

## Q/A -- How Can AAAFE Help?

All Asian-American Educational Foundation

Question/Answers for International Students

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- How do I get started?

- The U.S. Department of State maintains Overseas Educational Advising Centers in many countries. These Centers are designed to help international students with information on how to apply to U.S. colleges and universities. The American Center for Educational Exchange in various country provides these services to students -

- What is the difference between a college, a university, and a graduate school?

-Colleges generally offer only four-year undergraduate degrees, and occasionally a master's degree program. Universities are much larger in scope, offering undergraduate, graduate, and post-graduate degrees. Universities are usually made up of various colleges specializing in various academic pursuits. Graduate schools, often associated with a university, offer professional advanced degrees in fields such as law or medicine.

-What are the major differences between the U.S. and international systems of higher education?

-Compared to the overall educational system, the U.S. educational system is different in the following ways: More choices. Depending on your interests and financial resources, there are thousands of universities to choose from. Though good universities are very competitive, it is generally much easier to be accepted by a university in the United States than in other countries. More flexibility in choosing majors. A liberal arts student can switch to a science major without much hassle or vice versa.

Students with a bachelor's degree in one field (liberal arts for example) can pursue a graduate degree in a totally different field (engineering for example) by fulfilling a few prerequisite requirements such as courses or examinations.

Convenient credit transfer system. The credit transfer system allows students flexibility to move from one university to another. The credits they have earned at one university can be transferred to another university.

Different universities have different rules with regard to how many credits can be transferred. In addition, many universities have academic consortium programs with other universities that are close to them (in the same city or state) by which students can take classes at a participating university and have their credits recognized. Closer ties between the university and professionals who are working in the fields.

Universities arrange frequent advisory sessions or lectures for students by inviting guest speakers who are experts in the field. Through these interactions and cooperative educational programs, students learn to choose academic directions and prepare their future careers according to the needs of the job market as well as their interests. Excellent research facilities.

Libraries are a major part of a university. They provide various resources in print, electronic format, and other media, as well as plenty of study space. The number of books a student can borrow, the stacks that are open to the students, the librarians at information and reference desks who are ever ready to answer any research questions face to face with students or on the phone, the nationwide OCLC system and interlibrary service that enable students to go beyond the university library . . . all of these advantages surpass the imagination of overseas students about what a library can be.

- What is the U.S. academic standard?

- Higher education in the United States is based on an earned academic credit system, rather than on comprehensive examinations as in some countries. Credits are earned for successfully passing courses each term. A total of 120-130 credits is usually required for students to complete their undergraduate degree. Some U.S. colleges and universities operate on a semester term system, with two terms per year. Under this system, students usually take a total of between 12 and 15 credit hours (generally 3 hours per course) per term. Others operate on a quarterly term basis (4 terms per year) or on a tri-semester system (3 terms per year). Regardless of the system used by various schools, most students take a total of between 24 and 30 credit hours per year.

- What are the different U.S. academic degrees?

- An associate's degree is awarded after a two-year period of study at a junior college or community college. Many students completing associate's degrees then go directly into the workforce in vocational, computer technology, or other work-related fields. Some graduates, however, continue their education for another two years at a college or university to receive their bachelor's degree.

A bachelor of arts or science is awarded after a four-year period of study. These students follow one of many fields of study. Some are general in nature (e.g., social studies) while others are technical in nature (e.g., engineering).

A master's degree is the next academic level, requiring an additional one to three years of study depending on the academic field.

A Ph.D. or doctorate of philosophy requires at least an additional three years of study, and must include an approved original research project in the chosen field of study.

- How do I get information on specific U.S. colleges and universities?

- Nearly all U.S. colleges and universities have websites. Our web-site is &ldquo;AAAEF.ORG&rdquo; Most school websites are very extensive, with detailed information on the school's admissions requirements, tuition and other costs, courses of study available, scholarships and financial aid, and school activities.

Like many, our web-site &ldquo;AAAEF.ORG&rdquo; also have special sections on their websites that are devoted to international student admission requirements and procedures for applying. Most schools also have a special Office of International Student Activities dedicated to serving the special needs of international students on campus (i.e., help with admissions and course selection, student housing, special international clubs, local activities, etc.).

We suggest you begin your search by visiting various school websites and exploring their content where you can search schools by name, by location, by academic major, and more. Be sure to check each site's Office of Admissions, Office of Financial Aid, and Office of International Student Affairs; and look for other sections that apply especially to international students.

