

Esteban Aguas:

Hello everyone. Welcome to Meet Princeton, a podcast to introduce prospective students and their families to Princeton University, brought to you by the Office of Admission. For longtime listeners, you may realize something is different. I'm your new host, Esteban Aguas. I'm an assistant dean of admission and a Princeton graduate from the class of 2019. I'm so happy that you've tuned in to join us to hear from current student voices about what it's like to be an undergraduate at Princeton right now.

To kick off our new season of the podcast, I wanted to highlight our partnership with QuestBridge and hear about the experiences of students who were admitted to our university through the National College Match. I'm sure this may be the first time some of our listeners are learning about QuestBridge, so we hope to give a concise but comprehensive overview during this episode about the organization and its mission and explain how it's ultimately one of multiple channels through which high school students can choose to apply to our university, particularly students from first generation and lower income backgrounds.

Before we jump into our conversation, I want to take a moment to allow the two Princeton students who are joining me today to introduce themselves. So welcome to the podcast, Allen and Sukaina.

Allen Nieva:

Thanks for having me, Esteban. I'm super excited to be talking about my experiences as a QuestBridge match. My name is Allen Nieva. I am a sophomore. I'm from Queens, New York. I'm planning to major in psychology with a minor in neuroscience and certificate in cognitive science. After Princeton, I'm hoping to pursue higher education and a career in clinical neuropsychology. On campus, however, I'm pretty involved in a bunch of student organizations that center around that first generation low income demographic. In line with my academic interest, I'm also training to become a volunteer for CONTACT Princeton, a local hotline. Mental health is a big important topic for me and one of the things that really inspired my academic interests.

Sukaina Shivji:

Yeah, thank you so much for having me. To everyone who's listening, hi, my name is Sukaina Shivji. I am from the class of 2026. I was born and raised in Staten Island, New York, and I'm intending to major in molecular biology with potentially a minor in global health and health policy, but we'll see. So on campus I'm involved with the Muslim Student Association, which has been a place where I could find a home away from home. I'm also part of the Science Olympiad organization here on campus, and I am a huge advocate for women in STEM. So I'm on the board for the Princeton Association for Women in STEM.

Esteban Aguas:

Amazing, thank you both. I'm sure Allen and Sukaina will go into greater detail about the many exciting opportunities they've had on our campus. But before we begin, I think it would be helpful to give our listeners a brief overview of what exactly QuestBridge is. So could one of you explain QuestBridge's mission as an organization and perhaps provide greater detail about the National College Match specifically?

Sukaina Shivji:

Yeah, sure. So QuestBridge is a national nonprofit whose goal is to connect lower income and first gen students with partner colleges and universities throughout the country. One of the ways they do that is

through the National College Match, which helps outstanding high school seniors gain admission and a full four year scholarship to some of the nation's most selective colleges by ranking up to 15 partner schools. And actually being able to rank colleges is what makes the National College Match so unique. By ranking colleges, you could be matched, AKA granted early admission with a guaranteed scholarship, to the specific college that appears highest on your list that also wants to match with you.

Esteban Aguas:

Great. That sums it up really well and I would just add some additional context around why Princeton decided to partner with QuestBridge to begin with. So we've actually been a partner school since 2006 as part of our mission to provide a quality education to students from a wide range of socioeconomic backgrounds, especially students who may not have even previously considered Princeton as an option for an affordable education. We've actually matched with hundreds of scholars over the years and we look forward to meeting our next incoming cohort of QuestBridge match students. And with that in mind, I'm interested in hearing about your QuestBridge experiences. So I want to begin our conversation by asking why you both decided to apply to colleges through the QuestBridge National College Match. Sukaina, why don't you go first?

Sukaina Shivji:

Yeah, I think I can definitely talk about that. So one of the biggest reasons I think I chose the specific QuestBridge application was because I felt like it gives more room to describe your personal circumstances and give context to your life. I think it's very important to allow anyone who's reading your application to understand the struggles you go through, especially as a first gen low income student. And I thought that the QuestBridge application does a really good job at providing that space.

