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## Higher Education Glossary

*The following higher education glossary (Narayan, 2011) provides terms and definitions to support students and their families.*

**Academic adviser:** A member of a school's faculty who provides advice and guidance to students on academic matters, such as course selections.

**Academic year:** Annual period during which a student attends and receives formal instruction at a college or university, typically from August or September to May or June.

**Accredited:** Official recognition that a college or university meets the standards of a regional or national association. Although international students are not required to attend an accredited college or university in the United States, employers, other schools and governments worldwide often only recognize degrees from accredited schools.

**ACT (American College Test):** A standardized college entrance exam administered by the American College Testing Program. Four separate, multiple-choice tests measure knowledge of English, math, reading and science, and one optional writing test measures essay planning and writing skills. Most students take the ACT during their junior or senior year of high school, and most colleges and universities accept scores from either the ACT or SAT. Some schools may recommend, but not require, international students to take the ACT or SAT.

**Affidavit of Support:** An official document proving adequate funding from an individual or organization to cover an international student's educational and living expenses while enrolled at a U.S. college or university.

**AP (Advanced Placement program):** A program offered by the College Board, a U.S.-based nonprofit educational organization, that allows students to take college-level courses while in high school. Students can then take standardized AP exams; those with qualifying scores can earn credit at certain colleges and universities.

**Assistantship:** A financial aid award granted to a graduate student to help pay for tuition that is offered in return for certain services, such as serving as a teaching assistant or research assistant.

**Associate's:** An undergraduate degree awarded by a college or university upon successful completion of a program of study, usually requiring two years of full-time study. An associate's is typically awarded by community colleges; it may be a career or technical degree, or it may be a transfer degree, allowing students to transfer those credits to a four-year bachelor's degree-granting school.

**Audit:** To take a class to gain knowledge about a subject, but without receiving credit toward a degree.



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**Bachelor's:** An undergraduate degree awarded by a college or university upon successful completion of a program of study, typically requiring at least four years (or the equivalent) of full-time study. Common degree types include bachelor of arts (B.A. or A.B.), which refers to the liberal arts, and bachelor of science (B.S.). A bachelor's is required before starting graduate studies.

**Bursar's office:** The office that is responsible for billing and finances.

**Campus:** The grounds and buildings where a college or university is located.

**Career services:** An office at colleges and universities that offers counseling, workshops and other resources to help students find internships and jobs or apply to graduate programs. Some U.S. schools have advisers in these offices dedicated to working with international students.

**Coed:** Open to both men and women (often used to describe a school that admits both sexes and a dormitory that houses both genders).

**College:** A postsecondary institution that typically provides only an undergraduate education, but in some cases, also graduate degrees. "College" is often used interchangeably with "university" and "school." Separately, "college" can refer to an academic division of a university, such as College of Business.

**Commencement:** A graduation ceremony where students officially receive their degrees, typically held in May or June at the end of the academic year, though some colleges and universities also hold August and December ceremonies.

**Common Application:** A standard application form that is accepted by more than 750 member colleges and universities for admissions. Students can complete the form online or in print and submit copies to any of the participating colleges, rather than filling out individual forms for each school. However, international students will typically need to submit additional application materials unique to each college.

**Community college:** A public, two-year postsecondary institution that offers the associate degree. Also known as a "junior college." Community colleges typically provide a transfer program, allowing students to transfer to a four-year school to complete their bachelor's degree, and a career program, which provides students with a vocational degree.

**Core requirements:** Mandatory courses that students are required to complete to earn a degree.

**Course:** A regularly scheduled class on a particular subject. Each college or university offers degree programs that consist of a specific number of required and elective courses.



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**Course load:** The number of courses or credits a student takes during a specific term.

**Credits:** Units that a school uses to indicate that a student has completed and passed courses that are required for a degree. Each school defines the total number and types of credits necessary for degree completion, with every course being assigned a value in terms of "credits," "credit hours," or "units."

**Curriculum:** A program of study made up of a set of courses offered by a school.

**Dean:** The head of a division of a college or university.

**Deferral/Deferred admission:** A school's act of postponing a student's application for early decision or early action, so that it will be considered along with the rest of the regular applicant group. A "deferral" can also refer to a student's act of postponing enrollment for one year, if the school agrees.

