

# Overview

---

# UNITED STATES

---

Country Specific Guide

THE HEADMASTER

---

DREAM HIGHER

Exclusively  
available on  
**The Headmaster**



# WARNING

This content is made available exclusively to the members of The Headmaster. Any attempt to steal, copy, duplicate or share this information could lead to severe legal consequences.

# THANK YOU





# Table of Contents

<b>United States</b>	<b>4</b>
Understanding options for US higher education	4
The US educational system	4
Types of Degrees you can earn in the US	5
Non-Degree Programs	7
Types of schools in the US	7
Find the best college for you	8
How to find colleges and universities in the US	8
Understanding a college's academic reputation	10
Factors to consider when choosing a college in the US	12
Questions for Undergraduate Students	13
<b>Applying to Colleges</b>	<b>13</b>
Application Deadlines	15
Accepting an offer and enrolling at a college or university	16

## United States

### Understanding options for US higher education

If you want to pursue your higher education in a foreign country, it is always wiser to understand the country's educational system as it may be different from your domestic country.

You may have had eleven or thirteen years of pre-university level studies for international students in different education systems, whereas, typically, students enrolled in higher education in the United States, colleges, and universities require twelve years of education.

The US educational system

#### **Primary and Secondary Education**

Students in America are required to go to school between the ages of six and eighteen in what are called grades, which run from first through twelfth.

##### **Kindergarten**

The year before first grade (not mandatory in most US states)

##### **Primary or elementary education**

Grades one through five

##### **Middle school or junior high school**

Grades six through eight

##### **Secondary education**

Grades nine through twelve. These grades comprise of a college-prep curriculum or vocational training.

#### **Post Secondary Education**

In the United States, when students (usually around eighteen years old) finish secondary school, there are two opportunities for additional education:

### **Higher education**

Typically a two-year associate's degree or four-year bachelor's degree in an academic program.

### **Vocational training**

Typically a year or two, designed for immediate employment in a trade (e.g., carpentry, electrical)

### **Graduate and Postgraduate Studies**

For students who have completed a bachelor's degree and need or want more specialized training, there are master's degree programs and doctorate (or doctoral) degree programs, the highest level of academic study offered in the US.

In many countries, graduate studies are called postgraduate studies and can take up to five years or more. In the US, the term postgraduate studies can refer to work after a master's degree program, including studies for a doctorate degree.

### **Types of Degrees you can earn in the US**

There are four main degrees you can earn in the US: **associate's, bachelor's, master's, and doctorate (or doctoral)**. Undergraduate degrees usually refer to anything up to a bachelor's degree, while *graduate* and *postgraduate studies* refer to master's and doctorate degrees.

### **Undergraduate**

There are two options for undergraduate studies in the US: a two-year associate's degree and a four-year bachelor's degree.

#### **Associate's degree**

A typical associate's degree takes two years to earn. Community colleges are the most common types of schools that offer an associate's degree. According to the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC), there are almost "1,200 two-year,

associate degree-granting institutions and more than 12 million students” enrolled in these colleges.

### **Bachelor’s degree**

A bachelor’s degree is a four-year undergraduate program that is more general than a graduate degree. You choose a focus for your academic studies, called a major. In addition to courses in a major, you will take required core curriculum or general education classes that develop critical thinking and communication skills.

### **Graduate and Postgraduate Studies**

Graduate studies are only available to students who have completed a bachelor’s degree. The options for graduate or postgraduate programs are a master’s degree and a doctorate degree. Both master’s and doctoral programs are focused on a specific academic subject.

### **Master’s degree**

Master’s degrees take one or two years and require you to complete a thesis (a large, well-documented essay) or project before you receive your degree.

### **Doctorate degree**

Doctoral program length depends on whether you need to complete a master’s degree first and how long it takes to complete a dissertation, or research paper or project, that serves as the focus of your degree studies. With any paper or project, a faculty member will serve as a director or advisor.

### **Types of Bachelor’s Degrees**

- **BA** – Bachelor of Arts, for liberal arts majors in humanities and social sciences
- **BFA** – Bachelor of Fine Arts, for creative arts, such as music or dance
- **BS** – Bachelor of Science, for business, engineering, health sciences, math, sciences, and other tech fields

### **Types of Master’s Degrees**

- **MA** – Master of Arts

- **MBA** – Master of Business Administration
- **MEd** – Master of Education
- **MS** – Master of Science

### **Types of Doctorate Degrees**

- **EdD** – Doctor of Education
- **MD** – Doctor of Medicine
- **PhD** – Doctor of Philosophy

### Non-Degree Programs

While most international students come to the United States for academic programs, some students enroll in technical or vocational colleges designed for job training, like flight school or air traffic control programs. These programs may earn you a particular certification rather than a degree.

