



# The International Student's Guide to US Colleges and Universities

How to find and apply to the best colleges for your professional goals

# Welcome!

Congratulations on taking your first step toward studying in the United States.

Attending college in the US is an incredible decision for your future. Each year, more than one million international students study in the US for our universities' challenging academics, unmatched career support, and amazing cultural diversity.

This step-by-step guide to understanding American colleges and universities will help answer all your questions, from understanding the US higher education system to finding welcoming colleges that are right for you.

We hope you find this guide useful in your search for the right college in the United States—and remember, our advisors are always available to help. Get in touch today and see how we can help make your dreams of studying in the US become a reality.

Sincerely,

Tom Dretler



A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Tom Dretler', written in a cursive style.

Shorelight CEO & Co-founder

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Over 1 million international students studied in the US in 2019.



# Understand your options for US higher education

## TOPICS IN THIS SECTION

- ✓ How is the US higher education system structured?
- ✓ What types of degrees can I earn?
- ✓ What is the difference between universities and colleges?

If you want to study in the United States, it helps to first understand the country's educational system, as it may be different from yours.

For international students in British-styled education systems, you may have had thirteen years of education before entering a university degree program. Other countries may only have eleven years of pre-university level studies.

Typically, for students enrolled in higher education in the United States, colleges and universities require twelve years of education. For how long you need to study in the US will depend on the kind of degree you want to earn and the specific program.



# 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.

### WORDS TO KNOW

## School

*School* often refers to divisions with K-12 learners. But within colleges and universities, *schools* can be considered a subdivision of a university's academic areas (e.g., School of Engineering). It can also be used as a slang term in reference to universities, themselves (e.g., "How many schools are you applying to?").

# 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 school 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

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### **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

#### TYPES OF SCHOOLS IN THE US

1,626  
public

1,687  
private

985  
for-profit

[National Center for Education Statistics, 2017](#)

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.

#### INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS STUDYING IN THE US

[Institute of International Education, 2018-19](#)

431,930  
undergraduate

377,943  
graduate /postgraduate

62,341  
non-degree

223,085  
[Optional Practical Training \(OPT\)](#)





### TOPICS IN THIS SECTION

- ✓ Where can I research all my options?
- ✓ How do I know if a college has a good reputation?
- ✓ What should I consider besides ranking?

## 2 Find the best college for you

Now that you understand your options for higher education in the US, it is time 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.

## 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!

### Associate's, bachelor's, master's, and doctorate degrees

U.S. Department of Education [College Navigator](#)

### Undergraduate degrees

College Board's [Big Future](#)

#### FUN FACT

If you consider only US colleges and universities ranked in the top 10% globally, you'd be considering 400 to 500 schools!

#### 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.

[EducationUSA](#), the U.S. Department of State's network, has over 400 educational advising centers in more than 170 countries, so you can visit a center in or near your home region for more information. Additionally, Shorelight's dedicated [enrollment counselors](#) help international students find US universities that meet their needs.

4,000

Number of accredited US colleges and universities

#### CHECK A SCHOOL'S ACCREDITATION

Use the U.S. Department of Education's online [Database of Accredited Postsecondary Institutions and Programs](#)

## 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.

## 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.

Most online education, career and vocational training, English as

## CAN YOU ATTEND?

Before you get too invested in a particular university or college, make sure the school is legally certified to issue the I-20 forms that you will need to apply for a student visa. You can find a list of certified colleges on the [Department of Homeland Security website](#).

a Second Language (ESL) instruction, and for-profit private colleges are accredited by national accrediting groups.

Within each institution, there may be several academic programs that also have a national program accreditor as well (e.g., [ABET](#) is an accreditor that focuses on the quality of science, technology, engineering, and math—or STEM—programs). Program accreditations are signs of academic quality, too.

All [Shorelight partner universities](#) are accredited, including [American University](#), [University of the Pacific](#), and [University of Utah](#), which have outstanding accredited programs in many fields, such as accounting, [business](#), [computer science](#), [engineering](#), [finance](#), and [law](#).

