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Studying in the U.S. as an international student can be an exciting and enriching experience, which is why more and more students choose to come to the U.S. each year. Enrollment of international students in American high schools and colleges has risen significantly in recent years. The number of international high school students tripled between 2004 and 2016, now totaling nearly 82,000. Meanwhile, colleges host more than a million international learners each year. If you're thinking about studying in America, this guide breaks down the process of applying to a school, while also answering common questions about costs, visas and post-graduation options. When it comes to studying in the U.S., international students have a few different options: High School Some parents encourage their teenagers to attend high school in the U.S. to broaden their horizons and prepare them for the rigors of higher education. In addition to building English language skills, students also learn how to navigate a different culture. U.S. public high schools only allow international students to study for one year, but private schools do not limit the length of enrollment. Community College Because community colleges are largely an American phenomenon, many international students haven't heard of them. But these two-year colleges can be a great stepping stone for figuring out whether a four-year degree at a U.S. school is the right fit. Aside from introducing learners to the American education system, community colleges make it easy to transfer credits, save money on tuition, and develop academic, professional and personal networks before diving into a bachelor's degree. Undergraduate Studying in one of the best higher education systems in the world is reason enough for many international students to come to America for their undergrad years, but there's more. While undergrad programs in places like Europe tend to emphasize specialization, American colleges offer a rigorous general education program that covers a variety of foundational topics. U.S. colleges also typically offer a wider selection of degree programs and provide more flexibility to explore and make changes. Graduate Graduate programs encompass both master's and doctoral degrees, and can last anywhere from nine months to seven years, depending on the field of study and the student's career goals. Graduate programs appeal to both students coming to America for the first time and those who have already completed an undergraduate degree and want to stay in the country. Short-term Study Abroad Short-term study abroad experiences range from programs that last only a few weeks to a full academic year and allow students to supplement their learning at home with an international experience. Short-term study abroad experiences are available at all educational levels and there are many organizations that help students find a location, focus area and budget that meets their needs. Online Learning Studying and living in the U.S. is an expensive process that isn't always realistic for everyone. However, as online programs expand, lots of international learners are completing American degrees without ever setting foot in the country. Programs are available at all college levels and in many subject areas. Step 2: Understand the Cost of Studying Abroad Once students have decided on the type of study abroad program, the next step is identifying costs and how to pay for them. According to international education consultant Sarah Froberg, the type of school a student attends greatly affects the bottom line. “International students are usually not eligible for federal financial aid, so it's important to look at how the tuition costs vary from school to school,” she cautions. “State colleges are typically more affordable than private schools, but private schools typically award more scholarships.” Another thing students need to consider is how their home currency translates to the U.S. dollar. “Currency fluctuation can really change how long your money will last,” says Froberg. “Some of the questions to ask yourself include, ‘how far will my money go in U.S. dollars,' ‘what's the current exchange rate,' and ‘is the rate predicted to change.’” Plus, employment opportunities are limited, so relying on a part-time job isn't realistic. “International students can only work at an on-campus job, which usually pays minimum wage,” says Froberg. The following sections take a look at some of the common costs of studying in the U.S. at different academic levels. Students have two options when attending American high school: public schools, which are run by individual states, and private schools, which are run autonomously. Costs vary significantly between the two, so students and their families need to understand them fully before making a choice. Public high schools are free for American students to attend, but international learners must pay a fee. According to the U.S. Department of State, these fees usually range between $3,000 and $10,000 for the one year in which they can study abroad. Private high schools are more expensive, and these costs will vary greatly depending on the state, city, county and/or individual school. The Academy at Charlemont in Massachusetts, for example, charges $28,500 for tuition and fees annually. The examples highlighted below can give international students a general idea of what to expect. The amounts come from the high school at the University of North Carolina School of the Arts and The Academy at Charlemont. Unlike at the high school level, international college students are allowed to attend a public or private institution for the full length of the program – be it an associate, bachelor's, master's or doctoral degree. Because international students aren't eligible for lower in-state tuition, they can expect to pay a premium, even at public universities. The average annual tuition for 2017-18 was: Public community college: $8,614 per year Public four-year college: $25,620 Private four-year college (nonprofit): $34,740 To get a better sense of what those expenses look like, check out the estimated costs for international students attending the University of Iowa, a public four-year college: The Council on International Education Exchange organizes hundreds of