



ON POINT INSIGHTS

Navigating higher ed



From the Counselor’s Desk...

As application season rolls around, a student who has spent years building an interest in engineering suddenly asks if astronomy might be easier to get into. Someone who has written essays, joined activities, and chosen subjects around Economics starts considering Data Science, even though their profile shows little evidence of quantitative engagement. The reasoning is understandable. Admission to highly selective universities is competitive, and students naturally look for ways to strengthen their chances. But “gaming the system” is rarely as simple as it appears.



An application is not read only through the major a student selects. Admissions officers look at the whole picture: school subjects, activities, essays, projects, internships, recommendations, and the way a student explains their interests. If nothing in their profile shows engagement with the field, the application can feel forced and even fake.

Does that mean a student’s interests cannot change? No.

A move from economics to data science, or from psychology to cognitive science, can make sense if the student can explain how their interest evolved. A sudden jump from engineering to astronomy, with no coursework, reading, project, or genuine curiosity to support it, is much harder to explain.

There is also a misunderstanding around niche majors. Smaller programs are not automatically easier to get into. Sometimes they have fewer seats, fewer faculty members, and a more specific applicant pool. Applying to a less common major only helps when the student is actually a good fit for it.

This is why strategy has to be used carefully. The strongest applications are not built around what looks easiest to enter. They are built around what the student can pursue with curiosity, credibility, and commitment.

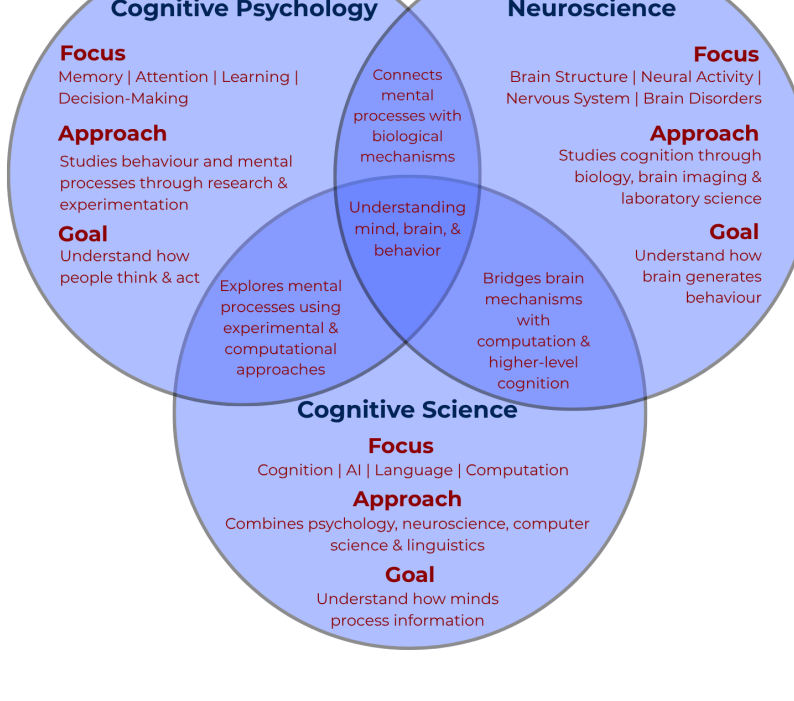
Raise the Bar Learning Beyond the School Curriculum

Students often assume that their academic profile is defined entirely by the subjects available at school. But even a rigorous curriculum cannot cover every emerging field, interdisciplinary interest, or specialized question a student may want to explore. That is where academic courses taken outside the prescribed curriculum can add value. Online platforms such as Coursera and edX offer access to a wide range of subjects. Ideal for self-motivated students who want to learn at their own pace, these courses are useful for building foundational knowledge in fields the school does not teach. The value, however, does not lie in accumulating certificates. One thoughtfully chosen course that leads to deeper engagement will always say more than five unrelated ones. What matters is why the student chose it, how seriously they approached it, and what changed as a result.