- Is there a way I can find out how different U.S. colleges and universities are ranked? - Yes, there are a number of independent rankings available of various U.S. colleges and universities. There is quite a lot of controversy, however, about the various ranking systems and the criteria they use to rank the schools. The University of Illinois lists information on a number of different ranking services and their results. U.S. News also publishes an annual listing of what it considers to be the top colleges and graduate schools. - How should I prepare to apply? - First you will need to verify your secondary, and any post-secondary, education. For each U.S. college or university you apply to, you must submit academic records of all courses taken and marks earned, exam results, and certificates awarded, You must submit original documents or copies that have been certified by your school or a U.S. embassy or counselor official. A certified English translation must accompany the original academic records if the original records are not in English. You will also need to verify your financial ability to undertake the proposed course of study (see below). But your first task is to get your academic records in order. - What are the English language requirements? - Assuming that you have completed at least your high school education or secondary schooling and have a strong academic record, your first task should be to study for and pass the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL). Until 1998, the TOEFL was available throughout the world as a paper-based test. In July 1998 the Educational Testing Service (ETS), which administers the test, introduced the computer-based TOEFL in the United States, Canada, Latin America, Europe, the Middle East, Africa, and selected Asian countries. The TOEFL is now administered only as a computer-based test in these countries. According to ETS, the computer-based test will completely replace the paper test by 2001. For testing sites in other countries, please visit the TOEFLwebsite. See also see USAScholars Test Preparation page. - What about English language test scores? - Each U.S. college and university sets its own minimum required test scores; they require at least a 550 TOEFL test score. At some schools, students who are otherwise academically qualified but have English test scores below the required minimum can enroll in special English language training at the school (at an extra cost). All students, however, must meet the minimum English language requirements before classes begin. It is important that you check the individual English language requirements and options for each school you are considering. - How can I prepare for the TOEFL test? - Information on taking the TOEFL test is available at the nearest U.S. Overseas Educational Advising Center, or at the American Center for Educational Exchange. We also suggest you visit Peterson's TOEFL Test Preparation site for information on how the exam is structured, and for tips on taking the exam, sample questions, and other tutorial resources. See also the LearninUSA Test Preparation page. - How can I improve my English skills before applying to a U.S. college or university? - The nearest Overseas Educational Advising Center has information on English language instruction programs available locally, and on approved ESL (English as a Second Language) study programs. Many of the approved ESL Centers are located at local universities. - What are the required academic tests? - Each U.S. college and university determines its own academic requirements. In almost all cases, international students are required to have successfully passed one or more special academic tests. Minimum acceptable test scores are also determined by each school, but students testing higher than the minimum will have an obvious advantage. Some schools publish "average score ranges" rather than minimum test scores. It is important to check on testing requirements and minimum scores for each school you are considering. (You can return to the schools

you are considering using Peterson's College Search.). Information on when and where you can take the required tests is available at your nearest U.S. Overseas Educational Advising Center. For information on the Center nearest to you, select the College Board's search engine. o For undergraduate students Most schools will require that you take either the Scholastic Assessment Test (SAT I) or the American College Testing Assessment (ACT). Check with each school you are considering. If you are applying to more than one school, you may have to take both tests since one can require the SAT I, while others may require the ACT. If you are applying to a school in a particular subject area, you may also be required to take the SAT II (Subject Tests). Please note that many schools, especially the more prestigious ones, now require that students take three SAT II tests regardless of what subject area they are applying for. An ESL test does not count as an SAT II test. For complete information on SAT I and II, visit the College Board website. For information on the ACT, visit the ACT website. o For graduate students The Graduate Record Examinations (GRE) General Test is primarily a multiple-choice test that most graduate schools use for admission into their graduate programs. The Graduate Record Examination Program, which is administered by the Educational Testing Service, also offers 16 Subject Tests, each of which measures achievements in a specific field. These tests are available at your nearest U.S. Overseas Educational Advising Center. For information on the Center nearest to you, select the College Board's search engine. o We also suggest you visit Peterson's GRE Test Preparation site for information on how the exam is structured, and for tips on taking the exam, sample questions, and other tutorial resources. o Depending on the school you are considering and your course of graduate study, you may have to take one of the following additional tests: The College Level Examination Test (CLEP) General Examinations cover five areas: College Mathematics, Humanities, English Composition (with or without an essay), Natural Sciences, and Social Sciences and History. The CLEP tests cover material that you would normally learn in introductory college courses. The purpose of taking these exams is to gain college credit on your record, which indicates that you have completed the work for specific courses. International students taking the CLEP test usually do so to validate post-secondary educational work done in their home country. Each college treats the scoring differently. You will have to contact the colleges and/or universities to which you are applying to find out their requirements. The exams are given by the College Board and scored by Educational Testing Service. We suggest you visit Peterson's CLEP Test Preparation site for additional information. o The Graduate Management Admissions Test (GMAT) measures verbal, quantitative, and analytical writing skills. The GMAT is used by graduate schools of business to assess the qualifications of applicants to graduate management programs. If you are interested in a degree in business, we suggest you visit the Peterson's MBA Site where you can search for various business schools, prepare for the GMAT test, and receive other helpful information. o The Law School Admission Test (LSAT) is administered four times a year at designated centers worldwide. The LSAT is a standardized test designed to measure some of the thinking skills considered essential for success in law school. It is required for admission to all 194 law schools that comprise the membership of the Law School Admission Council (LSAC). If you are interested in a law degree, we suggest you visit the Peterson's LSAT Site where you can search for various law schools, prepare for the LSAT test, and receive other helpful information. o The Medical College Admission Test (MCAT) is a prerequisite for admission to nearly all of the medical schools in North America. In applying to some medical schools, the MCAT score is as important as your four years of undergraduate study! On the other hand, some universities will set a minimum level of performance on the MCAT and then analyze school grades to decide who will be invited to the interviews. Either way, doing well is imperative for most applicants. If you are interested in a medical degree, we suggest you visit the Peterson's MCAT Site where you can search for various medical schools, prepare for the MCAT test, and receive other helpful information.