short-term educational opportunities for students around the globe. As an example, here are the actual costs for its eight-week summer program in Boston: Participation confirmation: $300 Educational costs: $2,910 Housing: $2,640 Meals not included in program fee: $600 International airfare: $1,200 Local transportation: $400 Books & supplies: $50 Visa: $1,000 Personal expenses: $300 Financial Aid Resources 3 Hidden Costs for International Students at U.S. Colleges This insightful article from U.S. News & World Report helps international students figure out how to cut costs without sacrificing education quality. eduPASS Billed as the “SmartStudent Guide to Studying in the USA,” eduPASS provides a ton of resources for students looking for help with financial aid, including a financial planning worksheet and loan explainers. Financial Aid for Undergraduate International Students NAFSA: Association of International Educators offers multiple resources to help international students figure out how much money they need and understand the various funding sources available to them. International Scholarships This website is devoted to helping international students find and apply for scholarships and grants that help them offset the costs of an American education. International Students Find Ways to Pay High Tuition Voice of America provides this fascinating article and accompanying interview with an international student who figured out how to attend school in America without breaking the bank. Offices of Financial Aid Lots of institutions – Bard College being just one example – provide resources specifically tailored to international students. After deciding which college they want to attend, students should look for a similar page or contact the Office of Financial Aid to find out about specific funding. Step 3: Applying Applying to a high school or college in the U.S. can be confusing, especially for international students who are likely unfamiliar with how the education system works in the country, including the application process. The following information provides students with a good idea of the type of information they'll need to compile and submit. Some schools may ask for additional materials, so it's best to read instructions and requirements for each school/program thoroughly. Because the international high school landscape is foreign to many international students, families often work with a consultant or agency to navigate the process. Students interested in this option should vet prospective agencies and carefully review all fees. Standard materials required for entrance include: Financial statements showing the family is able to pay for the program and any additional expenses Information about where the student will be staying while in school An F-1 visa for one-year stays or an M-1 visa for multi-year stays Entrance exam scores Online application TOEFL scores Teacher recommendations Copy of passport Immunization records School transcripts Even though most international students have taken at least some English language coursework before arriving, they may need to complete more upon arrival. “If your English isn't quite where it needs to be, it's quite common for students to start an English as a Second Language (ESL) class,” notes Sarah. “This is one of the smartest things an ESL learner can do because not only will it help them improve their English, but they can also get a head start on adjusting to life in the U.S.” At most U.S. colleges, international students go through the same admissions process as American students. Application requirements for prospective college students tend to be more in-depth than those at the high school level, and the review process may be more stringent, depending on the college. For starters, Froberg notes that international students will have to convert their secondary school transcripts to the U.S. academic system, and most colleges will also require at least two standardized tests (e.g., IELTS/TOEFL and SAT/ACT). Other requirements include: Financial statements showing the student or their parents can pay for the program and any additional expenses Confirmation of J-1 visa approval Online application At least three years of secondary school transcripts Minimum required GPA Letters of recommendation Immunization records Proof of health insurance Interview (optional, but encouraged at some universities, such as Harvard) All requirements must be submitted by the college's stated deadline. An admissions committee then reviews all applications and admission decisions will be sent, usually during the spring. Applying to an exchange program, internship, certificate or other short-term study option is typically less intense than applying to a high school or college, but students still need to start early to ensure all their paperwork is delivered on time. Some of the documents they'll likely be asked to provide include: Financial statements showing the student or his/her parents can pay for the program and any additional expenses Confirmation of visitor (B) visa or F-1 visa, depending on length of stay Documentation of English language abilities Online application Advisor support of participation letter Academic recommendation Transcript Resume, if applicable Application fee Immunization records Proof of health insurance The TOEFL More than 30 million individuals take the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) exam each year, and many of them do so because they want to study in the U.S. The TOEFL iBT exam can be taken online and helps students whose native language is not English qualify for academic programs abroad. Educational Testing Service (ETS), the administrator of the exam, offers 50 test dates throughout the year, so students should check with the school or program they want to attend and see when is the best time to take it. Because students may not achieve a high enough score the first time, they may want to leave extra time to retake it. ETS provides free preparation materials on its website, as well as more general information about the exam. Step 4: Applying for a Student Visa Once students have received an offer letter from a school, the next step is to obtain a visa from the U.S. government. Though it may sound intimidating, this process is simple and straightforward for students who are