International students may also take other types of continuing education or certification courses, which can help you gain expertise in a particular skill set, like a software program or foreign language. Some courses are in addition to degree studies, while others may count toward meeting licensing requirements to work in certain fields.

### Types of schools in the US

In your home country, the best colleges or universities may be public or run by the national or regional/state government. But in the United States, the federal government does not manage any college or university. The quality of education has nothing to do with whether a school calls itself a college or a university, or whether it is a state or a private college.

### **College VS. University**

In the United States, the words college and university are often used interchangeably. Some schools use the word institute (e.g., Massachusetts Institute of Technology, California Institute of Technology). Within larger universities in the US, there are different colleges or schools that represent different academic areas of study (e.g., College of Engineering, School of Business).

### **State College VS. Private College**

Rather than the federal government managing colleges or universities, the governments of the individual fifty states, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, and other US territories have the authority to operate, fund, and (in some cases) control public colleges and universities within their boundaries. These are public colleges or universities, and they tend to have large student populations.

Private colleges can operate on their own, without direct control from state or national governments. For instance, hundreds of private colleges in the US were founded by religious denominations or churches, such as the University of Dayton (affiliated with the Catholic Church) and University of the Pacific (a Methodist university).

### **Community Colleges**

Community colleges often cost significantly less than traditional colleges and universities and offer an education that provides workforce preparation or credits toward completing a bachelor's degree. At most community colleges, you typically earn an associate's degree over two years. Only some community colleges in select states offer bachelor's degrees. Approximately 100,000 international students currently attend community colleges in the United States.

## **Find the best college for you**

Getting to understand your options for higher education in the US is the preliminary step to begin your search for the perfect college!

There are several factors to consider when deciding which college or university is right for you: rankings and accreditations, academics and courses offered, location, size, and—most importantly—whether it accepts international students.

With thousands of colleges in the United States, take your time exploring all of your options. You may find that the best choice for you is not the most obvious.

### **How to find colleges and universities in the US**

You may know about specific United States colleges and universities from rankings, athletics,



or because they are schools that your friends or family attended. As you research where to study in the US, remember to be open to many possibilities, especially about schools that are new to you. There are hundreds of American universities where you can receive a high-quality education, even if you have never heard of them. Identifying colleges and universities that are a good fit for your academic and social needs is crucial to your college application process.

### **Research Online**

Begin your search for colleges online. Give yourself plenty of time for this phase of the process, as there is a lot of information!

### **Speak to a College Advisor**

Speaking to a US higher education expert, one who is properly trained and certified by an external organization, is a great way to understand which colleges match your academic interests, personal preferences, and professional goals. This can save time compared to researching online—and can help you quickly focus on the universities and colleges that have what you want.

### **Attend a College Fair**

If there are college or university fairs in your city, town, or school featuring US higher education institutions, try to attend so you can meet these representatives of American universities in person.

### **College Websites**

One of the most reliable sources of information is the college's website. Almost everything you want to know – from the choice of majors and programs to dormitories to application details – everything can be found on the website. Not just this information, websites are generally illustrative of a school, its students, and its mission.

### **Web-Based Portal Programs**

Many high schools offer online portals that allow students to research, track, and plan their college admissions. These are usually free of charge to students and families. The most common and widespread program is Naviance, Rhode Island Higher Education Assistance Authority sponsors (Waytogori.org).

### **Search Tools**

College search tools on the internet are an easy and fun way to do your research. These sites offer a large number of databases of comprehensive information on thousands of colleges and universities. Some sites also act as portals with direct links to the home pages of colleges. Other sites also allow students to help identify schools by inputting different criteria, such as location, academic interests, affiliations, GPA, etc., Some of the most widely used sites are:

- The College Board ([collegeboard.org](http://collegeboard.org))
- The US Department of Education ([nces.ed.gov/collegenavigator](http://nces.ed.gov/collegenavigator))
- The Princeton Review ([princetonreview.com](http://princetonreview.com))
- US News and World Report ([colleges.usnews.rankingsandreviews.com/best-colleges](http://colleges.usnews.rankingsandreviews.com/best-colleges))

### **Understanding a college's academic reputation**

In America, there is no ministry of higher education, and the U.S. Department of Education does not determine which colleges or universities may operate. There are no official US university rankings or accreditations by the federal government. Instead, several organizations rank colleges each year, and accreditation groups enable colleges to operate.

