

How to Pay for Uni in the USA

THE
GOOD
SCHOOLS
GUIDE

The definitive guide to costs, scholarships and financial aid, from [Uni in the USA](#)

This guide to paying for university in America is aimed at British students, but will be useful for any international student.

Most people who want to go to uni in the USA cannot afford the huge fees. Yet thousands of British students manage to go every year. How? Financial aid.

There are several routes to securing enough funds to get that all-American education everyone's talking about, including (click to jump ahead):

- [need-based aid](#)
- [scholarships](#)
- [sports scholarships](#)
- [loans](#)

These are explained below, along with a section on how to supplement your funds through [employment](#). We also explain at the start exactly what [the actual cost](#) of uni in the USA is.

In Brief, here's what you'll find in this document:

- US universities usually quote prices that are **all-inclusive**, not just tuition.
- Money you don't have to pay back is called a **scholarship** or **grant** and is either need- or merit-based, or awarded for special reasons (women, Ayn Rand enthusiasts etc).
- Some US universities will provide international students with financial aid purely on the basis of whether the student could not otherwise afford to attend; this is called **need-based aid**. Not all universities offer it; check before you apply. (See our list below).
- You can also be awarded **merit-based aid** of many different kinds. You need to put some effort into finding and researching what scholarships are available; start with some of the links we've listed below under **Scholarships**.
- **Sports scholarships** are amazingly plentiful - if you have real sporting abilities you should consider them, but bear in mind that the recruitment and application processes take some time, are strictly regulated, and that competition can be ferocious for major sports and top teams.
- While international students cannot take out either UK or US government loans, you can sometimes get **loans** from banks and other private companies.
- It is possible to supplement your financial aid by finding **work** – mainly on-campus, but potentially off-campus as well, through the OPT or CPT schemes (definitions below).

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The Actual Cost

American universities tend to throw around big numbers like \$55,000. When you see figures like this, you need to remember one key point: it's normally **all-inclusive**. This is very much **unlike the UK**. Here, universities quote you the cost of **tuition only** (typically £9,000 – remember also to factor in the difference between dollars and pounds!). The American price, by contrast, will normally include:

- **Room and (usually) board** - sometimes in very nice accommodation
- **Administrative fees**
- **Health insurance** - vital due to lack of NHS
- Use of **campus facilities** - including libraries, fitness centres and so on (you normally have to pay extra for this in the UK)
- Membership of the **student union** and **student societies**
- **Books** required for study - doesn't sound like much but can cost around \$1,000 per year!

Not all universities include the same extras in their total prices, so make sure to check carefully. Things that typically **aren't** included, and for which you need to budget, are:

- **Living costs** - these are quite low, because most stuff is already paid for! But you will need money for your own entertainment and anything extra you plan to buy. Prices vary throughout the country - cities are more expensive than rural areas, and the Northeast is more expensive than the Midwest or the South. There is a useful price comparison website [here](#). As a general rule, costs are 20% lower in the US than the UK.
- **Travel costs** - airfares are significant, but get cheaper the further you book in advance. Weirdly, it can be much cheaper to travel by ship (sometimes a third of the one-way air fare) if you fancy a multi-day trip where you'll be the youngest person on board – and ships can also carry much more luggage. Check air fares, then compare with trans-Atlantic “crossing” rates.

Need-Based Aid

The primary way that British students finance their education in the USA is through need-based aid. This is provided by universities as a way of enticing good students who couldn't otherwise afford to attend, but who will greatly enhance campus and classes with their brains and diversity.

Take Princeton as an example. The total cost of attendance is \$66,700 for the 2018-19 year. But the average financial aid last year was \$53,100 per student. In other words, the average student only paid \$13,600; the neediest students paid much less than that. Change this into pounds, and you find it's comparable to the £9,000 fees owed in the UK (which, we repeat, don't even include all your rent and food costs!). For a handy currency converter, click [here](#).

A few numbers

600+: the number of US universities that offer at least \$20,000 in financial aid to international students.

250: the number of US universities that have 'full ride' scholarships available.

Source: the Fulbright Commission

Of course, not all universities are as generous (or wealthy) as Princeton. But they're not all as expensive as Princeton either. It tends to work out that more expensive unis are also the wealthiest, and thus able to provide the most need-based aid.

To receive need-based aid, most unis will ask you to fill out several forms and provide information such as your parents' income. Sometimes they will ask you to do this through a centralised system provided by CollegeBoard, known as the [CSS/Financial Aid PROFILE](#), which is relatively straightforward to follow.

Alternatively, you may have to do this through the [FAFSA](#) (Free Application for Federal Student Aid) instead. Don't be confused: Americans fill out the FAFSA for Federal (government) aid, for which you are **not** eligible. Some universities, however, will still want you to fill it out just so they can assess your finances in a more standardised manner.

