

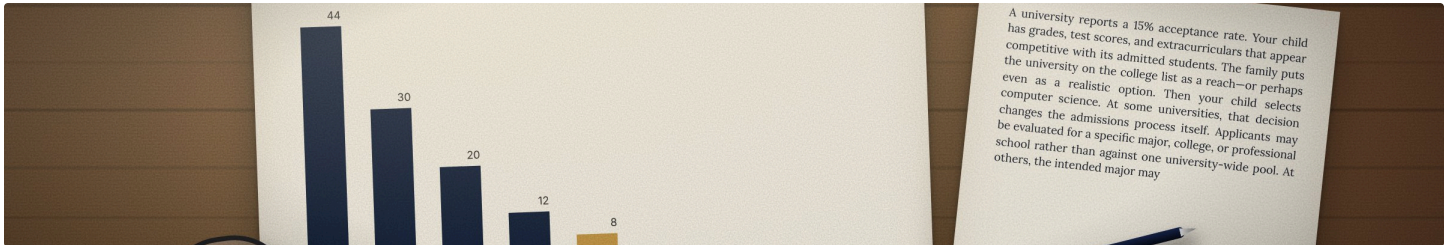
ADMISSIONS STRATEGY

Think a 15% Acceptance Rate Is Safe? Why Your Child's Major Might Be Far More Competitive



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October 20, 2026



A university reports a 15% acceptance rate. Your child has grades, test scores, and extracurriculars that appear competitive with its admitted students. The family puts the university on the college list as a reach—or perhaps even as a realistic option.

Then your child selects computer science.

At some universities, that decision changes the admissions process itself. Applicants may be evaluated for a specific major, college, or professional school rather than against one university-wide pool. At others, the intended major may have little or no bearing on first-year admission. The distinction can fundamentally change how a family should interpret an acceptance rate.

The headline number is not necessarily wrong. It may simply answer a different question from the one parents are asking.

The right question is not just, “How hard is it to get into this university?” It is, “How does this university admit students into the academic program my child actually wants to study?”

WHY THE OVERALL ACCEPTANCE RATE CAN BE MISLEADING

An overall acceptance rate divides the number of admitted applicants by the number of applicants considered. It describes the university’s admissions results across the population included in that calculation.

But universities are not all organized the same way.

Some admit students directly into majors. Others admit students into colleges or schools, such as engineering or nursing. Some allow students to enter without declaring a major and choose one later. Even within a single university, the rules can differ by program.

The University of California explicitly cautions that its campus-level admissions statistics can conceal differences in competitiveness among colleges and majors. Some campuses admit students directly into individual majors, and the degree of competition can vary substantially.¹

That means the overall acceptance rate is useful—but it is not a complete measure of the admissions challenge facing a particular applicant.

Imagine two hypothetical universities, each admitting 15% of applicants overall. At University A, students are admitted to the university and explore majors afterward. At University B, students apply directly to computer science, nursing, or business programs with limited capacity.

The two universities have the same headline acceptance rate. They do not necessarily offer the same admissions pathway or the same level of competition for the intended program.

This is why families should be careful with claims that a university’s overall acceptance rate of 15% automatically means its computer science acceptance rate is 3%. Such a figure might be accurate for a particular program and year, but it cannot be inferred from the overall rate alone.

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Major-specific figures are not consistently published, and definitions differ across institutions.

THREE UNIVERSITIES, THREE DIFFERENT ADMISSIONS STRUCTURES

The most useful way to understand major-level selectivity is to examine actual university policies.

1. UC BERKELEY: COMPUTER SCIENCE REQUIRES PARTICULAR ATTENTION

At the University of California, Berkeley, first-year applicants interested in computer science apply directly to the major. Students admitted to the program spend all four years in it. Berkeley also states that transferring into computer science from another major on campus is rare but possible, with a comprehensive review process for students who qualify under the applicable policy.

The university distinguishes between students who applied to computer science and those who did not. Its current policy also restricts certain students who entered as transfers without selecting computer science on their application from later changing into or adding the major.²

The practical lesson is straightforward: a student who wants to study computer science at Berkeley should investigate the direct-admission pathway before applying. Admission to the university is not interchangeable with admission to the intended major.

2. PURDUE UNIVERSITY: YOUR INTENDED PROGRAM IS PART OF THE EVALUATION

Purdue asks first-year applicants to select a primary major and offers the opportunity to select an alternate. Its admissions guidance says that reviewers consider grades related to the intended major, preparation for that program, and available space. Purdue also warns that changing majors or locations is never guaranteed.³

The university publishes academic profile information that families can examine by college, school, and competitive major. This is more useful for evaluating an applicant's preparation than relying on the campus-wide acceptance rate alone.

Purdue's computer science program provides another important detail: the university states that computer science is closed to transfer applicants for the listed terms

on its official closed-program page. Program availability can change, so families should verify the policy for their intended entry term.⁴

A student should not assume that getting into Purdue under a different major will create a reliable route into computer science later.

3. UCLA: THE MAJOR MAY MATTER IN ONE SCHOOL BUT NOT ANOTHER

UCLA illustrates why families should not assume that every university uses the same system.

