

The Stress-Free Guide To Studying In The States

A Step-By-Step Plan for International Students

Toni Summers Hargis

*The Stress-Free Guide to Studying in the States:
A Step-By-Step Plan for International Students*

by Toni Summers Hargis

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“A very thorough introduction for international students considering university study in the US, this book covers everything from vocabulary and abbreviations through campus life and academic culture. Definitely a must-read for parents and students unfamiliar with the application process in the US.”

***Amanda Eckler, Assistant Director for Programs, Yale University,
Office of International Students & Scholars (OISS)***

“For international students trying to decide which US university to choose, and then navigate the complexities of the application system, the comprehensive advice in this guide is a must-read.”

***Louise Tickle, Award-winning Education and Social Affairs
Journalist. <http://louisetickle.co.uk>. @louisetickle***

“The jargon, the cultural differences and the inside track on the application process are all explained in this guide for anyone thinking about studying in the US.”

***Sean Coughlan, BBC News education correspondent,
Education Journalist of the Year 2011, @seanjcoughlan***

“Wise advice demystifies the process, from first thoughts about an application to arrival and settling in, and makes this excellent book an essential ‘*must-buy*’ guide for applicants, parents and school Higher Education applications staff.”

***Peter J. McDonald, Director of University Entrance,
Magdalen College School, Oxford, England***

“Applying to university or college in the USA is a minefield for those studying outside the country. In this Guide however Toni Hargis has succeeded in ‘demystifying’ what is in essence a very complex process in a thoroughly clear and comprehensive manner.”

***Julia Douglas, Head of University US Applications,
Sevenoaks School, Kent, England.***

*Dedicated to my own hard-working students,
Cydney, Aidan and Cal*

x

About the Author



Toni Summers Hargis is a Brit who has lived in the USA since 1990. She is mother to three YankeeBrits, all of whom are plowing their way through the American education system. Educated at Bristol University, England, and Loyola University, Chicago, Toni has first-hand knowledge of student life on both sides of the Pond and is so far surviving her experience as a parent in the US college application process.

Toni is the author of *Rules, Britannia; An Insider's Guide to Life in the United Kingdom*, (St. Martin's Press) the popular book for Americans visiting the United Kingdom. She also blogs as Expat Mum (<http://expatmum.blogspot.com>) is a featured columnist for *Expat Focus* (www.expاتفocus.com), and for BBC America's *Mind the Gap* (www.bbcamerica.com/mind-the-gap), and has appeared on TV and radio to discuss UK/ US matters. In her spare time Toni runs *Caring Kid Connections* (www.caringkidconnections.com), a charity she founded in 2009 to help school children in Ghana.

Visit *The Stress-Free Guide To Studying in the States* web site at www.stress-freestudyinthestates.com

Acknowledgments

Although I say throughout that this book brings together information from all over the Internet, it also contains invaluable advice from professionals in the field and from individuals who have gone through the process. My sincere thanks to the following people who generously gave me the benefit of their expertise and experiences.

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A Note from the Author

Applying to any college is exciting – applying to study in a foreign country can be daunting, because of the unfamiliar application process, the need to obtain a student visa and the whole idea of operating in a different culture.

There are many good books, web sites and consultants to help potential American undergraduate students submit the best application they can, craft winning personal essays, and obtain financial aid or athletic scholarships. In addition, there are consultants and numerous US government web sites giving you the rules and regulations relating to Non-Immigrant visas. The problem is, while the information is all out there on the web, it's often difficult to find or make sense of, and if you don't have the extra money to pay a consultant, you can be put off before you've started.

Help is here!

The Stress-Free Guide to Studying in the States brings all this information together for the first time, at an affordable price. As an international applicant to an American undergraduate program, *The Stress-Free Guide to Studying in the States* gives you a comprehensive, step-by-step plan for the entire process so you can decide how much you want to tackle yourself, and how much help you may need to enlist. Let me stress that negotiating the US college application process, and obtaining the necessary visa, is entirely manageable on your own and this book will help you succeed without paying big bucks to a consultant or agency. URL addresses for all relevant web sites are provided so the information you access is always up-to-date.