### PRIMARY GROUPS THAT GRANT ACCREDITATION

[ABET](#)—for engineering, engineering technology, computing, and applied and natural sciences programs. Approximately 800 colleges in thirty-two countries have ABET accreditation, with more than 580 programs in the US.

[American Bar Association \(ABA\)](#)—for law programs. There are more than 200 accredited law institutions and programs in the US.

[Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business \(AACSB\)](#)—for business and accounting programs. Only 856 institutions worldwide have this accreditation, including 534 business and 179 accounting programs in the US.

[Commission on Collegiate Nursing Education \(CCNE\)](#)—for nursing programs. There are around 1,000 CCNE-accredited nursing degree programs in the US.

[Liaison Committee on Medical Education \(LCME\)](#)—for medical schools. More than 150 US institutions have LCME accreditation.

See [all the higher education accreditation organizations](#)

### SHORELIGHT PARTNER UNIVERSITY RANKINGS

[Auburn University](#)  
#27 Best First-Year Experience

[University of Kansas](#)  
#59 Top Public Schools

[University of the Pacific](#)  
#7 Best Ethnic Diversity

All rankings from *U.S. News & World Report*

### 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](#).

The good news: when it comes to the US institutions listed in various world university rankings, they are *all* accredited, top-tier colleges and universities.

### 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](#)

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Every Shorelight partner university is within the top 250 on the *U.S. News & World Report's* Best National Universities rankings.



#### DID YOU KNOW?

More international students choose to study in the USA than in any other country.

### HOW US COLLEGES COMPARE TO COLLEGES IN OTHER COUNTRIES

Because there are more than 4,000 accredited universities and colleges in the United States, a top-200 school in the US might be a top-10 school in a country with only 150 universities. For example, compare these institutions:

#### American University

- **Ranked #77** in the *U.S. News & Worlds Report's* Best National Universities category in the US
- Ranked in the **601-650 range** by QS Top Universities

#### Sichuan University

- Ranked a **top-thirty university in China**, according to the *U.S. News & Worlds Report's* Best Global Universities
- Ranked in the **601-650 range** by QS Top Universities

#### Florida International University

- **Ranked #218** on the *U.S. News & Worlds Report's* Best National Universities category in the United States
- **Ranked #417** globally

#### Indian Institute of Technology (IIT)

- **Ranked #1** in India
- **Ranked #513** globally

So, a US university ranked near the top 200 might be perceived to be better ranked than the top university in India!

### 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.

Remember, you also want to take into account the location within the United States, including the climate and surrounding area. If you prefer sunny weather year-round, colleges in Florida and Southern California may move toward the top of your list. If you like to ski, you may want to consider colleges in Utah or the Northeast region of the US.

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.

#### TOP FIVE STATES HOSTING INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

1. California
2. New York
3. Texas
4. Massachusetts
5. Illinois

Institute of International Education, 2018-19



40% of undergraduate students begin their first year in college undecided about their major.

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### ACADEMIC OPTIONS

For many international students, the focus of your academic studies might be the most important factor when choosing colleges in the United States. For undergraduate students with multiple academic interests, you may be able to complete a double major. Or, you may decide to add a minor (a secondary academic focus that requires about half the total classes taken for a major).

You do not have to commit to your focus of study right away: in the United States, most students change their minds on what their major will be during their time in college.

>> **LEARN MORE** about majors and how to choose one in **SECTION 4**.

If you have completed your bachelor's degree, searching for graduate or postgraduate programs can be a simpler process. After all, you likely already know which academic subject will be the focus of your advanced degree, so you can focus on schools that offer that specific program.

### WORDS TO KNOW

## Liberal arts

Areas of study covering humanities subjects like English literature, foreign language, history, mathematics, natural sciences, and social studies. Liberal arts colleges offer a well-rounded education with a solid foundation for many future careers, including law, education, journalism, and more.

### COST

Simply put, studying at American universities is expensive. The cost of college is charged by the year, and the yearly price covers college tuition, fees, living expenses, books and supplies, and health insurance.

But what is different about paying for college in the United States is that there may be academic, athletic, artistic, and even service-based scholarships available, or need-based financial aid

(like grants for international students), depending on the university or college you attend. With your family, you will need to determine how much you can afford each year to support your study in the United States.

