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## U.S. System of Higher Education

### WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN A COLLEGE AND A UNIVERSITY?

The terms, college and university, are used interchangeably and mean the same thing in the U.S. As a general rule, colleges tend to be smaller and usually offer only undergraduate degrees, while a university also offers graduate degrees. Within each college or university you will find schools, such as school of arts and sciences or the school of business.

### WHO CAN BECOME A COLLEGE OR UNIVERSITY STUDENT? ARE THERE AGE LIMITATIONS TO ATTEND U.S. COLLEGES & UNIVERSITIES?

A high school education is usually required to become an undergraduate university student. Many institutions will not accept international students who are younger than age 17. There are sometimes exceptions to that general rule.

### WHAT IS THE ACADEMIC CALENDAR FOR COLLEGES & UNIVERSITIES IN THE U.S.?

The Academic year will be slightly different for each university but normally runs from end of August/early September to the end of May. It may be divided into two terms of 18 weeks called semesters. Alternatively, the university may have "quarters" or "trimesters" , which are about 12 weeks in length. In addition, universities very often provide six to eight week summer terms. These are optional and students attend if they wish to get through their degree faster, to decrease their course load during the regular terms, or to make up for courses not completed successfully during the regular academic year. There are at least two main holidays during the academic year: a two to four week break over Christmas and a one week Spring break sometime between early March and mid April.

### PLEASE DEFINE "UNDERGRADUATE" AND "GRADUATE" DEGREES.

**UNDERGRADUATE:** A program leading to an associate (2-year) or a bachelor's (4-year) degree; generally following high/secondary school.

**GRADUATE:** A program leading to a master's degree or doctoral degree; advanced study generally following a bachelor's degree.

### WHAT ARE THE DIFFERENT UNDERGRADUATE DEGREES?

#### Associate Degrees

Degree granted by a college or university after the satisfactory completion of a two year full time program of study or its part time equivalent. The associate of arts (A.A.) or associate of science (A.S.) degree is granted after students complete a program of study similar to the first two years of a four year college curriculum. The associate in applied science (A.A.S.) is awarded by many colleges on completion of technological or vocational programs of study. Associate degree programs may be "terminal" programs, which lead into specific careers upon graduation, or "transfer" programs, which correspond to the first two years of a bachelor's degree and tend to be more liberal arts based. Under the latter option one could then transfer into the third year of a four-year bachelor's degree program.

#### Bachelors or Baccalaureate Degree

Degree received after the satisfactory completion of a four or five year full time program of study or its part time equivalent at a college or university. The Bachelor of Arts (B.A.) and Bachelor of Science (B.S.) are the most common baccalaureates. There is no absolute difference between the degrees, and

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policies concerning their award vary from college to college. International students cannot generally study part-time and must maintain full-time status during the academic year. One of the most attractive features of the bachelor's degree program in the United States is that it is highly flexible. You can usually choose from a wide variety of courses and create your own unique program of study. The degree is awarded after you complete a specified number of credits. The first year of study is called the freshman year; the second is called sophomore; the third, junior; and the fourth, senior.

## WHAT ARE THE DIFFERENT GRADUATE DEGREES?

### Master's Degree

A master's degree is designed to provide additional education or training in the student's specialized branch of knowledge, well beyond the level of baccalaureate study. Master's degrees are offered in many different fields, and there are two main types of programs: academic and professional. A person who finishes graduate school in the U.S. earns an M.A., M.S. or Ph.D. degree (Master of Arts, Master of Science or Doctorate of Philosophy). The Ph.D. is the highest scientific degree in the U.S. This degree usually requires at least three years of study and a dissertation defense. M.A. or M.S. degrees are awarded after two years of graduate studies.

- Academic Masters: The Master of Arts (M.A.) and Master of Science (M.S.) degrees are usually awarded in the traditional arts, sciences, and humanities disciplines. The M.S. is also awarded in technical fields such as engineering and agriculture. Original research, research methodology, and field investigation are emphasized.
- Professional Masters: These degree programs are designed to lead the student from the first degree to a particular profession. Professional master's degrees are most often "terminal" master's programs, meaning that they do not lead to doctoral programs. Such master's degrees are often designated by specific descriptive titles, such as master of business administration (M.B.A.), master of social work (M.S.W.), master of education (M.Ed.), or master of fine arts (M.F.A.). Other subjects of professional master's programs include journalism, international relations, architecture, urban planning, public administration (M.P.A.), and public policy (M.P.P.).

### Doctoral Degrees

A doctoral degree is designed to train research scholars and, in many cases, future college and university faculty members. Receipt of a doctoral degree certifies that the student has demonstrated capacity as a trained research scholar in a specific discipline.

