

U.S. Higher Education Definitions

Accredited: A college or program that has been certified as fulfilling certain standards by a national and/or regional professional association.

Achievement Test: A series of subject matter tests administered by the College Board which are used by some colleges for admission and/or course placement purposes.

American College Test (ACT): A standardized college entrance exam administered by the American College Testing Program. Four separate, multiple-choice tests measure knowledge of English, math, reading, and science, and one optional writing test measures essay planning and writing skills. Most students take the ACT during their junior or senior year of high school, and most colleges and universities accept scores from either the ACT or SAT. Some schools may recommend, but not require, international students to take the ACT or SAT.

Adjunct: A professor appointed for a specific purpose on a part-time basis without remuneration.

Advanced Placement (AP): Most colleges will use either of these tests administered by the College Board which are used by some colleges for admission and/or course placement purpose.

Advanced Placement Class (AP Class): College level course at high schools across the United States and Canada, to prepare students to take the AP exam that allows them to attain college credit for this work.

Affidavit of Support: An official document proving adequate funding from an individual or organization to cover an international student's educational and living expenses while enrolled at a U.S. college or university.

Assistantship: An academic position that carries a stipend and usually involves part-time teaching or research, given to a qualified graduate student.

Associate Degree: An academic degree awarded by community colleges, junior colleges, four-year universities, business colleges and some bachelor's degree-granting colleges/universities upon completion of a course of study usually lasting two years.

Audit: To take a class to gain knowledge about a subject, but without receiving credit toward a degree.

Bachelor's: An undergraduate degree awarded by a college or university upon successful completion of a program of study, typically requiring at least four years (or the equivalent) of full-time study. Common degree types include bachelor of arts (B.A. or A.B.), which refers to the liberal arts, and bachelor of science (B.S.). A bachelor's is required before starting graduate studies.

Carnegie Classification: A classification of colleges and universities developed by the Carnegie Commission on Higher Education. It has been the leading framework for describing institutional diversity in U.S. higher education for over 3 decades.

Certificate Program: A program designated, usually earned from a professional society or educational institute, to assure qualification to perform a job or task. Certifications are very

common in aviation, construction, technology, and other industrial sectors, as well as health care, business and finance.

Chancellor: The chief administrative officer in certain American public and private universities and related institutions.

Coed: Open to both men and women (often used to describe a school that admits both sexes and a dormitory that houses both genders).

Commencement: A graduation ceremony where students officially receive their degrees, typically held in May or June at the end of the academic year, though some colleges and universities also hold August and December ceremonies.

Common Application: A standard application form that is accepted by more than 450 member colleges and universities for admissions. Students can complete the form online or in print and submit copies to any of the participating colleges, rather than filling out individual forms for each school. However, international students will typically need to submit additional application materials unique to each college.

Community College: This term refers to a two-year institution of higher education, generally public, offering levels of instruction adapted to the needs of the community. Offerings usually include a transfer curriculum (credits toward a bachelor's degree) and occupational programs (two-year course of study designed to prepare the student for employment).

Conditional admission: An acceptance to a college or university that is dependent on the student first completing coursework or meeting specific criteria before enrollment. For an international student, this can include a requirement to attain a certain level of English-language proficiency if the student's TOEFL score doesn't meet the minimum required.

Course load: The number of courses or credits a student takes during a specific term.

Credit Hour: A unit that gives weighting to the value, level or time requirements of an academic course taken at a school or other educational institution.

Dean: The head of a division of a college or university.

Deferral / Deferred admission: A school's act of postponing a student's application for early decision or early action, so that it will be considered along with the rest of the regular applicant group. A "deferral" can also refer to a student's act of postponing enrollment for one year, if the school agrees.

Department: A division of a school, made up of faculty and support staff that gives instruction in a particular field of study, such as the history department.

Discipline: An area of academic study.

Dissertation: An in-depth, formal writing requirement on an original topic of research that is typically submitted in the final stages before earning a doctorate (Ph.D.).

Drop: To withdraw from a course. A college or university typically has a period of time at the beginning of a term during which students can add or drop courses.

Dual degree: Program of study that allows a student to receive two degrees from the same college or university.

