

Enrolment into an undergraduate (UG) program is contingent upon successful completion of twelve years of schooling. A Bachelor's degree in the US typically takes four years to be completed. The two most common Bachelor's degrees are the Bachelor of Arts (BA) and the Bachelor of Science (BS). An Associate of Arts (AA) or Associate of Science (AS) degree can also be earned by high school graduates after 2 years of study, and some institutions consider these valid educational credentials for enrolment into the third year of a Bachelor's degree program. UG education can be pursued either at a four-year college or a university. Colleges and universities may be privately controlled or state-supported. Institutional control – whether public or private – has no bearing on the quality of academic programs.

The academic year generally runs from mid-August to the end of May. It is divided into either semesters, quarters or trimesters. In addition, universities provide six to eight-week summer terms which are optional. A four-year UG program generally requires the student to complete 120 credit hours. The most common method of measuring the academic performance is by calculating a grade point average (GPA) on a 4 point scale. At the end of each term, the letter grades (A, B, C, D, and E or F) are converted into numerals with A = 4, B=3, and so forth; their sum is averaged to determine the GPA.

**STRUCTURE OF EDUCATION:** The four years of UG education are termed **freshman, sophomore, junior and senior years**. Generally, the UG curriculum consists of four general areas of study, each utilizing about one-quarter of the course work required for a bachelor's degree.

**MAJOR:** This is the primary area of concentration (e.g. English literature, Anthropology, Chemistry, Electrical Engineering, Mathematics etc.) leading to a degree. The US system of higher education is flexible, and students can even earn double majors.

**GENERAL EDUCATION COURSES:** These usually include English, mathematics, sciences, humanities and the social sciences and a foreign language.

**ELECTIVES:** Students elect specific courses within each of these four areas that both interest and prepare them for the program they wish to pursue.

**LIBERAL ARTS PHILOSOPHY:** The UG curriculum is based on a liberal arts philosophy, requiring students to take courses from a broad range of subjects, thus giving them the opportunity to explore various fields of study such as the physical sciences, the natural sciences, and the social sciences or humanities. These are called general education requirements or distribution requirements, which attempt to produce well-rounded students with a broader understanding of the world. At the end of the second year, students eventually choose a major or a specific field of study. Students subsequently end up taking related courses

which build directly to their major during the last two years of their studies. Most liberal arts colleges may not offer majors in the technical or scientific disciplines as comprehensive colleges and universities do. However, there are “3-2” programs where liberal arts colleges have agreements with research universities to help students who want to get two Bachelor's degrees. In the first three years, students focus on the arts and sciences, planning course selection with an advisor and then transfer to the partner university majoring in a specific technical field. They spend two years here and emerge with two Bachelor's degrees in five years. Admissions to these programs are very competitive. Certain colleges and universities offering engineering or business offer a more structured curriculum than liberal arts schools.

## SCHOLARSHIPS

There are different types of scholarships such as those based on need, merit or athletic ability. Seeking scholarships or financial aid as a foreign student is an extremely competitive process. Receiving full or substantial scholarships covering total expenses is rare but not impossible. Partial aid is selectively given on the basis of academic ability and, at times, need. It is intended to supplement the amount provided by the student's family and other sources. Students and their families will be expected to provide detailed information regarding their finances to support costs towards their UG education. Outstanding students possessing exceptional talent and well-rounded backgrounds and high test scores should apply to colleges and universities which offer scholarships for international students.

## THE COLLEGE ADMISSIONS PROCESS

Application deadlines vary. The more selective institutions usually have early deadlines. Others vary from January to March and beyond. Some schools have rolling admissions with no fixed deadlines.

When it comes to applying for admission at a US college or university, there are different types of admissions processes you may encounter.

As an international student, you should submit your application ahead of time. Depending on the competitiveness of the U.S. institution, it is possible that it may be more difficult to be accepted in one than the other, either because the school's academic standards are very high, or it receives an extremely large pool of applications compared to the number of students who can be admitted.