At the doctoral level, the Ph.D. (doctor of philosophy) is the most common degree awarded in academic disciplines. Other doctoral degrees are awarded primarily in professional fields, such as education (Ed.D. or Doctor of Education) and Business Administration (D.B.A. or Doctor of Business Administration). Doctoral programs involve advanced coursework, seminars, and the writing of a dissertation that describes the student's own original research, completed under the supervision of a faculty adviser.

The Ph.D. degree is awarded to those students who complete an original piece of significant research, write a dissertation describing that research, and successfully defend their work before a panel of faculty members who specialize in the discipline. This may take an additional two to three years. To earn a Doctoral Degree it may take anywhere from five to eight years beyond the bachelor's degree, depending on the field of study.

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## WHAT IS THE LENGTH OF STUDY FOR MBA PROGRAMS IN THE US? CAN YOU WORK WHILE STUDYING?

MBA programs are traditionally two-year programs, though there are some one-year intensive programs. International students are allowed to work on campus up to 20 hours per week for the first year they are in the US. After the first year, international students can apply for permission to work off campus up to 20 hours per week if the work is directly related to their field of study, and must be approved by the international student office where the students are studying. Many international MBA students have full-time internships or jobs the summer following their first year.

## WHAT IS THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN ONLINE STUDIES AND DISTANCE STUDIES?

Essentially there is no difference, rather online studies is one of many means of distance learning (distance education). Distance education is a type of formal learning in which student and instructors are in different places. It may be synchronous or asynchronous. If distance education is synchronous, instruction is given at a particular time and, usually, at specific locations. If distance education is asynchronous, instruction can be received by students wherever and whenever they desire, as long as they have access to the Internet or, in the case of correspondence education, to the mail.

Distance education can be accomplished through:

- Mail
- Telephones and voicemail
- One-way or interactive radio, television, satellite, audio, or video transmission
- Video cassette recorders (VCRs) or CD-ROMs
- Email and Online

For more detailed information on Distance Education please go to the following website: (will need to link to Distance Education section within the Short-Term Study section on the research choices & test section off the students home page

## Is Distance Learning available on the Graduate Level?

Yes. To find accredited online distance learning programs please search the following website for the Distance Education & Training Council for accredited programs: <http://www.detc.org/>

## EXPLAIN THE TRANSFER PROCESS TO A U.S. COLLEGE OR UNIVERSITY FROM A UNIVERSITY OUTSIDE OF THE U.S.

Students transfer every year from other countries into U.S. degree programs and successfully complete their degrees. However, the structure of degrees in other countries rarely matches the structure of U.S. degrees, making the transfer process more complicated. The types of institutions in other countries also vary from those in the United States.

The transfer institution needs to consider a number of factors when granting credit for the courses you have taken at a non-U.S. institution. You may consider the following factors on which U.S. colleges & universities typically make decisions:

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Is your university or college recognized by the ministry of education in your country?

U.S. colleges are looking for institutions that are recognized by a ministry of education; however, if some other authority approves your college, it may still be acceptable. Decisions vary from college to college and often depend on what the situation would be for a similar college in the United States.

How similar is the nature or character of the courses you have taken to those offered at the transfer institution?

U.S. schools usually assess similarity by looking at information from course descriptions, syllabi, or catalogs. If your institution is not well known in the United States, the college may have to do a more detailed evaluation with you when you arrive, and only then decide whether and how to grant transfer credit.

How applicable are your courses toward the degree, and in particular the major, that you wish to pursue?

This will often involve evaluation of the courses by both the admissions office and the academic department to which you wish to be admitted. They will look at whether courses can be accepted for transfer credit first, and then at whether they can count toward the requirements for a specific major.

Applying courses toward a particular major is most difficult for professional programs such as engineering, architecture, or journalism, where course requirements are carefully structured and often dictated by accrediting bodies for the profession.

To make the transfer process run as smoothly as possible, you are advised to make sure all academic records provided are official and bear the original stamp or seal of the issuing institution. Submit course descriptions in English for all post-secondary courses taken. They should also include:

Summaries or outlines of the major topics covered in each course (If an outline is not available, write a summary yourself and have it certified by your school as accurate.)

The number of units or hours required in lecture and laboratory for each course on a weekly basis

The length of the term or academic year, and, if it is not given elsewhere, the year in which you took the course

Prepare a list of textbooks used in each course as this will help in any decisions that are made after you arrive at the campus about whether to grant credit for particular courses

Provide information on the total number of courses, credits, or units required for the diploma or degree program from which you are transferring

Students who transfer into a U.S. institution may also be able to receive credit for their secondary school work if it is considered to be comparable to introductory college-level work in the United States. Ask each college about its own policy on this issue.

## WHAT IS A COMMUNITY COLLEGE AND WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS OF ATTENDING?

Community colleges are sometimes called junior or two-year colleges and there are more than 1,700 such colleges in the U.S. Most community colleges are state-supported. A few are independent or under private control.