To begin, I would advise you to read through this book before making any decisions or taking any action. It is important to understand the big picture of the application and visa process, in order to manage your time and avoid unnecessary panic and stress.

Keep calm and remember to breathe!

Toni Summers Hargis
www.stress-freestudyinthestates.com

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Introduction

“It was a complete and utter nightmare.”

“I hadn’t a clue where to start.”

“I didn’t have the time to do the research.”

“The information is all over the place.”

These are just a few of the comments I received from non-Americans while writing this book. As a foreigner myself I found the whole process overwhelming when my daughter began her college applications, and I was very glad she knew what she was doing.

As many American high school students will tell you, the college application process can be a nightmare. Application forms are long and comprehensive, often taking days, if not weeks, to complete. US colleges take a much more holistic approach to deciding which students they make offers to, and many foreign applicants are not used to writing so much about themselves. Gone are the days when applicants simply reported their academic results and waited – now you’re expected to talk about your extra-curricular activities, demonstrate leadership or otherwise convince the college Admissions department *you* will be an asset to their student body.

Deadlines are not all the same, nor do you necessarily hear from colleges at the same time. There is no central application body for colleges so students are required to keep track of multiple applications on their own. It’s not surprising students from outside the USA might be overwhelmed and confused by the college application process.

Once you have successfully tackled the college application section of the nightmare, you’re faced with the visa application process. This

has the potential to be even more of a challenge depending on your circumstances and country of origin.

Fortunately the US government and its consular offices around the world are easier to work with now the information is available on the Internet – you can easily learn what’s required and track your applications online. Before the Internet you had to sit back and wait for your envelope to be returned to you because you’d omitted one vital document. Now most of the application is completed online it’s far less likely documents and forms will be lost in the process, and you have a better idea of how long everything will take.

The Institute of International Education states in its November 2012, *Open Doors* report – www.iie.org, that the number of international students in the USA in the 2011/ 12 academic year grew to a record 764,495; an increase of over 31% since 2001/ 2002, and a 5.7% increase on the previous year. Many of these students came from countries whose education system and culture is very different to that of America. The top three countries with the most students studying in the USA are China, India and South Korea.

For international students thinking about attending an undergraduate college in the USA, *The Stress-Free Guide to Studying in the States* helps meet the challenges of this new adventure. It gives practical advice, information and resources for all aspects of the college experience, imparts cultural information in an engaging yet useful way, and lessens some of the tension surrounding this huge step.

The Stress-Free Guide to Studying in the States covers not only the application process, but also the pre-application thinking process. In addition, it gives pointers for helping you find your feet when you first arrive at college, examples and nuggets of advice from real people who have survived the ordeal or are professionals in the field. Deciding you might like to attend college in the USA is an exciting thought, but the practicalities can be off-putting. With this book,

good organizational skills, sufficient time and a lot of deep breathing, you will be able to manage the application process perfectly well and cope with a strange college environment to boot.

What makes this book so relevant for international students?

It's written by an expat Brit who knows what it's like to come to the States as a 'foreigner'. Not only have I studied at both a British and an American university, and currently have children in the American education system, I have personally navigated the US immigration system and survived the agony that can be the 'college app' process.

Toni Summers Hargis
www.stress-freestudyinthestates.com

The Thought Process

While there's a lot to think about when looking at colleges in the USA, it helps to think clearly and chronologically. You can't do everything at the same time and there is a definite order to your questions and action points.

Is a US college feasible?

Chapter 1 – Thinking of Studying in the USA?

**Familiarize yourself with the US
college system and vocabulary**

Chapter 2 – An Overview of US Colleges

Narrow down your choices

*Chapter 3 – What to Consider When
Choosing a College*

Can't afford the fees?

