

This edition of Educare looks at the American higher education system from the perspective of how to apply to US colleges and universities from overseas, especially when the student is not a US citizen and not familiar with the system there.

There is also reference information on page 7 to resources for parents, teachers and students on transgender issues. The references are included to help families who will move for 're-entry' to the West or some Latin American countries where it is very much an issue, but are currently living in countries where this is not openly discussed.

Understanding the American education system – universities and colleges

Introduction

There are a multitude of situations around the world where TCKs are studying in school, college or university in a country or culture which is not their own. A major feature of this phenomenon is the prevalence and often the dominance of the American education system on the worldwide scene. Most of the staff members in the US-style International Schools are American, and their knowledge of other educational systems and requirements may be limited. Teachers and administrators from other backgrounds, particularly from European or Commonwealth countries, face a huge learning curve as they seek to understand the American way of doing things. Alongside this, non-American students and their parents face the challenge of adapting to the system and making wise academic choices, especially when the university entrance requirements in their passport countries do not match the normal graduation level of the school.

Consider the following scenarios, all of which are realistic and common.

- Korean students are studying in American International Schools and expect to go to college or university in the States. Their parents have limited knowledge of the higher education landscape and find the application process bewildering. The students themselves potentially face a massive cultural adjustment to the United States, where they will live for the most part without their parents.
- Teachers from the UK are recruited by an American International School. They try to learn a little before they go, researching online in order to gain knowledge of the American education system. When they arrive at the school they take a long time to adjust to the differences. They may have little idea as to why the SAT and ACT are so important to Americans, or understand that something called a 'quiz' is not a light-hearted piece of fun but a serious test. They may struggle with the fact the attendance record affects the end-of-year grade, or that their subject area is taught in an unfamiliar way, or in a different sequence to the one they are used to.

- Teachers in American schools do not understand why the non-American teachers find it so difficult. They in turn consider the UK system – and other European systems - to be very demanding.
- An academic head from a British-style International School is frustrated by the fact that a student transferring to an American school after passing International GCSE's with top grades does not receive as many graduation credits as he would have expected.
- A guidance counsellor in an American school is struggling to cope with the questions and demands of parents from the UK, who repeatedly ask for more AP classes to be scheduled and always talk about UCAS forms. University admissions requirements from Europe and the Commonwealth cannot be described in detail here, but it is important to note that European universities routinely require Advanced Placements (APs) in five subjects. Manchester University in the UK has a very helpful section for applicants from the US education system, at this web link:
<http://www.manchester.ac.uk/study/international/country-specific-information/usa/>

Learning about American education

Previous articles in *Educare* outlined and discussed recent changes in the American education system (see *Educare* June 2015 and October 2015). This article will focus on the American college and university scene, and draws heavily on the following two resources: a book by Toni Summers Hargis called *The stress-free guide to studying in the States: a step-by-step plan for international students*, 2016 edition, and the website of the Fulbright Commission, particularly from the *Education USA* section, under headings such as choosing a US university, funding a US education, admissions processes and standardised tests. At the end of the article details are given of another excellent resource, a free online magazine about studying in the US.

Toni Summers Hargis is a British mother of three who has graduated from universities in the UK and the US, and currently lives in the States where her children are studying. Her website is:

<http://tonisummershargis.com/>

An overview of Hargis's book will be provided below, with a little more detail from certain sections. Purchase of this book (available on Amazon) is strongly recommended as it is an invaluable reference tool for school principals, guidance counsellors, and students and their parents who are seeking to study in the US. American students who have spent most of their lives outside of their passport country will also benefit from reading it. Hargis points out that Americans who have lived overseas go through a specific kind of culture shock, made worse because they think they are familiar with the US. On arrival they find that they do not quite fit and that most of their peers do not share their global outlook.

The Fulbright Commission website (*Education USA* page) may be found at

<http://www.fulbright.org.uk/going-to-the-usa/undergraduate/educationusa-advice>

It is important to point out that the information here is relevant to all who wish to study in the USA, not just those applying for Fulbright scholarships from the UK. This website is especially useful for non-American teachers and academic principals seeking to understand how the US higher education system works. Parents and students will also find it helpful. The Fulbright Commission is linked to the *Education USA* network, which provides a list of frequently asked questions (FAQs) on its website at

<https://educationusa.state.gov/frequently-asked-questions-fags>

and a glossary of specialist terms at

<https://educationusa.state.gov/experience-studying-usa/us-educational-system/glossary>

American teachers and school principals would also benefit from studying these resources, as they highlight the areas of their education system that need to be explained to outsiders. They could be used as a basis for an orientation module designed to prepare non-American teachers to serve in a particular school.

