

ADMISSIONS STRATEGY

The BA vs. BS Choice: The Hidden Admissions Advantage Hidden in Plain Sight



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COURSE	Required	Varies
Foreign language	Required	Varies
Core mathematics	Varies	Required
Laboratory science	Varies	Required
Electives	More	Fewer
Major courses	Fewer	More

Two students want to study biology. One plans to pursue a Bachelor of Science; the other is considering a Bachelor of Arts in the same field. Their academic interests overlap, but their preferred coursework differs: one wants a concentrated sequence of laboratory sciences, while the other wants to combine biology with philosophy, public policy, or computer science.

COULD CHOOSING THE BA IMPROVE THE SECOND STUDENT'S ADMISSION CHANCES?

Possibly, in a limited number of institution-specific circumstances—but not simply because it is a BA. At some universities, applicants apply to the university or undergraduate college rather than a particular major. At others, admission to a major or school can be competitive. The degree title alone does not tell applicants which process applies.

The more reliable opportunity is to understand how a college structures its programs, how students are admitted, and which degree requirements genuinely match their academic goals.

The strategic advantage is not choosing the easier-sounding degree. It is choosing the right academic pathway with an accurate understanding of how admission works.

1. WHAT ACTUALLY CHANGES BETWEEN A BA AND A BS?

A Bachelor of Arts and a Bachelor of Science can cover the same broad subject while requiring different combinations of courses.

At some colleges, the BA provides more room for electives, language study, humanities courses, or a second major. The BS may require more coursework in mathematics, laboratory sciences, statistics, or related technical disciplines. These are common patterns, not universal rules.

Lehigh University's College of Arts and Sciences, for example, describes its BA programs as offering flexibility for additional majors and minors, while its BS programs generally emphasize greater depth in the major and related subjects. The university offers BS degrees in several fields, including computer science, cognitive science, economics, mathematics, psychology, and statistics. Its BA-versus-BS guide explains how the options differ at that institution.

The University of Denver likewise describes the BA as providing broader liberal-arts study and the BS as emphasizing the major and related subjects. Its undergraduate bulletin details the requirements.

These examples illustrate why students should examine the actual curriculum rather than rely on assumptions about the degree names.

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A BA in biology might leave room for a second major in economics or a substantial sequence of philosophy courses. A BS in biology might provide a more concentrated science curriculum that better fits a student's plans for advanced laboratory research. But the distinction depends on the institution, and either degree can support interdisciplinary study.

The first task is therefore academic: determine what each pathway requires, what it permits, and what it prepares the student to do.

2. DOES APPLYING FOR A BA IMPROVE ADMISSIONS ODDS?

This is the question that makes the BA-versus-BS decision seem like an admissions tactic. The honest answer is that there is no general rule that applicants to BA programs face less competition than applicants to BS programs.

Admissions structures vary significantly.

At Stanford, first-year applicants apply to the university as a whole rather than to a particular major, department, or school. Stanford encourages students to indicate prospective majors and career interests, but those choices do not bind them. Under that structure, choosing a prospective BA-style academic direction rather than a BS-style one is not a separate admissions route. Stanford's first-year application guidance explains the policy.

Princeton similarly states that students apply to the university, not individual departments, programs, or schools. Students pursue either the Bachelor of Arts or the Bachelor of Science in Engineering after enrolling, subject to the university's academic structure. Princeton's academic overview describes this approach.

UCLA illustrates a different distinction within the same university. For first-year applicants to its College of Letters and Science, intended major does not affect the admissions review. However, UCLA's Samueli School of Engineering admits students by declared major, with greater emphasis on preparation in science and mathematics. UCLA's first-year admissions guidance explains the difference.

These examples establish an important principle: the relevant question is not simply whether the degree is a BA or BS. It is whether the university, college, school, or major

to which the student applies has a separate admissions process—and whether the intended program affects selection.

A BA pathway could be worth investigating when a college genuinely has different program structures or admission requirements. But without institution-specific evidence, claims that a BA is an easier route are speculation.

3. UNDERSTAND THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN AN ADMISSIONS STRATEGY AND AN ACADEMIC FIT

Students sometimes approach major selection by asking which option appears least competitive. That question is incomplete.

Suppose a student wants to study computational biology. At one university, the relevant pathway may be a BS with substantial coursework in mathematics, statistics, and biology. At another, the student may be able to pursue a BA in biology while completing a second major in computer science.

Neither structure is inherently superior. The better choice depends on what the student wants to learn and which courses, prerequisites, and research opportunities are available.

A student interested in biological research may need particular laboratory and quantitative preparation. A student interested in science policy may benefit from combining biological sciences with economics, political science, or ethics. A student planning to apply to medical school should examine the prerequisite courses required by prospective medical schools rather than assume that a BS is mandatory.

In each case, the degree title is only one part of the decision. Students should compare:

- Required courses in the major and related disciplines.
- Mathematics, laboratory, and research requirements.
- Elective space and the feasibility of a second major or minor.
- Access to relevant undergraduate research opportunities.
- Requirements for changing majors or moving between schools.
- Preparation for intended graduate study or professional training.