- What are the financial requirements in applying to a U.S. college or university? - In order to obtain a visa to study in the United States, you will need to prove that sufficient funds are or will be available from an identified and reliable financial source to defray all living and school expenses during the entire period of anticipated study. Specifically, applicants must prove they have enough readily available funds to meet all expenses for the first year of study, and that adequate funds will be available for each subsequent year of study.

According to the U.S. Embassy at overseas : "Applicants must prove that they have enough funding for tuition, health insurance, and living expenses. On the Form I-20, the school must provide information on the cost of tuition, living expenses, and incidental expenses.

The school must also list on the Form I-20 how the student plans to meet these expenses -- through waivers, on-campus employment, assistantships, scholarships, or personal funds. "If applicants have received scholarships, they must provide evidence that the organization providing the scholarship has the intent and ability to pay. If they plan to use personal funds, they must show that they have adequate funding for the entire course of study, and that the money can be taken out of your banks." For more international student information, please refer on Student Visa Guidance from the U.S. Embassy in your country, for more tips on U.S. Visas for Foreign Students from the U.S. Department of State. - Will I be able to work while I am attending a U.S. college or university? - If you are accepted to a U.S. college or university, you will most likely be entering the United States on an F-1 student visa. An F-1 student may not accept off-campus employment at any time during the first year of study; however, the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) may grant permission to accept off-campus employment after one year. F-1 students may accept on-campus employment from the school without INS permission. It is important to consult with your school's International Student Affairs Office concerning any employment, on-campus or off-campus. In most cases, any employment will be limited to 20 hours per week so as not to jeopardize your legal status as a student. On-campus employment includes working for the school itself, or for a company doing business on the school campus such as working in the college bookstore, library, or cafeteria. Any employment, however, is likely to pay you only the minimum wages. Do not count on any part-time

employment to pay for your college or living expenses. - What about room and board at U.S. colleges and universities? -

The availability of student housing varies from school to school. Some require that students reside on campus, while others require only freshman (first-year students) to reside on campus, often in a school dormitory with other students. Not all schools guarantee or provide student housing. Some schools require that first or second year students purchase a meal plan through the university's cafeteria. Since room and board expenses can add significantly to the cost of securing your U.S. education, you should research this carefully for each school you are considering. Generally, such costs will be higher if the school is located in a major metropolitan area. The Admissions Office and Office of International Student Affairs can provide information on the school's room and board policy and requirements, and on available options such as off-campus housing. - When must I apply for college? - Application deadlines vary widely. - Applications for fall (August/September) admission may be due as early as October or November of the preceding year, although late winter/early spring is more common. Deadlines may be earlier if the university offers an early admission procedure and deadlines for transfer students (those who have undertaken some post-secondary education) may also be different. In addition, international students are often encouraged to submit their applications before published due dates because of the stiff competition they face. Here are two useful links to help you get information on admission deadlines and other admissions-related matters. The first is a link to college Admissions Offices, listed alphabetically. The second is a link to college Admissions Office E-mail Addresses, with the colleges listed by state. - What do admissions officers look at in considering an application? - Admissions officers consider a number of elements in reviewing applications. Your academic record (which is called a "school transcript") is important not just for the grades you received, but also for the level of difficulty of the courses you have taken. They also review teacher recommendations, test results (both academic tests like the SATs, if applicable, and ESL tests), extracurricular activities, and the admissions essay. Some schools also interview students to determine whether they would fit into the institution's program. - When can I expect to hear whether I've been accepted? - Generally, you can expect to hear in April or May regarding fall admission applications. If the school offers an early acceptance option, you may hear as early as December. If you haven't heard, contact the admissions office (Admissions Office E-mail Addresses) and request information on the status of your application. - What will I receive once I have been accepted? - You will receive an official letter of acceptance to the college or university, together with a Form I-20 which you will need to apply for your U.S. visa. You can also expect to receive other information such as a student handbook, information on campus housing, and other orientation materials. - Are there Vietnamese student associations at U.S. colleges and universities? - Yes, many U.S. colleges and universities have Vietnamese student associations that can provide very useful information on applying to the university, local college life, etc. There are several websites you can visit to see if there are Vietnamese associations at the schools you are considering. The Vietnamese Students and Scholars Associations in USA Universities lists associations by state; the Vietnamese Students and Scholars Associations at USA lists associations by university.