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In addition to academic programs leading to college degrees (e.g. associates degrees), community colleges offer vocational education and technical training. Community colleges also usually have strong ties with their state's universities. This makes it easier for the student to transfer to one of these universities to complete the last two years of a four year Bachelors Degree after completing an Associates Degree at the Community College. The cost of a Community College is significantly less than a four year university and although they are less expensive you can still receive an excellent education there. Many American and international students attend the first two years of study in a community college with lower costs and easier admission policies to take many of the required subjects connected to their degree and then transfer for their last two years to a four year university.

## EXPLAIN THE TRANSFER PROCESS FROM COMMUNITY COLLEGE TO A FOUR YEAR UNIVERSITY.

A smooth transition from a community college to a four-year institution depends on the strength of the articulation agreement between the two schools. These contracts specify which courses transfer automatically from one institution to the other and, therefore, can be counted toward the four-year degree. Public community colleges work closely with the public universities in their state to develop transfer guidelines. The transfer of credits involving a private or an out-of-state institution may not be as well defined.

If your ultimate goal is to earn a Bachelor's Degree, then as early as possible you should:

1. Declare your intent to pursue a transfer Associate Degree
2. Confer with the academic/transfer counselor at the Community College to identify a major
3. Select a four-year institution and seek out the latest information on its transfer policy and its programs of study.

One reason for planning carefully is that schools do not have the same course requirements for identical degrees. By targeting the four-year institution early and determining what is needed to transfer, then following a carefully designed program, you can avoid unnecessary work and expense.

Because of accreditation or university requirements, some four-year institutions cannot accept certain courses from other schools. Before taking a lot courses in one field of study, students should talk to their academic/transfer counselor, who will be familiar with any restrictions.

Some institutions have worked together to establish "dual admissions" policies whereby students are admitted to both the two-year and the four-year schools at the same time. Immediately after completing an Associate Degree, the student may transfer directly into the bachelor's program at the cooperating university.

## HOW CAN I FIND IF AN INSTITUTION IS ACCREDITED?

The U.S. does not have a central government office that approves educational institutions. Instead it relies on a system of voluntary accreditation carried out by non-governmental accrediting bodies to ensure that schools meet standards. For accreditation information see the following US Government website:

<http://www.ope.ed.gov/accreditation/>. This web link allows you to search for a specific university or look up institutions by state.

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Another website for accreditation information is: <http://www.chea.org>.

If you intend to study in the United States you will not be issued a student visa unless the university you wish to attend is accredited by the U.S. Department of Education.

## HOW CAN I FIND OUT WHICH COLLEGES & UNIVERSITIES ARE RATED BEST FOR A SPECIFIC ACADEMIC MAJOR?

There are many magazines and publications that seek to rank US colleges and universities. What is important to remember - there are no official rankings of U.S. colleges and universities from within the United States. Each magazine or group that ranks institutions uses their own set of criteria that may or may not be giving you the information that is most relevant for your search. The U.S. News & World Report rankings are one of the most recognized U.S. university rankings sources. Following is their website:

<http://colleges.usnews.rankingsandreviews.com/best-colleges>

PLEASE NOTE: Education USA is in no way affiliated with US News. Additionally, when deciding on what university is best for you other factors should be taken into play. Such as cost, location, majors etc.

## PLEASE EXPLAIN ENGLISH LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY REQUIREMENTS.

A basic requirement for successful study in the U.S. is the ability to communicate in English. If English is not your native language, U.S. universities and colleges will ask you to take an English language proficiency test before admitting you to a degree program. Almost all institutions require either the TOEFL or IELTS. For further information, check each college's catalog or contact the admissions office to discuss your situation. As with many areas of U.S. education each institution sets its own English language admission standard. Some institutions may grant conditional acceptance with the understanding that you must attend English language classes, (ESL - English as Second Language) at their college prior to starting your degree program. Once you have reached the required English language level, you will be able to start your studies. In some cases it may be difficult for you to obtain a student visa if you cannot prove sufficient command of the English language to begin study in the U.S.

The following websites may give you some information on institutions that offer programs in English as Second Language (ESL) studies or intensive English Language programs:

<http://www.ies-ed.com>

<http://www.aaiep.org>

<http://www.uciep.org>

<http://www.petersons.com/ac/select/acesl.html>

[www.intensiveenglishusa.org](http://www.intensiveenglishusa.org)

<http://www.collegeboard.org>

The U.S. Department of State offers a free online English course: [www.usalearns.org](http://www.usalearns.org)

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## DO STUDENTS HAVE TO STUDY A FIXED SET OF SUBJECTS OR CAN THEY INDIVIDUALLY FORM THEIR MAJOR?

There are certain required subjects all students must take when studying for a degree. Also there are required core subjects you will be expected to take to complete your major. You will have the opportunity to also choose a list of electives. Degree programs in some subject areas are highly structured, and universities dictate exactly which courses a student must take and when they must take them in order to graduate with a major in that area.

