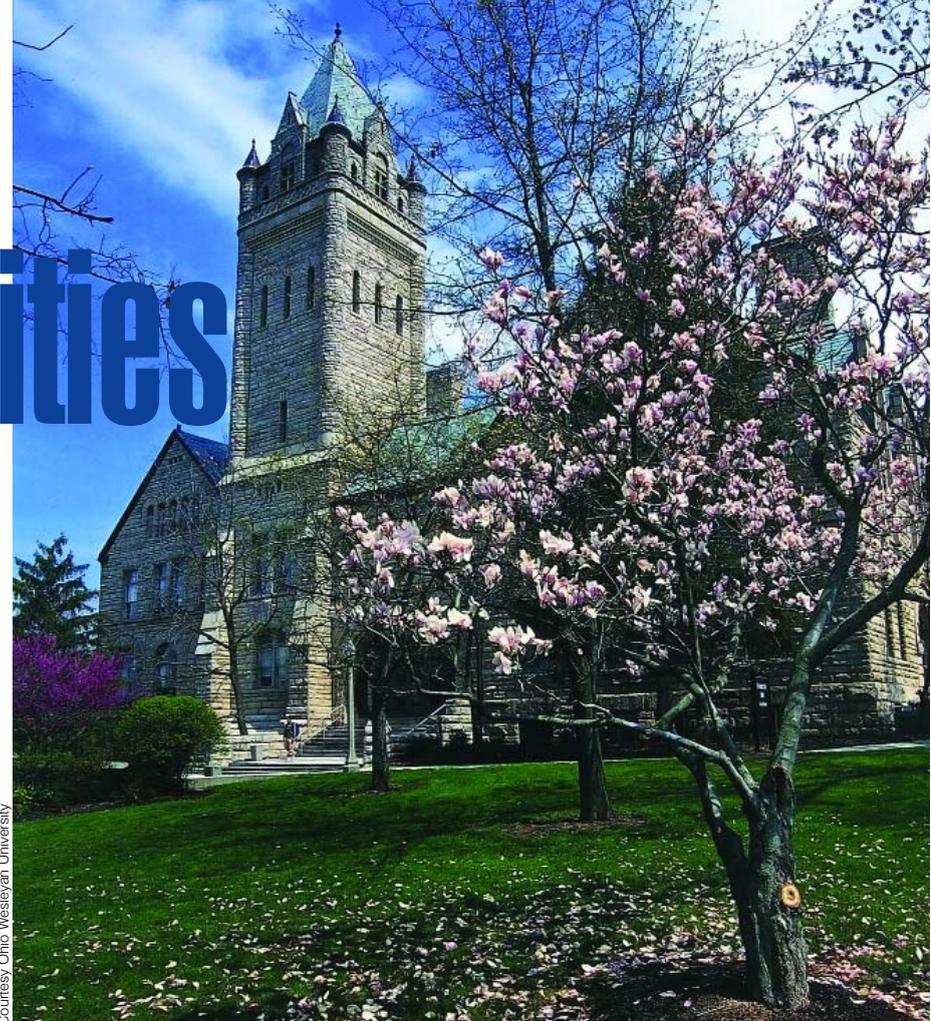
The world does not end if your SAT scores are not exceedingly brilliant. Of course, it enhances your application if they are good, but scores and academics are not the only criteria for selection. U.S. universities look for individuals who are well-rounded in all spheres. They recognize and appreciate the student's interests, whether it is music, dance, sports or community service.

