

# U.S. Higher Education: The Financial Side

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Interested in attending college in the United States? You may have noticed that the cost of an American education is higher than what you would pay in countries where the government centrally controls the educational system. We hope you have also noticed, however, that an American education gives you a tremendous return on investment, making it an excellent value for the money.

A U.S. education gives you broad exposure, not only to your chosen field of study, but to so much more: practical experience, hands-on laboratory work, the world's most advanced and most richly funded facilities (did you know that American universities were awarded \$40 billion dollars in research funding last year?), development of analytical writing and speaking skills, networking, and close relationships with professors who support your aspirations.

In addition to academics, American universities boast residential accommodations, clubs and student organizations, sports and recreational facilities, internships, and exchange programs with other universities—all designed to broaden your horizons and make you a dynamic force in society when you return home.

Fortunately, ambitious students who plan carefully can reduce their costs and also qualify for financial assistance from the university they attend.

Here are some ways of managing the cost of your U.S. education:

- Visit the nearest EducationUSA Advising Center, where you will receive comprehensive, current, accurate, and unbiased guidance on all opportunities available in the United States. EducationUSA



AP/WWP Photo by Toby Talbot

Students are walking on the campus of the University of Vermont in Burlington, one of "America's 25 Hot Schools" according to the 2006 edition of the Kaplan/Newsweek College Guide.

centers are backed by the U.S.

Department of State and serve as your official source of information. Locate the EducationUSA center nearest you by going to <http://www.educationUSA.state.gov/centers.htm>.

- Talk to your parents about how you are going to finance your U.S. education. Your parents (and perhaps other relatives) need to tell you how much they can afford each year multiplied by the four years it normally takes to get an undergraduate degree. This figure, called the Family Contribution, forms the basis for your decisions on which universities to apply to, and protects you from applying to universities that are too expensive for your budget.

- Think about other features you seek in the college that is best for you: size,

location, living environment, fields of study, special programs, demographics, etc. With well over 3,000 institutions to choose from, it helps to know what you are looking for.

- There are special publications that provide information pertinent to international students: admission requirements, costs, and financial aid. Two publications you'll want to look for at your EducationUSA Advising Center are: *The College Board International Student Handbook* and Peterson's *Applying to Colleges and Universities in the United States*.

Besides university financial aid which is discussed below, funding for higher education in the United States falls into several categories, briefly described as follows:

**Family funds:** This is the most common source of financing for U.S. citizens and international undergraduates studying in the United States. Americans believe that individuals and their families are primarily responsible for

paying for a university education.

**College and university funds:** Funding provided by the university is the second most common source of educational funding. These funds can be either based on merit (scholarships for academic performance) or financial need (financial aid).

**Athletic scholarships:** These are another form of university funding. With careful planning, international students who have distinguished themselves in a sport can use these skills to finance their education in the United States.

**Corporate or institutional sponsors:** U.S. or foreign private sponsorship may take the form of an individual arrangement between the student and sponsor, or a competition open to selected candidates. If a company, public institution, or religious group pledges to sponsor a student, it should provide detailed documentation of the genuineness of its support, including details of any conditions (such as repayment or future employment) agreed to by the student.

**Foundations and international organizations:** Well-known organizations such as the United Nations select recipients according to their development priorities for a particular country. Recipients are primarily graduate rather than undergraduate students.

**Your government:** Check to find out about any local government support for overseas education programs.

**U.S. government:** Most U.S. government programs target graduate students. They are administered through the U.S. Embassy Public Affairs Section (PAS) or the U.S. Agency for International Development (AID) in accordance with bilateral agreements.

**Scholarship agencies:** Beware! Fraudulent agencies abound. As a rule of thumb, any so-called scholarship agency that demands a fee in exchange for information should be treated extremely cautiously, no matter how impressive the literature or convincing the guarantees.

### University Financial Aid: How It Works

The competition for financial aid among international students is very keen. Students who have limited personal financial resources will need to be exceptional applicants in order to compete successfully for the largest financial aid packages. The number of international students applying for financial aid is so great that successful applicants must go far beyond basic competence to gain the favorable consideration of an admission committee. Students vying for the big aid awards must distinguish themselves in a pool of outstanding students.