Early action: A program offered by some colleges and universities that allows students to submit their applications early, typically in November or December, and receive decisions early, usually in mid- or late December. Students are not required to accept the admissions offer and have until May 1 to decide. Although some schools allow international students to apply via early action, applicants who request financial aid may not receive a decision any earlier than those who apply through the regular decision process.

Early decision: A program offered by some colleges and universities that allows students to submit an application to their top-choice school early, typically in November or December, and receive the decision early, usually in mid- or late December. If accepted, students are required to enroll at that school and withdraw all applications to other schools. Although some schools allow international students to apply via early decision, applicants who apply for financial aid may not receive a decision any earlier than those who apply through the regular decision process.

Electives: Courses that students can choose to take for credit toward a degree, but are not required.

English as a Second Language (ESL): A course or program of study used to teach English to non-native English speakers.

Enroll: To register or enter a school or course as a participant.

Exempt: Not required to do something that other students may be required to do. For example, a school may require all students to take a freshman English course, but some students may be exempt based on their high scores on a college entrance exam or their previous coursework.

Extracurricular activities: Optional activities, such as sports, that students can participate in outside of academic classes.

Faculty: The members of the teaching staff, and occasionally the administrative staff, of an educational institution.

Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA): Application used by U.S. citizens and permanent residents to apply for financial aid from U.S. federal and state governments. International students are not eligible for U.S. government aid, but schools may ask international students to submit a FAFSA to determine financial need. (Note: A social security number is required to complete the FAFSA.)

Fees: An amount of money charged by colleges and universities, in addition to their tuition, to cover costs of services such as libraries and computer technology.

Fellowship: An amount of money that is given to postgraduates to allow them to study a subject at an advanced level.

Financial aid: All types of money offered to a student to help pay tuition, fees, and other educational expenses. This can include loans, grants, scholarships, assistantships, fellowships, and work-study jobs.

Fraternity: A student organization, typically for men, formed for social, academic, community service, or professional purposes. A fraternity is part of a college or university's Greek system. Some fraternities, such as those with an academic or community service focus, may be coed.

Freshman: A term, in an educational setting, which is often used to describe a student's status during their first year at an educational institution.

FTE: Full-time equivalency can refer to either faculty or student load, used to calculate enrollment for purposes of funding. One FTE represents a full-time unit load.

General Educational Development (GED): A group of five subject tests which, when passed, certify that the taker has American or Canadian high school-level academic skills. The test is always taken in person and never available online. Only individuals who have not earned a high school diploma may take the GED tests.

Grade Point Average (GPA): The average of all grades received. For transfer students, grade point average refers to the average grade received in transferable units.

Graduate Management Admission Test (GMAT): A computer adaptive standardized test that is an admission requirement for the Masters in Business Administration (MBA) program at many business schools in the United States. The exam tests mathematics and the English language in order to measure aptitude to succeed academically in graduate business studies.

Graduate or post baccalaureate certificate: A group of courses that focuses upon an area of specialized knowledge or information and is developed, supervised, and evaluated by the faculty members of the academic unit (i.e., department, program, etc.) offering the program.

Graduate Record Examination (GRE): A commercially run standardized test that is an admission requirement for many graduate schools principally in the United States, but also in other English speaking countries. The exam is primarily focused on testing abstract thinking skills in the areas of mathematics, vocabulary, and analytical writing.

Grant: A type of financial aid that consists of an amount of free money given to a student, often by the federal or a state government, a company, a school, or a charity. A grant does not have to be repaid. "Grant" is often used interchangeably with "scholarship."

Greek life / Greek system: A college or university's collection of fraternities and sororities on campus, whose names originate from letters in the ancient Greek alphabet.

Independent study: An academic course that allows students to earn credit for work done outside of the normal classroom setting. The reading or research assignment is usually designed by the students themselves or with the help of a faculty member, who monitors the progress.

Institute: An organization created for a specific purpose, usually for research, that may be located on a college or university's campus.

Internal Revenue Service (IRS): The U.S. government agency that collects income taxes. International students who work on or off campus or receive taxable scholarships must pay taxes. A college or university's international student adviser can provide further information, including on relevant tax treaties between the United States and specific countries that may allow certain benefits.

