

Higher Education

Glossary

An extensive list of common university terms so you can review college websites and higher education information with confidence and clarity.

a

academic advisor

Assigned upon enrollment, your academic advisor provides support and counsel on which classes to take and when to take them. They also write recommendation letters.

academic probation

A student may be placed on academic probation when they fail to meet minimum GPA or grade requirements. During this time, they must improve their academic performance or risk suspension or dismissal.

academic year

The combined fall and spring semesters make up an academic year. Bachelor's degree programs typically require four academic years to complete.

accelerated program

Students who want to graduate from their programs early often choose an accelerated option so they can start their careers more quickly.

accredited/accreditation

Available in both institutional and programmatic forms, accreditation signals that a school adheres to certain educational standards set by state, federal, and non-government agencies.

ACT

The ACT is a standardized test taken by high school students and used by colleges to ascertain their preparedness for higher education. Some students take the SAT instead.

add/drop period

Most colleges provide a 1-2 week add/drop period at the beginning of a semester during which students can change their courses after they have begun attending class.

admission requirements

Individual schools have unique requirements for students who want to attend the institution. These can include minimum GPAs, standardized test scores, and extracurricular experience.

assistantship

Assistantships allow students to work with professors in research or teaching capacities in exchange for stipends or tuition remission.

associate degree

An associate degree is an introductory undergraduate degree. Associate degree programs require two years of full-time study and are commonly offered by community colleges and vocational schools.

asynchronous learning

A type of online education, asynchronous learning allows students to watch lectures and complete assignments on their own time rather than having to attend classes on a specific schedule.

audit

Students audit, or sit in on, classes without receiving a grade. Learners who don't need the credit can access course materials and gain information about topics they're interested in.

bachelor's/baccalaureate degree

A bachelor's degree is an undergraduate academic degree that usually requires four years of full-time study to complete. It can lead to myriad entry-level positions after graduation.

b



campus

A school's campus is where learning takes place, where some students live, and where resources such as libraries, careers services, academic advisors, and study abroad offices reside.

career fair

Employers looking to hire upcoming graduates often attend campus-based and virtual career fairs to share what their companies do and recruit potential job candidates.

career services

A common department on college campuses, career services works with students to help them find internships, part-time work, and jobs after graduation. They also connect students with local employers.

certificate

A certificate verifies that a student has received education in a specialized topic. Certificate programs typically take less than a year to complete and are offered both online and in person.

certification

Certifications demonstrate successful passage of an exam or other requirement for performing certain work or meeting industry standards.

cohort

A cohort refers to a group of students that enter a particular degree program together and progress alongside one another until graduation, usually taking the same classes simultaneously.

college

Colleges are higher education institutions such as community colleges, technical schools, and liberal arts colleges, which provide associate and bachelor's degrees.

commencement

After completing all degree requirements, learners qualify for graduation. Commencement is the ceremony in which students receive their diplomas and celebrate their achievements.

Common Application

Used by thousands of colleges around the country, the Common App allows students to apply to multiple schools by filling out one document rather than completing separate applications.

community college

Community colleges offer diplomas, certificates, and associate degrees for students just beginning their higher education journey. They typically cost less than four-year institutions.

concentration

Within programs that cover a wide array of information, concentrations allow students to specialize their knowledge in a particular area.

continuing education

Continuing education units allow graduates to stay up to date on industry knowledge by participating in short courses that cover recent innovations or changes in the field.

co-op

Co-operative education allows for both theoretical learning and hands-on, practical application of newly acquired knowledge.

core requirements

Within a degree program, core requirements refer to the classes that students must pass in order to graduate. Electives typically complement core classes.

course

A course is a college class. These usually account for three credits of study, and students must take and pass a set number of courses to graduate.

course catalog

Learners use the course catalog to find classes related to their degrees, including both core courses and electives. Schools typically post the catalog online.

course load

The number of classes a student takes each term is known as their course load. Most full-time undergraduates take a course load of 12-16 credits per semester.

credit

A college credit is a metric used to determine the intensity/length of a course. Most classes constitute 2-4 credits.

curriculum

The curriculum includes the general education, major-specific, and elective classes taken by a student to graduate.

dean

Deans serve as the leaders of academic and student life departments. They oversee faculty and students, set departmental goals, and handle other administrative tasks.

dean's list

Students added to the dean's list have demonstrated academic excellence by achieving a specific GPA by the end of the term. Colleges typically publish the dean's list twice annually.

deferral

When colleges deny your early admission application but move you to the regular admissions cycle, this is known as a deferral.

degree

A degree is the document awarded to a student upon completion of a higher education program. Associate, bachelor's, master's, and doctoral credentials are all different levels of degrees.

department

Colleges divide academic disciplines into departments to help with organizational management and encourage networking among students in similar majors.

discipline

Academic disciplines refer to overarching study areas. For instance, in the business discipline, study areas may include accounting, finance, marketing, and human resources.

dissertation

A dissertation is a long paper consisting of original research about a unique academic topic. Completing a dissertation is a common graduation requirement for doctoral students.

distance Learning

Another name for online learning, this refers to taking classes or full degrees on a computer through the internet rather than attending classes in person.

doctorate (Ph.D.)