The amount of aid you receive will depend on your family's financial situation - the university will normally ask you to pay what they feel is affordable for you. They are often more lenient about this than you might think - for example Princeton doesn't ask you to pay anything unless your parents earn more than \$65,000 (note: dollars, not pounds!).

To be clear: **most US universities do not provide need-based aid to international applicants. But a lot of really good ones do.**

This means that need-based aid can be a key part of your decision about which universities you apply to – check carefully to see what each university's policy is. Need-based aid can be offered in the form of full all-in scholarship, or a package made up of both grants (scholarship) and loans.

Below is a summary of universities that offer need-based aid.

The Big Six: Universities to Consider for Need-Based Aid

These unis are all **need blind** for international students - this means they will not look at your financial situation when assessing your application. If you get in, they'll make sure you have **all** the money you need to be able to attend.

- **Harvard University** – Boston, Massachusetts; 7,000 undergrads, 5.2% acceptance rate. Links: [Financial aid page](#), [Uni in the USA review](#)
- **Princeton University** – Princeton, New Jersey; 5,000 undergrads, 6.4% acceptance rate. Links: [Financial aid page](#), [Uni in the USA review](#)
- **Dartmouth College** – Hanover, New Hampshire; 4,000 undergrads, 10.6% acceptance rate. Links: [Financial aid page](#), [Uni in the USA review](#)
- **Amherst College** – Amherst, Massachusetts; 2,000 undergrads, 14.0% acceptance rate. Links: [International financial aid page](#), [Uni in the USA review](#)
- **Yale University** – New Haven, Connecticut; 5,000 undergrads, 6.9% acceptance rate. Links: [Financial aid page](#), [Uni in the USA review](#)
- **MIT** – Boston, Massachusetts; 4,500 undergrads, 7.2% acceptance rate. Links: [Financial aid page](#), [Uni in the USA review](#)

NB: Acceptance rates are for all students, including internationals. These six do not have a quota for how many international students they accept.

Other Top Unis With Need-Based Aid for International Students

We think that one of the best lists of unis offering international aid is at InternationalStudent.com, which includes stats on the number of international students accepted and the average aid they received. However, they do not state where they get their data and they have been known to have incorrect numbers on occasion - so make sure to double check at the universities' websites.

Below is a non-comprehensive list of unis we review in [Uni in the USA](#) that have particularly great need-based aid packages for international students, to help you get started on your search.

These unis are often described as **need aware**. That means they might look at your financial situation when considering your application, but once you're admitted they'll cover most, if not all, of your "demonstrated need".

Many of the universities below can only afford to do this for a certain number of international students, which means that if you require financial aid, your admission will unfortunately be even more competitive than normal.

- [Williams](#) (Uni in the USA [Review](#))
- [Middlebury](#) (Uni in the USA [Review](#))
- [Swarthmore](#) (Uni in the USA [Review](#))
- [Vassar](#) (Uni in the USA [Review](#))
- [Vanderbilt](#) (Uni in the USA [Review](#))
- [Reed](#) (Uni in the USA [Review](#))
- [Skidmore](#) (Uni in the USA [Review](#))
- [Brown](#) (Uni in the USA [Review](#))
- [Wesleyan](#) (Uni in the USA [Review](#))
- [Mt Holyoke](#) (Uni in the USA [Review](#))
- [Stanford](#) (Uni in the USA [Review](#))
- [Hampshire](#) (Uni in the USA [Review](#))
- [Bard](#) (Uni in the USA [Review](#))
- [Georgetown](#) (Uni in the USA [Review](#))
- [Kenyon](#) (Uni in the USA [Review](#))
- [Oberlin](#) (Uni in the USA [Review](#))
- [Rice](#) (Uni in the USA [Review](#))
- [Tufts](#) (Uni in the USA [Review](#))
- [University of Chicago](#) (Uni in the USA [Review](#))
- [University of Pennsylvania](#) (Uni in the USA [Review](#))

All these universities are excellent and have highly competitive acceptance rates. If you are looking for something with less daunting admissions prospects, browse the [International Student listings](#), which are organised by state.

Alternatively, there is a (fairly random) list to get you started [here](#), from College Confidential.

Scholarships: Merit-Based Aid

Not all financial aid is need-based. A lot of international students finance their studies with “**merit-based**” aid instead. As with need-based aid, these are commonly called **scholarships**.

Merit-based aid is granted to students regardless of their family’s financial situation and is usually (but not always) awarded on the basis of some special skill or achievement. These scholarships come in every shape and size, and you can find one for just about anything - from sports to music to simply having a great application or being a certain ethnicity.