While graduate programs are generally shorter than undergraduate programs, the costs are similar and sometimes even less per year. Wherever you apply, ask the graduate school offices where you apply about the scholarships, assistantships, and fellowships available to international graduate students.

When it comes to paying for college, do not rule out certain universities based on their total costs. Check and see if those pricey colleges offer any financial aid for international students to help cover expenses.

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## 89% of recent international student alumni believe their US education was a good investment

World Education Services, international student satisfaction survey

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### 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.



## QUESTIONS FOR GRADUATE STUDENTS

Since you know what you want to study, look closely at the specific academic department that offers your degree program: see which concentrations in your discipline are possible, and identify faculty members with similar research interests who could serve as potential mentors or advisors. Take a close look at the degree types and their specific requirements—a master's of business administration (MBA) may be very different from a master's in international business (MIB), for example. Your research should provide clarity toward which programs most closely offer the coursework, connections, and opportunities that match your professional goals.

To help you get closer to a decision on where to apply to graduate school, answer these questions:

- When can I start my graduate degree program? Does the university bring in new students in the fall (August–September), spring (January–February), or even the summer (May–June)?
- Will the application require any standardized tests, like the **GRE** or **GMAT**?
- Is graduate-student or married-student housing available on campus?
- Can I get an internship or co-op while in the program?
- Are there support services for international students?





## TOPICS IN THIS SECTION

- ✓ What do I need to apply to a US college?
- ✓ Am I considered a transfer student?
- ✓ How do you enroll at a school?

# 3 Apply to college

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.

The college application process is not meant to be done alone. A dedicated **college guidance counselor or advisor can assist you** through the college admissions process.

## 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.

There is no Common App for graduate applicants. Instead, you will typically submit your applications through the college's own website.

If you are applying to Shorelight partner universities, you can use one online application to apply to multiple institutions for both undergraduate and graduate programs.

### ENGLISH PROFICIENCY TESTS

- Duolingo
- IELTS
- iTEP
- PTE Academic
- TOEFL

### UNDERGRADUATE TESTS

- ACT
- SAT

### GRADUATE TESTS

- DAT
- GMAT
- GRE
- LSAT
- MCAT

## 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 (including Shorelight partner universities) when it comes to the SAT/ACT or GRE/GMAT.

## ARE YOU A TRANSFER STUDENT?

If you have already done some undergraduate coursework, you may be considered a transfer student. This can change application requirements, particularly those related to standardized test requirements, application deadlines, and class start dates. Some colleges and universities may only take transfer undergraduate or graduate applicants for the fall term, while others let transfer students start in spring or even summer.

The classes you have already taken may count toward your bachelor's degree requirements. These are called transfer credits. Transfer programs at US colleges and universities are designed for students who have not taken more than two years of study and, at many colleges, no more than two years of course credit can be applied toward fulfilling degree requirements.

If you are considering transferring to a US college or university, Shorelight advisors are available for assistance.

**>> LEARN MORE about credits in SECTION 4.**

## ACADEMIC RECORDS

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 AND RECOMMENDATIONS

More selective colleges and universities will require an essay (for undergraduate applicants) or statement of purpose (for graduate applicants) and letters of recommendation. 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 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.

## INTERVIEW

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.

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## 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. For example, if you wanted to start at the [University of Illinois at Chicago](#) in late August 2020, you could have applied for admission as early as September 2019. Each college sets its own application deadline.

### EARLY DECISION OR EARLY ACTION

These deadlines, usually in November, give undergraduate applicants a chance to get an acceptance decision as far in advance as possible (e.g., nine to ten months before classes start). Typically, you will find out if you are accepted within a month of the application deadline and before January 1.

However, applying early decision often requires you to commit to enroll if you are admitted—which means you will have to withdraw your other college applications. Early decision applications are designed for students who know exactly where they want to go.

### REGULAR ADMISSIONS DEADLINES

Many US universities and colleges have application deadlines in January or February for start dates in August or September. Typically, you will be notified if you are admitted in March or early April.