International student adviser: A school official who assists international students, scholars, and faculty with matters including orientation, visas, income taxes, insurance, and academic and government rules, among other areas.

Interdisciplinary (studies/majors): Is a field of study that crosses traditional boundaries between academic disciplines. The Interdisciplinary Studies major is intended to serve the needs of students who want to design a unique individualized academic program, obtain a broadly-based education, and diversify their professional potential.

Internship: An experience that allows students to work in a professional environment to gain training and skills. Internships may be paid or unpaid and can be of varying lengths during or after the academic year.

Ivy League: An association of eight private universities located in the northeastern United States, originally formed as an athletic conference. Today, the term is associated with universities that are considered highly competitive and prestigious. The Ivy League consists of the highly ranked Brown University, Columbia University, Cornell University, Dartmouth College, Harvard University, Princeton University, University of Pennsylvania, and Yale University.

Junior: A term, in an educational setting, which is often used to describe a student's status during their third year at an educational institution.

Junior college: A two-year postsecondary institution that offers the associate degree.

Law School Admission Test (LSAT): A test administered by the Law School Admission Council (LSAC) for prospective law school candidates. It is designed to assess logical and verbal reasoning skills.

Liberal arts: Academic studies of subjects in the humanities, social sciences, and the sciences, with a focus on general knowledge, in contrast to a professional or technical emphasis. "Liberal arts" is often used interchangeably with "liberal arts and sciences" or "arts and sciences."

Liberal arts college: A postsecondary institution that emphasizes an undergraduate education in liberal arts. The majority of liberal arts colleges have small student bodies, do not offer graduate studies, and focus on faculty teaching rather than research.

Loan: A type of financial aid that consists of an amount of money that is given to someone for a period of time, with an agreement that it will be repaid later. International students are generally not eligible for U.S. federal government loans and will typically require an American cosigner to apply for a private bank loan.

Major: A program of study that leads to a degree; the subject area in which a student pursuing a college degree develops the greatest depth of knowledge.

Master's: A graduate degree awarded by a college or university upon successful completion of an advanced program of study, typically requiring one or two years of full-time study beyond the bachelor's degree. Common degree types include master of arts (M.A.), which refers to the liberal arts; master of science (M.S.); and master of business administration (M.B.A.).

Matriculate: To enroll in a program of study at a college or university, with the intention of earning a degree.

Medical College Admission Test (MCAT): A computer-based standardized test for prospective medical students in the United States and Canada. It is designed to assess problem solving, critical thinking, written analysis, and writing skills in addition to knowledge of scientific concepts and principles.

Merit aid / merit scholarships: A type of financial aid awarded by a college or university to students who have demonstrated special academic ability or talents, regardless of their financial need. Most merit aid has specific requirements if students want to continue to receive it, such as maintaining a certain GPA.

Minor: A secondary field of studies outside of the major field. Some degree programs require a minor.

Minority: A group of people who differ racially or politically from a larger group of which it is a part. In the context of college admissions, the four minority groups are Asian-Americans, African-Americans, Native Americans, and Hispanics.

Mission statement: The mission statement represents a self-definition of what the university/college sees as its reason for existence.

Need-based financial aid: Financial aid that is awarded to students due to their financial inability to pay the full cost of attending a specific college or university, rather than specifically because of their grades or other merit.

Need-blind admissions: A college or university's policy of accepting or declining applications without considering an applicant's financial circumstances. This policy does not necessarily mean that these schools will offer enough financial aid to meet a student's full need. Only a handful of U.S. colleges or universities offer need-blind admissions to international students.

Net price calculator: An online tool that allows students and families to calculate a personalized estimate of the cost of a specific college or university, after taking into account any scholarships or need-based financial aid that an applicant would receive. By Oct. 29, 2011, each higher education institution in the United States is required by law to post a net price calculator on its respective website.

Non-matriculated: Enrolled in a college or university's courses, but not in a program of study leading to a degree.

Nonresident: A student who does not meet a state's residence requirements. A college or university may have different tuition costs and admissions policies for residents versus nonresidents. In most cases, international students are considered nonresidents. A "nonresident alien" is a person who is not a U.S. citizen and is in the country on a temporary basis.

