

Introduction to the U.S. Higher Education System

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The U.S. Higher Education System

The U.S. higher education enterprise is large and diverse, with about 4,600 degree-granting institutions and more than 21 million students. Across the spectrum of higher education systems worldwide, the U.S. system is unique in multiple ways. Unlike most countries, the U.S. lacks a ministry of education or other central agency that holds overall responsibility for higher education nationwide. The federal government plays a limited role. Mirroring other U.S. governmental structures, the country's higher education system as a whole is decentralized. Public universities and colleges are under the purview of state, not federal government. Institutions have significant autonomy, and there is a wide range of institution types. Student populations vary significantly, and, unlike most systems around the world, several private—not public—institutions are considered the most prestigious.

Even the naming conventions of U.S. institutions stray from global norms. Many institutions called universities do not confer degrees beyond the master's level and some offer only a bachelor's degree. Some colleges, a term in many countries that refers to an undergraduate institution or advanced secondary school, offer doctorates. A few prestigious comprehensive research universities that offer bachelor's through doctorate degrees are known as institutes (e.g., California Institute of Technology and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology). In addition, there are some institutions called colleges, universities, or institutes that are not accredited but offer degrees and certificates.

No national laws govern the titles of degrees at either the undergraduate or graduate level, although each state typically regulates the level of degree that public institutions located within its borders can award. Each institution has the autonomy to determine its own program requirements, typically following broad degree guidelines set by the states or by specialized accrediting agencies.

Role of the Federal Government

Unlike most national governments with ministries of education, the U.S. federal government does not exercise general control over higher education or serve as its primary funder. It does, however, provide resources in two critical areas: student financial aid and research and development. Some institutions receive large amounts of federal funding through research grants (see “Research” below), as well as support for specific programs like access for students with disabilities, vocational education, and specific foreign language instruction. Over time, the role of the federal government in supporting students has expanded to include grant and loan programs for low- and moderate-income students. Today, the federal government is the primary financier of student financial aid.

While the federal government generally does not provide direct operational support to colleges and universities, special-purpose funding in the form of student financial aid is an extremely important revenue source and, in turn, has increased the federal government’s ability to influence colleges and universities in areas outside research. For example, in order for institutions to participate in financial aid programs, they must comply with a wide range of federal reporting requirements on topics ranging from teacher preparation to gender equity in intercollegiate athletics.

Despite the growing influence of the federal government, however, its role is still limited and has not yet encroached into core academic decisions, which are generally left to the institutions and, in the case of some public institutions, the states.

The U.S. Department of Education manages and oversees the use of federal funds distributed or used at postsecondary institutions. Its primary roles are:

- Establishing policies for federal financial aid to students, administering and distributing the funds, and monitoring their use.
- Enforcing civil rights legislation, such as the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, which ensure equal access to higher education regardless of race, national origin, gender, disability, and age.
- Designing programs to encourage particular types of curriculum development, such as foreign language training and area studies programs.
- Monitoring the use of federal funds granted to higher education institutions through contracts and grants for research in a wide range of areas.
- Collecting extensive data on hundreds of items such as enrollment trends, student race and ethnicity, faculty promotion and tenure, and fields of graduate study, and undertaking research on most aspects of education.

State Government

In the U.S., all government functions not specifically designated as federal responsibility by the Constitution are the jurisdiction of the state governments. Education is among those functions. As a result, rather than the federal government, each of the 50 states is responsible for governing public colleges and universities. State systems include doctorate-granting universities, regional master's institutions, and in

most states, community colleges. However, the degree of control by the states varies tremendously. In some states, a governing board appointed by the governor and/or legislature oversees all institutions, allocates funding, establishes accountability measures, develops policies, and approves new academic programs. In others, the state board plays only an advisory function and has little direct authority over institutions.

Accreditation

Accreditation ensures the quality of higher education institutions and academic programs to students, the postsecondary education and industry communities, and the general public. The accreditation process aims to ensure that colleges and universities maintain academic standards appropriate for their missions, are adequately managed, and are eligible to participate in certain state and federal programs.

Whereas in most other countries accreditation (or quality assurance) is carried out by government organizations, in the U.S., accreditors are private, nongovernmental organizations created for the specific purpose of reviewing higher education institution and program quality. However, institutions must be accredited by an accreditor that is recognized by the U.S. Department of Education in order to receive federal funds, and it is usually a prerequisite for funding from foundations or other external sources.