The highest academic level available, this terminal degree allows graduates to work in the highest echelon of their chosen discipline, whether in a research, academic, or professional capacity. A Ph.D. (short for doctor of philosophy) is a type of doctorate.

dorm

Also known as dormitories, dorms are campus-based housing for students who want to live close to the university with other learners.

double major

Students who pursue a double major earn two majors and one degree (e.g., a bachelor of arts) when they graduate.

dual degree

Pursuing a dual degree means earning two separate degrees (e.g., a bachelor of arts and a bachelor of science) upon graduation.

early action

Early action is a nonbinding process that allows learners to gain early admission to a school, well before those applying through the regular admissions process.

early decision

Unlike early action, early decision is a binding agreement that states if a student receives admittance to a particular college, they are obligated to attend.

electives

Unlike general education and core courses, electives allow students to take classes in any subject they find interesting. For instance, business students who want to learn fencing can take a fencing class as an elective.

endowment

Endowments are monetary gifts made by individuals and companies to help schools achieve both short- and long-term goals. The funds can be used for scholarships or new buildings, for example.

enroll

After students accept their offer of acceptance to a particular university, they are enrolled at the institution.

ESL (English as a Second Language)

Many colleges provide ESL classes for international students whose first language is not English. ESL can also refer to classes taught in education departments for students pursuing careers teaching ESL to K-12 or adult learners.

externship

Externships are similar to internships but typically last a shorter amount of time and do not provide college credit. Externships allow for job shadowing prior to graduation.



faculty

Another term for professors, faculty lecture students in classes, serve as academic advisors, and create syllabi for courses.

FAFSA

Also known as the Free Application for Federal Student Aid, the FAFSA is a document students must file each year of enrollment to qualify for federal student aid.

federal grant

Supplied through the U.S. Department of Education, federal grants provide approved students with educational funding that does not require repayment as long as all the terms are met.

fees

In addition to tuition, most colleges charge students fees for services such as facilities usage, technology, and parking.

fellowship

Fellowships are paid, short-term professional opportunities that can last several months or several years. They allow newly graduated students the opportunity to gain industry skills in supervised settings.

FERPA

Known as the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act, this law governs who can access students' educational records. It protects both students and their parents or guardians.

finals

Completed during the last week of each term, finals refer to the exams and assignments students must undertake before their summer or winter breaks.

financial aid

Financial aid, whether offered by a government entity, college or university, or private organization, refers to the money students receive to help offset the cost of college.

financial need

Many scholarships and grants require students to demonstrate financial need to qualify for funding. This means they must prove that they cannot pay for their education on their own.

first-generation student

To qualify as a first-generation college student, learners must be the first individual in their immediate family to pursue higher education. These learners often qualify for additional financial aid.

for-profit school

These institutions are privately owned and operated and take their cues from investors rather than academic professionals. Many prioritize making money over adequately preparing students.

fraternity

Fraternities and sororities are organizations within the Greek life system. Fraternities specifically cater to male-identifying students and provide access to social and philanthropic activities.

freshman/first-year student

Also known as incoming students, these are learners who are in their first year of study at a college or university.

full-time student

To qualify as a full-time student, learners must take a minimum number of credits per semester. At the undergraduate level, most schools and funders require at least 12 credits to qualify.

g

general education courses

Usually taken in the first two years of studies, general education classes cover topics within the arts and sciences and serve as a foundation for advanced learning.

GMAT (Graduate Management Admission Test)

Many business schools require learners to provide GMAT scores as part of their application. Schools often require a minimum score.

GPA

A grade point average refers to the numerical value of students' final grades in their classes. Learners can calculate their GPA by averaging their grades from each class at the end of the semester.

graduate school

Students attend graduate school to acquire a master's degree, doctorate, or other advanced professional degree, regardless of the subject area. Students attend graduate school after receiving a bachelor's degree.

graduate student

Graduate students are learners working toward advanced degrees after completing their undergraduate studies.

grant

A grant is a type of financial aid typically provided by state and federal governments, as well as by private institutions. It does not require repayment so long as learners meet the terms of the grant.