Many smaller scholarships are granted for winning essay competitions. Often, you don’t need to be *that* exceptional to win a reasonably sized scholarship. Scholarships are awarded both by the universities themselves and by a host of unaffiliated public and private institutions.

Finding Merit-Based Scholarships

Because there are so many scholarships to apply for, it can be very tricky to sift through all the options to find what’s best for you.

There are dozens of websites that allow you to “search” for scholarships; most of them are aimed at US students, and the vast majority of scholarships listed will not be available to international students. Nevertheless, the best search engines are definitely worth using to find the ones that are - we recommend several below.

Finding the best options unquestionably requires creativity and many hours of research. For example, some of the biggest scholarships won by British students this year were awarded by schools like Reed College (Oregon), Colorado College and Connecticut College - places that you might not have heard of, but which are nevertheless excellent institutions (even if less well known in the UK than those listed above). Many such awards do not show up on searches but must be discovered on college/university websites.

NB In the US, “college” and “school” are used interchangeably with “university”; “college” always refers to higher education. A university is technically made up of more than one college (eg: it may have a College of Arts and Sciences plus a College of Engineering) or, confusingly, “school” (as in the University of Florida School of Engineering).

For useful websites to aid you in your quest, we recommend the following:

Search Engines

[IEFA](#) - Allows you to search by your home country and by the subject you're most interested in. This is the same search engine that you might have seen at [InternationalScholarships.com](#) (both are run by InternationalStudent). Has a large database but doesn't have everything.

[Scholarships.com](#) - This link takes you to their page for international students; loads of scholarships are easily found by category in the left menu. Their search engine is geared to US students, but might be useful for some basic information.

[IIE](#) - Less comprehensive but still turns up a lot of great opportunities and includes some needs-based aid. Also allows you to search by state, if you have particular locations in mind.

[EducationUSA](#) - Only the most recently posted/updated scholarship info, so not at all comprehensive. But it is useful, and you can subscribe to it as an RSS feed.

[CollegeBoard](#) - This is the most famous and popular resource on the web for all things to do with US unis, applications and funding. It's aimed very much at US students, but it does allow you to filter its massive database for more relevant results by clicking the "international" button under "Personal Information".

Other Resources

[Uni in the USA scholarships page](#) – lists some of the main scholarships available to international students.

[Fulbright](#) - provides a 'guide to funding a US university degree'.

Sports Scholarships

Sports scholarships work in a different way to other kinds of financial aid in the US, so we give them their own section. There are more detailed links and information on [this Fulbright page](#).

American universities are famously obsessed with sports and go to great lengths to recruit good players; offering serious financial aid is a part of this. This is true not just for American football and basketball, but for most sports that you've heard of.

Awards vary from a few thousand per year to a full ride. Importantly, these scholarships do not always go to World No. 1s or national champions – sometimes, having captained your school team or being a regular at county or even town level is enough to catch the eye of an eager admissions rep. The best players may find themselves recruited by US unis before they've even applied.

If you don't get headhunted, there's still a possibility of being granted a sports scholarship. You should bear in mind that athletic directors and coaches play a central role in award decision-making, so it is important to establish contact with these individuals early in your application process.

You can make a direct approach to coaches at individual colleges and universities. You will need to put a sport CV together, and the coach may ask for a video demonstrating your abilities. The whole recruitment process is time consuming, so start early. It's also strictly regulated by the NCAA (thanks to many law suits and plenty of corruption).

You could also consider using a US **sports scholarship agency** to facilitate things. They will of course charge a fee, but it may be worth it to help a talented student through the labyrinth of uni and scholarship options. [Uni in the USA](#) has short list of such agents under [Resources, References and Links](#) (none of whom has paid to be there - we have vetted them to the best of our ability).

If you are offered a scholarship, never go by a verbal agreement, or even by a letter from the coach. Details of the scholarship offer **must be written into a contract**. Also bear in mind that sports scholarships are always offered on a **yearly basis**, so you must renew them each year.

Sports scholars must still apply to universities and complete their studies as normal. You can't attend a university simply to do sports, and most of the top universities will require grades and test scores indicating you are up to their academic rigour.

Loans

The worst thing about funding your study abroad is that you can't get the nice, simple, reassuring student loans from DirectGov like all your friends going to uni in the UK.

The (government-run) UK loans company will not give loans to those going to university abroad. Neither are international students eligible for US federal or state government loans.

Or is this actually the best thing? If you're clever, you may be able to finance your amazing US experience through some combination of all the means mentioned above **and come out entirely debt-free!**

However, sometimes it may be necessary to resort to loans. To be clear: these are funds that have to be paid back at the end of your studies, **with interest**. Since you can't get government loans, you'll have to apply for loans from banks or other private companies.