It is important to check the requirements of any majors you may wish to pursue. There is also great variation between course requirements in liberal arts colleges. Some colleges require students to take a certain number of classes in each of the broad subject groups, while other liberal arts colleges have no such requirements, merely making "strong recommendation" that students complete a well rounded education.

## WHAT IS A LIBERAL ARTS COLLEGE AND WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS OF A LIBERAL ARTS EDUCATION?

The liberal arts philosophy is a unique feature of the U.S. higher education system and offers a well-rounded academic education that develops the student's verbal, written and reasoning skills. Students at a liberal arts college, or at a university with a strong liberal arts program, begin their degree study by taking classes in a wide variety of courses in the liberal arts, humanities, languages and the social and physical sciences. They then choose a subject in which to specialize and take about 25 to 50 percent of their classes in the major area.

The study of the liberal arts and humanities prepares students to develop general knowledge and reasoning ability rather than specific skills offering a well rounded education. Some of the liberal arts colleges are small and some students leaving home for the first time, especially traveling to another country, will do much better in the smaller atmosphere. These colleges are well equipped with the latest technology and facilities. You will have a better chance of actually being taught by the professor rather than a graduate student in a smaller college. You can get to know your professors and they will get to know you by name! There is always the option of transferring to a larger university at a later time.

A liberal arts education also helps better prepare you for the ever-changing job market. Current research indicates that the average student will change jobs 8-10 times, in their professional careers, and many who are studying for degrees today may very well be employed in jobs that do not yet exist. The liberal arts tradition equips students with critical thinking skills, reasoning, and excellent communications skills (both written & oral) that will be essential for obtaining employment in a new field.

## WHAT IS GPA AND WHAT IS THE U.S. GRADING SYSTEM?

Schools, colleges and universities in the U.S. commonly use letter grades to indicate the quality of a student's academic performance. Each letter grade has a numeric value which is used to establish a grade point or quality point average (GPA/QPA).

Each student completes his or her degree with a grade point average (GPA). A cumulative grade point average is the GPA for all courses taken throughout the degree program. Most colleges and universities use a GPA scale of 4.0. To work out your GPA, take the numerical value assigned to the letter grade you achieve for each course then multiply this number by the number of credits each course is worth. Finally, add these numbers together and divide by the total number of credits for all courses.

- 100-90 =A=4 (excellent)

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- 89-80% =B=3 (good)
- 79-70% =C=2 (average)
- 69-60% =D=1 (below average)
- 59-50%=E or F (failing)

Work rated C or above is usually required of an undergraduate student to continue his or her studies. Grades of P (pass), S (satisfactory), and N (no credit) can also be used. In percentage scales, 100 percent is the highest mark, and 65-70 percent is usually the lowest passing mark. Your GPA may be interpreted differently by each college and university in the U.S. based on their review of your mark sheets/transcripts.

## WHAT IS THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN STATE AND PRIVATE COLLEGES & UNIVERSITIES?

State colleges and universities, also called public universities, are founded and subsidized by U.S. state governments to provide low-cost education to residents of that state. These universities tend to be very large and generally admit a wider range of students than private universities. State university tuition costs are generally lower than those of private universities. International students, as well as those from other states, are considered out-of-state residents and therefore pay a higher tuition than residents of the state in which the institution is located.

Private colleges & universities are funded by a combination of endowments, gifts from their alumni, research grants, and tuition fees. Tuition fees tend to be higher than state universities, but there is no distinction made between state and non-state residents. Private universities are usually smaller and can have religious affiliation or can be single-sex schools.

## ARE THERE OPPORTUNITIES FOR UNIVERSITY EXCHANGE PROGRAMS?

Many U.S. universities have formal links with universities outside the United States, and they have set up student exchange programs with these universities. Under such programs, U.S. students and students from another country trade places and experience living in each other's countries and studying at each other's universities.

Usually, the courses studied count toward the student's degree program in his or her home country. Most of these programs run for either a semester or an academic year. The advantage of this arrangement is that students from outside the United States generally pay the amount of tuition charged by their home university rather than the tuition and fees of the U.S. College or University which can be considerably higher.

Contact the office responsible for international programs and linkages at your institution to ask if your school has exchange agreements with any U.S. colleges or universities. If it does, find out how the exchange program operates and whether you are eligible to take part. Also, many U.S. universities list their exchange programs on their Web sites. You may be able to apply for funding for an undergraduate exchange program from your home university or institute, even if study abroad is not a requirement for your program of study. Funding from U.S. institutions for short-term study of this kind is very limited. If you are not eligible to receive funding from your own school or from the U.S. institution, you might try to obtain funding from social, welfare, or community organizations like Rotary International; from multinational companies; or from local businesses.