The designation of “recognized” means that the accreditor has been reviewed for quality by one of the following:

- U.S. Department of Education (ED)
- Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA)—CHEA is a national membership organization of colleges and universities; regional, national, and specialized accreditation associations; higher education commissions; and specialized groups that accredit specific disciplines and professions. Standards for recognition from CHEA are primarily focused on quality assurance and quality improvement. CHEA also coordinates research, analysis, and debate; collects and disseminates information about good practices in accreditation and quality assurance; and mediates disputes between higher education institutions and accreditors.

CHEA and ED both maintain publicly accessible databases of accredited institutions. The CHEA database offers the option to search by “Accreditor Organization Name.” The ED database allows searches for “Accrediting Agency.” Both the CHEA and Department of Education websites provide additional information on accreditation in the United States.

There are two basic types of accreditation: institutional and specialized.

- Institutional accreditors set standards for and evaluate performance of institutions as a whole. There are 19 recognized institutional accrediting organizations. Six of these are CHEA-recognized Regional Accrediting Organizations, which are responsible for accrediting most nonprofit two-year and four-year degree-granting and some proprietary (private, for-profit) institutions in the U.S. Some of the regional organizations also provide accreditation for institutions outside the U.S.
- Specialized accreditors do the same for a program or unit within an institution. There are approximately 60 recognized programmatic accrediting organizations.

CHEA INTERNATIONAL QUALITY GROUP

The CHEA International Quality Group (CIQG) is a forum for addressing quality assurance and accreditation challenges in a global context. It assists institutions and organizations to enhance their capacity for improving academic quality; advances knowledge and understanding of international quality assurance issues; and provides research and policy recommendations.

Higher Education Associations

The U.S. higher education sector includes various associations that have institutions or individuals (and sometimes both) as members. Often charged with multiple missions, these organizations can represent institutions as a group, administrative areas in higher education, or professional fields or academic disciplines.

For some associations, an important mission is to represent the interests of colleges and universities to the federal, and in some cases, state governments. Membership associations champion public policies that are in the collective best interest of all or some major segment of higher education. Many associations provide professional development programs and services to their members, as well as information on best practices in the field. Some organizations also serve as scholarly forums, publishing journals in their affiliated field; advancing academic topics, agendas, and leadership associated with the organization's discipline or other congregating identity; and holding conference meetings to bring interested parties together for discussion and collaborative work.

Membership in such associations is voluntary and usually involves paying dues to support infrastructure, programs, and publications. Most of these groups hold annual national or international meetings requiring a registration fee to attend. Some organizational business is transacted at these meetings, but most of the activity consists of speakers and issue forums, topic-focused discussion groups, and networking opportunities. These meetings allow people with common interests to exchange ideas and stay in touch with one another.

The American Council on Education (ACE) serves as the major higher education coordinating organization in the U.S. Its members and associates represent approximately 1,700 accredited, degree-granting colleges and universities and postsecondary-related associations, organizations, and corporations. Through consultation and consensus building with other higher education associations, ACE aims to speak for higher education nationally, especially to the federal government.

Governing Boards

Relative to other countries, institutional autonomy is a defining feature of U.S. higher education. The degree of autonomy from government control, however, varies significantly among the higher education sectors, from state to state, between private and public colleges and universities, and even from institution to institution within a given state. Private institutions retain significantly higher levels of autonomy than public ones, since in most cases they do not receive direct funding from their state. As a result, institutional leadership structures and operations also vary based on institutional size, mission, and organizational culture.

The highest level of institutional administration is the governing or policymaking body, typically called the board: board of regents, directors, trustees, or governors. Virtually all colleges and universities in the U.S. are governed by boards composed primarily of citizens rather than elected officials or government bureaucrats, though some are appointed by the state governor. Generally, governing boards are responsible for appointing the chief executive officer, usually called the president or chancellor. Working together, they set policies and priorities for the system as a whole, coordinate budgets, and advocate for the institutions under their jurisdiction. While boards are commonly an institution's highest authority, they share power and responsibility with the president, faculty and/or student senates, and other organizational entities.