**Degree:** A diploma or title awarded to students by a college or university after successful completion of a program of study.

**Department:** A division of a school, made up of faculty and support staff, that gives instruction in a particular field of study, such as the history department.

**Discipline:** An area of academic study.

**Dissertation:** An in-depth, formal writing requirement on an original topic of research that is typically submitted in the final stages before earning a doctorate (PhD).

**Doctorate (PhD):** The highest academic degree awarded by a university upon successful completion of an advanced program of study, typically requiring at least three years of graduate study beyond the master's degree (which may have been earned at a different university). PhD candidates must demonstrate their mastery of a subject through oral and written exams and original, scholarly research presented in a dissertation.

**Dormitories (dorms):** Student housing provided by a college or university, also known as "residence halls," which typically includes rooms, bathrooms, common areas and possibly a kitchen or cafeteria.

**Double major:** A program of study that allows a student to complete the course requirements for two majors at the same time.

**Drop:** To withdraw from a course. A college or university typically has a period of time at the beginning of a term during which students can add or drop courses.

**DSO (designated school official):** A college or university employee who works with international students and helps them maintain their legal status to study in the U.S. A DSO can



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answer questions students may have about a range of topics including employment, obtaining a driver's license, traveling outside the U.S. and much more.

**Dual degree:** Program of study that allows a student to receive two degrees from the same college or university.

**Early action:** A program offered by some colleges and universities that allows students to submit their applications early, typically in November or December, and receive decisions early, usually in mid- or late December. Students are not required to accept the admissions offer and have until May 1 to decide. Although some schools allow international students to apply via early action, applicants who request financial aid may not receive a decision any earlier than those who apply through the regular decision process.

**Early decision:** A program offered by some colleges and universities that allows students to submit an application to their top-choice school early, typically in November or December, and receive the decision early, usually in mid- or late December. If accepted, students are required to enroll at that school and withdraw all applications to other schools. Although some schools allow international students to apply via early decision, applicants who apply for financial aid may not receive a decision any earlier than those who apply through the regular decision process.

**Electives:** Courses that students can choose to take for credit toward a degree, but are not required.

**Enroll:** To register or enter a school or course as a participant.

**ESL (English as a Second Language):** A course or program of study used to teach English to nonnative English speakers.

**Exempt:** Not required to do something that other students may be required to do. For example, a school may require all students to take a freshman English course, but some students may be exempt based on their high scores on a college entrance exam or their previous coursework.

**Extracurricular activities:** Optional activities, such as sports, that students can participate in outside of academic classes.

**Faculty:** A school's teaching and administrative staff who is responsible for designing programs of study.

**FAFSA (Free Application for Federal Student Aid):** Application used by U.S. citizens and permanent residents to apply for financial aid from U.S. federal and state governments. International students are not eligible for U.S. government aid, but schools may ask international students to submit a FAFSA to determine financial need.



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**Fees:** An amount of money charged by colleges and universities, in addition to their tuition, to cover costs of services such as libraries and computer technology.

**Financial aid:** All types of money offered to a student to help pay tuition, fees and other educational expenses.

**Fraternity:** A student organization, typically for men, formed for social, academic, community service or professional purposes. A fraternity is part of a college or university's Greek system. Some fraternities, such as those with an academic or community service focus, may be coed.

**Freshman:** A student in the first year of high school or college/university.

**Full-time student:** A student who is enrolled at a college or university and is taking at least the minimum number of credits required by the school for a full course load.

**GMAT (Graduate Management Admission Test):** A standardized graduate business school entrance exam administered by the nonprofit Graduate Management Admission Council, which measures verbal, quantitative and analytical writing skills. Some business schools accept either the GMAT or GRE. In June 2012, the GMAT will incorporate an integrated reasoning section designed to assess how applicants analyze different types of information at once.

**GPA (Grade point average):** A student's overall academic performance, which is calculated as a numerical average of grades earned in all courses. The GPA is determined after each term, typically on a 4.0 scale, and upon graduation, students receive an overall GPA for their studies.

**Graduate school:** The division of a college or university, or an independent postsecondary institution, which administers graduate studies and awards master's degrees, doctorates or graduate certificates.

**Grant:** A type of financial aid that consists of an amount of free money given to a student, often by the federal or a state government, a company, a school or a charity. A grant does not have to be repaid. "Grant" is often used interchangeably with "scholarship."

