

The American Education System

International students who come to the United States may wonder about their American classmates' prior education. Due to its local variations, the American education system appears confusing. In addition, the structure and procedures at American universities differ somewhat from other systems, such as the British model. This is a brief overview of the American school and university systems.

To begin, because the country has a federal system of government that has historically valued local governance, no country-level education system or curriculum exists in the United States. The federal government does not operate public schools. Each of the fifty states has its own Department of Education that sets guidelines for the schools of that state. Public schools also receive funding from the individual state, and also from local property taxes. Public colleges and universities receive funding from the state in which they are located. Each state's legislative body decides how many tax dollars will be given to public colleges and universities. Students in grades 1-12 do not pay tuition. College and university students do pay tuition, but many earn scholarships or receive loans.

Much of the control of American public schools lies in the hands of each local school district. Each school district is governed by a school board; a small committee of people elected by the local community or appointed by the local government. The school board sets general policies for the school district and insures that state guidelines are met.

Generally, school districts are divided into elementary schools, middle schools, and high schools. Elementary schools are composed of students in kindergarten and grades 1-5. Most children attend kindergarten when they are five-years-old. Children begin 1st grade at age six. Middle school is composed of students in grades 6-8 and high school contains grades 9-12.

High school students are required to take a wide variety of courses in English, mathematics, science, and social science. They may also be required to take foreign language or physical education, and they may elect to take music, art, or theatre courses. Many high schools also offer vocational training courses. A course can be one semester or two semesters in length. The academic year generally begins in mid August and ends in early June.

In the United States, education is compulsory for all students until ages sixteen to eighteen depending on the individual state. According to the 2010 U.S. Census, 87.1% of people over the age of 25 were high school graduates. Most high school students graduate at the age of seventeen or eighteen-years-old. A student graduates after he or she has successfully passed all of the required courses. Grades are given to students for each course at the end of each semester. The grading scale is A (excellent), B (above average), C (average), D (below average), and F (failing). A student who fails a required course must repeat the course.

The Bureau of Labor Statistics reports that 66.2% of 2012 high school graduates were enrolled in college in October 2012. Students have the option of attending a two-year community college (also known as a junior college) before applying to a four-year university. Admission to community college is easier, tuition is lower, and class sizes are often smaller than in a university. Community college students can earn an Associate's degree and transfer up to two years of course credits to a university.

Admission to a University

Although admission policies vary from one university to the next, most determine admission based on several criteria, including a student's high school course of study, high school Grade Point Average (GPA), participation in extracurricular activities, SAT or ACT exam scores, a written essay, and possibly a personal interview:

- The university admissions office considers whether a student has taken courses in high school that have prepared him/her for more difficult coursework. A student's high school GPA is also considered. A GPA is a quantitative figure representing a student's accumulated grades. Each letter grade is assigned a number of points: A = 4 points, B = 3, C = 2, D = 1 and F = 0 points. A GPA is calculated by adding all of the points earned for each course grade and dividing the total points by the total number of courses taken. For example, a GPA of 3.0 is a "B" average for all of the courses taken.
- University admissions officers like to see applications from high school students who have participated in extracurricular activities, such as scholastic clubs, athletic teams, student government, and philanthropic clubs. Voluntary participation in these kinds of activities is an indication that students have learned valuable life lessons, such as teamwork, leadership, or civic responsibility.
- Most students in the United States take the SAT Reasoning Text (formerly known as the Scholastic Aptitude Test) or the ACT (formerly known as American College Testing) during their final year of high school. Each university sets a minimum SAT or ACT score that a student must achieve in order to gain admission. These are standardized quantitative examinations. The SAT tests critical reading, mathematics, and writing skills. The ACT tests English, mathematics, reading, and science reasoning, and includes an optional writing test.
- Universities often require students to write an essay as part of the application process. Each admissions office determines the length and content of the essay. The applicant also may be required to have a personal interview with a representative from the admissions office.

At the University:

University students pursuing a Bachelor's degree are called "undergraduates," whereas students pursuing a Master's or Doctoral degree are called "graduate students." American undergraduate students will say they are "going to school" or "going to college," which means they are attending university. A common question one student asks another is, "What is your major?" This means, "What is your major field of study?"

Most universities give undergraduate students a liberal education, which means students are required to take courses across several disciplines before they specialize in a major field of study. Graduate and professional (such as medicine or law) programs are specialized.

At the university level, most courses are only one semester long. Each course is assigned a number of credit hours. Credit hours are usually based on how much time is spent in class each week. Most courses are 3 credits. However, some courses may be 1, 2, 4 or 5 credits. All degree programs require students to complete a minimum number of credit hours before graduation. Most Bachelor's degree programs in the United States do not require students to write a final thesis.

Selection for admission to a graduate program is based on several criteria. These include completion of a Bachelor's degree, the student's undergraduate coursework, and their GPA. Students are also expected to write an essay as part of their application or submit a writing sample. Most Master's programs require students to have a minimum score on the Graduate Record Examination (GRE), which tests verbal reasoning, quantitative reasoning, critical thinking, and analytical writing skills.

Students continue to take courses at the graduate level. A final thesis is required for most Master's programs. Doctoral students take courses until they have earned enough credit hours to attempt their qualifying examinations, which are usually taken over several days and often include both a written and oral component. After doctoral students pass their qualifying exams, they are advanced to candidacy and can begin writing their dissertation. Before the degree is given, the completed dissertation must be orally defended before the candidate's faculty committee.

Because degree requirements can be very complex and vary from one university and department to another, all students should check with their university and department advisors to make sure they are meeting their educational requirements.

Editorial provided by Susan E. Hume, Ph.D., Associate Professor, Department of Geography, Southern Illinois University Edwardsville.

source: www.individualstudentguide.tothecase.com/articles-education-system.htm