Institutional Leadership

While specific titles and structures vary by institution, the following roles make up the typical institutional leadership suite:

- **President:** As the highest-ranked institutional leader and administrator, the president's role is focused on strategic planning, financial sustainability, and the overall quality and performance of the institution.
- **Chancellor:** Some university systems in the U.S. are composed of several campuses. In such cases, the chief administrator of each campus is called the chancellor, and he or she reports directly to the university system president.
- **Provost/chief academic officer:** This position refers to a chief university administrator in charge of academic issues—curriculum, research, and faculty. For the most part, provosts are appointed from the tenured faculty ranks. A provost can also serve as an interim president during the process of selecting a new president. In addition to “provost” and “chief academic officer,” this role can be titled “vice president for academic affairs.”
- **Vice president:** A vice president is a senior role at a university, reporting directly to the president or chancellor. He or she can oversee various nonacademic functions of the institution, including finances, human resources, student affairs, development, and information technology. At many institutions, there is a vice president for each functional area.
- **Dean:** A dean leads an academic division of a college or university. As the chief administrator of that unit, the dean serves as a facilitator and liaison between faculty, department chairs, unit staff, students, and university leaders. Academic deans are usually appointed from the faculty ranks.
- **Department chair:** The base unit of academic organization in most institutions is the department (often clustered around a discipline, field, or group of disciplines) and is led by the department chair. The chair is a liaison between the dean and the department faculty members.

Types of Degrees

Associate Degree

Two-year colleges and a small number of four-year institutions grant undergraduate associate degrees, typically awarded after the completion of 60 semester credits. Associate degrees may represent a

terminal degree in a vocational field or may prepare students to complete a bachelor's degree at a four-year institution.

Bachelor's Degree

The undergraduate bachelor's degree is the most commonly awarded degree type, preparing students for most jobs that require a postsecondary degree and is a prerequisite for further graduate study. Although the traditional bachelor's degree, which requires four years of full-time study, is in arts (BA) or science (BS), some colleges and universities award bachelor's degrees that identify the specific area of concentration. This is especially true in the case of professional concentrations, such as the bachelor of education, bachelor of nursing, or bachelor of social work.

Master's Degree

The graduate master's degree typically requires one or two years of study beyond the bachelor's degree depending on the field. Master's degrees usually include a long research paper, master's thesis, or some other piece of original work, though this is not always the case for some professional degrees. Professional degrees often require, in addition to or in lieu of a major original capstone research project, a practicum (practical experience) in the field. In addition to the master of arts (MA) and master of science (MS), many degrees are awarded in education (MEd), business administration (MBA), nursing (MSN), and fine arts (MFA). The MFA is generally considered the terminal degree in the field.

Doctoral Degree

The graduate doctoral degree is the highest academic degree awarded by universities in the United States and is considered the terminal degree in most fields. In research fields, the degree usually awarded is the doctor of philosophy (PhD). This degree requires at least two to three years of course work beyond the bachelor's degree, successful completion of comprehensive written and oral examinations, and a major research project in the form of a dissertation (often called a thesis in other countries) that is an original contribution to the field. In the field of education, students may earn a PhD or an EdD. The latter is less research intensive and more practice oriented. Doctorates are also awarded in medicine (MD), dentistry (DDS), law (JD), and divinity (DD), but these degrees denote intense professional preparation rather than scholarly research competence.

Institution Types

Understanding the array of U.S. institutional types is a complex task. Two key organizations are responsible for the most commonly referenced higher education categories: the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) and the Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education. At the highest level, institutions are delineated as being public or private. Public and private institutions in the U.S., as defined by the NCES (2018):

Public institution

An educational institution whose programs and activities are operated by publicly elected or appointed school officials and which is supported primarily by public funds.

Private institution

An educational institution controlled by a private individual(s) or by a nongovernmental agency, usually supported primarily by non-public funds, and operated by leaders other than publicly elected or appointed officials.

Among private institutions, NCES defines not-for-profit and for-profit as follows:

Private not-for profit institution

A private institution in which the individual(s) or agency in control receives no compensation, other than wages, rent, or other expenses for the assumption of risk. These include both independent not-for-profit schools and those affiliated with a religious organization.