Your EducationUSA advisor can help you to develop a

strong and compelling application. In the Advising Center, you will find helpful guidebooks on essay writing and other aspects of the admissions process.

The amount of aid and the number of students receiving awards vary tremendously from one institution to another, and very few colleges or universities provide financial aid packages that cover the entire cost of a college education. Each institution sets its own budget and policies for international student financial aid, which is administered separately from aid for U.S. citizens.

Private liberal arts colleges award the most financial aid to international students, with private research universities following. Public universities (operated by the various states) and two-year institutions (community colleges) are less expensive than private universities, but rarely award financial aid to international students. Some institutions may offer aid only under special circumstances, or after the student has completed (and paid for) the first year of study.

Students in need of financial assistance should begin the college selection process at least one year in advance to allow plenty of time to research and identify possible sources of funding, take required examinations, and complete the admission and financial aid applications by the required deadlines.



AP/WWP Photo by Pat Sullivan

Rice University in Houston, Texas is regularly ranked among the "best buys" in American higher education.

### Ways of Reducing Educational Costs

Reducing the cost of education is the equivalent of creating a scholarship. Although you should not overestimate your potential for cost saving, you are encouraged to look for ways of minimizing your educational expenditure. Some ideas include the following:

- **Best buys:** Find the colleges and universities that offer the highest quality education at the lowest cost. Your EducationUSA advisor can refer you to several books

and magazines devoted to identifying educational bargains.

- **Accelerated programs:** Completing a four-year bachelor's degree in three years saves many thousands of dollars. Students can accelerate their programs by: a) taking one additional course each semester (in selected cases), b) attending summer school, c) taking courses at a nearby community college if tuition is lower and credits are transferable, and d) earning credit for college-level studies (such as A-levels, Baccalauréat) completed in the home country. Taking placement exams or submitting SAT Subject Test scores may also yield credit toward the degree, depending upon institutional policy.
- **Out-of-state tuition waivers:** In some states, selected international students are permitted to pay in-state tuition rates, often as a reward for excellent grades or leadership roles. Seek information about tuition waivers from admissions officers or the international student adviser. International students can also take advantage of in-state tuition if your hometown has a formal Sister City link with the city where you attend college.
- **Living expenses:** Becoming a resident assistant in a dormitory saves thousands of dollars in boarding costs. Working in the dining hall offers a modest salary plus meals. Living off campus with a relative or friends saves money, if suitable accommodation is available and public transport is efficient.



AP/WWP Photo by Daniel Miller

Community colleges such as Owens Community College in Toledo, Ohio, offer two-year Associate Degrees.

- **Two-year and community colleges:** Many U.S. and international students save thousands of dollars in tuition by attending community colleges for their first two years and then transferring to four-year institu-

tions to complete their degree. Before embarking on this route, make sure that all your courses will be recognized by the degree-granting institution when you transfer.

- **Work:** Immigration regulations permit international students in F-1 status to work part-time on campus. Students can normally expect to work 10-15 hours a week during the academic year, and full-time during vacation periods. Realistically, these earnings may be enough to pay out-of-pocket costs such as books, clothing, and personal expenses, but not pay any college bills. A variety of employment opportunities, including work in dining halls or the library, may be available on the college campus. As students advance academically, they may get jobs as research assistants or tutors, enhancing their academic work while earning money. Campus jobs are popular among American students, who are proud of earning their own way.
- **Loans:** Many colleges and universities expand their financial aid capacity by granting loans to international students as part of a financial aid package. Loans can either come from private, college-controlled funds or from financial institutions, separate from the federal government loan programs for U.S. citizens and permanent residents. Some loan plans require a U.S. citizen/resident to co-sign, meaning they guarantee that the loan will be repaid. Most colleges and universities are careful not to overload international students with unreasonable loans.

## You Can Do It

If over half a million international students can succeed in navigating the U.S. university admission and financing process each year, so can you. Your hard work will pay off in an education that will fast-forward your life, enable you to achieve your goals, and offer opportunities you may never have even imagined. ■