### ROLLING ADMISSIONS

Schools with rolling admissions policies, like many Shorelight partner universities, 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.

### GRADUATE ADMISSIONS

For graduate or postgraduate international applicants, the “how to apply” process can be different for each program at the same US college or university, and may even be different for master’s versus doctoral programs in the same department.

So, be sure to pay very close attention to the details you receive in any communications from those departments or to what is posted on their websites.

For many doctoral programs, applicants are only considered for fall entry (August/September) with application deadlines between December and February. If you miss the application deadline, you may have to wait a whole year before you can apply again.

>> **LEARN MORE** about the US academic calendar in **SECTION 4**.

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## 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 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.

Of course, for many families, choosing where to attend university in the United States will involve a discussion on funding. If you get more financial help from one college and your net cost of education would be much lower than anywhere else, that may be the place to go. In the end, however, you are the one who has to live, eat, study, and thrive at the college or university you choose. The goal is to find the institution 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 American universities will set a deadline date for sending in a tuition deposit and possibly a housing deposit (deposit amounts will vary by college) to hold your place for the next academic year. If you have not paid your deposit by the deadline, you could lose your spot at that college.

### **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). SEVIS was created in 2003 to serve as the central clearinghouse for all

F, M, and J visa students and exchange visitors who study in the United States. This important document contains much of the personal information about you (full name, birth date, SEVIS ID numbers, academic program, English proficiency standard, start date, and funding sources).

As you prepare for your eventual visa interview at the US embassy or consulate nearest you, follow these steps to apply with confidence.

1. Pay a \$350 I-901 SEVIS Fee online (and keep the SEVIS fee receipt you are sent electronically).
2. Apply for your non-immigrant visa (online DS-160 form).
3. Schedule your visa interview at the US embassy or consulate.
4. Complete the interview.





#### TOPICS IN THIS SECTION

- ✓ What do I need to do before I leave home?
- ✓ What is campus life like?
- ✓ How will I be graded?

## 4 Thrive on campus

You may be just starting your college search, but it helps to know what studying in the United States is like before you arrive on campus. After all, the American college experience is a major reason why so many international students choose to study in the United States!

## Preparing for your move to campus

Once you have enrolled at a college and you have your visa, it is time to head to campus! Your US college or university will tell you when you need to arrive for the beginning of the academic term or orientation. (Note that orientation may be optional.) Consider arriving early: it is a good idea to give yourself as much preparation time as possible before your first day of classes.

### IMPORTANT DATES FOR IMMIGRATION REGULATIONS

- Arrive in the US no more than thirty days in advance of the start date on your I-20
- You must arrive by that I-20 program start date

### ACADEMIC CALENDAR

In the American education system, the academic year typically begins in August or September. Depending on the university, the academic year may be divided into quarters, trimesters, or semesters, and will run until May or June. For colleges that follow semesters, the fall semester runs from late August or early September to mid-December, and the spring semester runs from January through May.

### TALK TO YOUR COUNSELOR

If possible, attend a pre-departure orientation or an in-country physical or virtual event with your counselor or university to prepare for travel and to meet others attending US universities. Be sure to let your counselor know when you will be arriving at the airport, and add their phone number and email address to your contact lists.

### HAVE ALL YOUR PAPERWORK EASILY ACCESSIBLE

Before you get on the plane, double-check that you have all the required documents you will need to present at the border (I-20 form, financial documents, admissions letter, SEVIS fee receipt, passport with an F-1 student visa).

### WORDS TO KNOW

#### Semester

A common measurement for an academic term. Typically, colleges and universities have two semesters (fall and spring) in a required academic year. Each semester is approximately sixteen weeks long. Many universities also offer a summer semester for students who do not start in fall or for those who may want or need to take additional courses to accelerate or stay on track with their academic programs.

#### Quarter

An academic calendar variation that divides the year into four ten-week-long periods, with only three required (fall, winter, spring).

#### Trimester

An academic calendar that follows three terms—fall, winter, and spring. Each trimester is twelve to thirteen weeks long.