prepared. In addition to paperwork, most visas require an interview. According to Froberg, there's no reason to feel overwhelmed so long as you follow the rules. “It's important to be honest and polite during your visa interview without offering up any excess information that could cause confusion,” she says. “It's also important to show strong ties to your country, as the officer wants to see that you plan on returning once your program is finished.” The following section takes a look at the most common types of visas for international students and what is required to obtain them. Regardless of the visa you apply for, Froberg notes that preparation is key. “The most important thing I tell students is to study this list of required documentation from the U.S. Department of State before going to your visa appointment,” she says. “If you forget something, you will most likely be denied your visa and need to go back for another appointment.” For students who must travel a long way to the embassy, forgetting even one slip of paper can cause lots of headaches, so be prepared. Visitor (B) visas allow students from countries that don't participate in the Visa Waiver Program to visit the U.S. for 90 days or fewer and engage in a short-term program of study. To qualify, students must state the purpose of the trip and how long they plan to stay. They must also provide documentation about their permanent address outside America and show proof of funds. Applications can be made to the U.S. embassy in their home country. This visa costs $160 and does not allow holders to work or intern while in the country. The F-1 visa is provided to students attending an accredited university or college, high school, private elementary school, seminary, conservatory or other academic institution that provides language training. International students attending a public high school can only use this visa for a year, but students attending other types of schools can extend it for the length of the program. Before applying for an F-1 at the U.S. embassy, students need a Form 1-20 from their school. “The most complicated part of getting an F-1 is showing the correct financial documentation,” says Froberg. “The school should be able to provide sample documentation, as well as guidelines for translating the document so it meets the school's requirements.” After combining all fees associated with an F-1, this visa costs $480. F-1 visa holders are allowed to work at an on-campus job, provided it is part time. The M-1 visa, also known as the vocational visa, allows students to reside full time in America and study a topic that isn't traditionally seen as academic. Examples may include language programs, technical/vocational programs or training in a specific trade (e.g., cooking, cosmetology, flight training). Unless otherwise specified, M-1 visa holders can stay in the U.S. for two years or until their program ends, whichever is sooner. Applicants must demonstrate English proficiency, maintenance of funds and an intention to leave once the program is completed. Applications are made via the U.S. embassy and cost $520. The J-1 visa is often used interchangeably with the F-1 visa, but there are key differences. The J-1 can be used for standard university degree programs, but unlike the F-1, at least 51 percent of funding cannot come from the student's personal funds. This is a common visa for students taking part in educational exchanges like the Fulbright Program. Additionally, students must receive a separate work permit for any on- or off-campus employment. Applications must be made to the U.S. embassy and cost $500. Step 5: Preparing for Departure Once students are accepted to their school of choice and have a visa in hand, there are a few remaining things they'll need to take care of before leaving their country and heading to the U.S. The following checklist helps students ensure they haven't forgotten to take care of anything before jetting off. After Graduation You not only navigated the complex American education system, you conquered it. Now that you've finished your program or degree, what's next? Here are some potential options: Return Home After gaining the education you came for, you can use your newly gained knowledge to help your home country. Not every student gets the opportunity to gain a diploma or degree in a different country, so newly minted graduates returning home are often in high demand due to their unique knowledge, skillsets and professional networks. Continue Studying in America Depending on the degree you earned and your remaining budget after completing those studies, you may decide to stay in America to earn another degree. As long as you're enrolled in an accredited academic program and can show proof of funds, you can continue studying in the U.S. and building your skills. Start a Career in the U.S. After learning the ways of the American education system, making professional contacts and making new friends, some international students want to stay in the country and begin their careers. Though this process isn't easy, students who are focused and determined may find success in relocating to the United States on a more permanent basis. After students graduate from college, they can apply for what's known as Optional Practical Training (OPT), a one-year work permit of sorts that allows new graduates to work in a field related to their studies and actually get paid for it. Students have 90 days between graduation and the OPT starting to find a job, so it's critical that they build professional contacts and take part in unpaid internships while still in school to strengthen their chances of finding employment quickly. Froberg has some helpful advice for students considering this path who don't want to experience heartache along the way. “My biggest advice for students is to never work illegally in the U.S.,” she says. Students may think that the government can't track down things like babysitting or working at a restaurant, but they dig deeply into employment history when reviewing OPT applications. “If the United States Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) discovers that you worked illegally, they could not only deny your application but also cancel your visa and ban you from the United States.”

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