Chapter 4 – Funding your College Degree

How to apply

Chapter 5 – The College Application Process

ACT or SAT? Understanding the ACT and SAT tests

Chapter 6 – Standardized Tests

Hearing back from colleges
Chapter 7 – Offers and Rejections

Visa process and other important steps
*Chapter 8 – Before You Go – Visa Application
and Other Important Steps*

What to do when you get to college?
Chapter 9 – On Arrival

Finding your feet at college
Chapter 10 – US College Life – The Lowdown

Learning the American Way
*Chapter 11 – The American Language
and Customs*

What parents need to know
Chapter 12 – Notes for Parents



Chapter One

Thinking of Studying in the USA?

If you've picked up or downloaded this book, you're obviously giving some thought to attending college in the USA. Great – keep going. More and more foreign students are doing it, and American colleges are actively encouraging it, so it's not a pipe dream. Even if your high school has no experience in sending students to college in the USA, this shouldn't be a barrier to you.

Before getting too far into the details think carefully about the realities. There is a lot involved in getting to a college in the USA and it can seem perplexing and daunting at first. Here are a few points to consider (details on all points follow in subsequent chapters).

Using a consultant

Many international students hoping to attend a US college turn to consultants and experts to help them or to manage the entire process. These companies will help you narrow down the colleges to look at, assist with applications and manage the visa application

process, but some would-be applicants find they cannot afford these additional fees. As I explained in the introduction, there is nothing secret about US college or visa applications, and (especially with the help of this book) most families will be able to handle the process as long as they allow sufficient time. Before making a decision about hiring a consultant, read this book to get a realistic idea of the time and effort you'll need to apply to colleges in the USA.

If you do engage a consultant, check the small print on the web site or the printed materials before signing up. While they may advertise a specific sum for their services, there can be many additional costs along the way. It is important you (or your parents) know the full financial commitment before you begin working with them. Don't be embarrassed to ask about additional costs that might arise. Running out of funds halfway through the process may mean you suddenly have to manage a process you know nothing about.

 **WARNING**

If your consultant insists on only looking at a few colleges without encouraging you to look at others, ask whether he or she is working in collaboration with these colleges. Although some consultants will point to specific colleges because they believe they are the best fit for you, some are being paid a commission by individual colleges to attract international students. It is in your best interests to know if your consultant is being paid a commission in this way.

Hamilton Gregg – www.hamiltongregg.com, an international Education Consultant based in China, advises:

'When students are looking for someone to help they should consider the following: Does the agent have the student's best interest in mind? This is very hard to determine as one never knows or can tell.'

THINKING OF STUDYING IN THE USA?

- ★ *Families should run, run quickly, from anyone who ‘guarantees’ admission to a school or set of schools. There are no guarantees, ever.*
- ★ *What is the background of the consultant/ agent? Are they educators and do they know anything about the schools, your major or what the school is like?*
- ★ *Are they cutting corners – falsifying documents to help the student gain entry? This is tricky as foreign education systems are often not in line with US college expectations (i.e. the academic information doesn’t always fit neatly into a US college application form).*
- ★ *Is the consultant a true professional in the field? What are their qualifications? For example, the Independent Educational Consultants Association – www.iecaonline.com* is very stringent in their acceptance of consultants, requiring an M.Ed., proven success in admissions work, letters of recommendation from families and university admission staff who know the individual, a list of schools the consultant has visited personally, and a guarantee that members will follow strict ethical guidelines such as not accepting commissions from schools, not writing essays or falsifying documents etc. Many Agents cannot ever qualify.’*

You can find reliable assistance and advice from the Education USA advising network, which is supported by the US Department of State’s Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs (ECA). It provides advice and support to students in 170 countries around the world who are interested in studying in the USA. Visit the web site for information and to help find an advisor near you – <https://www.educationusa.info/about.php>.

* Please note – all web sites cited in this book, with particular reference to government web sites, are prone to changes in design and format which may affect their URLs

In addition, NACAC (National Association for College Admission Counseling) is closely monitoring international education consultants. For a deeper understanding of the issues, visit their website – <http://www.nacacnet.org/studentinfo/InternationalStudentResources/Documents/InternationalRecruiting.pdf>.