Keep official copies of your transcripts, immunization records, medications, and other essential items in your carry-on, too. At customs, you will be asked familiar questions. Answer truthfully, precisely, and confidently to have a smooth entry experience into the United States.

If you are attending a Shorelight partner university, a Shorelight counselor will pick you up at the airport and bring you to campus.

**>> LEARN MORE about student visas and how to apply for one in SECTION 3.**

## Campus experience

Once you arrive on campus, your first few days will be very busy: you will have orientation, steps to get settled in your new housing, and other programs for new students. There will likely be mandatory events just for new international students.

At Shorelight partner colleges and universities, you will take part in arrival and ongoing sessions to make you feel comfortable on campus and ease your transition to campus life. Sessions on international student regulations, housing, health insurance plans, on-campus

work options, activities and organizations, athletic events, and much more will make you feel welcome.

### CAMPUS JOBS AND CO-OPS

Once you are settled, you may want to explore the opportunity to work on campus. Legally, as a F-1 student visa holder, you can work up to twenty hours per week while classes are in session (if there are jobs on campus available for international students). You can work up to forty hours per week during vacation periods.

As you progress into your academic major, you may find internships, co-ops, or other off-campus work options related to your program. Many internships or co-ops may also offer credits toward your degree studies.





Keep an eye out for these opportunities and talk with your academic/faculty advisor and international student advisor about them so they can help you with immigration regulations and any permissions you will need before working off campus.

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## Classroom experience

In US colleges, class sizes can be as large as 400 students in an auditorium or as small as four students around a table. At larger state universities, you will likely find big class sizes in the first two years of study. At liberal arts colleges, smaller class sizes (ten to twenty students) are standard.

For instruction, professors and academic experts typically teach classes. Teaching assistants (often graduate students working for a professor) may teach large undergraduate lecture classes or smaller lab or discussion sections. In addition to teaching staff, you will have either an academic advisor or faculty advisor (once you declare an academic major as an undergraduate) who will help you choose classes and make sure you are on track for graduation.

### QUIZZES, TESTS, PAPERS, AND PROJECTS

On the first day of each class at the beginning of an academic term, you will likely receive a syllabus from the professor or instructor.

## You should not expect to have more than half your total classes in your intended major

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Minors are other academic focus areas in addition to a major, and typically require half as many classes as a major.

Concentrations are specializations within a major that allow you to explore a more specific area of study. For example, at the University of South Carolina, the department of history offers regional concentrations (e.g., Latin America, Middle East/North Africa, etc.) as well as thirteen different subject areas, such as political history, history of slavery, or history of religion.

**>> LEARN MORE** about finding the right school based on your academic area of interest in **SECTION 2**.

The syllabus covers what you can expect during the course—all the scheduled quizzes, tests, papers, and final exam requirements. Additionally, the syllabus will list the required textbooks and the reading that must be done for each class meeting.



In many classes, the syllabus will also break down what percentage of your course grade comes from papers, quizzes, tests, group projects, mid-term and final exams, and even classroom participation. (That's right—in many courses, your grade is impacted by your involvement in discussions!)

As a graduate student, you will have a required master's thesis/project or doctoral dissertation at the end of program. These could take anywhere from a few months, for a master's thesis, to two or more years, for a dissertation.

### CHOOSING A MAJOR, MINOR, OR CONCENTRATION

For undergraduates, majors represent what you are most interested in learning, and this focus prepares you for a career in a related field of study or to go on to graduate school. You may have selected your major before you enrolled, or you may choose it as you take courses in areas of interest, narrowing down what you want to do as you go.

The US education system is designed to teach life skills that will serve you well, no matter which career you choose after graduation. So, you will take a variety of courses, many outside your major, in order to get a degree.

For many international students, taking courses outside their intended academic field of study is a foreign concept. But US colleges and universities value liberal arts classes in subjects like English literature, foreign languages, and history, as well as mathematics, social studies, and natural sciences. These courses are considered important foundations for critical thinking, logical thought, and communications skills.

>> **LEARN MORE** about finding the right school based on your academic area of interest in SECTION 2.

