

U.S. Higher Education System

While characterized by great diversity, American institutions of higher education are classified in general as follows:

A. UNDERGRADUATE STUDY

Community and Junior Colleges: **provide a two-year course** beyond high school or secondary school. Courses are either “**Terminal**”, leading to employment, or “**Academic**”, preparing the student for transfer to a four-year college or university where he/she will **complete his/her education**. Graduates of junior colleges are usually awarded an Associate in Arts (A.A.) or Associate in Sciences (A.S.) degree.

A Technical Institute: offers a two- or three-year course of training for a semi-professional occupation, such as that of a dental, engineering or medical technician.

Terminal Occupational Education: offers one to three years of study beyond secondary level intended to prepare the student for immediate employment. Technical programs, also known as “Vocational” and “Organized Occupational” studies, do not prepare a student to continue higher education at a regular four-year college or university.

Liberal Arts College or University: offers a university education combining natural and social sciences as well as humanistic studies. The term “college” is often used where undergraduate study is concerned. The college may be part of a university which also has graduate and professional schools, or it may be an independent institution offering a Bachelor’s degree program, with little if any instruction at the graduate level.

The Bachelor’s Degree: Four years of undergraduate study lead to a Bachelor’s degree in Liberal Arts or in Science, a B.A. or B.S. degree, and qualify the graduate to apply for admission to a graduate school. The Bachelor of Arts (B.A.) or Bachelor of Science (B.S.) degree is awarded on successful completion of a specified number of courses or units and the full degree requirement is usually stated as being 120 credits (about 40 courses) for institutions operating on a semester system, and 180 credits for a quarterly calendar. A Bachelor’s degree program is designed to last four years, the first year being called Freshman year, the second Sophomore, the third Junior, and the fourth Senior. Courses in the first two years are referred to as “lower division” courses and in the last two years as “upper division” courses.

Many institutions have experimented with a wide variety of amendments to the structure of their degrees in recent years. Nevertheless, the original pattern usually survives in some form and consists of:

- **General basic courses** sometimes called “**core courses**” or “**distribution requirements**,” which must be taken by all students, usually during their first two years. These comprise about a third of the degree and they include subjects such as English, a foreign language, a natural science, social science and mathematics.
- Courses in which a student wishes to “**major**”, i.e. specialize, which are mostly taken in the last two years and usually amount to a quarter or more of the total degree requirements.

- “Elective courses” which the student chooses from any field.

Students from other countries do not necessarily enter an American college or university as freshmen (first-year students). They may be admitted by the college at a higher level or receive advanced standing, mainly through placement tests. Each college or university in the United States determines for itself the level of entry for each student. Students may sometimes complete a Bachelor’s degree in less than four years by (a) receiving credits for pre-college work (i.e. the European Baccalaurate) or (b) taking courses during the summer.

B. GRADUATE STUDY

Graduate and Professional Schools: Provide post-university study leading to the Master’s or doctoral degree.

1. The Master’s Degree

The M.A., M.S., M.B.A. and other professional **Master’s degrees require a minimum of one academic year**. More often 18 months or two years are needed. Although requirements for advanced degrees vary far more than for the Bachelor’s degree, some number of course credits is always required. The Master’s degree will usually require a minimum of about 30 credits up to a maximum of 60 credits, and an average grade of “B.”

2. The Doctorate Degree

The Doctorate Degree covers many fields of specialization and requires a minimum of three to four years of study beyond the Bachelor’s degree; two to four years of study after the Master’s degree. Most graduate schools do not require that a student fulfill the specific requirements for the Master’s degree before becoming a candidate for the Doctor’s degree, although many students find it desirable to do so. Doctorates in Education, Science and Law are sometimes labeled Ed.D., Sc.D., Jur.D., but most doctorates are known as Ph.D. (Doctor of Philosophy) degrees.

Source: <http://www.fulbright.be/study-in-the-us/graduate-studies/us-higher-education-system/>