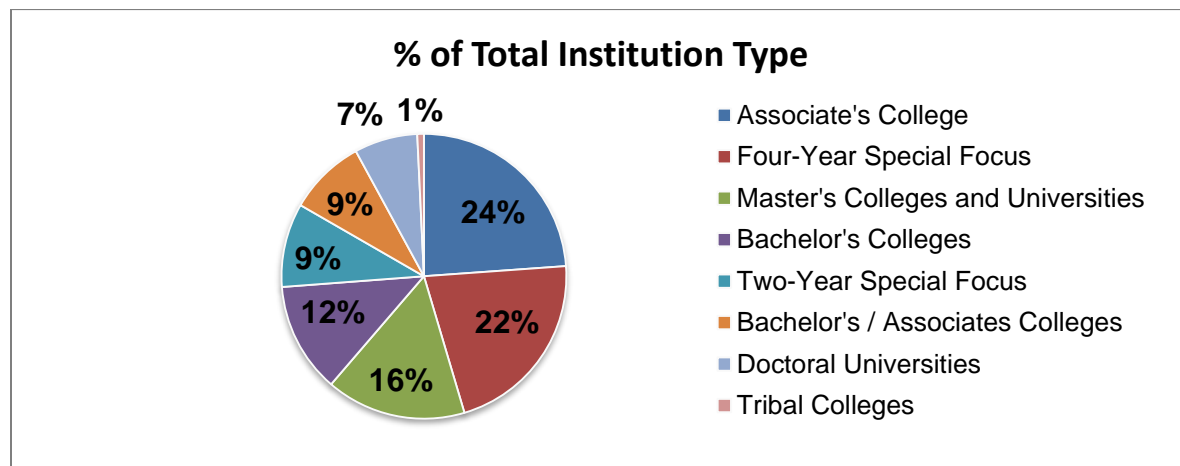
Private for-profit institution

A private institution in which the individual(s) or agency in control receives compensation other than wages, rent, or other expenses for the assumption of risk.

According to the NCES, degree-granting refers to postsecondary institutions that are eligible for Title IV federal financial aid programs,¹ and that grant an associate or higher degree. For an institution to be eligible to participate in financial aid programs it must offer a program of at least 300 clock hours in duration, have accreditation recognized by the U.S. Department of Education, have been in operation for at least two years, and have signed a participation agreement with the Department.

Degree-granting colleges and universities are frequently referred to as two-year or four-year institutions. Two year institutions grant associate degrees and are community or technical/career colleges. Four-year institutions are colleges and universities that award bachelor, masters, and/or doctoral degrees. Although two and four refer to the typical duration of study for an undergraduate to receive the lowest level degree in either type of institution, these are conventional names that do not necessarily align with program and degree policies.

U.S. HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEM, BY INSTITUTION TYPE



Tuition and Fees

U.S. higher education has an intricate tuition and fee structure. Students can choose from a wide range of institutions with significantly different educational offerings and different costs. Because tuition and fees vary by the type of college or university, the cost difference between a public and a private institution, or between an institution with highly selective admissions practices and one that is less selective, can be significant.

Undergraduate tuition for a year at a public community college might be as little as \$1,500. At a highly selective private institution, however, it could be as much as \$40,000 or more. If students attend a residential institution where they live on campus, their overall costs above tuition can also include room and board.

Public institutions generally charge lower tuition than private ones. At public institutions, however, residency status (whether a student has a permanent residence in or outside the institution’s state prior to enrolling) places students in different tuition and fee brackets. Out-of-state students are often required to pay higher tuition rates because over time they or their families have not paid the state taxes that underwrite the cost of a public postsecondary education.

Overall, the U.S. higher education system is a high-cost, high-aid system, and financial aid structures are extensive and complicated. Financial aid is one of the few areas where the federal government plays a major role. The government provides funding, regulates and administers loans, and creates oversight policy that affects individual students, institutions, and states.

For domestic students, financial aid is a combination of gift aid and self-help aid. Gift aid is a form of financial support that reduces the cost of college and does not require repayment. It includes government, institution, and privately funded grants and scholarships. Grants are primarily offered based on a student’s financial need, while scholarships are primarily based on a student’s merit (academic, athletic, artistic, etc.).

Altogether, the U.S. Department of Education offers \$120 billion per year in multiple forms of financial aid. The rising cost of U.S. postsecondary education, however, has outpaced government and even private financial support. Policymakers, higher education professionals, and the public widely acknowledge that the federal financial aid system needs improvement, especially with regard to the application and evaluation process that qualifies students for assistance.