**GRE (Graduate Record Examination):** A standardized graduate school entrance exam administered by the nonprofit Educational Testing Service (ETS), which measures verbal, quantitative and analytical writing skills. The exam is generally required by graduate schools, which use it to assess applicants of master's and PhD programs. Some business schools accept either the GMAT or GRE; law schools generally require the LSAT; and medical schools typically require the MCAT.

**Higher education:** Any type of education that takes place after high school, or secondary school.



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**Humanities:** Academic courses focused on human life and ideas, including history, philosophy, foreign languages, religion, art, music and literature.

**IELTS (International English Language Testing System):** A standardized test that measures English-language proficiency in reading, listening, speaking, and writing. Many U.S. colleges and universities require nonnative English speakers to submit IELTS or TOEFL scores as part of the admissions process.

**Independent study:** An academic course that allows students to earn credit for work done outside of the normal classroom setting. The reading or research assignment is usually designed by the students themselves or with the help of a faculty member, who monitors the progress.

**Institute:** An organization created for a specific purpose, usually for research, that may be located on a college or university's campus.

**International student adviser:** A school official who assists international students, scholars and faculty with matters including orientation, visas, income taxes, insurance and academic and government rules, among other areas.

**Internship:** An experience that allows students to work in a professional environment to gain training and skills. Internships may be paid or unpaid and can be of varying lengths during or after the academic year.

**IRS (Internal Revenue Service):** The U.S. government agency that collects income taxes. International students who work on or off campus or receive taxable scholarships must pay taxes. A college or university's international student adviser can provide further information, including on relevant tax treaties between the United States and specific countries that may allow certain benefits.

**Ivy League:** An association of eight private universities located in the northeastern United States, originally formed as an athletic conference. Today, the term is associated with universities that are considered highly competitive and prestigious. The Ivy League consists of the highly ranked Brown University, Columbia University, Cornell University, Dartmouth College, Harvard University, Princeton University, University of Pennsylvania and Yale University.

**Junior:** A student in the third year of high school or college/university.

**Junior college:** A two-year postsecondary institution that offers the associate degree. (See "community college.")

**Letter of recommendation:** A letter written by a student's teacher, counselor, coach or mentor that assesses his or her qualifications and skills. Colleges, universities and graduate schools generally require recommendation letters as part of the application process.



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**Liberal arts:** Academic studies of subjects in the humanities, social sciences and the sciences, with a focus on general knowledge, in contrast to a professional or technical emphasis. "Liberal arts" is often used interchangeably with "liberal arts and sciences" or "arts and sciences."

**Liberal arts college:** A postsecondary institution that emphasizes an undergraduate education in liberal arts. The majority of liberal arts colleges have small student bodies, do not offer graduate studies, and focus on faculty teaching rather than research.

**Loan:** A type of financial aid that consists of an amount of money that is given to someone for a period of time, with an agreement that it will be repaid later. International students are generally not eligible for U.S. federal government loans and will typically require an American cosigner to apply for a private bank loan.

**LSAT (Law School Admission Test):** A standardized law school entrance exam administered by the nonprofit Law School Admission Council, which measures reading comprehension, analytical reasoning and logical reasoning skills. There is also a writing section; although it is not scored, it is sent to each law school to which a student applies.

**Major:** The academic subject area that a student chooses to focus on during his or her undergraduate studies. Students typically must officially choose their major by the end of their sophomore year, allowing them to take a number of courses in the chosen area during their junior and senior years.

**Master's:** A graduate degree awarded by a college or university upon successful completion of an advanced program of study, typically requiring one or two years of full-time study beyond the bachelor's degree. Common degree types include master of arts (MA), which refers to the liberal arts; master of science (MS); and master of business administration (MBA).

**Matriculate:** To enroll in a program of study at a college or university, with the intention of earning a degree.

**MBA:** A Master of Business Administration degree.

**MCAT (Medical College Admission Test):** A standardized U.S. medical school entrance exam administered by the nonprofit Association of American Medical Colleges, which measures verbal reasoning and writing skills and physical and biological sciences knowledge. The MCAT will likely undergo significant changes in 2015, with new areas added, such as genetics, cell and molecular biology, psychology, and sociology.