Esteban Aguas:

Thanks for sharing that. Another aspect that definitely makes the QuestBridge application unique is that it does have additional short answer questions and essays that really encourage students to reflect on their lived experiences. And these responses ultimately provide even more helpful context to us admission officers when we're reviewing the application. And how about you, Allen, why did you apply through QuestBridge?

Allen Nieva:

I applied for many of the same reasons. Actually, my first instance of hearing about the National College Match was about half a year before the application even opened up because that's when applications for QuestBridge's College Prep Scholars Program came out. I just really liked the idea of being able to have an application that tries to level the playing field, as Sukaina said, highlighting these personal experiences that we normally wouldn't get the spotlight for on more conventional applications like the Common App for example. So it also really highlighted for me at that time the idea of achieving not just the high end education, but doing so without placing my family in debt. And I felt like this application was really a big shot I had at being able to do that.

Esteban Aguas:

Right, that's a good point. And of course, after you rank up to those 15 schools, you then have that waiting game like all students do after they apply to schools. The one unique thing about doing the QuestBridge match process is Match Day, and I'm sure applicants have a slew of emotions during that time.

Sukaina Shivji:

I was feeling very nervous, of course, as anyone would be in that position waiting for your college acceptance or potentially your college rejection. It was definitely a very charged moment. But I also felt very grounded in that sense because I feel like I was very strongly of the belief that whatever happened was best for me and I have very strong faith. So I think that definitely helped me reconcile any nervous feelings that I had with the idea that whatever ended up happening would be the right path.

Allen Nieva:

Match day for me plays back in my head like a movie, you know what I mean? That day I really didn't have that many high expectations. I mean, I knew for certain if I didn't get matched it wouldn't be the end of the world. And also I wasn't the only person from my school who had applied for the match and I didn't know if anyone was going to get in. So I really wanted to open this at home. Because the decision had come out around maybe 3:00 PM Eastern time I want to say, and that was right when I had just gotten out of classes. But I felt pressured—I opened it up in front of everybody.

When I did get matched, it was a complete surprise. I actually dropped my phone and I felt that the people around me were very supportive, but maybe even they were more excited about it than I was because at the time I hadn't fully processed everything and I hadn't fully processed everything until maybe months later just because it was such a big shock to the system. It wasn't the end of my high school experience for sure, but it by far stood as the defining moment for me.

Esteban Aguas:

Yeah, I think that's well said by both of you. I still remember the day that I found out that I got into Princeton, and it's that whole mix of speechlessness, excitement that I don't think you ever forget, that always replays in your mind and it's always so fun.

Sukaina Shivji:

I'll say I definitely relate to Allen in the sense that I really wanted to open my match decision at home, but I also got out of school at 3:00 and then I had a club meeting until 5:00. So I stayed at school and I'm coming back on the bus home. So it was around 5:30-ish and after you get matched, you get an email from Princeton congratulating you on getting matched. So I'm sitting there on the bus waiting to go home, I haven't opened my decision and I get this email that has the most crazy title I've ever seen that I got matched, and that's how it happened. That's how I found out. I found out from the subject line of this email, which was, I think so crazy. I started sobbing on the New York City public bus just fully in complete tears, called my mom, opened the decision on the bus just to double check that I wasn't being scammed, and it was definitely kind of a crazy experience for me as well.

Esteban Aguas:

That's so exciting. I can only imagine what that was like, but it's always so rewarding opening the email and seeing that big tiger at the top of it and just being so excited to be welcomed to the Princeton family.

So when you saw that you matched with Princeton specifically, what was your initial thought? Because obviously you ranked other schools, so how did it feel to see that it was Princeton that you matched with?

Allen Nieva:

I'll go ahead and say, Princeton was not the top school I had ranked. I found I put most of my time into Princeton because it felt like a stronger fit than the schools that I had ranked above it. If I did get matched, I thought it would be to one of my schools much lower on the list. So when I did see that tiger and the confetti and the congratulations and all that, I wasn't really sure if I was reading the right screen. I thought I might've gotten this image in my head or maybe I was just seeing things. But as I said before, I just didn't fully process until everyone else saw my phone and they screamed Princeton.

Esteban Aguas:

And what about you Sukaina?

