

Financing Your Education in the United States

GENERAL

Studying in the United States can be an inspiring, exciting, and rewarding experience, but it can also be difficult to finance. Truthfully, education in the United States is very expensive; students and their families pay a higher proportion of the cost of education compared to those in other countries. The cost of living, too, can be high relative to that in other countries. In addition, financial aid is limited and difficult to find. Foreign students must often compete with American students and other talented international students for the same limited funding.

Before you begin your search for financial aid, one word of advice: you must be persistent if you are going to find any aid. As there is no central database or resource for finding aid, the search can be long, tedious, and often unrewarding. While funding is available, you need to be realistic. 80% of foreign students in the United States finance their education through personal and family sources at the undergraduate level, while 47% of foreign graduate students finance their education through personal or family sources (Open Doors, 2001).

PLANNING

It is essential that you think about planning your entire U.S. education before you leave your home country. If you plan to study in the U.S. for several years, think beyond the first year and ask yourself, "How will I finance the years that follow?" Some students have to end their education in the US after one year because they failed to plan ahead and ran out of money.

Because financing a U.S. education often poses a significant challenge for international students, researching how you will pay for college is just as important as your school selection, test preparation, and application. Begin your search well before you plan to leave your home country. Be aware that many scholarships and grants are available only to students applying from their home country, so you should investigate these sources before you depart.

You should expect the following expenses when studying in the U.S.: application fees, standardized test fees, tuition, travel expenses, living costs (including room and meals), books and supplies, health insurance, and incidental expenses. You may need to combine several sources of funding in order to fully finance your education in the United States.

One should begin the application process 18 months before the intended date of study. Ideally, planning and researching financial assistance should begin at the same time, but certainly no later than one year (12 months) before the following school year. The steps involved in applying for financial assistance are as follows:

- Identify and target possible resources
- Write to the sponsor of the funding for initial information
- Organize and complete application requests

- Return completed financial assistance applications well ahead of the final deadline date indicated on forms. These dates may be much earlier than regular application deadlines-as early as 8-9 months before classes begin.

Remember, applications for financial aid are very competitive in the U.S.; an incomplete, late, poorly written, or messy application could make the difference between you and the other applicant. Plan ahead, plan well, prepare carefully, and follow instructions! Give yourself plenty of time to put together a quality request for financial assistance and make sure that your application, including application fee, transcripts, standardized test results, letters of recommendation, and essays are complete and returned to the institution well ahead of all deadlines.

UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS

Funding is especially limited for international students who wish to pursue undergraduate studies in the United States. 80% of undergraduate international students are funded by personal or family funds. While aid is available from US universities for international students, it is usually reserved only for those with outstanding academic, artistic, or athletic talent.

The best sources of funding for prospective undergraduate students include your home country, your U.S. university, and nongovernmental sources. You can also find a list of schools that have given financial aid to undergraduate international students at <http://www.fh-hannover.de/usa/ugfinaid.htm>

Think also about your special interests, minority group, or religious affiliations. For example, some aid is targeted specifically to help members of a certain religious group, for female students, for students with disabilities, or for students with demonstrable special interests or expertise (i.e. horse racing, peace studies, etc.)

GRADUATE STUDENTS

Generally speaking, more funding is available for graduate students than for undergraduates. You may find however that more funding sources are available *after* you complete your first year of study. The best sources of aid for graduate students include aid from your home country, U.S. federal aid (such as the Fulbright grant: consult our website below), nongovernmental sources, and especially the academic department in your field of study at your university in the U.S.