### **Accreditation**

Accreditation is an indicator of the quality of an academic program at a university or college. When in doubt, only choose accredited US colleges and universities for your academic studies. Employers in your home country and postgraduate programs will likely only recognize degrees from accredited schools.

Accreditation also ensures that your course credits are likely to count if you need to transfer from one college to another. For example, credits from an unaccredited college would not transfer to an accredited college.

In the US education system, the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) has the

authority to accredit or approve various accrediting bodies in the US. It oversees six regional accreditation groups that enable nearly all public and private nonprofit colleges and universities to operate.

### **College Rankings**

While many countries have official government lists that rate the top universities in their own nations (e.g., league tables in the UK), in the United States there are no public standardized college rankings.

Instead, several private organizations determine the college criteria that indicates the quality of education in the US. These organizations annually rate and rank colleges within the US and around the world. Some, like U.S. News & World Report, rank universities and colleges in several categories, including Top Universities for International Students, helping you narrow your search. Graduate students will want to look at U.S. News & World Report's Best Graduate Schools.

### **Rankings to Consider**

Each ranking group has a different methodology for selecting the top-tier schools that make their lists. Most factor in teaching and education quality, faculty research, and academic reputation, among other criteria.

### **US College Rankings**

U.S. News & World Report

Forbes

The Princeton Review

### **Global Rankings**

QS World University Rankings

Shanghai Ranking

Times Higher Education

## Factors to consider when choosing a college in the US

When choosing which schools to apply to, look at tests required (academic standardized and English proficiency tests), costs, scholarships, international student services, campus facilities, and internships and job placement rates. Based on your research, you can narrow your application list down to target only the colleges and universities that meet your needs.

If you are an undergraduate, you might look closer at campus amenities, while graduate students—who are living on campus or not—might consider the area's off-campus quality of life, too.

- **Curriculum, courses, and majors:** Which college's academic program appeals to your interests and study style most? Consider whether you want more flexibility in your major or whether you seek an intensive, directed course from the start.
- **Campus environment and climate:** City, suburban, rural, consolidated campus versus distributed campus – the value of warm weather cannot be overestimated for some students!
- **Student mix:** Is the college co-educational or single-sex? Are there students from all over the country/world with different backgrounds and experiences?
- **Size of school:** Undergraduates/graduates, student-to-faculty ratio, average class size, and professors versus teaching assistants taking entry-level classes.
- **Opportunities for further studies and employment:** Research, professional schools, internships, and graduate placements.
- **Alumni network:** Domestic, international, strength, and accessibility.
- **Facilities, extracurricular activities, and sports:** Access to laboratories, computing centers, music, theater, athletic facilities, and competitive sports teams.
- **Cost versus prestige:** Financial aid or a brand college? Decide what is more important - lightening your financial burden and being a merit scholar with special status or privileges on campus, or going to a well-known college familiar to your friends and family.

## Questions for Undergraduate Students

As an undergraduate, you will likely spend a lot of your time on campus, so the campus experience is a crucial part of your decision. To narrow down the colleges on your application list, answer these questions:

- What do I want to study?
- Do I want to attend a large university or a small college?
- Should I go to a public college or a private college?
- Would I be happier at a college campus that is in the countryside, a small town, or a city?
- Which types of campus activities and student organizations do I want to join?

Colleges list their class size and average student-to-faculty ratio (i.e., how many students are on campus for every faculty member) on their websites so you can easily get a sense of the class sizes at the colleges that interest you. College websites will also list the programs available, as well as activities and student organizations.

## Applying to Colleges

At this point, you may have a short list of colleges where you want to apply—ideally, around five to ten universities in the United States.

When applying to US colleges and universities, be ready for a fairly complex, lengthy, and sometimes confusing process. But the right approach and appropriate guidance can make the application process easier.

### **Documents needed for your US college applications**

To streamline your application process, make sure you have everything you need to complete your applications ahead of time. Beyond filling out the application form, each university or college will have its own required application checklist. You will also need a valid passport, payment for your application fees, and, for some colleges, proof of financing.

### **College Application Forms**

While most colleges have their own application forms online, prospective undergraduate

international students may also be able to use the Common Application to apply to one (or more) of nearly 900 US colleges and universities.

