

A COMMUNIQUE FROM THE CAREER CELL

Studying abroad is not easy. The entire process needs to be meticulously planned, and it is difficult for parents or guardian to identify the right institute and courses for their wards. The right time to begin planning is NOW.

There are a few common and important questions that most parents or guardians ask about higher education abroad, for their children. Here is our first presentation in the series of education abroad.

EDUCATION IN THE UNITED STATES

Education in the United States is provided in public and private schools and by individuals through home schooling.

Study levels in the US

- Elementary school
- Middle school/Junior high school
- High school
- Higher education

Primary, or elementary, education lasts until fifth grade, middle school or junior high school covers sixth through eighth grade, followed by secondary education in ninth through 12th grades. Secondary education can cover both college-preparatory curriculum or vocational training. Students normally attend 12 grades of study over 12 calendar years of primary/elementary and secondary education before graduating and earning a diploma that makes them eligible for admission to higher education.

Higher Education

There are two main options: a two-year associate's degree and a four-year bachelor's degree. Generally, associate's degrees are granted at two-year US community colleges, while bachelor's degrees are awarded from four-year colleges and universities.

Bachelor's degrees in the USA typically take 4 years to complete. The first 2 years include common required courses, such as math, history, literature, and communications. This develops a broad-based knowledge across many subject areas — an advantage for competing in the global workplace. The final 2 years focus on the your chosen "major" subject.

US bachelor's degrees are flexibly designed to allow students to change their major after 1 or 2 years. You can also add on a "minor" (a "mini-major") in a different subject, study more than one major, or get a head start on graduate studies through an accelerated degree program. Within your degree, you can have a huge choice of elective courses so you can customize it to your interests and strengths.

After a bachelor's degree, some students choose to continue on to a master's degree (also called a "graduate" degree).

Types of institutions

There are various types of institutions in the US that provide quality education. These can be categorised into:

Colleges

Smaller than the universities, colleges generally provide undergraduate degrees. Community colleges, an affordable study option in the US, offer two-year associate degrees after which you can continue your studies in the university for another two years to gain an undergraduate degree.

Universities

Offer research-based masters, doctoral and post-doctoral degrees. There are mainly two types of universities in the US

- Public universities: Mostly state universities, established and run by the state government
- Private universities: A mix of profit and not-for-profit supported by tuition fee and donations; approximately 20% of students attend private universities

Application Process

- Students need to submit separate applications to each U.S. graduate program that they want to apply to. Students can apply to as many universities as they wish, though for time and cost purposes we recommend you choose 4-6 universities. Each university will set its own deadlines, applications requirements, etc. Fortunately, most applications will follow a similar format, and you'll be able to re-use or adapt the materials you prepare for each application.
- Ideally, you should start the pre-application process about 14-18 months before you plan to begin your studies in the U.S.
- It is advisable to select as many as 20-30 universities to write to or email at first, although your final shortlist could be anywhere from 8 to 10 or more schools.
- Your pre-application request could be in the form of an email describing your educational background, degree and the program you intend to pursue in the U.S. (state the academic year you intend to enroll in - the year and the session), and proof of financial support (specify if you need financial assistance). Your request should be addressed to the appropriate official as mentioned on the website pertaining to international graduate admissions.
- Register for standardized admission tests: it is best to take the required standardized tests by October or November of the year before the Fall semester. If you are applying for the Spring semester, take the tests before June of the previous year.
- Complete and send in application forms: You can either use the on-line applications or those that are mailed by colleges/ universities. Read the website carefully at the time of accessing online application forms. Almost all U.S. institutions charge a non-refundable application fee anywhere between U.S.\$ 50 and U.S.\$ 250.
- Application deadlines vary with competitive/selective institutions usually having early deadlines. Others vary from January to March and beyond. Some schools have rolling admissions with no fixed deadlines. Generally speaking, all parts of your application should have reached the university before the deadline as applications are processed on a first-come, first-served basis.