If you plan to work and live in the US, remember that these loans do follow you forever and never go away (not even if you file for bankruptcy). On a brighter note, the administrators of the debt often try very hard to work with you and can sometimes work out pauses in your payments if you are unable to pay for a brief period.

Occasionally, universities themselves will also run loan schemes for students, though this is more common at the post-graduate level.

In both cases, few loans will have policies that are as beneficial to the student as the ones we're used to in the UK. Most will charge **higher interest rates**. For this reason, they should be a last resort.

US Private Bank Loans

For student loans from a US bank, you will almost always need a **US co-signer**. This can be a friend, relative or any other acquaintance as long as they a) have good credit and b) are either a US citizen or US permanent resident. They will have to pay back the loan if you default.

These loans vary in their flexibility - some require you to begin repayments while still studying (sometimes just the interest), while others allow you to begin repayments up to six months after graduating. Most will **not** wait for you to have a stable job to start repayments, as the British loans do. However, they generally do not require collateral.

The main way to apply for such loans is through the [International Student Loan Company](#).

As with scholarships, there are dozens of websites specialising in student loans for US universities - but almost all of them are aimed at US citizens and will tell you all about things like Federal loans and the FAFSA form. Ignore them. You are not eligible.

UK Loans

It's not unheard of for Brits to take out private loans in the UK to finance their studies. Unfortunately, you can't get student loans from UK banks, so you have to get a normal loan, same as you would for starting a new business or any other investment. These loans will not give you any advantages from being a student. **You will have to begin repayments immediately**, while you're still at university, meaning you, or someone willing to pay for you, must have a stable, regular income.

Employment

Because you'll be studying most of the time, you probably won't be able to have a full-time job while you're taking a bachelor's degree in America. And because you're international, you can't legally be employed in most jobs in the US while a student.

Still, part time employment can be a useful **supplement** to your finances. The capitalist US is, unsurprisingly, much more encouraging towards money-earning activities than the UK, and it's a lot more common for students to juggle work and study. Just don't plan to rely on a salary for everything.

On-campus work

With your student visa, and if you fill out the additional (but equally bureaucratic) forms for a **social security card**, you are typically allowed to work **on campus** while studying at a US university. Most universities set jobs aside for students in their libraries, administration offices and science labs, and there's often an employment office specially to help you get them. If you're keen to do this, you can ask them about it once you are accepted (before you even show up). Note that these jobs are almost always **part-time** - most universities will not let you work more than 20 hours per week during term time.

OPT and CPT

It is potentially possible to work off-campus as well, but this is a lot more complicated. You have to apply for something called **Optional Practical Training** (OPT) from the dreaded US Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS). Below is a summary of the OPT system. Official information is available [here](#).

- You can apply to USCIS for OPT at any point after your first year. You must do this through your university (normally the international students office).
- If granted permission, which is not guaranteed, you can take up to **12 months** of OPT.
- This 12-month period can be taken at any point during your studies or immediately after, and **it does not have to be taken all at once**.
- Your OPT allows you to take any form of paid employment, as long as it is related to your studies (in practice, this is a fairly broad definition due to the liberal arts curriculum - it includes most forms of employment).
- If you take OPT while school is in session, your employment has to be part time. If you take it in the holidays, it can be full time.
- You still apply to jobs as normal, and you are accepted and rejected as normal. The OPT is just the document that legally allows you to work.
- You should apply for the OPT at least **three months before** you plan to use it, ideally four or more. USCIS takes forever to process it.
- You can use the OPT immediately after you graduate - this is called **post-completion OPT** and you must apply for it within 60 days of graduating. If you get it, it extends your student visa until the end of the OPT work.

- If your main subject is engineering or something sciency or mathsy, you can apply for an additional 17 months of OPT, bringing the total to 29 months.

In another strange and disconcerting twist of US officialdom, there is also something called Curricular Practical Training (CPT). This is very similar to OPT, but with a few slight changes. The only official info we can find is [here](#), but there's a better summary on UC Berkeley's website [here](#). The gist is:

- CPT still allows you to work legally in any job that is related to your studies.
- There is **no time limit** on CPT - you can do as much as you want. However, if you do more than 12 months of full-time CPT, you probably won't be eligible for OPT too.
- You **cannot** do CPT after you graduate.
- It's much less hassle to apply for CPT - you still do it through your university, but it only takes days or weeks instead of months.
- Like OPT, you can only apply for CPT after you've finished one academic year.
- CPT often counts as course credit at your uni and can even be a requirement in some cases.

Additional Resources

As with everything to do with US unis, [Fulbright](#) has loads of great info on finances.

Comprehensive but selected list of the best resources we've found is on the [Resources, References and Links: Uni in the USA](#) page.

If you want to engage a one-on-one consultant to help you through the the uni and/or financial aid application process, go to [Uni in the USA's expert university consultants](#).