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The final two items are particularly important. Some universities make it easy to explore different fields after enrollment; others restrict entry into particular programs or limit internal transfers. An applicant should not assume that admission to one program guarantees access to another later.

4. WHEN THE BA CAN BE THE BETTER CHOICE

A BA can be especially attractive when a student's academic interests cross disciplinary boundaries.

Consider a student who wants to study biology and public policy. The student is interested in disease prevention, environmental regulation, and the way scientific evidence informs government decisions. A BA program that leaves sufficient room for public policy coursework may fit those interests better than a more concentrated science curriculum.

Or consider a student interested in psychology and computer science who wants to investigate how people interpret information, make decisions, and interact with digital systems. Depending on the university, a BA may provide more flexibility to combine the fields, while a BS may offer a stronger concentration in quantitative or experimental methods.

These are not arguments that a BA is easier. They are arguments that curriculum design matters.

Lehigh's degree guidance, for example, explicitly highlights the room that its BA programs can leave for additional majors or minors. Other colleges may offer comparable flexibility through different degree structures. Applicants should verify the actual requirements rather than assume that every BA includes more elective space.

There is also no reason to treat interdisciplinary study as the exclusive domain of the BA. Many BS programs allow minors, double majors, and cross-department coursework. The right comparison is between the specific programs—not between generalized stereotypes about two degree titles.

5. WHEN THE BS MAY BE THE STRONGER FIT

A BS may be preferable when a student wants a concentrated sequence of technical or scientific coursework and the program provides the necessary preparation.

For example, a student interested in laboratory-based biological research may want extensive coursework in chemistry, mathematics, statistics, and experimental methods. A BS curriculum that integrates those subjects may provide a more direct path toward the student's academic goals.

Similarly, a student interested in quantitative psychology, applied mathematics, or computational research may find that a BS includes more of the methods they want to study.

That does not mean a BA cannot support rigorous scientific work. Nor does a BS automatically make an applicant more competitive for a science-related career. The relevant question is whether the courses and opportunities available through the program support the student's intended development.

Students should also avoid choosing a degree solely to signal seriousness to admissions officers. A coherent academic record, meaningful engagement with a field, and an informed explanation of academic interests are more useful than a degree label selected for appearance.

6. A PRACTICAL FRAMEWORK FOR COMPARING BA AND BS OPTIONS

Before deciding which pathway to list on an application, families should work through four questions.

First, how does the college admit students? Check whether applicants apply to the university, an undergraduate college, a specific school, or a particular major. Determine whether the intended major affects admission and whether the program has additional requirements. Use the institution's current admissions guidance.

Second, what are the actual degree requirements?

Compare course lists, laboratory requirements, quantitative preparation, elective space, and capstone or research requirements. Do not infer the curriculum from the BA or BS designation.

Third, can the student pursue the desired combination of fields? Review double-major and minor policies, prerequisites, course availability, and any restrictions on changing programs. An interdisciplinary plan is only useful if it is feasible within the university's rules.

Fourth, can the student explain the choice honestly? The student should be able to articulate why the pathway fits their interests. If the only explanation is that one option

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might be easier to enter, the academic rationale needs more work.

This process may reveal that the BA is the better choice. It may reveal that the BS is better. At some universities, the degree designation will not affect the admissions decision at all.

The objective is not to find a loophole. It is to make an informed decision using the information that actually matters.

HOW SCHOLAR COACH HELPS FAMILIES EVALUATE DEGREE CHOICES

Scholar Coach helps students compare academic pathways without relying on unsupported claims about which degree is easier to enter.

Map the student's academic interests. We identify the subjects, questions, and methods that genuinely motivate the student, including interests that cross disciplinary boundaries.

Compare degree requirements. We examine official curricula to understand differences in major requirements, laboratory or quantitative preparation, elective space, and opportunities for interdisciplinary study.

Verify the admissions structure. We check whether the student applies to the university, undergraduate college, school, or major, and whether the institution indicates that

major selection affects admission.

Assess the feasibility of the academic plan. We investigate prerequisites, double-major rules, transfer restrictions between programs, and access to relevant courses or research opportunities.

Connect the choice to the application. We help the student explain the academic reasoning behind the intended pathway and ensure that the application reflects genuine interests rather than an attempt to exploit an assumed admissions advantage.

The goal is not to choose the BA or BS that sounds less competitive. It is to identify the academic pathway that fits the student and understand how the university actually evaluates applicants.

A degree designation is not an admissions shortcut. Used thoughtfully, it is a way to align a student's interests, coursework, and future plans with the structure of the university they hope to attend.

SOURCES AND FURTHER READING

Stanford Undergraduate Admission — First-Year Application

Princeton Admission — Academics

UCLA Undergraduate Admission — Application Review Process

Lehigh University — BA vs. BS

University of Denver — Selecting a Degree Program

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