AVERAGE ANNUAL PRICE FOR UNDERGRADUATE TUITION, FEES, ROOM, AND BOARD

	Total tuition, fees, room, and board			Tuition and fees		
	All institutions	4-year	2-year	All institutions	4-year	2-year
Public	17,237	19,488	10,091	6,817	8,804	3,156
Nonprofit	44,551	44,702	25,252	32,556	32,720	15,293
For-profit	25,431	25,532	25,027	14,419	14,423	14,397

Institutional Finance

Student tuition and fees cover only a portion of the revenue stream at U.S. institutions. Funding sources include:

- Tuition and fees from students
- Federal government
- State and local governments
- Endowment/private gift income
- Sales and other services
- Other sources

The importance of these revenue sources varies according to institutional type.

Federal funding is not provided as general institutional support, but impacts almost all types of institutions. While it does not contribute to postsecondary operating budgets, as noted previously, the federal government plays a primary role in disbursing financial aid, in the form of grants or loans, to students who use them to pay for college. Federal money is also awarded to institutions through competitive research proposals, grants, and contracts to develop specific projects at an institution.

State and local funding, conversely, does provide general institutional support, but is more central to public institutions than private. For example, state and local governments usually provide a large portion of direct operating support at public colleges and universities—more than 30 percent at many of them. That amount is diminishing, however, both as a share of state expenditures and as a percentage of institutional revenue. In response, state governments and public institutions have raised tuition, shifting the cost of postsecondary education from taxpayers to students.

At private institutions, state and local governments provide a smaller portion of direct support amounting to 2 percent or less of institutional revenue. Tuition and fees from students contribute significantly more income to private institutions. However, similar to public institutions, ongoing tuition increases have now significantly outpaced inflation and increases to student/family incomes, as well as the available government funding for financial aid. Many small private institutions are struggling to sustain themselves financially and a few have closed in recent years or merged with other institutions.

As government funding falls and tuition increases beyond the rates of inflation, institutions are forced to reduce the services they provide, improve efficiencies, or generate new revenue. U.S. colleges and universities are also pursuing many efforts to diversify and widen their revenue streams, such as developing online education and niche-oriented degree and non-degree academic programs, expanding research capacities, engaging in licensing and sponsorship agreements, and pursuing auxiliary enterprises—for example, managing real estate and running conference centers.

Finally, private donations provide an increasingly critical source of revenue for U.S. colleges and universities that is unfounded in most other higher education systems. Donations originate from alumni, non-alumni individuals, foundations, corporations, other organizations, and, to a small degree, religious

entities. Shrinking state funds for higher education are making private donations as critical to public institutions as they traditionally have been to private ones.

Endowments, closely related to these donations, are private funds given to an institution that provide ongoing support into the future. In most cases, the donor will stipulate that funds be invested and that only the income from those investments be spent, sometimes with a specific purpose. While public attention often focuses on the relatively small number of colleges and universities with large endowments, most institutions have only modest ones or no endowment at all.

Research

As noted previously, the U.S. higher education landscape encompasses nearly 5000 degree-granting institutions. As of 2018, however, only about 270 of these were categorized as research universities according to the Carnegie Classification. Research institutions are a subset of doctoral degree-granting institutions, and are further divided into the following two categories:

- R1 or Research 1 Institutions: About 130 institutions that reach a very high level on two measures—research activity and per capita resources for research activity; and
- R2 or Research 2 Institutions: Approximately 139 institutions that also reach a high level on one of these two measures—meaning they either lack research facilities or do not have many faculty members or other staff conducting research at their respective institutions.

Research universities are the most elite group of institutions in the U.S. as well as worldwide. Many occupy top spots in various national and global university rankings. As a group, they serve as the primary source of scientific discovery and technological innovation that fosters global economic and social development.

Typically R1 and R2 universities have a vice president or a similar top leadership position responsible for managing the institution’s research portfolio. Conducting research represents a key piece of faculty members’ work at these universities, and research output features prominently as a criterion in obtaining promotion and tenure.

Historically, the U.S. federal government has played a major role in funding university research. As reported by the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS), the government funded a majority of university research and development since the middle of the twentieth century, reaching as high as 73 percent in the late 1960s. This proportion declined over the last several decades and it remains around 60 percent today (AAAS n.d.).