## "It's never too early to start."

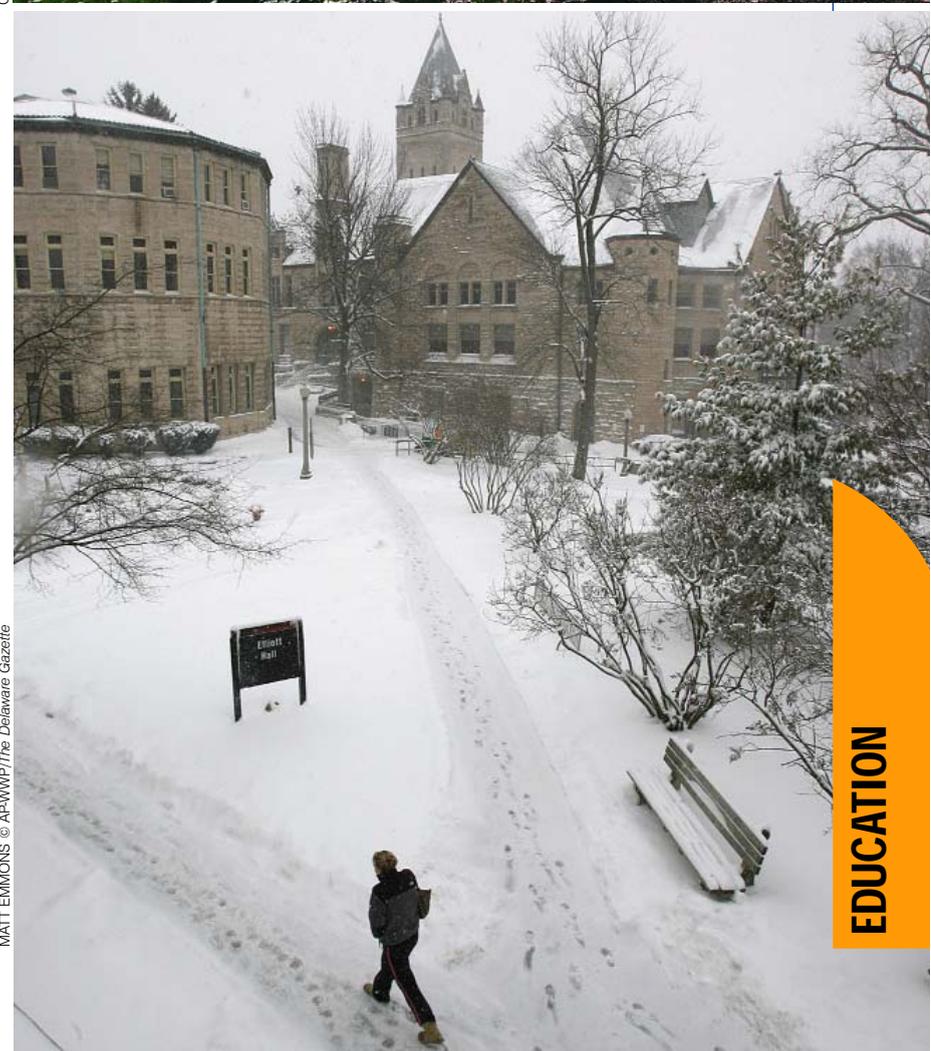
Another quality they value a lot is leadership. A single exam grade is not a true reflection of your potential. If you think your SAT scores aren't that great, don't sit back! Instead, get involved in school clubs, participate in events. Support a cause if you feel strongly about it and join an NGO which promotes it. Play sports, lead teams and bring forth your hidden potential. Explore different things and gain valuable experiences. You never know which of these might make you stand out among other applicants.

When I was in high school, I hated going to music class every day after school. I complained about missing my afternoon naps. But when I look back, I have no regrets. My training helped me get a national level government scholarship in vocal Indian music and this did wonders for my U.S. application. My good academic standing and involvement in extracurricular activities helped me get my application accepted by good U.S. universities.

Once they reach the United States, Indians have a lot of adjusting to do—from food, people and culture to