Notarized: Certified as authentic by a public official, lawyer, or bank. Colleges and universities often require international students to submit notarized documents, such as the Affidavit of Support or high school transcripts.

Open admissions: A college or university's policy of accepting all students who have completed high school, regardless of their grades or test scores, until all spaces are filled. Most community colleges have an open admissions policy, including for international students.

Orientation: A college or university's official process of welcoming new, accepted students to campus and providing them with information and policies before classes begin, usually in a half-day or full-day event. Many colleges and graduate schools offer a separate orientation just for international students to cover topics such as how to follow immigration and visa regulations, set up a U.S. bank account, and handle culture shock.

Part-time student: A student who attends a college or university taking less than the full-time amount of credits. For example, depending on the education institution, a student taking 3 to 11 credits per semester or 1 to 8 credits per quarter is considered part-time.

Plagiarism: The use of another person's words or ideas as your own, without acknowledging that person. Schools have different policies and punishments for students caught plagiarizing, which tends to occur with research papers and other written assignments.

Post-doctorate: Academic studies or research for those who have completed a doctorate. A "postdoc" can refer both to a person who is pursuing a post-doctorate and to the post-doctorate itself.

Prerequisite: A required course that must be completed before a student is allowed to enroll in a more advanced one.

Priority date: The date by which an application must be received in order to be given full consideration. This can apply to admissions, financial aid, and on-campus housing. After the priority date passes, applications may be considered on a case-by-case or first-come-first-served basis.

Private school: A postsecondary institution controlled by a private individual(s) or a nongovernmental agency. A private institution is usually not supported primarily by public funds and its programs are not operated by publicly elected or appointed officials. Stanford University, for example, is a private school.

Probation: A status or period of time in which students with very low GPAs, or whose academic work is unsatisfactory according to the school, must improve their performance. If they are unable to do so, they may be dismissed from the school. Students may also face "disciplinary probation" for nonacademic reasons, such as behavioral problems in the dorms.

Professional school: A higher education institution for students who have already received their undergraduate degree to gain training in specific professions, such as law, medicine, and pharmacy.

Prospective students: Individuals who have contacted an eligible institution requesting information concerning admission to that institution.

Provost: An administrative officer in colleges and universities who holds high rank and is concerned with the curriculum, faculty appointments, research affairs, etc.

PSAT: The Preliminary SAT, a standardized practice test cosponsored by the nonprofit College Board and the National Merit Scholarship Corp., which measures reading, writing, and math skills, giving students experience with the SAT. Students usually take the PSAT in their junior year of high school, and U.S. citizens and permanent residents can submit their scores to qualify for National Merit scholarships.

Public school: A postsecondary institution that is supported mainly by public funds and whose programs are operated by publicly elected or appointed officials. The University of California—Berkeley, for example, is a public school.

Registrar: The college or university official who is responsible for registering students and keeping their academic records, such as transcripts.

Registration: The process in which students choose and enroll in courses to be taken during the academic year or in summer sessions.

Regular decision: An admissions process used by colleges and universities that typically requires applicants to submit their materials by January 1; an admissions decision is generally received by April 1, and if admitted, students usually have until May 1 to respond to the offer. The majority of applicants are evaluated during regular decision, rather than early action and early decision.

Resident assistant (RA): A student leader who works in campus dormitories and supervises issues and activities related to dorm life. RAs often receive free housing in the dorm in return for their services.

Resident/Non-resident Status: Student status based on place of legal residence. Non-residents (out-of-state) often may pay higher fees and meet higher admission requirements than residents.

Rolling admissions: An admissions process used by some colleges and universities in which each application is considered as soon as all the required materials have been received rather than by a specific deadline. Colleges and universities with this policy will make decisions as applications are received until all spaces are filled.

Room and board: Housing and meals. "Room and board" is typically one of the costs that colleges and universities will list in their annual estimated cost of attendance, in addition to tuition, fees, and textbooks and supplies. If students choose to live in dormitories, they may be required to buy into a meal plan to use on-campus dining facilities.

SAT: A standardized test, owned, published, and developed by the College Board, for college admissions in the U.S.

Scholarship: A type of financial aid, in the form of a grant that does not have to be repaid by the recipient. Scholarships are most often given to students for one of two reasons: achievement in academics or other areas, or financial need.