**Merit aid/merit scholarships:** A type of financial aid awarded by a college or university to students who have demonstrated special academic ability or talents, regardless of their financial need. Most merit aid has specific requirements if students want to continue to receive it, such as maintaining a certain GPA.



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**Midterm exam:** An exam given after half of the academic term has passed and that covers all material studied in a particular course until that point. Not all courses have midterm exams.

**Minor:** An academic subject area that a student chooses to have a secondary focus on during their undergraduate studies. Unlike a major, a minor is typically not required, but it allows a student to take a few additional courses in a subject different from his or her major.

**Need-based financial aid:** Financial aid that is awarded to students due to their financial inability to pay the full cost of attending a specific college or university, rather than specifically because of their grades or other merit.

**Need-blind admissions:** A college or university's policy of accepting or declining applications without considering an applicant's financial circumstances. This policy does not necessarily mean that these schools will offer enough financial aid to meet a student's full need. Only a handful of U.S. colleges or universities offer need-blind admissions to international students.

**Net price calculator:** An online tool that allows students and families to calculate a personalized estimate of the cost of a specific college or university, after taking into account any scholarships or need-based financial aid that an applicant would receive.

**Nonmatriculated:** Enrolled in a college or university's courses, but not in a program of study leading to a degree.

**Nonresident:** A student who does not meet a state's residence requirements.

A college or university may have different tuition costs and admissions policies for residents versus nonresidents. In most cases, international students are considered nonresidents. A "nonresident alien" is a person who is not a U.S. citizen and is in the country on a temporary basis.

**Open admissions:** A college or university's policy of accepting all students who have completed high school, regardless of their grades or test scores, until all spaces are filled. Most community colleges have an open admissions policy, including for international students.

**OPT (Optional Practical Training):** A type of work authorization that allows international students to participate in professional work related to their field of study. OPT can take place during a degree program or after graduation. Under OPT, students are authorized to work for up to 12 months, but those who received degrees in certain science, technology, engineering and math, or STEM, fields can apply for a 24-month extension.

**Orientation:** A college or university's official process of welcoming new, accepted students to campus and providing them with information and policies before classes begin, usually in a half-day or full-day event. Many colleges and graduate schools offer a separate orientation just





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for international students to cover topics such as how to follow immigration and visa regulations, set up a U.S. bank account, and handle culture shock.

**Part-time student:** A student who is enrolled at a college or university but is not taking the minimum number of credits required for a full course load.

**Pass-fail:** A grading system in which students receive either a "pass" or "fail" grade, rather than a specific score or letter grade. Certain college or university courses can be taken pass-fail, but these typically don't include ones taken to fulfill major or minor requirements.

**PhD:** A Doctor of Philosophy degree.

**Plagiarism:** The use of another person's words or ideas as your own, without acknowledging that person. Schools have different policies and punishments for students caught plagiarizing, which tends to occur with research papers and other written assignments.

**Prerequisite:** A required course that must be completed before a student is allowed to enroll in a more advanced one.

**Priority date:** The date by which an application must be received in order to be given full consideration. This can apply to admissions, financial aid and on-campus housing. After the priority date passes, applications may be considered on a case-by-case or first-come-first-served basis.

**Probation:** A status or period of time in which students with very low GPAs, or whose academic work is unsatisfactory according to the school, must improve their performance. If they are unable to do so, they may be dismissed from the school. Students may also face "disciplinary probation" for nonacademic reasons, such as behavioral problems in the dorms.

**Provost:** The senior academic officer of a college or university who typically oversees all academic policies and curriculum-related matters.

**PSAT:** The Preliminary SAT, a standardized practice test cosponsored by the nonprofit College Board and the National Merit Scholarship Corp., which measures reading, writing and math skills, giving students experience with the SAT. Students usually take the PSAT in their junior year of high school, and U.S. citizens and permanent residents can submit their scores to qualify for National Merit scholarships.

**RA (Resident assistant):** A student leader who works in campus dormitories and supervises issues and activities related to dorm life. RAs often receive free housing in the dorm in return for their services.

**Registrar:** The college or university official who is responsible for registering students and keeping their academic records, such as transcripts.



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**Registration:** The process in which students choose and enroll in courses to be taken during the academic year or in summer sessions.