Courtesy Ohio Wesleyan University



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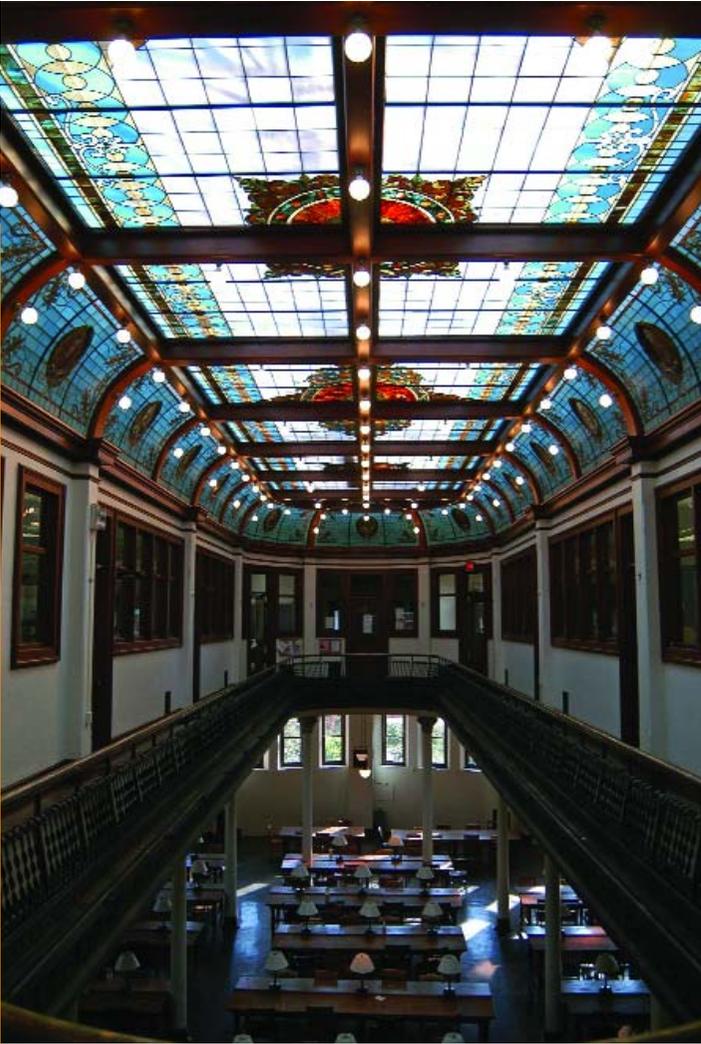
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Ohio Wesleyan University

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Left: Ohio Wesleyan University's Slocum Hall includes one of the most beautiful spots on campus, the reading room, with its Romanesque arcade and enormous, stained-glass skylight.

Left center: Wesleyan's students come from diverse backgrounds.

Left bottom: Orchesis, a contemporary dance group at Ohio Wesleyan.

the teaching environment. You need to let the system grow on you. It is very important for Indian students to mingle with people from different countries and not alienate themselves. The best part of a U.S. education is the diverse student body. The experience of interacting with students from different ethnic backgrounds, countries and cultures is very exciting. Make friends from the world over. Most important of all, do not go with a set of preconceived notions about any country or race.

The classroom culture takes a while to get used to. The U.S. education system is very different from India's system. The classrooms are more informal and interactive. The teaching is more discussion-oriented, where the aim is to learn from and contribute to the classroom. In some courses, class participation is evaluated as part of the grade. So the key is to speak up!

In the Indian education system, rote memorization can get you through exams. But in the United States, if you reproduce exactly what's in the text without giving credit to the source, it is considered an offense. Plagiarism is what most Indian students need to watch out for. It may be completely unintentional, but habit is no reason for committing plagiarism. The transition from rote memorization to a more practical approach proves to be the most challenging for Indian students.

Another tricky adjustment can be the food. Even if your favorite cuisine has never been Indian, just after a week into the semester you start to miss all the spices and the roadside delicacies. But this is inevitable and you gradually learn to live with it.

My first year in the United States and particularly at college has been great. Ohio Wesleyan University is a small, liberal arts college in the city of Delaware in Ohio. Its close-knit community embraces everyone with equal warmth. During my first year, I have been able to forge friendships with American students and those from several other countries. It makes me feel like I have a home in almost every country now. My first year away from home has taught me to balance freedom and the responsibilities that accompany it.

The U.S. undergrad experience is one of a lifetime. This education is beyond books. It's all about learning and growing as an individual. As I step into my second year of college, I hope to create value out of the education I receive and enjoy every moment of my life as a student.



*Bhavna Murali is a sophomore at Ohio Wesleyan University.*