GRE (Graduate Record Examination)

The most commonly required standardized test for graduate school admission, the GRE consists of several sections designed to ascertain whether a learner is ready for advanced study.

Greek life

Comprising fraternities and sororities, Greek life is a system of membership organizations that provide students with opportunities to take part in social and philanthropic activities.

h

higher education

Another term for post-high school study, higher education refers to the education students receive at colleges and universities, which culminates in the achievement of diplomas, certificates, and degrees.

honors college

Students with top academic marks may be invited to join an honors college, a more rigorous track at a college or university with an accelerated general education curriculum and a culminating project, such as a thesis.

humanities

Disciplines like English, history, foreign language, and drama fall into the category of humanities. Unlike social sciences, these classes usually promote qualitative, rather than quantitative, thinking.

hybrid degree

Learners who pursue hybrid degrees mix campus-based and online learning. Students considering this path should live somewhat close to their colleges.

IELTS (International English Language Testing System)

International students who hope to study at U.S. universities typically need to take either the TOEFL or the IELTS and meet a minimum score in English language proficiency to receive admission.

independent study

Working with a faculty advisor and other academics, students can create their own course of independent study based on selected readings and assignments.

in-state tuition

Public colleges and universities allow students who reside in the same state as the institution to pay in-state tuition, or a lower amount than what nonresidents pay. Most schools require the student to have lived in the state at least one year prior to enrollment.

institution

Colleges and universities may also be referred to as institutions. The terms can be used interchangeably.

internship

Internships give students the opportunity to gain relevant, hands-on work experience before graduating. Most internships offer college credits and some pay.

Ivy League

The Ivy League is a group of eight renowned private schools in the U.S., including Harvard, Yale, and Princeton. These institutions maintain rigorous academics and admission requirements.

junior

A junior is a student in their third year of study in a bachelor's degree program.

junior college

Another name for community colleges and technical schools, junior colleges focus on providing diplomas, certificates, and associate degrees at reasonable prices.

lab

Some classes include lab work for the practical application of theoretical topics. Labs tend to be more common in science-based classes, such as chemistry and biology.

lecture

A lecture is the portion of a class when the professor teaches new information and the students take notes. It's also a type of class that often takes place in a large lecture hall and caters to several dozen students.

legacy student

If a student's parent or other relative attended the same school as them, they're considered a legacy student. Some colleges take this into consideration during the admission process, while others do not.

liberal arts

The liberal arts is a broad field of study including subjects within the arts, sciences, and humanities.

liberal arts college

Many colleges label themselves liberal arts institutions. This simply means they offer a variety of degrees covering the arts, sciences, and humanities while prioritizing critical thinking.

loan

After exhausting other financial aid options, some students still need to take out federal student loans to cover the remainder of their college costs. Loans require repayment at a set interest rate over a specified amount of time.

LSAT (Law School Admission Test)

The vast majority of law schools require applicants to supply LSAT scores as part of their application. This test is administered across the U.S.

major

A term used in undergraduate studies, a major refers to a student's chosen area of study, such as accounting or history.

master's degree

After completing a bachelor's degree program, a student may decide to pursue a master's degree for advanced study in their field. Master's degree programs usually take 1-3 years to complete.

MBA

Master's in business administration degrees provide the advanced training needed to take up high-powered professional roles. Many MBAs also offer specializations in areas such as human resources and hospitality.

MCAT (Medical College Admission Test)

Students who want to attend medical school need to take the MCAT as part of admission requirements. These tests can be taken across the U.S.

meal plan

Many colleges require in-person students to purchase campus-based meal plans that can be used in cafeterias and restaurants across campus.

merit-based aid

While need-based aid supports students with limited finances, merit-based aid supports those who demonstrate academic and/or personal excellence but may or may not have financial constraints.

merit scholarship

Colleges, private foundations, nonprofits, and professional associations often offer merit scholarships to deserving students.

microdegree

Microdegrees entail abbreviated educational programs that support job development or provide specialized training. These programs typically consist of 3-5 courses and take less than a year to complete.

midterms

Midterms are exams and projects students must complete by the halfway point of the semester. Finals, by contrast, take place at the end of the semester.

minor

In addition to declaring a major in undergraduate studies, many learners declare a minor. These require fewer credits than majors but allow for directed study.