Sukaina Shivji:

I think I felt complete and utter relief. That was the biggest emotion at that moment because I only ranked three schools and they were all pretty well-known, very prominent schools. So I was like, my gamble is either I get into this and I get a full-ride scholarship and I'm financially secure. I don't have to worry about paying for undergrad or I go through the common app process. So just the fact that I matched at all was amazing. And then the fact that I matched to Princeton, which is close to where I live and such a beautiful campus was doubly amazing. So it was just this feeling of utter relief and gratitude at that moment.

Allen Nieva:

If I may piggyback on that really quickly. I might not have had any initial thoughts, but I do recall kind of sharing a similar sentiment of the relief. I remember photos being taken by somebody, I don't know who that was, but in every photo I didn't look particularly excited or jumpy. I just looked really tired, but happy. So I guess maybe not an initial thought, but an initial emotion—I felt safe.

Esteban Aguas:

Well said. I think you both bring up two important points that I want to build upon. So Allen, you mentioned fit, and I think fit is such an important part of the college application search process, or rather the college application process as a whole, because the QuestBridge match is essentially a formalized version of determining fit from both the student perspective and the college perspective. The students will rank the schools that they think are a good fit for them, and then once their applications go off to the partner schools, the respective admission offices then get to determine whether or not they think the students are a good fit for their campus. And the match is the beauty of that, to show that you both have made a decision and agree that you are meant to be at that university.

And then Sukaina, I also like that you mentioned that you'd only listed three schools, so we always say that you can list up to 15, but many students decide to rank way fewer and that's okay. I think that's part of the process that's really nice—it really puts the agency back into the student's hands. Even though the match is a binding process, which means once you match with the school, you are contractually obligated to attend it. It's nice to know that you're able to really craft a curated list of schools that you know where, if you match with any of them, you'd be really happy to attend them as a student.

So now you've matched with Princeton, you're a Princeton student—I want you to think back to your early days at our university. What's some advice that you would give to the incoming QuestBridge match class at Princeton?

Sukaina Shivji:

I think the first thing I would say is that always remember now that you've matched, once you get on campus, that you deserve to be here. You deserve to be here, period, flat out. Sometimes you might be faced with situations that challenge you or that try you or make you feel like, oh, I don't know if Princeton is actually the place that I'm supposed to be. But I'm telling you right now that you need to squash those thoughts because it is really, really important to know that Princeton will become, if it hasn't already, a place that you belong and a place that you find a sense of family and security, and just probably your community that you will engage with for the rest of your life.

Allen Nieva:

You really took the words right out of my mouth. I was thinking of the words, "You deserve to be here." You just said it perfectly. Because it's true. I would say that in my time at Princeton, coming in especially, but even still to this day, I've had some of my most meaningful conversations and connections and sources of support from other Questies. And it can be daunting coming in because you're coming into a world renowned university, with some of the most accomplished people in the country, in the world, really, and you are one of those accomplished people. Given the odds that you faced, given the circumstances that you were allotted, given the opportunities that you had, you fully took advantage of them, and Princeton saw that and they admitted you.

Princeton, I think, does a good job of legitimizing or providing areas of support for individuals within our demographic, especially for matches. And so really rely on the people that understand you best on this campus, I would say.

Sukaina Shivji:

Yeah, I think to add on to that, seeking out communities that you feel safe in and the communities that you feel at home in is super important. I sought out the Muslim Student Association, which is something that I'm currently very involved in, and it's brought me a lot of peace and sense of security because I've been able to not only interact with people who are different than me and amazing outside of those spaces, but also find comfort when I need it in places where I feel at home. So I think that that's very important as well.

Esteban Aguas:

That's also great to hear. So thank you both for sharing. And I'm sure they will serve as comforting words to our incoming students as they await their match as well.

And to wrap up our conversation, you're both now sophomores. You've completed your first year at Princeton. I want to know how it was. What kind of home have you made our campus? What are you involved in? What opportunities are you most excited about to come? I'm excited to hear about them.

