

Studying in the **United States**

A guide for international students & families — how U.S. higher education works, the student visa, admissions and English requirements, costs, and how to apply and thrive.



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2026 EDITION

ABOUT K12 ACADEMICS

The world's largest education resource.

Online since 2004, K12 Academics has helped millions of families, students and educators **find the right school, college, camp, business and program in their community** — for every kind of learner.

A WORLD OF OPPORTUNITY — AND A PROCESS

The U.S. hosts more international students than any country — drawn by world-class, flexible universities. Studying there is a real opportunity, but it comes with a **process**: understanding the system, the student visa, admissions and English requirements, and the (significant) costs. This guide walks it in **ten steps**.

General guidance, not legal or immigration advice. Visa rules, admissions, and costs vary and change. This guide is an overview; always confirm current requirements with each university, the U.S. Department of State, and official sources, and consult your school's international office.

Understand Why Students Choose the U.S.

WHAT TO KNOW

The U.S. draws international students with **world-renowned universities, academic flexibility, breadth of programs, research opportunities, and a global campus experience**. It's a big investment, and understanding the appeal helps you weigh it.

BY THE NUMBERS

Top universities

world-renowned

Flexible

explore before choosing a major

Opportunity

research & global network

HOW TO HELP

Weigh what the U.S. offers — flexibility, breadth, reputation — against the cost and distance, to decide if it's the right fit for your goals.

GOOD TO KNOW

U.S. degrees are **flexible** — you often explore subjects before declaring a major, unlike many countries' systems.

Understand the Higher-Ed System

WHAT TO KNOW

U.S. higher education is varied: **large universities, small liberal-arts colleges, and community colleges** (an affordable entry point). Undergraduate degrees usually take four years, with a flexible “general education” core before specializing.

BY THE NUMBERS

Many types

universities, LACs, community colleges

4-year degree

typical undergrad

Flexible

gen-ed then major

HOW TO HELP

Learn the **types of institutions and how degrees work** — including community college as an affordable path that can transfer to a university later.

GOOD TO KNOW

Community college is an affordable, legitimate route — strong students often transfer to a top university after two years.

Understand the Student Visa

WHAT TO KNOW

Most international students study on an **F-1 student visa**. In brief: you're admitted to a school, receive a **Form I-20**, pay the SEVIS fee, and apply for the visa at a U.S. embassy or consulate. Rules are specific — follow official guidance.

BY THE NUMBERS

F-1 visa

the typical route

Form I-20

from your school

Official process

embassy/consulate

HOW TO HELP

Understand the **F-1 process at a high level**, then rely on **official sources and your university's international office** for the exact, current steps — this is where accuracy matters most.

WATCH OUT

Visa rules are precise and change — use only **official government sources** and your school's international office; this guide is not legal advice.

Research & Choose Universities

WHAT TO KNOW

Choose based on **fit, not just rankings**: academic programs, size and setting, location and climate, cost, support for international students, and outcomes. Build a balanced list of reach, match, and safety schools.

BY THE NUMBERS

Fit first

not just rankings

Programs & support

international-friendly?

Balanced list

reach/match/safety

HOW TO HELP

Research widely and build a **balanced, fit-based list** — weigh programs, cost, location, and international-student support, using our Top Universities by Country and college guides.

GOOD TO KNOW

Look beyond famous names — many excellent U.S. universities offer strong programs, support, and better value.

Meet Admissions Requirements

WHAT TO KNOW

Applications typically require **academic transcripts, English-proficiency scores, essays, and recommendations**. The SAT/ACT is often **optional** now, and some universities require credential evaluation of foreign transcripts.

BY THE NUMBERS

Transcripts

+ credential evaluation

Essays & recs

tell your story

SAT/ACT

often optional now

HOW TO HELP

Gather **transcripts (evaluated if required), English scores, essays, and recommendations** early, and check each university's specific requirements — they vary.

GOOD TO KNOW

Requirements differ by university — always check each school's international-admissions page for its exact list and deadlines.

