

Academic Vocabulary

Academic year: The school year that begins with autumn classes. The academic year at most US colleges and universities starts in August or September.

ACT (American College Test): A standardized college entrance exam administered by the American College Testing Program. Four separate, multiple-choice tests measure knowledge of English, math, reading, and science, and one optional writing test measures essay planning and writing skills. Most students take the ACT during their junior or senior year of high school, and most colleges and universities accept scores from either the ACT or SAT. Some schools may recommend, but not require, international students to take the ACT or SAT. (See the U.S. News college test prep guide for more information.)

Advisor: School official, usually assigned by your college or university, who can help choose your classes and make sure you are taking the right courses to graduate.

AP (Advanced Placement program): A program offered by the College Board, a U.S.-based nonprofit educational organization, that allows students to take college-level courses while in high school. Students can then take standardized AP exams; those with qualifying scores can earn credit at certain colleges and universities.

Associate's: An undergraduate degree awarded by a college or university upon successful completion of a program of study, usually requiring two years of full-time study. An associate's is typically awarded by community colleges; it may be a career or technical degree, or it may be a transfer degree, allowing students to transfer those credits to a four-year bachelor's degree-granting school.

Audit: To take a class to gain knowledge about a subject, but without receiving credit toward a degree.

Bachelor's: An undergraduate degree awarded by a college or university upon successful completion of a program of study, typically requiring at least four years (or the equivalent) of full-time study. Common degree types include bachelor of arts (B.A. or A.B.), which refers to the liberal arts, and bachelor of science (B.S.). A bachelor's is required before starting graduate studies.

Campus: The grounds and buildings where a college or university is located.

Coed: Open to both men and women (often used to describe a school that admits both sexes and a dormitory that houses both genders).

College: A postsecondary institution that typically provides only an undergraduate education, but in some cases, also graduate degrees. "College" is often used interchangeably with "university" and "school." Separately, "college" can refer to an academic division of a university, such as College of Business. (See U.S. News's rankings of Best Colleges.)

Commencement: A graduation ceremony where students officially receive their degrees, typically held in May or June at the end of the year, though some colleges and universities also hold August and December ceremonies.

Common Application: A standard application form that is accepted by more than 450 member colleges and universities for admissions. Students can complete the form online or in print and submit copies to any of the participating colleges, rather than filling out individual forms for each school. However, international students will typically need to submit additional application materials unique to each college.

Community College: A public, two-year postsecondary institution that offers the associate degree. Also known as a "junior college." Community colleges typically provide a transfer program, allowing students to transfer to a four-year school to complete their bachelor's degree, and a career program, which provides students with a vocational degree.

Core requirements: Mandatory courses that students are required to complete to earn a degree.

Course: A regularly scheduled class on a particular subject. Each college or university offers degree programs that consist of a specific number of required and elective courses.

Course load: The number of courses or credits a student takes during a specific term.

Credits: Units that a school uses to indicate that a student has completed and passed courses that are required for a degree. Each school defines the total number and types of credits necessary for degree completion, with every course being assigned a value in terms of "credits," "credit hours," or "units."

Culture shock: Feelings of uncertainty, confusion, or anxiety that can occur when adjusting to a new country and culture that may be very different from your own. International students may also experience "reverse culture shock" upon returning to their home country, after they have become accustomed to the new country and culture.

Curriculum: A program of study made up of a set of courses offered by a school.

Dean: The head of a division of a college or university.

Deferral / Deferred admission: A school's act of postponing a student's application for early decision or early action, so that it will be considered along with the rest of the regular applicant group. A "deferral" can also refer to a student's act of postponing enrollment for one year, if the school agrees.

Degree: A diploma or title awarded to students by a college or university after successful completion of a program of study.

Department: A division of a school, made up of faculty and support staff that gives instruction in a particular field of study, such as the history department.

Dormitories (dorms): Student housing provided by a college or university, also known as "residence halls," which typically includes rooms, bathrooms, common areas, and possibly a kitchen or cafeteria.