Credit-bearing courses, dual enrolment programs, and university summer programs work differently. They involve formal assessment, instructor expectations, and an official transcript. In some cases credits can be transferred to meet the undergraduate degree requirements. Summer programs also offer students the chance to experience university-level learning in an intensive setting before they formally enroll.

Consider a student who enrolled in Harvard Secondary School's Summer Program where she found herself in a mixed levels of learners – from high school to undergraduate students. Initially uncertain about contributing among older classmates, she gradually found her footing, eventually challenging assumptions and debating theories. The experience became the basis of one of her college application essays and reflected something more than academic ability: a student willing to dive deeper into a subject and grow through the process.

That kind of engagement is what gives external learning its weight in an application. A course chosen with intention, pursued seriously, that leads to new questions does more than fill a line on a resume. It becomes part of how a student understands their own interests and communicates them to universities.



Spotlight Cognitive Psychology | Neuroscience | Cognitive Science

For students fascinated by the human mind, the choice between these three fields can feel disorienting. The names overlap, the reading lists look similar, and universities sometimes use the terms interchangeably. But each field approaches the study of the mind and brain from a meaningfully different angle.

Cognitive Psychology focuses on mental processes: perception, memory, decision-making. The tools are primarily controlled experiments, observational studies, and data drawn from how people actually respond and perform. The central question is what the mind does and why.

Neuroscience goes to the biological root, studying everything from how individual neurons fire to how large-scale circuits produce behavior and emotion. The methods here involve brain imaging, electrophysiology, and increasingly, genetic tools. The question shifts from what the mind does to how the brain produces it.

Cognitive Science is the broadest of the three. It is an interdisciplinary field that pulls from psychology, linguistics, philosophy, computer science, and neuroscience to understand how the mind works across multiple levels. Students in this field often engage with artificial intelligence, language processing, and computational models of thought alongside more traditional psychological research.

Career paths follow that logic. Cognitive Psychology leads toward clinical work, UX research, and education. Cognitive Science opens doors into AI, human-computer interaction, and data science. Neuroscience points toward research, medicine, and neuro engineering.

The clearest way to choose is to ask: are you most curious about how people think, how minds and machines connect, or how the brain makes it all possible?

What’s Happening In Higher Ed?



Beyond the Big Four

Student mobility patterns continue to evolve as countries compete for international talent. India’s higher education rise is increasingly **extending beyond the IITs**, though internationalization remains a challenge. In the Netherlands, the first **decline in international student enrollment** in more than two decades and broader reports of **falling international student numbers at Dutch universities** are prompting questions about the long-term impact of housing shortages and policy changes. Japan, meanwhile, is seeing **growth in short-term study abroad experiences**, signaling a shift in how students are approaching international mobility and global exposure.

The Big Four

Policy and enrollment pressures are reshaping the traditional study destinations. In the UK, new **UKVI compliance metrics** for universities have now come into effect, increasing accountability around international student recruitment and retention. In the US, students completing the **FAFSA can now view their results immediately**, while colleges appear to be **relying more heavily on waitlists** as they navigate enrollment uncertainty. Financial pressures are becoming increasingly visible too, with **tuition discounting continuing to climb** and institutions such as **Syracuse University warning of budget challenges** linked to admissions slowdowns.

Uncertainty remains for some international students despite the end of the recent **U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services pause**. Meanwhile, the proposed overhaul of the **long-standing F-1 "duration of status"** system continues to generate concern about how future student stays in the US could be affected, while a court ruling **striking down a proposed \$100,000 H-1B fee** highlights the continued debate around immigration and post-study work pathways.

Testimonial

“Rachna, a heartfelt thank you for being with us every step of the college application journey. What stood out is your unwavering dedication and commitment to each student that you work with. You invested the time, effort, and patience to really understand Samaya and guided her to be authentic to the process, discovering and bringing out her best self. Your belief in her made a meaningful difference as you supported her through every setback and celebrated her every success like your own. You always went the extra mile, and for this, we can never thank you enough. Can’t think of anything that you could have done differently - I think we’re completely biased.”

Rachna Bery
Parent