### **Standardized Tests**

As an international student applicant, you will need to take at least one test to determine your English proficiency. You may also need to take other standardized tests to demonstrate academic proficiency. Ask in advance—a growing number of undergraduate colleges and graduate departments are now test-optional when it comes to the SAT/ACT or GRE/GMAT.

#### **English Proficiency Tests**

- Duolingo
- IELTS
- iTEP
- PTE Academic
- TOEFL

#### **Undergraduate Academic Standardized Tests**

- ACT
- SAT

### **Academic Transcripts**

For most colleges in the US education system, your academic records (translated into English) will be the most important piece of the admissions evaluation process. For undergraduate applicants, that means submitting transcripts from every institution you have previously attended: your complete secondary school academic transcripts, external exams, and (for transfer students) any prior colleges or universities. For graduate applicants, it means submitting official copies of undergraduate (and any graduate) degree transcripts of coursework taken.

### **Essays**

More selective colleges and universities will require an essay (for undergraduate applicants)

or statement of purpose (for graduate applicants). Each school will have its own essay topic. Topics may be as broad as “What do you want to do with your life?” or as specific as “What event has had the biggest impact on you?”

### **Letters of Recommendation**

Some selective colleges and universities will require you to submit Letters of Recommendation along with your transcripts and essays. Letters of recommendation should be written by someone who has either taught you in a class and can speak to your academic abilities, or by an advisor who can provide a more well-rounded perspective on the kind of person you are.

### **Interviews**

The most competitive colleges may require an interview, which you can do on campus, online via Zoom or a similar video conference program, or with staff or alumni living abroad.

### **Application Deadlines**

For new international undergraduate students considering US colleges and universities, applications are generally accepted as early as a year before the academic term you wish to join. Each college sets its own application deadline.

### **Early Decision**

Early Decision is a good choice for students who have selected a definite top-choice college and can submit a compelling application early in the process. Students may only apply to one school as Early Decision, and the application is binding, meaning the student must attend if admitted. ED applications must be submitted in their entirety, usually on November 1 or November 15.

### **Early Action**

Early Action applications are not binding, so an offer of admission doesn't mean you must enroll. You may apply to other schools simultaneously. Given this, Early Action is a good decision for students who have decided that they definitely want to apply to a particular school and who are ready to submit their applications in November. Typically, you will find out if you are accepted within a month of the application deadline and before January 1.

### **Single-Choice Early Action/Restricted Early Action**

Single-Choice Early Action or Restricted Early Action is similar to Early Action in that students are not bound to attend if accepted. However, with the Single-Choice Early Action restriction, students cannot apply early to any other school, be it Early Action or Early Decision, until they have heard back from their Single-Choice Early Action school. Some Ivy League and other highly-selective schools use this early-round option.

### **Regular Decision**

Regular Decision means that applications must be submitted by a set date in your senior year, usually January 1 or 15, or February 1. The college then takes action on all the applications and notifies all students of admissions decisions simultaneously. Notification dates are in the spring of the senior year, usually around April 1. If accepted, you must notify the college by May 1 of your intent to accept or decline their offer of admission.

### **Rolling Admissions**

Schools with rolling admissions policies mean they will accept applications throughout the year for the next academic term (or year). Typically, you will find out if you are admitted as early as a few days or within three to four weeks of application.

### **Accepting an offer and enrolling at a college or university**

Once your application has been completed and all supporting materials received, you will generally get an email or letter notifying you when decisions are made and when you can expect to hear about the next steps.

If you are admitted to a college, congratulations! Here is what to do next.

### **Deciding between multiple offers**

If you have multiple offers, it is helpful to go back to the criteria you used when deciding where to apply. Think about what you have learned since applying— any interactions with representatives, students, or recent graduates—and what you know about life on each



campus. If you can, seek out current students, ideally from your home country, to get their opinions as you make your final decision. Your ultimate goal is to find the college or university that fits you best across multiple criteria.

### **Securing your Spot**

Your admissions letter will list next steps to accept your offer, how to receive the I-20 form needed to apply for your student visa, and the dates to arrive on campus for the beginning of classes. Many universities might set a deadline date for sending in your tuition deposit and possibly a housing deposit to hold your place for the next academic year.

### **Applying for your F-1 Student Visa**

You should receive your I-20 document, otherwise known as the Certificate of Eligibility for Nonimmigrant (F-1) Student Status, either with your admissions letter or once you have paid your deposit and documented that you have the funding available for at least one year of academic study. The document is produced by your school and comes from the Student and Exchange Visitor Information System (SEVIS).