For first-year applicants applying to majors within the College of Letters and Science, UCLA states that the choice of major neither helps nor hurts admission prospects. Applicants can also apply undeclared. However, certain professional schools—including nursing, music, and the arts—have their own application requirements and deadlines.⁵

In other words, it would be misleading to say that applying to any popular major at UCLA automatically makes admission more competitive. The relevant question is which school or program the student is applying to and what its published rules say.

These examples demonstrate why major-specific admissions research must precede assumptions about selectivity.

THE “EASY MAJOR FIRST” STRATEGY CAN BACKFIRE

Some applicants consider applying to a less competitive major with the intention of transferring into computer science, nursing, or business after enrolling.

The strategy sounds logical: get into the university first, then pursue the desired program later.

The problem is that the second step may be more difficult than the first.

Universities may impose prerequisite courses, minimum grades, application reviews, capacity limits, or restrictions on which students may change majors. Some programs do not accept internal transfers under certain circumstances. Others permit applications but do not guarantee admission.

Berkeley's computer science policy and Purdue's warnings about major changes provide concrete examples of why

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families should not treat an internal transfer as an assured alternative. Neither policy means that every internal transfer is impossible; the point is that eligibility and availability must be verified rather than assumed.

There is also an academic cost to consider. A student who spends the first year taking courses for a different major may have to catch up on prerequisites, extend the degree, or reconsider whether the institution can support the intended academic path.

The better rule is this: apply to a major you would genuinely be willing to study, and choose a university only after understanding how realistic it is to enter the program you ultimately want.

An alternate major is not inherently a problem. It becomes a risky strategy when the student has no real interest in it and depends on a transfer that the university does not promise.

HOW TO RESEARCH MAJOR-SPECIFIC SELECTIVITY BEFORE APPLYING

Families do not need a secret admissions formula. They need a repeatable method for investigating each college.

Step 1: Find the actual admissions unit. Determine whether the student applies to the university, a college within the university, a major, or a professional school.

Step 2: Search for official program-level data. Look for first-year applications and admits by major, college, or school. If the university does not publish those numbers, do not substitute an unofficial estimate for verified data.

Step 3: Read the internal-transfer policy. Search the university's official website for "change of major," "internal transfer," "capacity-constrained major," and "direct admission." Read the current rules for the intended program and entry year.

Step 4: Evaluate academic preparation for the specific program. Check required high school courses, relevant grades, program-specific prerequisites, and any published academic profiles. A university-wide average may not describe the applicant pool for a particular program.

Step 5: Build a list around realistic pathways. Include institutions where the student has a credible path to the intended field—not simply universities with appealing

overall acceptance rates. If the major is not available through the expected route, determine whether an alternative program is genuinely acceptable.

WHAT A "SAFETY SCHOOL" SHOULD ACTUALLY MEAN

No university with a selective admissions process should be treated as a guaranteed acceptance merely because its overall rate looks more favorable than that of other colleges.

For students targeting computer science, nursing, business, engineering, or another capacity-constrained program, the distinction between university admission and program admission is especially important. But it is not universal: some institutions admit students to a broad college and let them choose among majors later, while others impose more specific requirements.

A sound college list therefore evaluates three separate questions:

- University admission: How selective is admission to the institution or relevant college?
- Program access: Can the student enter the intended major directly, or must the student compete for it after enrollment?
- Alternative pathway: If the first choice is unavailable, would the student genuinely want and be able to pursue another program?

A lower overall acceptance rate does not tell the entire story, and neither does a major's reputation. Families need the actual admissions structure and current program policies.

HOW SCHOLAR COACH HELPS FAMILIES BUILD A MORE ACCURATE COLLEGE LIST

Scholar Coach helps students and families evaluate colleges in the context of their intended academic goals rather than relying on headline statistics alone.

Map each university's admissions structure. We identify whether the student applies to a major, school, or broader undergraduate division and verify the official admissions requirements.

Investigate major-level evidence. Where institutions publish applications, admits, academic profiles, or capacity information by program, we use those sources. Where data

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are unavailable, we distinguish verified facts from estimates rather than inventing a percentage.

Evaluate transfer restrictions. We review published internal-transfer policies and identify prerequisites, capacity limits, and other conditions that could affect a student's ability to enter the desired program later.

Compare realistic academic pathways. We consider alternate majors, related departments, interdisciplinary programs, and institutions where the student's intended field is accessible through a different admissions structure.

Build a balanced college list. We help families distinguish reaches, more realistic options, and likely options while accounting for the actual program the student wants to study. No category guarantees admission, but a carefully researched list reduces avoidable assumptions.

The goal is not to frighten families away from competitive majors. It is to make sure they understand what they are applying for.

A 15% acceptance rate is a university-level statistic, not a personal probability. Before calling a school a safety—or assuming a different major provides an easier route in—find out how the university admits students into the program that matters most.

NOTES

¹ UC Admissions: First-Year Admit Data

² Berkeley EECS: Computer Science Bachelor of Arts and How to Declare the CS Major

³ Purdue: First-Year Admission Criteria

⁴ Purdue: Closed Programs

⁵ UCLA Undergraduate Admission: Choosing a Major as a First-Year

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