Applications

Timeline

Like most professionals in the field, Matthew Beatty, Director of International Admissions at Indiana University, stresses the importance of starting early when applying to US colleges. ThinkEducationUSA – www.thinkeducationusa.com, recommends you allow at least a year between your first college search and the date you would like to start classes at an American college:

- ★ The first six months should be a time to research all that will be required of you. This book will cut down on some of the research time by making the information available in one place, but exploring your options and examining your favorite colleges closely can still be a time-consuming activity. If you are looking for financial aid this will add additional time to the research stage.

- ★ Twelve months before your intended start date, ThinkEducationUSA recommends you register for any required standardized tests such as the ACT, the SATs or TOEFL. The results of these tests take several weeks to come back and you may not be able to apply to colleges without this information. (See *Chapter Five – The College Application Process* and *Chapter Six – Standardized Tests (ACT and SAT)*.)

- ★ Once you have the scores from your standardized tests (above), you must allow time for those scores to be officially reported to the colleges you are applying to.

- ★ Your applications should begin seriously in the fall/ autumn **before** you wish to attend college (assuming you're looking to begin in the fall/ autumn). In most cases you won't receive a college offer till March-May of the following year, and you cannot begin your visa application without a firm offer and acceptance.
- ★ The visa application can take anything from a few weeks to several months.
- ★ The College Board (which administers the SAT test) has a suggested two-year to-do list to prepare for applying to American colleges – <http://international.collegeboard.org/study-in-the-US/resources>

There is no overarching organization through which you apply to American colleges. Many now use the Common App form (see *Chapter 5 – The College Application Process*), which saves duplication of material but does not administer individual college applications, and each individual college will request supplementary material. However you apply, many colleges have different deadlines, application requirements and academic standards – some take extra curricular activities into account while others rely solely on academic scores. Applying to college can be a minefield even for American students, and although it is extremely manageable, it will take commitment and effort.

Note for Americans living abroad

If you are a US citizen living outside the USA and plan to return to the US to attend college, you can apply as a regular undergraduate applicant. If you have not attended an American school you may be required to have your high school records and exam results evaluated by an official third party evaluator. (See *Chapter Five – The College Application Process* for details.)

As an American, you are eligible for Federal Aid. The government's Office of Student Aid provides grants, loans and work-study

funds for college students under FAFSA (Free Application for Federal Student Aid). The web site – www.fafsa.com, gives detailed information about FAFSA, can estimate your eligibility for federal aid and provides free assistance regarding the form and the aid program itself.

The new government web site – <http://studentaid.gov>, brings lots of financial advice for students to one portal.

Residency

The term *residency* usually refers to an individual's residency in a particular state in the USA, and is used by colleges to establish whether a student will pay *in-state* or *out-of-state* fees. State residency requirements differ from state to state, but many require you to 'maintain a domicile' in that state for at least 12 months prior to the last day for late registration. In other words your 'constant presence' in that state is required, meaning you cannot leave to go home during that time. Residency cases are decided on an individual basis. Details can be found at – www.collegeboard.com/testing/international/state, together with a list of links to individual states.

High school relationship

Your application to a US college may create extra work for your high school, especially if you are the first student ever to do this. As well as having to send your academic information to each college, many colleges also require two or more letters of recommendation from teachers, and a few request even more information.

According to Clare Brown, Head of Careers at Caterham School in England, non-US teachers, "... are not very good at waxing lyrical about (their) students other than in academic terms; waxing holistically is a new thing."

US colleges expect teachers to write about a student's personality as well as academic performance, so you may need to invest some time in getting the best recommendation letters possible. Tanya Rehki is an Indian student currently studying on the East coast, who remembers, "Our high-school teachers did write some recommendation letters, but our college counselor single handedly had to correct the English of every recommendation letter." If English isn't the first language of your letter writer, try to have someone check the letters before submission. Most college Admissions staff will not hold it against you as long as the meaning of the letter is clear.

Applying to a US college will require assistance from your high school staff so if you're not on good terms with the administration and teachers, you might want to start mending some fences!

Visiting the college

Many American students visit the colleges they're interested in before applying or before accepting an offer. If you're lucky, you'll be able to visit colleges before you decide to apply or accept. If you can't visit, most colleges have brochures for prospective students making every place look like something out of a Hollywood movie.