Drop: To withdraw from a course. A college or university typically has a period of time at the beginning of a term during which students can add or drop courses.

Early action: A program offered by some colleges and universities that allows students to submit their applications early, typically in November or December, and receive decisions early, usually in mid- or late December. Students are not required to accept the admissions offer and have until May 1 to decide. Although some schools allow international students to apply via early action, applicants who request financial aid may not receive a decision any earlier than those who apply through the regular decision process.

Early decision: A program offered by some colleges and universities that allows students to submit an application to their top-choice school early, typically in November or December, and receive the decision early, usually in mid- or late December. If accepted, students are required to enroll at that school and withdraw all applications to other schools. Although some schools allow international students to apply via early decision, applicants who apply for financial aid may not receive a decision any earlier than those who apply through the regular decision process.

Electives: Courses that students can choose to take for credit toward a degree, but are not required.

Enroll: To register or enter a school or course as a participant.

Exempt: Not required to do something that other students may be required to do. For example, a school may require all students to take a freshman English course, but some students may be exempt based on their high scores on a college entrance exam or their previous coursework.

Faculty: A school's teaching and administrative staff who is responsible for designing programs of study.

FAFSA (Free Application for Federal Student Aid): Application used by U.S. citizens and permanent residents to apply for financial aid from U.S. federal and state governments. International students are not eligible for U.S. government aid, but schools may ask international students to submit a FAFSA to determine financial need. (Note: A social security number is required to complete the FAFSA.)

Fees: An amount of money charged by colleges and universities, in addition to their tuition, to cover costs of services such as libraries and computer technology.

Financial aid: All types of money offered to a student to help pay tuition, fees, and other educational expenses. This can include loans, grants, scholarships, assistantships, fellowships, and work-study jobs. (See the U.S. News paying for college and paying for grad school guides for more information.)

Freshman: A student in the first year of high school or college / university.

Grade: A score or mark indicating a student's academic performance on an exam, paper, or in a course. A "grade" can also refer to which year a student is in while at elementary, middle, or high school, but that usage typically does not apply at the college or university level.

Grade point average (GPA): A student's overall academic performance, which is calculated as a numerical average of grades earned in all courses. The GPA is determined after each term, typically on a 4.0 scale, and upon graduation, students receive an overall GPA for their studies.

High school: A secondary school that offers grades 9 to 12.

Humanities: Academic courses focused on human life and ideas, including history, philosophy, foreign languages, religion, art, music, and literature.

International student adviser: A school official who assists international students, scholars, and faculty with matters including orientation, visas, income taxes, insurance, and academic and government rules, among other areas.

Junior: A student in the third year of high school or college / university.

Junior college: A two-year postsecondary institution that offers the associate degree. (See "community college.")

Letter of recommendation: A letter written by a student's teacher, counselor, coach, or mentor that assesses his or her qualifications and skills. Colleges, universities, and graduate schools generally require recommendation letters as part of the application process.

Liberal arts: Academic studies of subjects in the humanities, social sciences, and the sciences, with a focus on general knowledge, in contrast to a professional or technical emphasis. "Liberal arts" is often used interchangeably with "liberal arts and sciences" or "arts and sciences."

Loan: A type of financial aid that consists of an amount of money that is given to someone for a period of time, with an agreement that it will be repaid later. International students are generally not eligible for U.S. federal government loans and will typically require an American cosigner to apply for a private bank loan.

Major: The academic subject area that a student chooses to focus on during his or her undergraduate studies. Students typically must officially choose their major by the end of their sophomore year, allowing them to take a number of courses in the chosen area during their junior and senior years.

Matriculate: To enroll in a program of study at a college or university, with the intention of earning a degree.

Merit aid / merit scholarships: A type of financial aid awarded by a college or university to students who have demonstrated special academic ability or talents, regardless of their financial need. Most merit aid has specific requirements if students want to continue to receive it, such as maintaining a certain GPA.

Midterm exam: An exam given after half of the academic term has passed and that covers all material studied in a particular course until that point. Not all courses have midterm exams.

