

Higher Education in the US



Before university

At the end of high school (12th grade), students graduate with a high school diploma and can then decide to go on to college or university.

Applying to university

There is an online selection process and students must submit:



1. Academic transcripts = official copies about their academic work. This includes “grades” and the “grade point average” (**GPA**), which are measurements of academic achievement over the past 3 or 4 years at high school. The GPA goes from 0.1 – 4.0.

2. Scores in standardised tests in maths, critical reading and writing e.g. the SAT - Scholastic Aptitude Test – or ACT American College Testing.

3. An essay about the student’s character and personality traits such as passion, drive, determination and perseverance. They write about their goals, achievements and aspirations; how they have overcome obstacles and adversity; they demonstrate leadership skills. It has to be unique, nuanced, compelling and relevant. American students have to learn how to sell themselves.

Extra-curricular activities are considered to be an extremely important part of American education and when applying for university, colleges are looking for “well-rounded” students - not just excellent grades like in France. They want students who have played an active role in their community and school; students with leadership experience such as the captain of a sports team, member of an orchestra or marching band, an active member of the National Science Team or debating club, involvement in theatre productions, a volunteer at a children’s hospital... Voluntary work, sports prowess, musical talent, organisational and leadership skills – different and varied interests are essential to the overall education and top schools will be looking for evidence of this. Scholarships are an important part of US university life and it is possible to get into a highly academic university based on sporting talent alone.

At university



In the US it takes 4 years to complete a Bachelor’s degree (= an undergraduate program).

A “major” is the main field of study of a degree. For example, if someone’s major is biology, they will earn a Bachelor of Science in Biology (BSc).

One important aspect of the American higher education system is that it is very flexible and broad: students in the US can (and do) change their major many times during their 1st and 2nd year (*Freshman* and *Sophomore* year). Students select courses, both **prerequisite courses**

(obligatory) and **elective courses** (optional), across several diverse and wide disciplines (literature, sciences, social sciences, languages...) in their 1st and 2nd years before specialising in a major field of study in their 3rd and 4th year (*Junior* and *Senior* year).

There are generally 15-20 hours of lectures a week. Half of students will have part-time jobs and by the junior and senior year, many students will do internships which are very well paid and will help the student pay back their student loans after graduation. For many students, it can take 20 years to pay back their student loans...

1. STATE COLLEGE OR UNIVERSITY

Each of the 50 US states operates at least one state university: for example Michigan State University and the University of Michigan. Some have an excellent reputation like UCLA (University of California) Berkeley.

For in-state students (of parents who have paid their taxes in that state), tuition fees would be around \$15,000 a year. For out-of-state students, it would be 3 times more expensive.

2. PRIVATE COLLEGE OR UNIVERSITY

States also have privately-run colleges and universities. All Ivy League universities are private and are highly selective and elitist. There are 8 in total. Tuition fees are around \$60,000 a year. Examples include Harvard, Princeton and Yale.

3. COMMUNITY COLLEGE

Community colleges are two-year colleges and are not as selective or expensive as university.

In the 2017 Shanghai Academic Ranking of World Universities, 8 of the universities in the top 10, were American.

Student Life

Freshmen live in university dorms which are shared rooms with shared bathrooms. The rules can be strict (no overnight guests...). In junior and senior year, students will move away from campus and rent a house/flat with more flexibility.

Whilst living in a dorm, students can choose (and pay...) to become part of a sorority or fraternity. These groups are focussed on community service and involve social obligations: they offer a social network not just at university but later on in life.

https://www.internationalstudentguidetotheusa.com/articles/american_education_system.htm

<https://www.studyusa.com/en/a/58/understanding-the-american-education-system>