Meanwhile, the share of total research support from industry increased from less than 3 percent in the 1960s to 6 percent today. The support from universities themselves also increased in recent decades—from less than 10 percent in the late 1960s to more than 20 percent today. According to the latest data from the National Science Foundation (NSF), “total university-performed R&D now surpasses \$55 billion a year in inflation-adjusted dollars, with universities themselves accounting for roughly \$12 billion”

Academic Calendar, Credit and Grading System

While there are some similarities across U.S. colleges and universities, academic calendars and credit systems are determined by individual institutions. Some state legislatures establish guidelines for their

public institutions, but overall, the systems used are largely individualized without government oversight or universal consistency.

Most U.S. higher education institutions operate on an academic year divided into two equal semesters lasting 15–16 weeks, with a winter break of two to three weeks in December and January, and a summer session of 10–12 weeks in June, July, and August, plus additional shorter breaks. A few institutions use a quarter system in which the year is divided into four sessions with breaks in between, or a trimester system where the academic year has three sessions and a 10–12 week summer break or time for specially offered courses.

Credit System

A typical bachelor's degree program of study on a semester calendar requires students to accumulate at least 120 credit hours. Full-time registration is usually 15 credit hours per semester/30 credit hours per academic year, and shortfalls can be made up in summer sessions or through independent study. These credit hours translate into approximately 30–40 courses and represent at least 5,400 actual hours of dedicated academic work for a non-science or non-art concentration, and well over that total for graduates of programs in the sciences, engineering, fine arts, or performing arts. For traditionally enrolled full-time undergraduate students, this amounts to approximately four years elapsed time at most institutions (different than the common three year duration of many programs outside the U.S.).

A typical master's degree program requires at least 33 credit hours and includes a research thesis or culminating project. This translates into over 4,000 hours of supervised and unsupervised (independent research) study and typically varies between one and two years elapsed time.

A doctoral program can incorporate 8,000 or more hours of advanced study and research beyond the master's degree. Most U.S. programs require a dissertation or thesis of substantial length at the end of a doctoral program, which represents a scholar's independent contribution to a discipline or field of knowledge. A few programs vary from this tradition to offer more practiced-based demonstrations of achievement or allow students to produce multiple published academic articles rather than a single thesis paper. The dissertation, however, remains the dominate project culminating doctoral programs and degree confirmation.

Grading

Like academic calendars and credit systems, grading policies are also highly individualized and can vary significantly even within a single institution. Departments and even individual faculty within a department often have jurisdiction over grading scales in their programs and courses. Though exact points and percentages vary, most course-level grading falls into three categories: norm-referenced, criterion-referenced, and pass-fail.

Norm-referenced grading systems (colloquially called “grading on a curve”) are based on a preestablished formula regarding the percentage or ratio of students within a whole class who will be assigned each grade or mark.

NORM-REFERENCED GRADING (EXAMPLE)

A (Excellent)	= Top 10% of Class
B (Good)	= Next 20% of Class
C (Average, Fair)	= Next 30% of Class
D (Poor, Pass)	= Next 20% of Class
F (Failure)	= Bottom 20% of Class

Criterion-referenced grading systems are based on a fixed numeric scale, usually equated to a letter mark, from which the faculty assign grades based on the individual performance of each student.

CRITERION-REFERENCED GRADING (EXAMPLE)

A (Excellent)	= 95-100	or	90-100
B (Good)	=85-95	or	80-90
C (Fair)	=75-85	or	70-80
D (Poor)	=65-75	or	60-70
F (Failure)	<65	or	<60

Pass-fail grading systems are used in some U.S. programs and institutions, especially when the student work to be evaluated is highly subjective (e.g., in the fine arts and music); there are no generally accepted standard gradations (e.g., with independent studies); or the critical requirement is meeting a single satisfactory standard (e.g., in some professional examinations and practica).

IMPLICATIONS FOR ENGAGEMENT CREDIT AND GRADE CONVERSION TOOLS

The credit hour system in the U.S. differs from most systems around the world, which can have implications for student exchanges as well as establishing joint or dual-degree programs with non-U.S. institutions. Some U.S. institutions—such as the University of South Carolina (USC)— offer an [International Credit Conversion Guide](#) that serves as a tool for students and faculty to calculate USC credit earned through international study.