Allen Nieva:

I'm going to be honest, it was difficult. The first year for most people, even regardless of your demographic, you're adjusting to a complete new way of life, a new way of living, of studying, of socializing. I think a fear that I had was even though I had support being a QuestBridge student from other QuestBridge students and also other organizations that promote first gen, low income success, that those circles themselves would be bubbles and that we might not have been able to reach in to other aspects of campus life. Coming in, I really found that it wasn't as big of a barrier as I thought it would be. I would say I've had a lot of support, a pretty strong string of individuals from as early as fourth grade into my final year at high school that have just built me up and have nurtured me, but

never really took control of the process for me. Coming into Princeton I wanted to be able to give back, and so I found multiple opportunities to be involved, not just with interacting with other FLI students, but also with serving that FLI demographic.

Sukaina Shivji:

I would also agree that my first year was definitely a bit tough. It was definitely quite difficult I think. Like you mentioned, Allen, you said it perfectly we're adjusting to a whole complete new way of life, and especially for first gen, low income students, it's an added difficulty to adjust to something that we're completely unfamiliar with and definitely I think the social aspect was something that I struggled with at first as well, because you no longer have your high school friends, your built-in community, you no longer have your family, so I think that was definitely a bit difficult.

But I did find some great resources in my RCA who was incredibly supportive. For those who are listening, RCA is residential college advisor. Your RCA is kind of like the built-in support for your first few months here at Princeton and throughout your first year. And so I found support in my RCA and also in the Muslim Student Association, like I mentioned. I also found academic support in McGraw, which is the tutoring center that we have on campus, which was incredibly helpful when I started to struggle in my classes as usually everyone starts to do. And so I think definitely these support networks that I found here were helpful in making the transition to Princeton less difficult.

And now in my sophomore year, I'm a lot more settled. I have communities that I can freely interact with and I'm able to manage academics and social life. I'm balancing it a bit better now than I was in my first year. And I'm definitely, kind of like what Allen mentioned about giving back and being in the service of humanity, I'm definitely looking forward to that. I hope to be a in the future advising students academically, advising first years in particular. And also hopefully to be a McGraw tutor because I loved my McGraw tutors, they were so, so helpful.

And another thing to look forward to is I am really interested in international internship programs. So for those who are listening, Princeton will often offer fully funded international internships, especially for first gen, low income students, and it's a great thing to take advantage of so I'm definitely looking forward to that as well.

Allen Nieva:

If I may add on, it's one thing for people to understand that they deserve to have academic opportunities. It's another thing for them to understand that they deserve to have the various support networks academically, community-wise, even medically. QuestBridge scholars are admitted into the schools because they are maximal opportunists. And that can extend into college even when they're struggling, even when their first set of prerequisites hits hard, even when they're dealing with a set of extenuating circumstances, whatever it may be. You are deserving enough to reach out and find support to capitalize on the opportunities that you already deserve to have outside of that.

Esteban Aguas:

I think that's a great message and positive note to end on. Thank you both so much for sharing your stories and your time with me today. I think our listeners really gained some incredible insight into the QuestBridge match process. And to all the students who are hoping to match with Princeton and who do match with Princeton, welcome to the Princeton community. We're so excited to have you.

This transcript was exported on Feb 07, 2024 - view latest version [here](#).

We hope you enjoyed hearing about Allen and Sukaina's experiences matching with Princeton through QuestBridge, and we want to extend our sincerest congratulations to the students who recently matched with Princeton. We cannot wait to welcome you on campus.

As I said earlier, this podcast was created with prospective students and their families in mind. So I'd like to direct all of our listeners to our admission website at [admission.princeton.edu](https://admission.princeton.edu). There you can watch, read, and learn more about Princeton. Also, if you have any questions about anything to do at all with admissions and you'd like your questions to be answered live on air, please write into our mailbag found on the Meet Princeton webpage on our website.

Meet Princeton's audio engineer is Nick Dinnoli of Orangebox Pictures. Mary Buckley and I, Esteban Aguas, are executive producers. Original music was composed by Molly Truman, who is also our master sound designer and engineer from the class of 2024. We'd also like to give a special thanks and shout out to our guests, Allen Nieva and Sukaina Shivji, for their great contributions to this episode and to our listeners for tuning in. Thank you so much for listening, and we hope you'll join us next time on Meet Princeton.