Minor: An academic subject area that a student chooses to have a secondary focus on during their undergraduate studies. Unlike a major, a minor is typically not required, but it allows a student to take a few additional courses in a subject different from his or her major.

Need-based financial aid: Financial aid that is awarded to students due to their financial inability to pay the full cost of attending a specific college or university, rather than specifically because of their grades or other merit.

Need-blind admissions: A college or university's policy of accepting or declining applications without considering an applicant's financial circumstances. This policy does not necessarily mean that these schools will offer enough financial aid to meet a student's full need. Only a handful of U.S. colleges or universities offer need-blind admissions to international students.

Non-matriculated: Enrolled in a college or university's courses, but not in a program of study leading to a degree.

Open admissions: A college or university's policy of accepting all students who have completed high school, regardless of their grades or test scores, until all spaces are filled. Most community colleges have an open admissions policy, including for international students.

Orientation: A college or university's official process of welcoming new, accepted students to campus and providing them with information and policies before classes begin, usually in a half-day or full-day event. Many colleges and graduate schools offer a separate orientation just for international students to cover topics such as how to follow immigration and visa regulations, set up a U.S. bank account, and handle culture shock.

Pass-fail: A grading system in which students receive either a "pass" or "fail" grade, rather than a specific score or letter grade. Certain college or university courses can be taken pass-fail, but these typically don't include ones taken to fulfill major or minor requirements.

Plagiarism: The use of another person's words or ideas as your own, without acknowledging that person. Schools have different policies and punishments for students caught plagiarizing, which tends to occur with research papers and other written assignments.

Prerequisite: A required course that must be completed before a student is allowed to enroll in a more advanced one.

Priority date: The date by which an application must be received in order to be given full consideration. This can apply to admissions, financial aid, and on-campus housing. After the priority date passes, applications may be considered on a case-by-case or first-come-first-served basis.

Private school: A postsecondary institution controlled by a private individual(s) or a nongovernmental agency. A private institution is usually not supported primarily by public funds and its programs are not operated by publicly elected or appointed officials. Washington University in St. Louis, for example, is a private school.

Probation: A status or period of time in which students with very low GPAs, or whose academic work is unsatisfactory according to the school, must improve their performance. If they are unable to do so, they may be dismissed from the school. Students may also face "disciplinary probation" for nonacademic reasons, such as behavioral problems in the dorms.

Professional school: A higher education institution for students who have already received their undergraduate degree to gain training in specific professions, such as law, medicine, and pharmacy.

Provost: The senior academic officer of a college or university who typically oversees all academic policies and curriculum-related matters.

PSAT: The Preliminary SAT, a standardized practice test cosponsored by the nonprofit College Board and the National Merit Scholarship Corp., which measures reading, writing, and math skills, giving students experience with the SAT. Students usually take the PSAT in their junior year of high school, and U.S. citizens and permanent residents can submit their scores to qualify for National Merit scholarships. (See the U.S. News college test prep guide for more information.)

Public school: A postsecondary institution that is supported mainly by public funds and whose programs are operated by publicly elected or appointed officials. The University of California—Berkeley, for example, is a public school.

Registrar: The college or university official who is responsible for registering students and keeping their academic records, such as transcripts.

Registration: The process in which students choose and enroll in courses to be taken during the academic year or in summer sessions.

Regular decision: An admissions process used by colleges and universities that typically requires applicants to submit their materials by January 1; an admissions decision is generally received by April 1, and if admitted, students usually have until May 1 to respond to the offer. The majority of applicants are evaluated during regular decision, rather than early action and early decision.

Rolling admissions: An admissions process used by some colleges and universities in which each application is considered as soon as all the required materials have been received, rather than by a specific deadline. Colleges and universities with this policy will make decisions as applications are received until all spaces are filled.

Room and board: Housing and meals. "Room and board" is typically one of the costs that colleges and universities will list in their annual estimated cost of attendance, in addition to tuition, fees, and textbooks and supplies. If students choose to live in dormitories, they may be required to buy into a meal plan to use on-campus dining facilities.