Meet English-Language Requirements

WHAT TO KNOW

Most universities require proof of **English proficiency** — commonly the **TOEFL, IELTS, or Duolingo English Test**. Minimum scores vary by school, and some offer **conditional admission** with English support.

BY THE NUMBERS

TOEFL/IELTS

+ Duolingo

Scores vary

by university

Conditional

some offer it

HOW TO HELP

Take an accepted **English test** in good time, aim for each university's required score, and explore **conditional-admission** or pathway programs if you need more English support.

GOOD TO KNOW

If your scores fall short, **conditional admission and pathway programs** can still get you in — many universities offer them.

Plan for Costs & Funding

WHAT TO KNOW

Studying in the U.S. is **expensive**, and financial aid for international students is **limited** (most U.S. federal aid isn't available to them). Look hard for **scholarships, university aid for internationals, and funding from home**.

BY THE NUMBERS

High cost

tuition + living

Limited aid

for internationals

Scholarships

seek them actively

HOW TO HELP

Budget the **full cost** (tuition, living, insurance, travel), and actively pursue **scholarships and any international-student aid** — some universities are far more generous than others.

WATCH OUT

Never assume there's no aid — some U.S. universities offer significant scholarships to international students, so research and apply widely.

Navigate the Application Process

WHAT TO KNOW

Most students apply via the **Common App** (or each university's system), with deadlines typically in the **fall and winter** before the year they'll start. International applications need extra lead time for testing, documents, and the visa.

BY THE NUMBERS

Common App

+ university systems

Fall/winter

deadlines

Extra time

testing, docs, visa

HOW TO HELP

Start **early** — international timelines are longer — track each deadline, complete applications, and plan for the visa process *after* admission and the I-20.

GOOD TO KNOW

Give yourself **extra months**: English testing, credential evaluation, applications, and the visa all take time and must line up.

Prepare for the Transition

WHAT TO KNOW

Arriving means **cultural, academic, and practical adjustment**: a new classroom style (participation, independent work), climate, food, banking, and daily life. Universities' **international offices** are there to help.

BY THE NUMBERS

Culture shock

normal & temporary

Classroom style

participation-heavy

Int'l office

your key support

HOW TO HELP

Prepare for the **adjustment**, and lean on your university's **international student office** — for orientation, visa guidance, and support settling in.

GOOD TO KNOW

The **international student office** is your go-to for everything from visa questions to homesickness — connect with them early.

Thrive as an International Student

WHAT TO KNOW

Beyond studying, **build community, use campus resources, and explore opportunities** like internships and (after graduation) **Optional Practical Training (OPT)** for U.S. work experience. Your global perspective is an asset.

BY THE NUMBERS

Community

find your people

Opportunities

internships, OPT

Your strength

a global perspective

HOW TO HELP

Get involved, use every resource, and explore **career opportunities like OPT** — while celebrating the global perspective and resilience you bring.

GOOD TO KNOW

International students bring **real strengths** — and post-study work options like OPT can extend the opportunity. Make the most of it.

Studying in the U.S.: The Essentials

A snapshot of the journey — confirm every detail with each university, official U.S. government sources, and your international office.

The system

Flexible universities, liberal-arts colleges, and (affordable) community colleges; 4-year undergrad with a general-education core before specializing.

The visa

Most study on an F-1 visa: get admitted, receive a Form I-20, pay the SEVIS fee, and apply at a U.S. embassy/consulate — follow official guidance.

Admissions

Transcripts (evaluated if required), English scores (TOEFL/IELTS/Duolingo), essays, and recommendations; SAT/ACT often optional.

Costs

High tuition and living costs with limited aid for internationals — pursue scholarships and university aid actively.

Applying & thriving

Apply via the Common App with fall/winter deadlines and extra lead time; lean on the international office; explore OPT after graduation.

YOUR U.S. JOURNEY STARTS HERE

Find Your Community.

Explore our Top Universities by Country, country guides, and college resources — among **1,297 free resources** to help students study anywhere.

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