**Room and board:** Housing and meals. "Room and board" is typically one of the costs that colleges and universities will list in their annual estimated cost of attendance, in addition to tuition, fees, and textbooks and supplies. If students choose to live in dormitories, they may be required to buy into a meal plan to use on-campus dining facilities.

**SAT:** A standardized college entrance exam administered by the Educational Testing Service (ETS) on behalf of the nonprofit College Board, which measures reading, writing and math skills. Most students take the SAT during their junior or senior year of high school, and most colleges and universities accept scores from either the SAT or ACT. In addition, students may choose to take the SAT Subject Tests in English, history, languages, math and science to demonstrate their knowledge in specific academic areas. Some schools may recommend, but not require, international students to take the SAT or ACT.

**Scholarship:** A type of financial aid that consists of an amount of free money given to a student by a school, individual, organization, company, charity, or federal or state government. "Scholarship" is often used interchangeably with "grant."

**Semesters:** Periods of study that divide the academic year into two equal segments of approximately 15 to 18 weeks each. Some schools also offer a shorter summer semester, beyond the traditional academic year.

**Seminar:** A course offered to a small group of students who are typically more advanced and who meet with a professor to discuss specialized topics.

**Senior:** A student in the fourth year of high school or college/university.

**Social Security number:** A nine-digit number issued by the U.S. government to people who are authorized to work in the United States and collect certain government benefits.

Many colleges and universities use the Social Security number as the student identification number. International students who are in the United States and are authorized to work either on or off campus must apply for and obtain a Social Security number, which is then used to report their wages to the government.

**Sophomore:** A student in the second year of high school or college/university.

**Sorority:** A student organization for women formed for social, academic, community service or professional purposes. A sorority is part of a college or university's Greek system.

**Standardized tests:** Exams, such as the SAT, ACT and GRE, which measure knowledge and skills and are designed to be consistent in how they are administered and scored. Standardized tests



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are intended to help admissions officials compare students who come from different backgrounds.

**STEM:** The collective subjects of science, technology, engineering, and math.

**TA (Teaching assistant):** A graduate student who assists a professor with teaching an undergraduate course, usually within his or her field, as part of an assistantship.

**Term:** Periods of study, which can include semesters, quarters, trimesters or summer sessions.

**Thesis:** A formal piece of writing on a specific subject, which may be required to earn a bachelor's or master's degree.

**TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language):** A standardized exam administered by the nonprofit Educational Testing Service (ETS), which measures English-language proficiency in reading, listening, speaking and writing. Many U.S. colleges and universities require nonnative English speakers to take the TOEFL or IELTS and submit their scores as part of the admissions process.

**Transcript:** An official record of a student's coursework and grades at a high school, college or university. A high school transcript is usually one of the required components of the college application process.

**Transfer credit:** Credit granted toward a degree on the basis of studies completed at another college or university. For instance, students who transfer from a community college to a four-year college may earn some transfer credit.

**Trimesters:** Periods of study that divide the academic year into three equal segments of approximately 10 to 12 weeks each.

**Tuition:** An amount of money charged by a school per term, per course or per credit, in exchange for instruction and training. Tuition generally does not include the cost of textbooks, room and board, and other fees.

**Undergraduate student/undergraduate studies:** A student enrolled in a two-year or four-year study program at a college or university after graduation from high school, leading to an associate or bachelor's degree.

**University:** A postsecondary institution that typically offers both undergraduate and graduate degree programs. "University" is often used interchangeably with "college" and "school."

**Wait list:** A list of qualified applicants to a school who may be offered admission if there is space available after all admitted students have made their decisions. Being on a wait list does



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not guarantee eventual admission, so some students may choose not to remain on the list, particularly if the school is not their first choice.

**Withdraw:** To formally stop participating in a course or attending a university.

**Work study:** A financial aid program funded by the U.S. federal government that allows undergraduate or graduate students to work part time on campus or with approved off-campus employers. To participate in work-study, students must complete the FAFSA. In general, international students are not eligible for work-study positions.

## Reference

Narayan, A. (2011, August 15). *U.S. higher education glossary—US news & world report*. US News and World Report. Retrieved November 10, 2022, from <https://www.usnews.com/education/best-colleges/articles/2011/08/15/us-higher-education-glossary>