

# The path to studying in the United States

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## **Namita Mehta & Raj Chinnai**

Indian students dream about studying in the United States for many reasons. Whether it's the comfortable college campuses with small class size, a liberal arts education that allows you to take classes in astronomy, Russian history, and creative writing (even if you are pre-med), or even the possibility of becoming the next Sundar Pichai or Indra Nooyi, the United States offers a world of opportunity.

Last year, approximately 2,00,000 Indian students immigrated to the United States for higher education, mostly for undergraduate, graduate, and professional studies. To join this cohort, you must understand the nuances of the educational landscape and the process.

### **Choosing an Undergraduate University**

Making your college list depends heavily on what you want to study because there is a wide range of choices. Some considerations include: size, location, rankings, majors and specialities, admit rates, and internships and other opportunities.

Before you apply, it is crucial to research each college.

In fact, several colleges ask you why you are applying to their institution and you have to give specific details and reasons to be successful. In addition, some colleges, such as the STEM-focused Harvey Mudd College only accepts undergraduate students, whereas, larger public colleges such as UC Berkeley offer all majors and admit undergraduate, postgraduate and PhD students.

## **Choosing a Major**

Colleges in the United States offer myriad majors, including architecture, business, computer science, and more. Law and medicine can only be studied at the postgraduate level, and thus, pre-med and pre-law students study various undergraduate majors.

At the undergraduate level, programmes are broad-based and require you to take classes in subjects beyond your major. Some universities, such as Columbia University, have a strong core curriculum, whereas others, such as Brown University, give you the freedom to develop your own curriculum. Moreover, you need not declare your major until the end of your sophomore or second year, an advantage if you have several interests. In fact, many students choose a major and then change it at least once!

As the United States follows a credit system, you can graduate with a single major, a double major, or even a major and a minor. Moreover, many colleges offer untraditional majors as well.

For example, Yale University offers a major in Ethics, Politics, and Economics. UCLA offers a major in the Mathematics of Computation. Some universities specialise in the arts or just STEM.

Some colleges even offer 3+2 engineering programmes where you can pursue a liberal arts education for the first three years (where you major in physics or chemistry at one school) before transferring to a separate engineering school for the remaining two. You graduate with two degrees after five years, one in liberal arts, one in engineering. For example, you can study three years of liberal arts at Vassar College and complete your engineering degree at Dartmouth College.

There's no single formula for applying to undergraduate programmes in the United States. Admissions committees take into account several factors when making the admissions decision. (Academic history, letters of recommendation, involvement in extracurriculars as well as your Personal and supplementary essays)

## **Postgraduate and Professional Programmes**

At the postgraduate level, international students are drawn to the talented faculties, advanced research opportunities, and incomparable infrastructure that universities in the United States offer. You must apply in your final year of undergraduate study or when you've gained at least one to three years of work experience.

You are most likely to be admitted when you are clear about why you want a postgraduate or professional degree in that discipline, have demonstrated the academic rigour (such as a minimum GPA in your undergraduate programme and test scores) required to succeed in their programme, and have engaged in activities beyond your major. Students typically apply to graduate programmes for a master's degree, a PhD or to professional schools for an MBA or a law or medical degree. The United States is home to top programmes in nearly all areas.

International students find STEM MBA programmes, such as those at the Kellogg School of Management, Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania and Tuck School of Business, particularly attractive. They allow you to stay and work in the United States for an extra 24 months after graduation (whereas full-time MBA programmes allow only for a 12-month Optional Practical Training visa).

### **Getting an F-1 Visa**

To attend a university or college in the United States, international students must apply for F-1 visa status no earlier than 120 days before your course starts.

First, gain admission at a university and confirm your intent to attend. The university will issue you a Form I-20, Certificate of Eligibility for Nonimmigrant Student Status.

You'll pay a SEVIS fee of \$350. Your Form I-20 and your SEVIS fee receipt are crucial to the next step, which is to fill out and submit a DS-160 form to your local consulate, where you'll interview with a consular officer. Afterwards, your visa will be issued or denied. Hold onto your I-20—you'll need it. And remember: you can enter the United States no earlier than 30 days before your course starts.

### **The EB-5 Visa and Permanent Residency**

For those who can make a five-year investment in the United States, there is also the EB-5 visa. Since the F-1 Visa creates real challenges for international students, this can be an attractive option.

The EB-5 visa provides permanent residency and gives students the ability to work for any company, without needing to be sponsored.

There are other benefits but it requires an investment of \$9,00,000 in an approved project that creates at least 10 jobs. When the capital is paid back, the total cost is about US \$85,000, similar to a year's tuition and expenses.

### **Final Advice**

Whichever method you choose, research the details of each and pay attention to deadlines! Studying at a college and living in the United States can be highly rewarding, but it does take planning.

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