Overview of Hargis's book

The book is organised into twelve chapters and has a comprehensive list of useful websites at the end. Chapter one emphasises the complexity of the college application process, advising that plenty of time is needed: some sources recommend starting the application process two years before the targeted start date. Hargis also points out that studying in the US can be very expensive. Chapter two (expanded on below) explains the terminology of higher education, and chapter three gives advice on how to choose a college. It is important to be aware that a student who has passed A-levels or the IB should be able to enter the college or university at a higher level because of transfer credit allocated to these courses. Chapter four discusses funding, and chapter five outlines the application process step-by-step. Information on this can also be found on the Fulbright website at

<http://www.fulbright.org.uk/going-to-the-usa/undergraduate/educationusa-advice/applying>

Fulbright provides details about the Common Application process (Common App) at this link:

<http://www.fulbright.org.uk/going-to-the-usa/undergraduate/educationusa-advice/applying/common-application>

There are further links on this page to guides for students and schools. The guide to students displays a template with specific advice on how the Common App should be completed, and the guide to schools gives information on all of the relevant documents required.

Both Hargis and the Fulbright website emphasise that filling in forms is only part of the process, and that students are also required to write at least one personal essay to support their application. These essays are not as standardised as (for example) those required in the UK

admissions process, which includes a 'personal statement' written in a format specified by UCAS, the central admissions body.

A wide range of essential documents are required to support the application, one of the most crucial of which is the school transcript. This is a detailed report from the students' secondary school, covering all of the years of secondary education (from age 11 or 12 to age 18). If the student has attended more than one secondary school, each one is required to supply a transcript. The Fulbright website has a section in which the components of a school transcript are explained and a template is provided. See this link:

<http://www.fulbright.org.uk/going-to-the-usa/undergraduate/educationusa-advice/applying/school-documents>

Advice is also given on other requirements such as references.

Chapter six of Hargis's book focuses on the requirements of the SAT and ACT (expanded on below) and chapter seven looks at college offers and rejections. Chapters eight and nine deal with practical, nitty-gritty areas – visa applications, the documents that students need to bring with them, accommodation issues and the process of registering for classes. A helpful 'to do' list is included, covering essentials such as banking, telephones etc. Hargis strongly emphasises the need to take out adequate medical insurance and she advises on how to do this. Chapter ten, 'The lowdown on college life' refers to subjects as diverse as tax returns, social security numbers, alcohol and drug laws, college regulations and hazing (a form of bullying) as well as academic information.

Regarding accommodation in a student residence (commonly referred to as a 'dorm'), Hargis clarifies the fact that students are almost always required to share their bedroom with another student. This person may be assigned randomly, or students may use one of several available mechanisms to try to ensure that they have a compatible roommate. Some colleges have procedures for agreeing behaviour in a shared room, whereas others do not, and in these it is up to the students themselves to work out arrangements for potential areas of conflict such as overnight guests, keeping the room clean and tidy, etc. It is worth noting that very little is provided in student rooms, and the new arrival will have to go shopping straight away for basic items such as bed linen. However, in most residences meals are included in the package.

Chapter eleven discusses American culture and customs, (expanded on below) and chapter twelve contains some helpful notes for parents.

Types of degree and academic institutions

The first degree for which students enrol is called the Bachelor's degree. Unlike in the UK, this is not an Honours programme, but Honours are conferred on top students. There are also several ranks for those who excel – cum laude (with honour), magna cum laude (with great honour) and summa cum laude (with greatest honour).

Many careers require a post-graduate degree, as indicated by the examples below.

To become a lawyer, students take a three year post-graduate programme at a law school. For doctors, the requirement is around four to five years of specific pre-med courses followed by four years of post-graduate training.

For undergraduates, the 'major' is the subject that the student ultimately specialises in, although this does not have to be declared until they are going into their 'junior' year (the third of four years of study). A 'minor' subject can be studied alongside this.

There are several types of college offering degree courses at different levels.

Community colleges, sometimes called tech or city colleges, typically offer two year associate degree programmes. Some of these colleges are linked to another college where students can progress to two further years of study in order to gain their Bachelor's degree.

Liberal arts colleges are those which offer a general curriculum rather than technical or vocational subjects.

