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The Advantages and Disadvantages of a University Education in the United States

***A guide to help international
students make informed decisions***



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INTRODUCTION

Thank you for downloading myUface.com's guide, "The Advantages and Disadvantages of a University Education in the United States." We wrote this guide to help international students like yourself make informed decisions about whether or not to apply to U.S. colleges and universities.

According to the Open Doors report (opendoors.iienetwork.org), there are approximately 623,805 international students at U.S. institutions of higher learning. That's 3.5% of the total student body, and more than the entire population of the American state of Wyoming. And for every student that is studying in the U.S., there are many more who want to study in the U.S.

You may have heard about the increase in students going to study in other countries, such as Britain or Australia. You may have even been contacted by a university in a country other than the U.S., and they may have told you something like this: "Yes, the U.S. used to be the top destination for international students, but they're on the decline. The newest hotspot for international students is _____."

It *is* the case that other destinations have increased in popularity over the years. But remember, the United States remains the top destination for international students. And far from decreasing, over the past decade the number of students in the U.S. has vastly increased, from 514,723 in 1998/9 to 623,805 this past year.

So, there is no doubt about it – the U.S. is the country of choice for international students.

But it's worth pausing for a moment and asking a simple question: **why?**

This is obviously an important question if you're planning to spend four years of your life studying in a foreign country. In this guide, we'll seek to answer this question as honestly as we possibly can, providing you with both the advantages and the disadvantages of a university education in the United States.

Let's say right from the outset that we are not exactly neutral evaluators. As products of the U.S. university system, and as people who have spent a fair amount of time working with it, we are what you might call partisans of the U.S. higher educational system. We happen to think that it represents the best available option for a majority of international students. But we are also aware of its shortcomings, and we promise to present them to you in as unbiased a light as possible. We hope that, by reading this guide, you'll gain a fuller understanding of what would await you at a U.S. university.

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Questions to Consider:

What's your initial impression? Are U.S. universities a good place to study?

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The Advantages of a U.S. Education, Part One: Diversity

If you enroll to study at a “typical” U.S. university, you’ll encounter students and professors from a bewildering array of backgrounds. Students of many different nationalities and socio-economic backgrounds will share the same classrooms, assignments, and living spaces. There are three main reasons why you should care about diversity in a university you attend:

First, diversity among the student body may increase the quality of the education you receive. Here, for example, is the President of the University of Virginia’s view of the value of diversity in the educational process¹:

“We value diversity here because it has to do with the human richness, the variety of experiences and backgrounds and perspectives and reasons for learning that distinguish us as people, based on our own backgrounds, our own expectations and our own prior experiences.”

If you are in a classroom with twenty students, each of whom is from a different cultural background, then you will most likely experience many different perspectives about the material presented. Although different studies have come to different conclusions regarding the impact of diversity on education, there is a general consensus that a diverse learning environment presents certain unique opportunities to students and teachers alike.

Second, as we move into a more and more globalized world, the ability to interact with people from different cultural backgrounds, and to perform well in a variety of cultural settings, will become more and more in demand. For example, The Partnership for 21st Century Skills, a “leading advocacy organization focused on infusing 21st century skills into education,” lists, among others, the following skills as vital²:

- * Global Awareness
- * Communication and Collaboration
- * Social and Cross-Cultural Skills

It’s very easy to see how studying at U.S. university with a diverse student body would help you build all of these skills.

Third, the contacts you make with students from different countries and cultures can help you in your professional career. This is especially true if you see yourself going into an international career.

And let’s not forget **the most important reason** for you to value the diversity you’ll find on U.S. campuses: meeting students from other backgrounds is just plain interesting.

1-<http://www.america.gov/st/diversity-english/2008/January/>

2-<http://www.21stcenturyskills.org>

“If you are in a classroom with twenty students, each of whom is from a different cultural background, then you will most likely experience many different perspectives about the material presented.”

Questions to Consider:

Does the thought of studying with people from all over the world interest you? Why or why not?

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The Advantages of a U.S. Education, Part Two: The Value of U.S. Degrees

One very important reason to consider a university education in the United States is the value of the degree you'll receive at the end of it. According to one recent report from National Public Radio, degrees from U.S. universities are so highly regarded abroad, that having one is "solid gold¹."