n net price

This term refers to the actual price a student and/or their family pays for college after all grants, scholarships, and other forms of funding are deducted from the cost of attendance.

n nondegree

Nondegree programs include courses that culminate in diplomas and certificates, as well as other educational offerings that do not lead to degrees.

n nonprofit school

As opposed to for-profit schools, nonprofit institutions do not answer to investors and reinvest any profits back into the school.

n nonresident

Learners attending public colleges outside their home states are considered nonresident students. This status often means they pay higher tuition rates.

n nontraditional student

While each college determines who counts as a nontraditional student differently, this term typically means a learner who is not a first-time student entering a bachelor's degree program directly from high school.

o off-campus housing

Some students decide to live in off-campus housing not owned by their college. This living arrangement can be a more cost-effective option with fewer rules to follow.

o on-campus housing

Many schools require students to live in on-campus housing in their first one or two years to help them acclimate to college life. Housing options typically include dorms and apartments.

o orientation

Orientation takes place before classes officially start for incoming students. During orientation, students often participate in icebreaker activities and learn about life at the school.

o out-of-state tuition

Students attending public schools outside their home states typically pay out-of-state tuition, which is higher than in-state tuition.

p part-time student

Unlike full-time learners, part-time students take a smaller number of classes per semester to help them balance personal and/or professional obligations.

p pass/fail

A pass/fail class is a course that does not use the standard A-F grading scale but instead offers only a pass or fail grade.

p Pell Grant

Offered by the U.S. Department of Education, the Pell Grant is a type of need-based funding that supports students with limited financial means.

p placement test

Placement tests help school administrators determine a student's readiness for postsecondary education and allow them to place students in the appropriate class levels.

plagiarism

Plagiarism occurs when students knowingly or unknowingly use another person's work without providing proper credit or attribution.

postgraduate

Postgraduate refers to any classes taken or degrees pursued after completing a bachelor's degree program.

postsecondary

Postsecondary refers to any classes taken or degrees pursued after high school.

practicum

Many healthcare programs require students to take part in practicums that allow them to build real-world, practical skills.

prerequisites

Prerequisites are classes that colleges expect applicants to have taken prior to enrollment. These can apply to both high school and college students.

priority date

The priority date set by the college's admissions team precedes the regular admission deadline. Students who submit applications by the priority deadline receive more consideration.

private college

Private colleges depend primarily on endowments, student tuition and fees, and alumni gifts to fund the institution.

public college

Public colleges receive the majority of their funding from state governments. Because of this, they can offer lower tuition rates than private schools.

Public Ivy

While all Ivy League schools are private, the Public Ivies are state institutions known for academic excellence. Examples include the University of Connecticut and William & Mary.

quarter

Colleges use either quarter or semester systems to break up the academic year. There are two semesters each year, or four quarters. One standard semester-based class credit accounts for roughly 1.5 quarter credits.

RA (resident advisor/assistant)

Reporting to resident directors, resident advisors are typically juniors and seniors who live in dorms and oversee the students there.

registrar

Registrars function as college administrators, overseeing data surrounding incoming and outgoing students, handling credit transfers, and conducting degree evaluations.

registration

Registration takes place at the start of each semester or quarter and provides students the opportunity to register for the classes they'll take that term.

regular decision

The majority of students apply to colleges through the regular decision process. Look for regular decision deadlines when evaluating potential schools. Most regular decision deadlines are in January.

residency

Those in their final year of medical school must apply for residency, a form of postgraduate training and a required stage for becoming a physician. Medical residencies usually last three or more years.

rolling admission

Rather than waiting for all applications to arrive before making admission decisions, some schools maintain a rolling admission option, which means applications are evaluated as they come in.

room and board

Many colleges use room and board as an overarching term to describe the fee that covers both on-campus housing and a meal plan.

SAT

Functioning similarly to the ACT, the SAT is a standardized test used by many colleges to evaluate whether a student is prepared for postsecondary learning.

scholarship

Scholarships reduce the cost of education and do not require repayment. Universities, foundations, professional associations, and employers commonly offer scholarships to college students.

semester

Semesters function as a measurement of time in college. Most semesters last 16 weeks in the fall and spring, and there are typically two semesters in an academic year.

seminar

This type of high-level, discussion-based class offers a deeper focus on a specific subject and a more intimate class atmosphere.

senior

Seniors are students in their fourth and final year of undergraduate studies.

service learning

Service learning allows students to step outside the classroom and gain skills by helping others. Many colleges maintain service learning offices to connect students with volunteer opportunities.

social sciences

The social sciences examine how individuals and societies relate to one another from an academic perspective. Disciplines in social sciences include sociology, political science, and psychology.

sophomore

Students in their second year of undergraduate studies are called sophomores.

sorority

Sororities function as part of Greek life and provide social and philanthropic opportunities for female-identifying learners.