SAT: A standardized college entrance exam administered by the Educational Testing Service (ETS) on behalf of the nonprofit College Board, which measures reading, writing, and math skills. Most students take the SAT during their junior or senior year of high school, and most colleges and universities accept scores from either the SAT or ACT. In addition, students may choose to take the SAT Subject Tests in English, history, languages, math, and science to demonstrate their knowledge in specific academic areas. Some schools may recommend, but not require, international students to take the SAT or ACT. (See the U.S. News college test prep guide for more information.)

Scholarship: A type of financial aid that consists of an amount of free money given to a student by a school, individual, organization, company, charity, or federal or state government. "Scholarship" is often used interchangeably with "grant."

School: Any educational institution, including those that provide elementary, secondary, and postsecondary education. In the latter case, "school" is often used interchangeably with "college" and "university."

Semesters: Periods of study that divide the academic year into two equal segments of approximately 15 to 18 weeks each. Some schools also offer a shorter summer semester, beyond the traditional academic year.

Seminar: A course offered to a small group of students who are typically more advanced and who meet with a professor to discuss specialized topics.

Senior: A student in the fourth year of high school or college / university.

SEVIS (Student and Exchange Visitor Information System): A computerized U.S. government database used to track international students and scholars in the United States. Once an international student is accepted by a U.S. college or university, the school is required to mail the student a Form I-20, which is a paper record of the student's information in SEVIS. A student must pay a SEVIS fee and use the payment receipt and I-20 to apply for a visa.

Social Security number: A nine-digit number issued by the U.S. government to people who are authorized to work in the United States and collect certain government benefits. Many colleges and universities use the Social Security number as the student identification number. International students who are in the United States and are authorized to work either on or off campus must apply for and obtain a Social Security number, which is then used to report their wages to the government.

Sophomore: A student in the second year of high school or college / university.

Standardized tests: Exams, such as the SAT, ACT, and GRE, which measure knowledge and skills and are designed to be consistent in how they are administered and scored. Standardized tests are intended to help admissions officials compare students who come from different backgrounds.

Syllabus: A description of a course which also lists the dates of major exams, assignments and projects.

Teaching assistant (TA): A graduate or advanced undergraduate student who assists a professor with teaching an undergraduate course, usually within his or her field, as part of an assistantship.

Term: Periods of study, which can include semesters, quarters, trimesters, or summer sessions.

TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language): A standardized exam administered by the nonprofit Educational Testing Service (ETS), which measures English-language proficiency in reading, listening, speaking, and writing. Many U.S. colleges and universities require non-native English speakers to take the TOEFL and submit their scores as part of the admissions process.

Transcript: An official record of a student's coursework and grades at a high school, college, or university. A high school transcript is usually one of the required components of the college application process.

Transfer credit: Credit granted toward a degree on the basis of studies completed at another college or university. For instance, students who transfer from a community college to a four-year college may earn some transfer credit.

Tuition: An amount of money charged by a school per term, per course, or per credit, in exchange for instruction and training. Tuition generally does not include the cost of textbooks, room and board, and other fees.

Undergraduate student / undergraduate studies: A student enrolled in a two-year or four-year study program at a college or university after graduation from high school, leading to an associate or bachelor's degree.

University: A postsecondary institution that typically offers both undergraduate and graduate degree programs. "University" is often used interchangeably with "college" and "school."

Visa: An official mark or stamp in a passport that allows someone to enter a country for a particular amount of time. Common visa types for international students and scholars in the United States include the F-1 (student visa) and J-1 (exchange visitor visa). To apply for a U.S. visa, student applicants must first receive a Form I-20 from the college or university they plan to attend, which is created by the U.S. government's SEVIS database.

Wait list: A list of qualified applicants to a school who may be offered admission if there is space available after all admitted students have made their decisions. Being on a wait list does not guarantee eventual admission, so some students may choose not to remain on the list, particularly if the school is not their first choice.

Withdraw: To formally stop participating in a course or attending a university.