Regardless of your field of study, a degree from a U.S. university will be recognized by the overwhelming majority of employers throughout the world. There are two reasons for this, and understanding them will help you more fully understand the true value of a U.S. degree:

First, to gain accreditation in the U.S., a university has to go through a rigorous, transparent, well-established process that provides independent verification of the quality of education provided. The specific process of accreditation is a subject in itself, but here's a snapshot:

Accreditation in higher education is a collegial process of self-review and peer review for improvement of academic quality and public accountability of institutions and programs. This quality review process occurs on a periodic basis, usually every 3 to 10 years. Typically, it involves three major activities: (1) A self-study by an institution or program using the standards or criteria of an accrediting organization; (2) A peer review of an institution or program to gather evidence of quality; and (3) A decision or judgment by an accrediting organization to accredit, accredit with conditions or not accredit an institution or program².

This means that when an accredited U.S. university awards a degree, the quality of that degree has been vouched for by an independent process of quality assurance. That makes employers feel better about your degree.

Second, a very large number of international students have graduated from U.S. universities and gone on to successful careers around the globe. Having experienced the U.S. educational system themselves, they know its strengths and are likely to positively evaluate candidates who also received a U.S. degree. The influence of this factor will only increase as, year after year, U.S. universities continue to host international students.

To conclude briefly, because of the strong, independent system of accreditation in the United States, and the ever-growing network of graduates from U.S. universities throughout the world, the reputation of U.S. degrees has never been better. **Here's the bottom line:** if you choose to study in the U.S., you can be confident that the value of your degree will garner respect all over the world.

1 - <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=102560847>

2 - http://www.chea.org/pdf/chea_glance_2006.pdf

"[B]ecause of the strong, independent system of accreditation in the United States, and the ever-growing network of graduates from U.S. universities throughout the world, the reputation of U.S. degrees has never been better."

Questions to Consider:

Think of graduates from U.S. universities that you have met. What special skills do they seem to possess that might be a product of their educational experience in the U.S.?

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The Advantages of a U.S. Education, Part Three: The Facilities

If you've done any research at all about U.S. universities, you've probably heard quite a bit about how expensive it can be to study in the U.S. Although we want to note that the difference in cost between universities in the U.S. and other countries is often exaggerated, it's likely safe to say that, in general, and with many individual exceptions, the cost of a higher education at a U.S. university is going to be higher than in other countries.

This is often brought up as a reason not to study in the U.S. Certainly, cost should be an issue in deciding what university to attend, but it should not be the *only* issue. It helps to remember that, in most cases, university costs are high for a reason, and that quite often the increased cost of U.S. university education reflects, at least to a certain extent, the higher expenditures made by U.S. universities upon the educational process. The OECD notes that the United States spends more per tertiary student than all but 3 OECD members (Norway, Luxembourg, and Switzerland)¹. A large part of that comes from student tuition costs.

More money spent for each student means more money for state-of-the-art facilities. By facilities I don't only mean classrooms, but also money for research, for top-notch professors, for sports venues, for student comfort, for libraries, for IT resources, and so on and so forth. Quite often, then, the high cost of a university can positively reflect the quality of the education you'll receive at that university.

In fact, the situation is even better - many of the most expensive universities in the United States actually spend *more* - sometimes two or three times more - on each student than that student spends on tuition.

The point here is that when it comes time to look at individual universities, don't look at the tuition cost in a vacuum. An expensive school might be worth it because of the quality of education it provides. An inexpensive school might actually present less value because it doesn't provide the same educational resources. Of course, in many cases, and depending on what you want to study, expensive universities will provide poor quality, and inexpensive universities will provide high quality.

Don't be scared off by the high cost of U.S. universities. Look at the total picture, including the educational quality they provide, in making your decision. And keep in mind that in many cases, you'll get what you pay for.

"More money spent for each student means more money for state-of-the-art facilities . . . for research, for top-notch professors, for sports venues, for student comfort, for libraries, for IT resources, and so on and so forth."

Questions to Consider:

Do higher tuition costs translate into better facilities? Do better facilities mean a higher quality education?