**A** = 4.0 Best  
**B** = 3.0  
**C** = 2.0  
**D** = 1.0  
**F** = 0.0 Worst

### GRADING SYSTEM

Most US colleges use a combination of a 4.0 grade point average (GPA) scale and a letter grading system from A to F. Many American universities will also use a plus or minus (+/-)

after the letter. These grades allow for a different value on the 4.0 scale (e.g., A- = 3.7 and B+ = 3.3).

Some universities offer classes with Pass/Fail or Satisfactory/Unsatisfactory grades, but these will not impact your GPA.

### ACADEMIC CREDITS

You will usually take between three and six classes each academic term, and each class is given a certain number of academic credits. As long as you pass a course (e.g., a D grade or better) you will get credit for that course.

Most university classes are worth between three and five credits. The number of credits per class varies by the hours of instruction each week. For example, if you have a course that meets a total of three hours a week over the course of a sixteen-week semester, that course will typically be worth three credit hours. If you have three hours of instruction, plus an hour lab section each week, the course will likely be a four-credit sections.

Most bachelor's degrees require 120 to 133 credits, depending on the field of study, which comprises of forty to forty-four classes. Graduate degrees, including master's and doctorates, vary based on the specific program. Generally, you will need at least thirty credits, with some longer doctorate programs requiring as many credits as a bachelor's degree.

>> **LEARN MORE** about the types of degrees you can earn in the US in SECTION 1.

### SAMPLE FULL-TIME UNDERGRADUATE COURSE SCHEDULE

	YEAR 1	YEAR 2	YEAR 3	YEAR 4
Fall Semester	5 classes, 3 credits each	5 classes, 3 credits each	5 classes, 3 credits each	5 classes, 3 credits each
Spring Semester	5 classes, 3 credits each	5 classes, 3 credits each	5 classes, 3 credits each	5 classes, 3 credits each
<b>Total Credits Earned</b>	<b>30 Credits</b>	<b>60 Credits</b>	<b>90 Credits</b>	<b>120 Credits</b>



“No matter what your major is, American education lets students explore possibilities they may not have considered.”

**-NATCHA FROM THAILAND,  
AUBURN UNIVERSITY**

88% of international student alumni feel positive about their career prospects.

World Education Services, international student satisfaction survey

## Life after graduation

For international students who complete their degrees in the United States, roughly 60–65% choose to stay in the US for work opportunities. For F-1 student visa holders, that means one to three years of potential paid employment in your field of study, depending on your major. This work permission is called Optional Practical Training (OPT). If you enroll in a STEM major, you can have three years of OPT for each degree level (bachelor’s, master’s, and doctorate) you complete in the United States.

In fact, more than 20% of the million-plus international students in the United States during the 2018–19 academic year were in OPT.

You have researched schools, applied to your favorites, and, hopefully, enrolled in your dream school. Now it is time for a rewarding experience as an international student in the US! Go to classes, study hard, and make friends from around the world.

And remember: you do not have to go it alone.

The college search, application, and moving abroad processes each have numerous steps that are much easier to navigate with the help of an expert. Shorelight advisors can help you every step of the way, from finding the school that best meets your professional goals and personal needs, to walking you through the application process and helping you when you arrive in country.

**Talk to an advisor today to learn how Shorelight student services can help you make your dream of studying in the US a reality.**

# 5 We are invested in your success

Shorelight helps international students study at top US universities—and brings US university programs to students abroad. Our award-winning student services with one-on-one support help students through their entire educational journey—at no additional cost.



## **Research & Resources**

- Talk to an education advisor
- Verified tuition, rankings, & stats
- Helpful articles & tips

## **Application Assistance**

- Dedicated enrollment counselor
- Streamlined application process
- Help choosing a major

## **Student Visa & Pre-Arrival**

- Visa application & interview help
- Prep webinars & checklists
- Help with required college forms

## **Campus Transition**

- Airport welcome & campus tour
- Student & parent orientations
- Cultural group outings

## **Academic Support**

- Classes for your academic level
- English-language help
- Tutoring & mentoring

## **Career Development**

- Career Accelerator Program
- Internship & job search
- Resume, interview prep, & more

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