The word 'university' is usually applied to institutions which include graduate schools or 'grad schools' where postgraduate degree courses are offered. A helpful further explanation of these terms is given on the 'Study in the USA' website at the following link:

<https://www.studyusa.com/en/a/107/what-is-the-difference-between-a-school-college-and-university-in-the-usa>

ACT and SAT

The ACT and SAT tests are described in chapter six of Hargis's book. She explains that they can be taken at various centres around the world: students need to choose either the ACT or the SAT. The importance of thorough preparation cannot be over-emphasised, and many students attend classes aimed specifically at working towards these tests. Hargis offers advice on choosing between the ACT and the SAT, and how to report test scores to the colleges to which students are applying. The College Board website recommends taking the SAT two years before the student wishes to begin undergraduate studies.

The ACT and SAT are different to A levels and the IB in the following three areas.

- First, the ACT and SAT concentrate on English language, maths and (in the case of ACT) science, whereas A level and IB encompass a wide range of subjects and students make a choice of three or four. These may or may not include English or maths, depending on the student's aspirations for higher education.
- Secondly, students taking A levels or the higher level IB study a broad body of material in depth (college-level equivalent) for each subject area.

- Thirdly the testing style differs widely: for A level and IB, there is a strong emphasis on structured and free writing and practical work (such as laboratory skills). Multiple choice questions (as used in both the ACT and the SAT) do not feature prominently.

Detailed information about the ACT, including sample questions, can be found at this link:

<http://www.act.org/content/act/en/products-and-services/the-act/test-preparation.html>

Sample SAT tests can be seen here:

<https://collegereadiness.collegeboard.org/sat/practice/full-length-practice-tests>

Credits and Grade Point Average (GPA)

Colleges use the credit system, which stipulates the amount of credit hours a student must achieve in order to graduate. Wikipedia explains this further:

...a semester credit hour (SCH) is 15-16 contact hours per semester. Most college and university courses are 3 Semester Credit Hours (SCH) or 45-48 contact hours, so they usually meet for three hours per week over a 15-week semester.

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Course_credit]

GPA or grade point average is a score relating to academic achievement, based on homework, class assignments and test scores. This system is explained by Hargis in chapter ten (p 206 to 207). She provides a table which shows percentage scores, their corresponding letter grades and the equivalent GPA value (on a scale of 0 to 4.0.) The method for converting test marks or grades into the GPA is described in easy steps. It is important to be aware that more difficult classes are often given more 'weight' (i.e. contribute a higher potential score to the GPA), so this needs to be checked for the relevant courses. The GPA is affected by attendance.

American culture

Chapter eleven of Hargis's book refers to American language and customs, under numerous headings. She addresses the issues of culture shock and homesickness, both common challenges faced by international students. Elsewhere in the book she stresses the importance of seeking help with mental health problems, and she explains that in the US there is no shame or stigma attached to doing this. Language features such as the common use of euphemisms are referred to in this chapter. For students who are used to British English, she gives a useful summary of the differences in spelling and pronunciation. She refers the reader to the Merriam-Webster online dictionary and thesaurus as a reference point for making sense of the vast array of unfamiliar or differently-used vocabulary:

<https://www.merriam-webster.com/>

Hargis describes and explains aspects of everyday life ranging from public transport (transportation), money, weights and measures and shopping to the layout of cities and numbering systems for buildings. This information is very useful for students coming from overseas who are not familiar with the US.

Studying in the US – free magazine aimed at different regions of the world

The 'Study in the USA' website offers an excellent resource aimed at numerous cultural groups, in several languages. – English, Chinese, Japanese, Spanish, Portuguese and Arabic. The magazine, called *Study in the USA*, is brightly coloured and well-illustrated and can be read or downloaded free of charge from

<https://studyusa.com/en/a/192/download-study-in-the-usa-magazines>

It contains articles on subjects such as understanding the US education system, choosing the right college, how to apply, finance and visas, and 'homestay' experiences. 'Homestay' refers to a system whereby the student is hosted by a local family. This can be a very positive option for students who need to improve their English, and provides a supportive environment for the initial transition period into the US.

Feedback

Please let us know if you have comments on this article, or if you have experiences related to its content which would be helpful for others. Write to us at stevegillbryant@gmail.com.

Gill Bryant January 2018

Good resources on Transgender concerns

Understanding the many issues around the transgender debate is essential for those facing re-entry to the West and many Latin American countries. The following are helpful resources

Transgender (Talking Points Book), Vaughan Roberts (2016), Good Book Company
The Transgender Debate (What about Gender Identity?) Andrew Walker (2017), Good Book Company
Understanding Gender Dysphoria, Mark Yarhouse (2015), CAPS Books

Educare is a free e-magazine produced for the benefit of TCKs, their parents, international school staff, and sending organisations and supporters. It can be freely forwarded on to anyone who would benefit from it. Direct subscription from mk_tck@yahoo.co.uk