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1 - <http://masetto.sourceoecd.org/pdf/factbook2009/302009011e-09-02-01.pdf>

The Advantages of a U.S. Education, Part Four: A Practical Focus

Here's a great benefit of going to university in the United States: your studies are generally going to be focused on practical, real-world applications. What does this mean?

- it means you will graduate not only with theoretical knowledge of a subject, but also with experience of using that knowledge in actual, real-world situations.
- it means that when a prospective employer asks about your "work experience," you'll have a good answer - even though you just graduated!
- it means that employers will value your degree more than degrees from universities in other countries, because they know you'll need less training to adapt to the workplace.
- it means that you're going to spend a lot of time in university actively implementing what you've learned. For many students this aspect of their education is the most rewarding.

Why are U.S. universities more focused on the practical applications of knowledge? Well, there are many reasons. Here's a few:

- Historically, universities in the United States have received more of their funding from private sources - from students themselves, from corporations looking for specific research, or from philanthropists (generally men and women who had made a lot of money in the business world). These private funders have been more interested in education that yields practical benefits.
- American culture generally places a high value on practice. Americans are just as interested in whether something works as in why it works.
- Americans have developed educational methodologies that suggest that the most effective way to learn about a theory is to implement it. One popular practice, called "Service Learning," assigns students real work with groups that aren't able to pay for it. In a marketing class, for example, you might help a local non-profit organization design its web page. In other words, American universities do teach theory - they're just more likely to teach it via practice, rather than via textbook.

The combination of practical experience with "book learning" is one of the most unique and fascinating aspects of the U.S. higher-educational system.

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Questions to Consider:

Do you think students should go outside of the classroom and do "real-world" activities as part of their education?

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The Benefits of a U.S. Education, Part Five: The Variety of Programs Available

A great benefit of studying at a U.S. university is that you're sure to find one that very closely matches your interests. How do I know? Because there are 4,314 degree granting institutions in the United States, and surely at least one of them has a program that would interest you ¹.

Nowhere else are you going to find such a vast number of educational institutions from which to choose. Some other quick stats:

- Of the 4,314 institutions mentioned above, 643 are "public" and 1,640 are "private."
- 2,629 offer four-year degrees; 1,685 offer two-year degrees
- In California alone there are 412 institutions; for those of you who like tropical climates, we note that Hawaii has 23, Florida 174; for those who like the cold, Alaska has 8 and North Dakota 22.
- There are over 1,600 different educational programs offered by U.S. universities, covering everything from Construction to Library Science to Public Administration to Indian Studies to Theology and Pastoral Ministry.
- The length and cost of degrees differs as well. There are at least 23 different kinds of Associate's degrees, most of which take two years to complete; and there are at least 38 different bachelor's degrees, most of which take four years to complete (with some exceptions) ².
- The same degree at two different universities will be a very different learning experience. This is because, as we talked about in yesterday's post, most universities try to give their students practical experience with organizations and businesses in the surrounding community. If you got a Bachelor of Science in Business Administration in Michigan, for example, you might spend a lot of time learning about the Manufacturing sector; whereas the same degree from a university in Silicon Valley would give you more background and experience in IT.

The secret to the large number of universities and programs is, again, diversity. The U.S. is such a diverse country, not only in terms of its ethnic makeup, but also in terms of its geography and economy. The degrees that are most needed in Boston, Massachusetts are not going to be the same as the degrees that are most needed in Fargo, North Dakota. And since universities in the U.S. aren't controlled by the central government, they're free to determine - independently - the programs that will most likely serve their community. That's why you'll find more universities and more programs in the U.S. than anywhere else. That's a huge advantage if you know exactly what it is you want to learn.

1 - http://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d07/tables/dt07_255.asp

2 - www.wikipedia.org

"[S]ince universities in the U.S. aren't controlled by the central government, they're free to determine independently the programs that will most likely serve their community."

Questions to Consider:

What exactly do you want to study in the U.S.? Have you identified any programs that match your goals?

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The Supposed Disadvantages of Studying in the U.S.: Visas and Costs

Let's speak briefly about two supposed reasons not to study in the U.S.

