

Understanding US Higher Education: A Glossary

Terms	US Definition
Adjunct professor	A professor who possesses a profession outside of teaching and is primarily occupied with their respected field. They may be considered part-time professors at educational institutions. These include research professors, clinical professor, professor of practice, etc.
Associate's Degree	A degree that is usually obtained from a two-year college or university. The associate's degree is not required for continuing education, but it may be put forth in the pursuit of a bachelor's degree.
Bachelor's Degree	A degree obtained from a four-year college or university, which signifies the completion of a certain major's course requirements. To be accepted into a bachelor's program, an applicant must have completed the equivalent of US secondary school. Different colleges and universities vary in their standards for student acceptance into their programs.
College	An educational institution for general higher learning, often focused on the liberal arts as opposed to technical or professional training.
Community College	Community colleges are generally two-year programs in the US that offer diplomas, certificates, or associates degrees after completion of the program. Students who complete community college tend to transfer to four-year colleges or universities for the completion of their bachelor's degree.
Credits	Each course taken in the undergraduate career is worth a certain number of credits, which usually indicate the number of hours a student spends in the course every week. In order to graduate and earn a bachelor's degree in a particular major, a student must complete the required number of credits.
Dean	The head of a college or school who administers that academic unit of the institution.
Department Chair or Head	A professor in a particular department of study who performs administrative duties such as creating the department budget, interviewing new faculty, and arranging schedules of classes, in addition to instructing their own classes.
General Equivalency Diploma (GED)	Certification that declares an individual to have received the equivalent of a high school diploma once they pass a four-part assessment.
Grade Point Average (GPA)	The grading scale in the United States which measures academic achievement. Courses are graded in percentages that are converted to letter grades.
Graduate Professors	Instructors for courses of graduate education who have usually obtained at least a master's degree. They may be addressed in a similar fashion as an undergraduate professor or may invite students to use their first name. These instructors are usually much more focused on research interests and involvement during class discussions. Their course structures may be less rigid than undergraduate and do not focus on exact assignment deadlines. At the same time, expectations for student performance are much higher. Students are generally expected to do research on a topic throughout the semester and present their findings in the form of a paper and/or presentation.

Graduate Student	A student who has obtained a bachelor's degree and is working towards a master's degree or doctorate in a particular field. A graduate school is generally a division within a university. The completion of the particular graduate program leads to the obtainment of the relevant degree.
GRE	A standardized examination that is an admission requirement for most graduate schools in the United States.
Liberal Arts	The liberal arts are composed of academic subjects including literature, philosophy, mathematics, social sciences, and physical sciences. A liberal arts education equips students with a general base of knowledge and the critical thinking skills to enter a variety of careers or to specialize through graduate or professional training.
Major	A specific focus of study in undergraduate education. A student who declares their major in a particular subject must complete all course requirements in order to receive their degree. For example, a student majoring in chemistry would be required to fulfill a certain number of courses in the department of chemistry in order to receive a Bachelor of Arts or Sciences in Chemistry.
Master's Degree	A master's program typically takes about 1 to 2 years to complete. To be accepted into a master's program, students must have finished the equivalent of a US bachelor's degree. Programs vary in their standards for admissions, as well as in the standardized test types they require. For example, a master's program in law school requires the applicant to take the LSAT (a standardized test specific to law) while a master's in public health requires the GRE.
PhD	The highest available degree is a doctorate degree. Most PhD programs require the completion of a master's degree before acceptance into the program; however, some allow students to directly pursue the degree after completing a bachelor's.
Pre-professional	Undergraduate student that plans to attend a program for a professional degree (law, medicine, business) after their undergraduate education.
President	The chief executive of the institution who is responsible for strategic planning and maintaining relationships with the public and other organizations. This role is similar to that of a CEO of a business.
Primary School	Considered "elementary school" in the US which goes from kindergarten through grades 5 or 6.
Private College or University	A higher level educational institution funded by private contributions and student tuition. Private colleges and universities are generally smaller in size compared to state colleges and universities.
Provost	The chief academic officer at a college or university. The provost reports to the president and is responsible for designating the academic priorities of the institution and allocating resources in support of these priorities. Generally speaking, the provost is responsible for recruiting, retaining, and supporting the faculty of an institution. At small colleges, the provost may also be called the dean. In larger universities, the provost oversees the dean of the college and the deans of any other schools that make up the institution.
Secondary School	Middle school and high school (grades 6-12 in the US system).
State college or university	A higher level educational institution that is funded and founded by the government of the state in which it resides.

Teacher's Assistants	Undergraduate or graduate students who provide additional assistance to students and teachers in the undergraduate classroom. They answer student questions and lead some class activities with the guidance of the professor.
Tenure	An indefinite academic appointment. Faculty may only be terminated due to extreme circumstances or termination of the department.
Undergraduate professors	<p>Instructor for courses of undergraduate education who have completed at least a bachelor's degree and usually a PhD. Students generally address these instructors respectfully as "professor" or "doctor" unless the instructor tells them to do otherwise.</p> <p>Ex. Emily Smith, PhD would be addressed as "Dr. Smith" or "Professor Smith."</p> <p>Undergraduate professors usually expect students to meet required assignment deadlines and to participate in class discussions (when applicable). They have a structured grading format that will be followed precisely.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Full professor - An established professor with tenure who has been promoted to the highest faculty rank at the institution. • Associate professors - Possesses tenure, mid-level status, and potential for promotion. • Assistant Professor - Not tenured, on the tenure track with potential for promotion.
Undergraduate Student	A student who has completed primary and secondary school with a diploma or has obtained a GED, and is studying at a college or university to complete an associate's or bachelor's degree. This process generally takes about four years in which students take a variety of courses that fulfill their major's requirements.
University	A group of schools for various levels of study under the same institutional name. At least one of these schools is a college.
Vocational School	A type of educational institution that provides vocational education or a technical skill or trade. The completion of a vocational program earns a certificate or diploma in a particular trade, which is not equal to an associate's or bachelor's degree. However, this certificate may be used to obtain a career in the trade of study.