Assistantships: An assistantship is a type of work-scholarship program that is unique to graduate students in the United States. Depending on the university and your type of assistantship, you would generally work 10-20 hours per week, and in exchange you would receive a full or partial tuition waiver or reduction, and a small stipend to cover your living expenses. You will not be considered for an assistantship until you have been accepted into a graduate program, and doctoral candidates are generally preferred over Masters candidates. There are basically three types of assistantships:

Teaching Assistantship: If your field of study is taught at the undergraduate level, you stand a chance of securing a teaching assistantship. These positions usually involve conducting small classes, delivering lectures, correcting class work, grading papers, counselling students, and supervising laboratory groups. Appointments are based on academic qualifications and are subject to the availability of funds within a department. Obviously, your command of the

English language is extremely important for this type of assistantship, and your job offer may carry the stipulation that you must pass an additional English exam when you arrive at the University, as well as go through additional training. If you are interested in a teaching assistantship, contact the academic department.

Research Assistantships: This type usually requires that you assist in the research activities of a faculty member. Although it is less rare to receive this type of award your first year of graduate school, contact the department after being admitted and describe your particular research interests. If you are interested in a research assistantship, contact the department, and perhaps the particular professor you wish to work with, if s/he is conducting that type of research. This is perfectly appropriate and you do not need an introduction. Write a formal letter describing your interest in the research, your previous research experience and credentials, and explain why you think you would be a productive member of the research team.

Administrative Assistantships: Unlike the previous assistantships, this type is not necessarily connected to your academic area of study. This type involves working at an administrative office of a university, such as admissions, student affairs, residence life, or library. These involve more searching because they are not offered by your academic department, but you can go to the individual websites of those departments or look on the student employment web page (often in the Career Center or Placement Office website).

Fellowships and Grants: These awards are similar to assistantships, but have no work requirement. They are comparatively rare, and sometimes come from outside organizations.

ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE (ESL) STUDENTS

There is generally no aid available to students who wish to study English as a Second Language. You should be prepared to finance this type of study completely with private funds. A good resource for comparing costs of programs is the American Association of Intensive English Programs websites at www.aaiep.org.

BEGINNING YOUR SEARCH

Before you begin, there are a couple of terms you should be familiar to help you determine your eligibility for any particular type of aid.

U.S. Citizen or Permanent Resident: U.S. Citizen is probably self-explanatory, but the layman's term for a Permanent Resident is a "green card holder". Almost all federal funding is reserved for people that fall into these two categories, so if you see "federal aid" come up in your search, you will not be eligible for this type of aid unless you are a U.S. Citizen or have the "Green Card" (For this information, please refer to the U.S. Embassy website at www.embusa.es or the Immigration and Naturalization Service website at www.ins.usdoj.gov)

Work-Study program: Although international students are allowed to work part-time on campus on an F-1 visa, they are not allowed to participate in the federally funded Work-Study program. You have to be a U.S. Citizen or Permanent Resident to be eligible.

Residency: You may see this term come up in your searches, most often in terms of “in-state residency”. Laws concerning who can be considered a “resident” of a state differ from one state to another. You can most often find this information in the Financial Aid portion of a University’s website, or sometimes there is a Residency Office at larger universities.

Scholarship/Grant/Fellowship: Scholarships, grants, and fellowships are more or less synonyms. They all imply free money. Scholarships and grants can be for both undergraduate and graduate study, but fellowships are more often for graduate or post-graduate work.

Assistantship: See explanation in “Graduate Student”

FAFSA (Free Application for Federal Student Aid): You will see this term frequently when applying to various colleges and universities. It is a form that determines the financial need of a family, and decisions about need-based financial aid are made using this form. As this is a form that is used to determine *federal* financial aid, you must be a U.S. citizen or permanent resident to benefit from this form.

For tips on beginning an internet search, see a helpful guide at <http://www.indiana.edu/~intlcent/> (click on “New and Transfer Students”, then “Financial Aid for International Students” and then “Internet Search Suggestions”)

GENERAL FUNDING RESOURCES

The following resources can be found in many libraries.