Reason #1: It's too hard to get a visa **Verdict:** FALSE

You do hear about a number of international students who don't get visas to the U.S. The process seems complicated, filled with all kinds of strange-sounding documents like I-20s. The truth is, though, when you hack through all the confusion, the process is really quite simple:

1. You apply to a university in the U.S.
2. The school accepts you and send you some documents
3. You apply for a visa interview at the U.S. Embassy, and go to the interview with the necessary documents
4. The embassy approves your application and puts a visa in your passport
5. You get on a plane for the U.S.

Now, there are certain steps of the process which do present real difficulties for large numbers of international students. Quite often the above scenario can become much more complicated (visit the myUface blog for more about visas). But for the majority of international students the process - though long - ends in success. It's also worth mentioning here that many think the Obama administration may be more open to international students¹.

Reason #2: U.S. universities cost too much. **Verdict:** FALSE

You should be skeptical of claims like "universities in _____ country are expensive," because there are so many different kinds of universities and programs available. In every country, you'll find some programs that are expensive and some that are not. For example, let's look at some yearly tuition information available on the web (NOTE: these are estimates taken from random sites² for the purposes of illustrating a point):

- U.K. tuition is between £3,500 to £18,000
- In Australia, it's between \$10,000- \$16,000
- Tuition in the U.S. is between \$5,000 and \$30,000

Using April 2009 exchange rates, and taking the middle point of those ranges, tuition costs work out to be \$15,695 in the UK, \$9,347 in Australia, and \$17,500 in the U.S. **The bottom line** is that, yes, the U.S. will tend to be more expensive for university study . . . but probably not by such a large amount as to outweigh the various benefits of going there. And always remember, there are going to be universities in the U.S. that cost less than the average university in the U.K. or Australia. It all depends on what you want and what kind of program you're looking for.

1 - <http://www.journal-online.co.uk/article/5089-obama-could-draw-students-away-from-uk>

2 - www.hero.ac.uk, www.studyinaustralia.com, www.edupass.org

Questions to Consider:

Have you heard horror stories of students not getting U.S. visas?

Have you looked at specific universities in the U.S.? Do you know how much it would cost to attend? Have you looked for other schools which might cost less?

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The Real Disadvantages of Studying in the U.S.: Will it help you get a job?

Let's talk about a real disadvantage for many of those who choose to study in the U.S.: for many careers in many parts of the world, a U.S. education simply does not provide the appropriate preparation. Let a member of the myUface staff give you an example:

"A student I knew from an Eastern European country had always dreamed of studying in the United States. He wanted to become a lawyer. The problem was that, in his country, a law degree is awarded at the end of undergraduate education at a specialized legal faculty. In addition, his country's system of law was completely different from that practiced in the U.S. In other words, by going to get an undergraduate degree in the U.S., he would have:

- *missed out on getting the degree he needed to practice law in his home country*
- *learned very little information that actually pertained to his own legal system*

Now, that's not to say he shouldn't have wanted to study in the U.S. In fact, despite the disadvantages of a U.S. university in this regard, he ended up coming to study in the States. But even he acknowledged that those four years were in a certain respect wasted, at least in terms of how they strictly applied to his chosen profession (they were certainly not wasted in terms of his life - he had a great experience, made lifelong friends, developed leadership and cross-cultural skills, and so on)."

The bottom line here is that before you decide to pursue university education in the United States, you should do some research into how it might impact your chosen career. In the majority of cases, a U.S. degree will probably advance your career. But in certain cases, due to the system used in your country, it might not provide you with the appropriate qualifications. This is particularly possible in some of the following fields:

- law
- education (i.e. getting certified to be a teacher in a public school)
- medicine or dentistry

"[B]efore you decide to pursue university education in the United States, you should do some research into how it might impact your chosen career."

Questions to Consider:

Do you know what you'd like to do as a career? What are the requirements in your country for having such a career? Do you need a specific degree? To pass a certain test? How will education in the U.S. impact your ability to meet such requirements?

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The Real Disadvantages of Studying in the U.S.: Returning Home

Here's another potential disadvantage of studying in the U.S. that you should consider: in certain countries, and within certain professions, people who possess U.S. degrees are viewed with suspicion and even resentment.

