



Study Abroad 101

FAQs about College/University for International Students

If you're planning to study abroad in the States, you've probably been researching university locations, academic programs, admissions requirements, and scholarships for international students. There's a lot to consider!

As you prepare, it's also important to familiarize yourself with the terminology and structure of higher education in the U.S. To help, we invite you to enroll in Study Abroad 101 by reading this quick guide. It's a crash course designed to explain new terms and answer international students' most common questions about studying abroad at a U.S. university.



IS A COLLEGE THE SAME AS A UNIVERSITY?

In short, yes. However, technically speaking, a college in the United States is usually defined as an institution that offers associate and bachelor's degrees only, while a university is usually defined as one that offers masters' and/or doctorate degrees, too. (Keep reading for details of each degree, below.)

Yet, in reality, this is not necessarily the case, as there are many esteemed colleges that offer graduate programs. Therefore, these terms are used interchangeably by most people. For example, it's common to ask "Where did you go to college?" and the answer might be, "I went to Colorado Mesa University." It's also important to note that college and university are also commonly referred to in the U.S. simply as "school," as in, "I've heard Colorado Mesa is an excellent school!"



WHAT IS A COMMUNITY COLLEGE?

A community college (also called a junior college) is a public or private institution that provides the first two years of undergraduate study. Generally speaking, community colleges are smaller, and admissions requirements are more flexible, than at a four-year college. Furthermore, community colleges often have special agreements that allow for smooth admission to partner universities once the student completes the first two years.



WHAT IS A "2 + 2" PLAN AND SHOULD I CONSIDER THIS?

Many students begin their study at a community college, completing their first two years of general study, and afterward transfer to a four-year college to complete their specific degree. This so-called "2 + 2" model (two years at community college + two years at a university) allows the student to graduate from the school of his or her choice (the diploma will only list the final school attended), while saving money on tuition.

This option could be right for you if budget or admissions requirement are a concern, or if you prefer to study on a smaller campus during your first two years.





WHAT IS THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN A STATE AND PRIVATE UNIVERSITY?

State universities receive funding from the state in which they are located, while private universities do not. State universities tend to be larger and more affordable than private universities, and offer more degrees, but this can vary substantially from school to school. [Read more about whether a small or large college is right for you.](#)



WHAT IS A LIBERAL ARTS COLLEGE?

A liberal arts college is one that strives to provide a broad, well-rounded education in many subjects, with only about 25-50% of the courses in the student's specific major. This is in contrast to a college that focuses the majority of one's classes on his or her specific degree program.



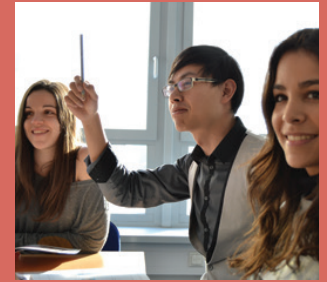
WHAT IS A MAJOR AND WHEN DO I HAVE TO DECIDE ON ONE?

A major is a field of undergraduate study, such as business administration, journalism, or physical therapy. Students at most U.S. universities must officially decide, or "declare" their major by the end of their second year of undergraduate study. Once a major is declared, the student completes a program of courses in the chosen field in order to complete a degree. The word *major* is also used as a verb, as in, "What are you going to major in?" or "I'm majoring in international studies."



WHAT ARE "CORE" AND "ELECTIVE" COURSES?

Every university major, or program of study, has certain required courses that students in that major must complete. These are core courses. Elective courses, on the other hand, can be in a variety of subject areas outside of one's major, and are courses the student can choose with more flexibility.



WHAT ARE THE DIFFERENT DEGREES I CAN EARN AT A COLLEGE OR UNIVERSITY?

At a college/university, students can earn either an undergraduate or graduate degree:

UNDERGRADUATE DEGREES:

When you first apply to college after high school, you are applying to be an "undergraduate" student, meaning you do not yet have any type of degree. As an undergraduate student, you can earn an *associate* or *bachelor's* degree.

An **associate degree** is a two-year program that can be completed at a community college or a four-year college. Some associate degrees are vocational in nature (focused on a specific skill to prepare you for a job) but most are designed to lead to a four-year bachelor's degree.

A **bachelor's degree** is a four-year program that includes the associate degree and can fall into one of two categories: science or arts. A Bachelor of Science (BS) degree includes more technical and scientific degrees, such as nursing, mathematics, and biology, while a Bachelor of Arts (BA) includes degrees that fall into the category of social sciences, such as humanities, languages, and arts.

GRADUATE DEGREES:

Students who wish to take their education further can apply to graduate school, which is a division of the university offering advanced degrees beyond the bachelor's level: master's or doctorate degrees.

A **master's degree** is a specialized degree added onto a bachelor's. It is usually a two-year program and is focused on a specific field of study. Like bachelor's degrees, master's degrees can be in arts (an MA) or science (an MS) but they can also be in other areas, such as a Master's in Business Administration (MBA).

A **doctorate** is the highest degree you can earn. Programs typically take three to eight years (depending on the program and your current degree level). Common doctorate degrees are the Medical Doctor (MD) degree or, in the field of law, the Juris Doctor (JD) degree. The PhD, or Doctor in Philosophy degree, has a somewhat misleading name, since a person with this degree did not necessarily study philosophy. The PhD can be in any number of disciplines, such as PhD in business, zoology, or literature.



WHAT IS A UNIVERSITY CREDIT?

A credit is a unit of measure that colleges use to give value to classes based on “contact hours,” or time when the professor is teaching. Most college classes are three credit hours, and in most cases, they meet three hours a week. A typical undergraduate student takes 12-15 credit hours per semester, which would be four to five classes.

Degrees require a certain number of credits for completion. For example, a bachelor’s degree requires around 120-130 credit hours and a master’s degree requires around an additional 30-64.



WHAT IS THE ACADEMIC CALENDAR FOR COLLEGES IN THE U.S.?

At most colleges, the academic year is nine months long and starts in the fall, around August, and ends around May. Many colleges use a semester system, meaning the academic year has two terms (fall and spring).

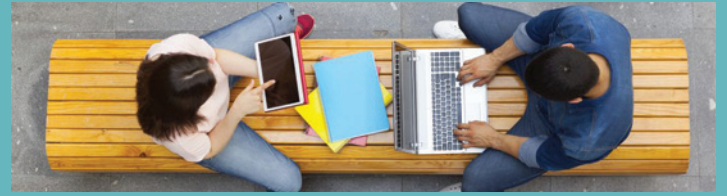
Other schools have an academic year divided into trimesters (fall, winter, and spring sessions) or quarters (fall, winter, spring, and summer sessions). Schools with semester or trimester programs offer optional summer sessions for students who wish to accelerate their study.



WHAT IS A “CREDENTIAL EVALUATION” AND DO I NEED ONE?

U.S. universities that accept applications from international students receive transcripts, diplomas, and other academic records from diverse education systems around the world. Universities use the services of independent credential evaluators to evaluate and verify these documents.

Generally, if you have completed any university courses in another country, it’s likely that you will need to submit a credential evaluation to the university to which you’re applying in the USA. Check the university’s website, or contact their Office of Admissions to double-check before you request one. If you need a credential evaluation, be sure to choose an approved evaluation company. [Click to learn more about credential evaluation.](#)



Congratulations! You’ve completed your crash course on U.S. college/university terminology to better prepare you for your plans to study abroad. And remember, if you still have questions, a Bridge advisor is here to help.



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