

**Excerpt from Fulbright Foreign Fellows Handbook
Institute of International Education
Fulbright Program for Foreign Students**

Higher Education in the United States

Higher education is the term used in the United States for formal education beyond the twelve years of elementary and secondary school. United States higher education is decentralized and diversified. Educational institutions may be supported by state funding, private organizations or religious denominations. Each United States institution of higher education is headed by a President or Chancellor and is usually controlled by a governing board of trustees or regents.

Although there is a difference, the terms college and university are usually used interchangeably. Colleges in the United States have no exact counterpart in the educational system of any other country. Colleges are usually referred to as liberal arts colleges, although most offer courses in many fields, including the sciences. A college may be an independent institution or part of a university. A university is made up of a group of schools which may include an undergraduate liberal arts college, graduate schools, and professional schools. Graduate study, which prepares the student for professional practice is largely a function of the university, but there are also many individual tax-supported professional and technical schools. The standards of professional schools are usually established by the professional associations and societies in each field.

The academic year lasts between thirty-two and thirty-six weeks, beginning in August or September and lasting through May or June. Most colleges and universities divide the school year into two equal parts called semesters or terms. Some divide the year into a system of three equal trimesters. Others have four quarters, of twelve weeks each, and require their students to attend classes during three of the four quarters. Many schools have summer sessions, which last from six to twelve weeks; tuition and fees for this period may be charged in addition to those paid for the academic year.

At the undergraduate level, courses offered at each college or university and the regulations and requirements are listed in the college catalogue, published by each institution in print and/or made available on the university website. The first two years of an undergraduate program are usually devoted to general learning. Study programs include many subjects, and the scope of each subject is usually broad. Since they survey an entire field of study, they are usually taken as introductory courses or as prerequisites for more specialized courses. During the final two years of college student specialize in one subject by concentrating most of their courses in it. The field of concentration is called a major. Some courses are required for the degree and others may be chosen as electives.

Graduate study is the advanced specialized studies leading to a master's degree or a doctor's degree and emphasizes preparing students for research or for professional practice. Graduate work leading to a masters of arts (M.A.) or masters of science (M.S.)

degree requires a minimum of a one-year, but usually a two-year program of study beyond the bachelor's degree is the norm. The typical requirements for a master's degree include successfully completing 32 to 36 credits of graduate courses, including a minimum of 20 credits in the major field of study; maintaining a minimum average of grade B; writing a thesis; and passing examinations in all required courses. Study for the master's degree is sometimes undertaken as preparation for further graduate work or as an extension of the general education of the bachelor's degree program. Degrees for doctor of philosophy (Ph.D.) and doctor of education (Ed.D.) require a minimum of three years full-time study beyond the master's degree, but in most fields more is necessary.

Graduate students attend lecture courses and seminars and carry out research under professional guidance. Graduate study leading to a doctorate emphasizes original research. The method of teaching in most colleges and universities consists of lectures supplemented by reading assignments and class discussions between the professor and students. Science courses include lectures and laboratory periods. Art courses (except history of art courses) generally include lectures and studio classes in which the students work with artistic media. Education courses sometimes offer opportunities to observe class sessions and to practice teaching in elementary and secondary schools. Assignments usually call for the student to read a number of books and/or articles and to write essays, reports, and/or term papers. Reading lists are distributed to the students at the beginning of the semester listing the reading material a student needs to read by a given date.

Most examinations are written, not oral. Quizzes and tests are short examinations. They may be given regularly throughout the semester, or they may be unscheduled and even unannounced. Quizzes may consist of short questions requiring short responses. Common questions are ones that contain answers of "true" or "false" or a series of multiple choices and the correct one must be selected. Midterm examinations are usually longer than quizzes and are given in the middle of the school term. Finals are examinations which cover the subject matter of an entire course and are usually given at the end of the term.

Every course is worth a certain number of hours, credits or points, depending upon how many hours of lectures, class meetings, and laboratory work are offered each week. A course which lasts for one term and consists of three one-hour class periods a week is valued at three hours, points or credits. Grading systems vary among institutions. Many employ the first five letters of the alphabet to denote levels of achievement. To receive full credit for their courses, students must maintain an average of grade 'C', considered a satisfactory level of academic work. 'B' denotes above-average or superior work and in most graduate programs a grade of 'B' is considered the lowest satisfactory grade. 'A' indicates excellent achievement. 'D' is a passing grade, but denotes lower-than-average work, and 'E' or 'F' symbolizes completely unsatisfactory work. A student who receives an 'E' or 'F' as a final mark fails to receive credit for the course. The course therefore does not contribute toward his degree requirements. When a student receives an unsatisfactory grade for an examination or a course he/she is said to have failed. Often an elective course may be marked only Pass or Fail. Some schools use the symbol 'I' to denote incomplete work and allow the student to make up the work for a course after the end of the semester. If a student's work is incomplete or unsatisfactory, the college may put him or her on

probation – that is, allow him or her a period of time, usually one school term, in which to make up incomplete work and/or raise grades to a satisfactory standard.

Many graduate schools make assistantships available to candidates for graduate degrees. Assistantships are, in a sense, paying jobs. Sometimes the assistant is paid in cash; sometimes he/she receives free tuition for his services. Assistantship duties range from grading papers to serving as a laboratory technician to teaching freshman courses or doing specialized research. In general, research assistants will work on the projects of the particular school or department in which they are employed. Hours of service generally range from ten to fifteen per week, but some research assistants may be expected to devote up to twenty hours.