To use an extreme example to illustrate the point: in certain countries, if you possess a U.S. degree the government may not like it. Really, it happens. OK, for most of you this will not be a problem. But you could suffer from suspicion of your degree in other ways:

- colleagues may be threatened by your degree.
- colleagues may feel that your degree doesn't apply to the "way we do things here."
- colleagues may have negative political feelings about the U.S. as a country, and apply those feelings to their relationship with you.

Are these reactions fair or reasonable? Absolutely not. But they can be surprisingly common, especially in fields like economics, politics, public policy, and so forth. A member of the myUface staff once met a group of **Harvard** graduates who had studied politics, but who were almost completely ignored by the politicians in their own country, and had all moved onto different fields.

By the way, this in no way applies only to U.S. universities. Usually, if this kind of attitude exists at all, it will exist in relation to foreign degrees in general.

The bottom line is, be aware of the "culture" that exists within your chosen profession, and ask yourself, would holding a U.S. degree help me or hurt me here? How will I fit in "going back?"

Here is a list of five other difficulties (not necessarily disadvantages) to studying in the United States for you to consider:

1. Studying in the U.S. - or in any foreign country - involves **adjusting to a new culture and way of thinking**. Although this is an exciting challenge to overcome, and will positively shape your character and personality, it is nonetheless a difficult process.
2. For most international students the United States is very far away from their home country. Because of the time difference, **organizing ways to connect with those in your native country can be challenging**.
3. Similarly, the distance between your country and the U.S. will make it **hard to travel home** during short breaks in the Spring and Fall, or over the weekend.
4. A huge benefit of U.S. university is that it provides a high quality education. The flip side of that is that **obtaining a U.S. degree is very challenging and requires hard work**. You will be challenged by professors and fellow students. If you are looking for an easy path to a degree, this may not be it.
5. **English, english, english**, all the time. Though studying in the U.S. can be a great way to perfect your spoken and written English, it can be difficult if you are not fully committed to learning the language. Do you like English? Do you really like English?



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So, should you study in the U.S.?

So, we've considered most of the advantages and disadvantages of going to the U.S. for your university education. But you may still be having difficulty deciding if studying in the U.S. is the right decision. Here are three pieces of advice about how you should go about making the decision whether or not to study in the U.S. (or anywhere else, for that matter):

1. Remember, you won't be studying at a university called "the U.S." You'll be studying at one particular university in the U.S. So please, do some research about individual universities. DON'T think that every university in the U.S. will be more or less the same, because they AREN'T. Until you bring real universities into your decision-making process, you won't be making an informed decision at all.
2. Keep your options open. Remember, you don't need to decide right now that, no matter what, you're studying in the U.S. You should research different programs in many countries, including your own. You may want to consider pursuing entrance into U.S. universities and, at the same time, applying to universities in other countries as well.
3. Find good advisers. Making the decision to study in the U.S. will be easier if you connect with people who are familiar with the U.S. system of education. Find such people and develop a relationship with them. The right adviser can help answer all your most difficult questions and lead to a better decision. In your country, look for an Educational Advising Center. On the internet, you need go no further than www.myuface.com. Remember, you can always ask us questions and we will always give you the best advice we can!

The decision to study in another country is a daunting one, but it can be fun as well. The options for international students are more diverse and exciting than ever before. Consider all your options carefully, but always remember: if you do your research, take your time, keep your options open, and find good advisers, you will find the perfect program for you!

Good luck!

Questions or comments? E-mail blog@myuface.com

About myUface:

myUface connects talented international students with universities and academic programs in the U.S. The service is FREE for students, and administered by a staff with decades of experience placing students in the U.S.

At **myUface.com** you'll be able to create an online academic profile and share it with our university partners. You'll also have access to advice on applying to U.S. universities, studying in the U.S., preparing for standardized tests, and much more - all from the **myUface** staff, who have decades of experience getting international students into U.S. universities.

About the myUface blog:

The **myUface blog** strives to provide you with all the information you'll need to identify and gain admission to educational programs in the United States.

Updated daily, the blog addresses challenges international students face in coming to study in America, and helps them understand the way the admissions process works at U.S. universities.

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