Consider how you would approach the application process – are you only thinking about one particular college or are you open to anything and everything? The former won't be too much of a challenge, while the latter will take significant time and energy.

Costs

If, like many students, your parents will be paying your fees, discuss the US possibility with them as soon as you can to avoid disappointment. You might not think a few thousand pounds/dollars/ euros is much in the grand scheme of things, but if your

parents are already stretching themselves it could be the deal-breaker. Be sure to discuss realistic figures with them and always include the hidden costs listed below.

Although the financial paperwork required by colleges and the US government only requires proof of funds to cover your first year, the Consular officer in charge of your visa application will often look at the bigger picture and ask not only how you plan to pay for all four years, but also how this will affect the rest of your family.

Fees and financial aid

Although some American college fees are on a par with foreign college rates, many are higher. Unless you have been scouted and offered a scholarship already (which sometimes happens), you should consider how your fees will be paid. There are some need-based and merit-based scholarships* open to foreign students, but this usually depends on the individual college. There is no 'official' national organization to match students with available scholarships, although there are a few private companies who can help for a fee, and a number of web sites that help with the search. When looking at the dollar figures on college web sites, make sure you understand what the amount includes. Some colleges only state tuition fees and others include the cost of housing in the figure. In addition, some colleges charge a 'flat fee', which applies almost regardless of how many classes you take per semester; others charge by the class-load, although international students should remember they are legally required to take a full course-load.

Typically, a college application is based on academics and high school activities – ability to pay doesn't affect your application (called *need-blind*)

* **Need-based scholarships** are assessed based on family income and the applicant's ability to pay tuition, room and board. Merit-based scholarships are awarded for stellar achievements in areas such as academics, leadership and extra-curricular activities – for these scholarships ability to pay isn't a factor.

applications). This means that while your ability to pay isn't considered, you may receive an offer but no financial aid. There is no US Federal (government) Aid for foreign students, and financial scholarships are thin on the ground compared to those for American/ resident students. Although an F1 visa allows you to work on campus for up to 20 hours per week, foreign students have to prove they can pay a year's fees before being granted a visa. (See *Chapter Four – Funding your College Degree* for details on financial aid.)

Hidden costs

There are a number of costs in the US college application process you might not be aware of:

- ★ **Applications.** Most colleges charge a fee of between \$30 and \$100 to submit an application. As many students apply to five or more colleges, this adds up very quickly. Many colleges waive this application fee for students of limited means, so check with the specific college for more details under the 'Admissions' tab on the web site. There are also a few colleges that waive the fee if you apply online – <http://www.porcelina.net/freeapps/about.html> keeps an updated list of the colleges with free applications. This criterion alone shouldn't decide your choice of college options, but it's worth knowing.
- ★ **Standardized tests.** The majority of American colleges require test scores from either the ACT or the SAT test. There are fees to sit these tests and additional fees if you're having the scores sent to more than four colleges. If you require your scores to be sent to colleges as soon as possible, rather than within the usual time frame, (called *rush reporting*), this has a higher fee. If you change the place or date of your test you will be charged an additional fee, and there is always a processing fee for international test sitters. Fee waivers exist but these are only available to US citizens. If your first language is not English, you will be required to take an official

language proficiency test for which there is a fee. (See *Chapter Five – The College Application Process* and *Chapter Six – Standardized Tests (ACT and SAT)*.)



WARNING

There are hundreds of colleges that don't require ACT or SAT scores from applicants. However, because international students don't have the same academic records as American high school students, these tests scores are an important indicator when considering foreign applications, therefore many colleges require international applicants to take the tests. In some instances an IB or other high school test result may be sufficient, but you should read individual college web site information carefully.

- ★ **Translation costs.** If your high school information is not in English you must have it translated through a certified transcript translation company, often specified by your college of choice. Some of these companies can give you a price quote very quickly based on the word count of your documents. (See *Chapter Five – The College Application Process* for further details.)