Most applications will include:

- Application form
- Standardized test scores

- Transcripts
- Personal statement - which is also called the Statement of Purpose essay or SoP
- Separate research statement (sometimes required– describing your research interests and plans)
- 2-3 Recommendation Letters
- CV (sometimes required) listing your professional and extracurricular accomplishments
- An Interview may be requested for some students (such as MBA applicants), while an audition is likely to be required for students applying for programmes in the arts
- Arts students may also submit a portfolio of work, while students applying for research-focused degrees may be asked to submit a writing sample
- Application fee of approximately \$50-100 per application

Transcripts

You need to submit official records of your academic work called transcripts. Besides mark sheets, foreign students should ask their school to provide a list of the subjects they studied each year for their last four years of study along with the duration of the program. Detailed break-ups, if available, indicating the number of times the class met per semester should be included with the examination results. Ensure that official copies are procured from your academic institution in a sealed envelope. USIEF also attests academic documents for a fee.

Certification of Finances

Most colleges and universities include a Declaration and Certification of Finances form in their application packets. This must be signed by your parents, or whoever is meeting your college/ university expenses, and must be supported by a bank letter signed by the manager.

Statement of Purpose

Most graduate institutions require a Statement of Purpose essay which is a narrative about your interests and academic goals. This may be about a page or two long, describing your background and achievements and further plans. This provides you the opportunity to communicate positive factors to offset any weaknesses and discuss your areas of interest and any educational or career goals. Some colleges or universities specify essay topics

Letters of Recommendation

Institutions generally ask for two to three letters of recommendation. A member of the faculty, head of the department, a project guide or your supervisor at work, may write these.

Types of Standardized Tests

International students whose native language is not English may be required to take a test to establish their English language proficiency.

TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language)

IELTS (International English Language Testing System)

PTE Academic (Pearson Test of English Academic)

SAT/ACT

U.S. universities may require students to take either the SAT Reasoning Test OR ACT. The most competitive U.S. universities may require students to take the SAT Reasoning Test OR the ACT. Some U.S. universities do not require any admissions tests. If the U.S. universities accept both the SAT and ACT, it is a personal choice as to which to take.

Financial aid:

You can fund your studies by availing various kinds of financial aids available. These can be classified into:

- Need-based aid
- Athletic Scholarships
- Scholarships / Tuition Waivers
- Fellowships / Grants
- Teaching Assistantships
- Research Assistantships
- Administrative / Residence Assistantships
- These aids may be provided by the government, private organisations or educational institutions.
- Graduate financial aid is given on the basis of academic ability and merit. 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.
- Students with a greater chance of obtaining financial assistance must therefore demonstrate: high academic achievement, high scores on standardized tests, exceptional talent or a record of meaningful involvement in co-curricular activities relating to the intended field of study, Individualized letters of recommendation enumerating his or her abilities, or strong professional background (if required as part of the admissions requirement) will help.

Academic Year

Most American universities and colleges commence their classes in August/September usually known as the Fall session.

A few others also provide a January/February intake, called as the Spring intake that goes on till April. In fact, a Summer intake is also available for limited programs and colleges between the months of May and August.

Duration of Under Graduate Programme

The duration of each course depends on the university and specialisation. Most bachelor's degrees take three to four years, master's take one to two years and doctoral degrees may take four to seven years.

The academic year at many colleges comprises of two terms called the semesters. Some may have a three-term calendar where it is referred to as the trimester system.

Optional Practical Training (OPT) & Curricular Practical Training (CPT)

If one studies a bachelor's or master's degree at a US university, he/ she will have many opportunities to gain real work experience in the USA. International students are eligible to work off-campus after completing the first year of their degree program — and work in on-campus jobs in the meantime.

International students can also participate in Optional Practical Training (OPT) which allows study visa-holders to work in the USA in their chosen field for 12 months after graduation. Anyone who holds an F-1 visa, and is studying an academic program at university in the USA for at least 1 year, can apply. One important thing to note is that OPT jobs have to be related to the applicant's major or degree subject. Although there are 3 main types of student visa, most international students studying at a US college or university will be F-1 visa holders.

If you complete a degree in a STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering or Mathematics) field, you can extend your work placement to 36 months.

The main degree subject areas eligible for the STEM OPT extension include:

- Actuarial Sciences
- Biological Sciences
- Computer Science Applications
- Engineering
- Engineering Technologies
- Life Sciences
- Mathematics
- Physical Sciences

Curricular Practical Training (CPT) is temporary employment authorization for F-1 international students. CPT allows students to train or receive an internship related to their major field of study. It also allows them to be off-campus and gain amazing experiences. CPT internships must meet the following conditions: a degree requirement or a course requirement.