- *The College Handbook-Foreign Student Supplement* (updated annually). This guide to U.S. colleges and universities lists whether the colleges offer financial aid to foreign students, the total amount available, and the application deadline for aid. It can also be ordered from College Board Publications over the internet at www.collegeboard.com.
- *Foundation Grants to Individuals*, 7th edition. Undergraduate and graduate scholarship sources are described. Also included are fellowships, residences, internships, and grants by U.S. foundations to foreign nationals and citizens as well as company-sponsored aid. This book costs \$65.00 plus \$13.00 for overseas postage and handling, and is available from The Foundation Center, 79 Fifth Avenue, 8th Floor, New York, NY 10003, Tel. 1 (800) 424-9836. You may also access The Foundation Center’s website at www.fdncenter.org.
- *Funding for U.S. Study: A Guide for Foreign Nationals*. This book advises students on planning for financial aid and describes over 600 grants and fellowships open to foreign nationals in varying fields of studies and countries of origin. Contact IIE Books at the Institute of International Education, P.O.Box 371, Annapolis MD 20701-0301, Tel.: 1-(800) 445-0443; or visit www.iie.org if you would like to order the book. Cost is \$39.95 plus \$16 for overseas shipping and handling.

Internet Resources: General

- The College Board On-line: www.collegeboard.org
- EduPass: The Financial Aid Information Page: www.edupass.org
- Peterson's Education Center: www.petersons.com (click on "financing education")
- International Education Financial Aid: www.iefaf.org
- International Student.com: www.internationalstudent.com (click "financing")
- Study USA: www.studyusa.com/articles/financehome.htm
- Mach25 Scholarship Search: www.collegenet.com/mach25/
- FastWeb Scholarship Search: www.fastweb.com
- Wired Scholar: www.wiredscholar.com
- Rotary International: www.rotary.org/foundation
- Yahoo Directory: http://dir.yahoo.com/Education/financial_aid/
- International Student Organization: http://www.isoa.org/Financial_Aid/
- OSEAS Europe: <http://www.bibl.u-szeged.hu/oseas/links.html#aid>
- U.S. Journal: www.usjournal.com (click on "Special Services")
- The Foundation Center: www.fdncenter.org
- Foundations On-line: www.foundations.org

- Global Grants: www.globalgrant.com/eng

Internet Resources: More specific

- MacArthur Foundation: www.macfdn.org
- National Science Foundation: www.nsf.gov
- Center for the Education of Women: www.umich.edu/~cew/scholar.html
- University of Michigan International Institute: <http://www.umich.edu/~iinet/iisite/fundops.html>
- American Association of University Women: www.aauw.org
- National Academies on Science, Engineering, and Medicine: www.nas.edu/opportunities
- Organization of American States: www.oas.org (click "opportunities", "fellowships")
- Social Science Research Council-Fellowships: www.ssrc.org/fellowships
- National Endowment for Democracy: www.ned.org
- Athletic Scholarships: www.cpoa.com
- Hispanic Scholarships: www.hispanicscholarships.com
- Smithsonian Institute: <http://www.si.edu/ofg/start.htm>
- European Grant information: <http://www.kbr.be/fulbright/frmstud.htm>

Loans

Note about loans: Many loan programs in the United States will lend to international students ONLY if they have a U.S. citizen or permanent resident co-signer. A co-signer is someone who will become responsible for paying back all of the money if you do not fulfil your obligations.

- Citibank Student Loans: www.studentloan.com
- Educational Finance Group: www.iefc.com
- GATE Student Loan Program: www.gateloan.com
- Nellie May: www.nelliemae.com
- Wells Fargo: www.wellsfargo.com
- TERI loans: www.teri.org
- USA Group: www.usagroup.com
- Massachusetts Educational Financing Authority: www.mefa.org

Sources:

The United States-United Kingdom Fulbright Commission “Funding for Study or Research in the U.S.” <http://www.fulbright.co.uk/>

NAFSA: Association for International Educators “Financial Aid for Foreign Students Studying in the United States” <http://www.oldsite.nafsa.org/students/funding.htm>