Stafford Loan

The U.S. Department of Education provides Stafford Loans to approved undergraduates and pays the interest on the loan while the student is enrolled. Learners must demonstrate financial need.

standardized test

These exams are scored in a consistent manner to evaluate a variety of candidates. Examples of standardized tests include the ACT, SAT, and GMAT. Many institutions look at students' exam scores as part of the admission process.

STEM

Standing for science, technology, engineering, and math, STEM refers to a cluster of disciplines within academic studies.

student portal

Colleges use student portals to help learners stay organized. They can access email, review assignments, see their grades, and request documentation on these sites.

student services/student affairs

A college's student services or student affairs office supports students by offering resources such as counseling, career coaching, academic advising, and tutoring.

study abroad

Learners who want to study outside the U.S. commonly study abroad. These educational trips to other countries can last anywhere from two weeks to a full academic year.

subsidized loan

Provided by the U.S. Department of Education, these types of loans provide subsidization of interest accrued on a federal loan while the student is enrolled. Some also provide a six-month grace period after graduation.

syllabus

At the start of each semester, professors hand out a document, or syllabus, for each class that provides an overview of required readings, assignments, tests, and other necessary information.

synchronous learning

A type of online learning, synchronous learning requires students to attend real-time lectures and complete assignments at specific times.

TA (teaching assistant/teacher's aide)

Often graduate students, TAs help professors grade papers and lead classes in exchange for class credit and/or teaching stipends.

technical degree

Technical degree programs instill students with skills that translate directly to specific jobs. Examples of technical degrees include certificates and diplomas in web development, database management, and software development.

tenure

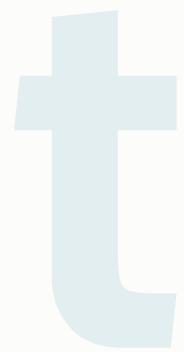
Institutions offer qualified and approved faculty members who demonstrate academic excellence tenure, or lifetime appointments.

term

This is another word used to describe a semester or quarter.

terminal degree

A terminal degree is the highest degree a student can earn in their chosen discipline. All doctoral degrees are terminal degrees.



thesis

Degrees focused heavily on academics often require undergraduate or master's students to write a thesis. A thesis functions as a shorter, more concise version of a dissertation.

thesis defense

After writing a thesis, students must defend their work and their findings before a panel of academics, including their advisor. This is typically the last step before graduation.

Title IX

This federal law was enacted in 1972 and prohibits any school or education-related program from discriminating on the basis of sex.

TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language)

Schools typically require international students to provide a passing score on the IELTS or TOEFL exams, both of which ascertain a student's level of English fluency.

trade school

Unlike colleges and universities, trade schools are dedicated to teaching students a specific trade. They may offer diplomas, certificates, or introductory degrees.

transcript

A transcript displays an overview of a student's academic progress and grades throughout college. Transcripts indicate which classes a student has taken.

transfer credit

Learners who start their college careers at one school but move to another typically transfer their credits. This way, they receive credit for classes already taken and passed at the first institution.

transfer student

Transfer students are learners who start their college careers at one school but move to another institution.

tuition

Tuition refers to the money students provide their universities in exchange for taking classes. Tuition typically only covers classes and does not include other fees.

undeclared/undecided

Students who are undeclared or undecided have yet to choose their undergraduate major.

undergraduate

Undergraduate studies refers to academic programs offering associate and bachelor's degrees. Students in these programs are also known as undergraduates.

university

Universities are typically larger institutions than colleges and offer both undergraduate and graduate learning opportunities.

unsubsidized loan

Unlike subsidized loans, unsubsidized loans do not cover costs associated with accrued loan interest while the learner is enrolled in school.

upperclassman/upper-level student

Upper-level students are in their third or fourth year of college and are often called juniors and seniors, respectively.

waitlist

If a school neither approves nor outright rejects your application in the first round, you will be placed on a waitlist. Depending on the number of students who accept offers, you may still be offered admission, just at a later date.

withdraw

A student may withdraw from a class if they realize they will not earn the grade they need, either for their major or any financial awards. They can retake the class again and aim for a higher grade.

work-study

Students who qualify for work-study funding through the FAFSA can apply for part-time, campus-based jobs that pay hourly wages.