The U.S. Department of Education and [Studyportals](#) offer detailed information on the U.S. credit hours system, comparison with other systems worldwide, and guidelines for conversion.

The World Education Services (WES) website offers the [iGPA \(international grade point average\) Calculator](#), which allows for grade comparisons on the 4.0 grading scale used in the U.S. Conversions are based on the most common grading scale used in a specific country.

Another useful resource is the [international GPA calculator](#), a tool used to calculate the United States Grade Point Average (GPA)—a number derived from the grades earned during study at a U.S. university on a scale from 0.0 to 4.0—using university grades or points from almost any country in the world.

Curriculum

The undergraduate curriculum typically consists of three components—general education, the major field of study (“the major”), and electives. General education is delivered predominately through either a core curriculum, in which all undergraduate students at a given institution take the same courses, or a

distribution format, in which students choose courses from a pre-specified list representing a range of topics from across the sciences, social sciences, arts, and humanities. General education requirements typically constitute between one-quarter and one-half of a student's courses depending on the institution and student's program of study. The other courses are focused on the student's major.

Students usually choose their major upon enrolling or by the end of their second year of studies, depending on institutional policy. Students may change their majors if their interests change and keep most of their credits earned toward their degree. Depending on the general education and major credit requirements, students may also take courses in any field or department for which they qualify.

Undergraduate curricula are frequently structured in a way that builds to some sort of culminating experience that validates a student's learning and achievement. Seldom does that summative activity take the form of an examination. More often, it is a research paper, a complex group project, an extended period of service in the community related to the major, or an interdisciplinary seminar in the major field. A growing practice is to ask students to submit an electronic portfolio of their best work in prior courses and non-classroom activities.

Graduate curriculum varies widely, but compared to U.S. undergraduate curricula, it is more tailored to both the student's selected field or subfield, and individual goals and interests. While programs in the same field may have some similar course content across institutions, studies for a master's or doctoral degree will be different between literature, biochemistry, economics, and computer science, for example. Different from U.S. undergraduate programs, all of the course work in graduate education focuses on or is directly related to the student's selected field of study. During the one to three years of graduate course work, some courses will be required, but a large number are typically elected by the student to fit their particular professional or research aspirations. Master's degree curricula are predominately course-based, but, as noted previously, often culminate with a capstone project, research paper, or practicum experience. Doctoral curricula usually involve two to three years of required and elective course work, followed by one to several years of independent research to complete a dissertation as well as written and oral examinations.

Faculty (professors)

In the U.S. context, the term "faculty" refers to college and university professors, and not—as it does in many other countries—to a school, college, or department within an institution. Faculty responsibilities typically fall into three basic categories: teaching, research, and service to the campus and/or community. However, faculty jobs are by no means uniform, and the time and attention that faculty devote to these three types of activities depend upon the mission of the institution at which they work, their academic discipline, and their rank and career stage. For example, faculty at community colleges more often tend to teach and be engaged in service activities, while many senior faculty at research universities spend more time engaged in research than in the other two areas.

Underpinning the traditional faculty role at U.S. institutions is the concept of tenure. Academic tenure is an indefinite academic appointment that can be terminated only under extraordinary circumstances, such as financial exigency or elimination of a specific academic program.

Tenure is considered a key means for defending the principle of academic freedom, a time-honored value in the U.S. higher education system. The purpose of academic freedom is to protect and legitimate the work of academics, maintain professional quality of their scholarship, promote civil discourse, and uphold an open exchange of ideas within the academic community.

The core protection of academic freedom is embedded in institutional policy, as well as in the contractual relationship between institutions of higher education and their academic employees—it does not encompass administrative staff at an institution. Even though the judicial courts may be involved in matters concerning the protection of academic freedom, and professional organizations like the AAUP also play a role, the day-to-day stewardship of academic freedom in the U.S. is primarily entrusted to the leadership of colleges and universities.

Over the last few decades, however, tenured positions have been declining with contingent faculty positions on the rise—these include both part- and full-time non-tenure-track appointments. The common characteristic of these appointments is that institutions make little or no long-term commitment to faculty holding them, non-tenure-track positions of all types now account for over 70 percent of all instructional staff appointments in American higher education.