Semester: One type of term within an academic year marking the beginning and end of classes. Each semester is 15 weeks in length, and there are two semesters (fall and spring) in an academic year.

Seminar: A course offered to a small group of students who are typically more advanced and who meet with a professor to discuss specialized topics.

Senior: A student who is in his or her last year of study before receiving a baccalaureate degree.

Service learning: A teaching and learning strategy that integrates meaningful community service with instruction and reflection to enrich the learning experience, teach civic responsibility, and strengthen communities.

Sophomore: A second-year undergraduate student in a college or university.

Student and Exchange Visitor Information System (SEVIS): A computerized U.S. government database used to track international students and scholars in the United States. Once an international student is accepted by a U.S. college or university, the school is required to mail the student a Form I-20, which is a paper record of the student's information in SEVIS. A student must pay a SEVIS fee and use the payment receipt and I-20 to apply for a visa.

Social Security number: A nine-digit number issued by the U.S. government to people who are authorized to work in the United States and collect certain government benefits. Many colleges and universities use the Social Security number as the student identification number. International students who are in the United States and are authorized to work either on or off campus must apply for and obtain a Social Security number, which is then used to report their wages to the government.

Sophomore: A student in the second year of high school or college / university.

Sorority: A student organization for women formed for social, academic, community service, or professional purposes. A sorority is part of a college or university's Greek system.

Standardized tests: Exams, such as the SAT, ACT, and GRE, which measure knowledge and skills and are designed to be consistent in how they are administered and scored. Standardized tests are intended to help admissions officials compare students who come from different backgrounds.

Teaching assistant (TA): A graduate student who assists a professor with teaching an undergraduate course, usually within his or her field, as part of an assistantship.

Tenure: A status offered to high-level faculty members at a college or university that allows them to stay permanently in their positions, after demonstrating a strong record of teaching and published research.

Term: Periods of study, which can include semesters, quarters, trimesters, or summer sessions.

Thesis: A formal piece of writing on a specific subject, which may be required to earn a bachelor's or master's degree.

Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL): A standardized exam administered by the nonprofit Educational Testing Service (ETS), which measures English-language proficiency in reading, listening, speaking, and writing. Many U.S. colleges and universities require non-native English speakers to take the TOEFL and submit their scores as part of the admissions process.

Transcript: An official record of a student's coursework and grades at a high school, college, or university. A high school transcript is usually one of the required components of the college application process.

Transfer credit: Credit granted toward a degree on the basis of studies completed at another college or university. For instance, students who transfer from a community college to a four-year college may earn some transfer credit.

Trimesters: Periods of study that divide the academic year into three equal segments of approximately 10 to 12 weeks each.

Tuition: A fee for instruction, especially at a formal institution of learning.

Tuition reimbursement: A contractual arrangement between employer and employee that outlines specific terms under which the employer may pay for the employee's continuing education.

Unit: A measure of credit earned for course completion based on the number of hours of instruction per week required in the classroom and/or lab or in independent study. A course earning three semester units will usually meet for three lecture hours a week.

Visa: An official mark or stamp in a passport that allows someone to enter a country for a particular amount of time. Common visa types for international students and scholars in the United States include the F-1 (student visa) and J-1 (exchange visitor visa). To apply for a U.S. visa, student applicants must first receive a Form I-20 from the college or university they plan to attend, which is created by the U.S. government's SEVIS database.

Wait list: A list of qualified applicants to a school who may be offered admission if there is space available after all admitted students have made their decisions. Being on a wait list does not guarantee eventual admission, so some students may choose not to remain on the list, particularly if the school is not their first choice.

WASC: The Western Association of Schools and Colleges, one of six official academic bodies responsible for the accreditation of public and private universities, colleges, secondary and elementary schools in the United States and foreign institutions of American origin. WASC has jurisdiction over the states of California and Hawaii.

Withdraw: To formally stop participating in a course or attending a university.

Work-study: A financial aid program funded by the U.S. federal government that allows undergraduate or graduate students to work part time on campus or with approved off-campus employers. To participate in work-study, students must complete the FAFSA. In general, international students are not eligible for work-study positions.