**Early admissions:** Some selective schools offer an early admissions process called **Early Decision** and **Early Action**. Those applying for Early Decision are eligible to apply to only one school and if admitted, then they are bound by the commitment to pursue their education at that particular school. Consider this option only if you are convinced that you would be willing to attend the school, if you were accepted. Early Action deadlines are usually

ahead of the regular admissions deadline and students have the option of applying to more than one school. If admitted, they have the option of choosing the best school. Since both processes are highly selective, students with exceptional talent and promise, strong academic records and high standardized test scores should consider applying early.

**Open admissions:** Schools that offer an open admissions policy accept applications on a continuous basis, sometimes throughout the year. This is also known as a “rolling admissions” policy: many schools will accept students who apply as long as they meet standard academic requirements. Open admissions can be an attractive option for students, because it offers the most flexibility and allows you to go through the admissions process whenever you are ready.

Please note that all enclosures of your application should have reached the college or university before the deadline as applications are processed on a first-come-first-served basis.

## ADMISSION REQUIREMENTS

Each regionally accredited college or university in the US is autonomous and therefore sets its own admission standards, resulting in varied admission requirements. Admission standards and selectivity vary from school to school. Admission requirements for undergraduate studies generally involve a close examination of academic records of school education (9th to 12th grade or its equivalent).

Students are required to take standardized tests. The SAT Reasoning Test is popular; another standardized test such as the ACT is also accepted by several universities. The TOEFL or the IELTS, increasingly, is required to demonstrate proficiency in English. In addition, selective colleges and universities may require the SAT Subject Tests. Certificates of merit or diplomas earned by participating in extracurricular activities -- academic as well as non-academic -- are also evaluated, and can enhance your chances of success.

The cost of higher education in the U.S. can range from \$18,000 to around \$50,000 or more per academic year. Tuition is usually lower for community colleges than for four-year colleges and universities. State colleges and universities are often, but not always, less expensive than private institutions. In addition to tuition, expenses for books and supplies, food, housing, medical treatment and health insurance, summer and vacation living costs and other miscellaneous costs substantially raise the financial requirements for academic study in the U.S.

## COMPLETING THE APPLICATION

Complete the online application forms well before the deadline. You can also download the application form and mail it along with a non-refundable application fee, with documentary proof of financial support, official academic records, official test scores, application essays, letters of recommendation, and supplementary materials as appropriate.

Most universities include a Declaration and Certificate of Finances form in their application packets. This must be signed by your parents, or whoever is meeting your college expenses, and must be supported by an official bank letter.

All colleges will ask you to submit official transcripts in addition to your mark sheets. A transcript is a detailed version of the mark-sheet, specifying the courses and the duration of the program and how the student was assessed in each course.

Some institutions require one or more essays about the student, his or her interests and goals. The essays provide an opportunity to communicate positive factors that balance any weakness and discuss his or her areas of special interest and any educational or career goals. Some universities specify essay topics on which a student is expected to express his or her views. These essays are important to craft carefully – they are read carefully and can make a difference.

Colleges generally ask for 2 to 3 letters of recommendation. These must come from your teacher or faculty or the head of your institution.

Finally, keep in mind that your application will be reviewed in an international pool. Universities and colleges receive applications from students all over the world. So, not everyone will be accepted. All colleges and universities have a set of institutional values and needs impacting admissions decisions each year. The process of getting into an American university or a college involves several factors, indicators and characteristics about you as an individual, weighed against goals and priorities set by each school. It is your responsibility to find the right match by selecting a university or a college that best meets your needs; work hard on your applications.

Once admitted, you will receive the I-20 (Certificate of eligibility). In order to enter the US, you should apply for a student visa (F-1).

For details on F-1 visa requirements, please visit the website: <http://newdelhi.usembassy.gov/consular.html> and also attend the visa seminars organized by USIEF.

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