FACULTY RANK AND TITLES, BY TENURE/NON-TENURE TRACK

	Tenured/Tenure-track	Non-tenure track
Full Time	Professor Associate Professor Assistant Professor Research Professor	Lecturer Instructor Professor of Practice Research Professor
Part Time	Professor Emeritus (a title of honor given to a retired faculty member still affiliated with the institution, who may or may not work part time)	Adjunct Professor Lecturer Instructor

Teaching and Learning

Current principles of good practice emphasize active learning as opposed to the more passive modes associated with listening to lectures. Active learning keeps students engaged by periodically posing questions, inviting discussion, and sometimes requesting student input through smartphones or laptops. In discussion sections and even in large lecture classes, students are assigned to work in small groups ad hoc in the classroom or on more extensive assignments in work outside of class.

Active learning also extends beyond the classroom. Undergraduate students often have an opportunity to work with faculty on research projects, either as part of a team or independently. Large research universities, as well as selective liberal arts colleges, are especially likely to make research experience available to students during their undergraduate studies.

Increasingly, instructors are including student work in local communities as part of their course design. The work might take place in cooperation with a local social service agency or relevant business where students collaborate on projects that are academically enriching and of practical use to the organization. This *service learning* is followed by class discussion and often personal reflective

writing. Service learning strives to bring classroom learning to life in a community context, give students experience with the environments in which they may be working, and instill habits of just citizenship.

In many doctoral programs, graduate students take on apprentice instruction responsibilities as part of their graduate training and education funding. These students work for faculty as teaching assistants (TAs) leading courses or sections of courses, and occasionally have an opportunity to develop and teach their own courses. The magnitude of support and pedagogical training for TAs varies between campuses and between fields within a campus. However, programs helping TAs learn how to teach and better understand their students are growing in prevalence and are often located in campus teaching and learning centers.

Co-curricular Activities

In addition to traditional student learning in the classroom, the U.S. collegiate experience is strongly shaped by co-curricular activities, which can be defined as the initiatives designed to supplement the curricular or main academic activities. They are not graded, and students typically do not earn academic credit. However, these activities represent a very important aspect of U.S. educational institutions' holistic approach to student development as well as strengthening and complementing classroom learning.

Categories and examples of co-curricular activities at U.S. colleges and universities include:

- Academically focused groups or clubs—National Society of Black Engineers or the Public Relations Student Society of America
- Cultural and religious associations—Muslim Student Society or Association of Asian Students
- Social organizations—a familiar type of student social organization is the Greek-lettered fraternity or sorority
- Student government—the formal, recognized student advocacy body on campus

Co-curricular programming is comparatively minimal for graduate students since many of them do not live on campus. Activities tend to be academic or professionally oriented, and depend largely on whether an institution has allocated administrative and financial resources that prioritize graduate student development.

Support Services

Most American four-year colleges and universities provide housing for students during the academic year. These residence halls, in addition to providing food service and sleeping rooms, provide programming to students on a variety of topics, both academic and social, such as improving study skills, building intercultural competencies, or learning about dangers of alcohol abuse.

Additionally, institutions provide a range of student support services including, but not limited to:

- Personal counseling
- Career placement and advising

- Recreation and physical fitness
- Child care
- Transportation
- Banking
- Health care
- Tutoring

Most large institutions provide some housing for a small number of graduate students, though residential programming is rare. Regardless of whether they live on- or off-campus, most graduate students enrolled full time, and often those enrolled only part time, have access to the university's support services noted above.

Alumni Engagement

As part of promoting a life-long connection and engagement with their students, many U.S. universities have an Office of Alumni Relations. These offices collect data on alumni, track their professional accomplishments, share news with the larger university community, and cultivate an alumni network for fundraising, marketing, and promoting the university brand.

Maintaining alumni relationships involves both traditional practices of reaching out through direct mail campaigns, phone calls, and student reunions, as well as new digital media; podcasts; webinars; and social networks such as Facebook, LinkedIn, or Twitter. These new venues allow institutions to engage with their alumni on a more consistent basis and through contemporary mediums.

Even though building and maintaining networks with their U.S. alumni has become a standard practice for most institutions, keeping track and connecting regularly with their international alumni still poses quite a challenge for many universities; obtaining and updating their information requires much more work. Some institutions organize alumni events for their former students in countries with a larger population of alumni, or organize meetings with university leaders when they travel to specific countries or regions. However, given the cost of such practices, a limited number of institutions are able to organize these international events on a regular basis.