The major difference between OPT and CPT is that OPT is granted during a programme whereas CPT is granted only when an academic programme is completed.

Difference between American and Indian System

The education system in India comprises of pre-primary (kindergarten), primary (1st to 8th grades), secondary (9th and 10th grades) and higher secondary education (11th and 12th grades). Soon after 12th grade one can directly join any professional course of choice which means lesser period of study to become a professional and an earlier job.

The school education pattern in USA is divided into three levels, viz the elementary school (kindergarten through fifth grade), the middle school (6th to 8th grade) and high school (9th to 12th grade). Once the kid finishes high school, then he can enroll for bachelor courses of choice in College and then later join professional courses in Universities which means a longer time of study period to become a professional.

The number of students per class are much higher in Indian schools. Uniforms are given high priority and adhered to strictly in Indian schools as compared with US where most schools do not have uniforms and dress codes are very flexible.

Tests

In India, even in lower classes, there are formal exams. Exam period is a very stressful period for students as well as parents. The exam dates will be declared well ahead of time and all other activities in the school will be planned around it. During exam season, parents usually cancel all other activities and focus only on creating a study environment for children.

In most cases, the kids who can memorize the study material can score higher marks in India. Ability to think and being creative is mostly not given the recognition it deserves.

Creative kids score higher in USA. In lower grades, exams are usually a part of normal teaching and so kids do not usually sit and read for days before they take a Test. This is different in higher classes where students prepare for tests earlier, though not so stressful.

The Indian system places a lot of emphasis on rote learning material. Students focus on absorbing as much knowledge as one can. Consequently Indians do well in quantitative subjects. However, knowledge is treated as facts and immutable truths rather than ideas to be assessed critically, so young Indians don't do as well in "soft" subjects and generally poor at critical or independent thinking. Schools for the most part ignore personality development and social skills.

The American system swings in the opposite direction with a greater emphasis on soft skills and creating a more rounded competitive individual with broader cross subject knowledge but then weaker in specific subject areas than Indian counterparts of the same grade.

In India, how well we perform in the midterm or final exam decides our grades. Assignments, quizzes, daily classwork/homework etc do not hold comparatively much weight in relation to final grades unlike in USA, though the situation is changing a lot now.

Grading or Percentage

Grading is very different in USA from India. In US the grade is typically converted to GPA for the whole of high school. The grades will be A, A-, B, B-, C, C-, D, D- and F according to the respective percentage obtained. The teachers typically conduct tests and assess different quizzes and performances including homework for some points and then convert them to a scale of 100.

In India, 12th grade final board exam scores alone are taken into consideration for admission into colleges as opposed to the continuous and comprehensive high school evaluation from 9th to 12th in the US. So there's no reason to constantly worry about or maintain the grades during the four year period. The grades are mostly A+, A, B+, B, C+, C, D and F as per the respective percentage obtained.

Syllabus and Books for students in USA

In USA, students do not need to carry a lot of books to schools. There are few books to be followed, but many of those books are kept in the school itself especially in lower grades. But in India, even a lower grade student carry a lot of books to school everyday. Education system is more strict and more of homework as well.

Compared to India, the syllabus and workload is relatively simplified and systematically organized in the US. In kindergarten and first few grades in USA, they prepare the children for future learning by teaching how to learn. The school's focus on fun-filled creative learning by providing lot of activities and interesting projects for children. They learn fundamentals of Math, language and science through real world problems.

Overall differences and similarities

Overall education system in USA is about learning, preparing children to explore and understand concepts, about learning the concept not only through books but by actually learning through practicals, not about stressing kids on written exams, not solely about academic competitiveness, about learning in small numbers and more about day to day practical evaluation of the child.

Overall education in India is more about memorizing with study materials, more about academic performance, giving utmost respect to teachers and scoring in final exams. Academic excellence achieves more preference than sports or other overall achievement though, with recent modifications which claims to be global concept, situations are definitely changing.

Similarities between Indian education and US education are that both have well-qualified teachers, sophisticated infrastructural facilities, impart quality education based on modern science and technology, have well-equipped labs and equipment, have concept of private and public schools, properly tailored curriculum as per regular standards and aim in upbringing qualified professionals for the society.