- ★ **Credential/ transcript evaluation.** While some American colleges are very familiar with foreign academic qualifications and can assess your application themselves, others employ the services of *credential evaluation* or *transcript evaluation* companies to evaluate your high school scores against the American equivalent. (Note *transcript evaluation* and *translation* are **not** the same thing.) Naturally this service is an added, and considerable, expense so find out from each college whether it is necessary. (For more notes on credential evaluations, see *Chapter Five – The College Application Process*.)

- ★ **Duration.** The majority of undergraduate degree programs in the USA last four years, which adds significantly to the overall cost. You can finish early by taking classes during the summer or loading up your courses, but this may not reduce the cost and you'll still need somewhere to live. If you're only half sold on the idea of spending much more time in higher education, four years as a student is definitely something to think about.

If you're looking for an international experience but not for four years, consider a Study Abroad program from a college in your own country, or an exchange program – <http://www.isep.org> has a list of US colleges in its directory. WISE (Worldwide International Student Exchange) has comprehensive options for studying abroad.

- ★ **Non-Immigrant visa.** Once you have accepted the offer of a place you will be applying for a student visa, which costs a substantial amount of money. (See *Chapter Eight – Before You Go – Visa Application and Other Important Steps*, for details of the steps involved for the visa application process, and the US government web site – <http://www.uscis.gov> for current fees. (Also see *Chapter Five – The College Application Process*.)
- ★ **Health insurance.** As a student attending an American college, and as a Non-Immigrant visa holder, you will be required to take out health insurance coverage. Annual costs vary depending on the type of coverage you choose, but it is a large expense if you are not currently paying for health care. (See *Chapter Eight – Before You Go – Visa Application and Other Important Steps* for details on health care and coverage.)

Academic considerations

Undergraduate colleges in the USA publish their minimum academic criteria for admission (Grade Point Average and standardized test

scores), and all applicants should ensure they meet or exceed these requirements. The general Admissions information will include detailed US high school credit requirements, which will be both confusing and inapplicable to foreign applicants. If there is a specific link for International Applicants on a college Admissions web page, head straight to that link. The 'International' tab will clearly state what is required of you and will give minimum requirements for foreign qualifications:

- ★ The University of Cambridge International Examinations board (CIE) has a list of worldwide universities that recognize their exams, although it is not exhaustive – <http://recognition.cie.org.uk>. Similarly, the International Baccalaureate web site shows which US colleges will accept predicted grades, which colleges will give credit for IB results and what the minimum score requirements are – www.ib.org.
- ★ While many colleges will look at your predicted grades closely, most will also ask for ACT or SAT scores. Visit individual college web sites for further information, as acceptance policies differ. (See *Chapter Six – Standardized Tests (ACT and SAT)* for details on both tests.)

✓ **TIP**

There is a practice in some schools to predict lower grades than are expected as a way of keeping students motivated. According to Julia Douglas, Head of US University Applications, Sevenoaks School, England, "If you're marked down in your mocks or midterms, don't panic. Have your school send a letter explaining the situation."

Course work

The American system leaves you very much in charge of your own syllabus and course load. In some education systems, such as

that in England, you may decide to study English or History and much of the course is predetermined and restricted to that subject. An American college will require you to put your own schedule together and you are expected to continue studying subjects you have neither interest in, nor talent for. For some students this means picking up a Science or a Language class after a gap of more than three years. (Don't worry, colleges have introductory classes which start from scratch.)

In addition to having to take a Math and Science class when all you want to study is Shakespeare, you will also have to figure out how many of these courses are necessary before you're off the hook, how to get yourself registered, and whether or not you're fulfilling the minimum number of credit hours for your semester. *And* you'll have to do this every semester. You don't just sign up for a four-year degree course and turn up on day one. (See *Chapter Eight – Before You Go – Visa Application and Other Important Steps* for further details.)

On the other hand, the breadth of subjects required by most American colleges is the attraction for some students coming to the USA to study. If you aren't ready to start narrowing down your academic options, or simply love to study in a range of areas, the American college system would be very suitable for you.

Sounds complicated, and it is if you've never experienced this type of system before. Fortunately, most colleges hold separate and thorough orientations for foreign students, and there is a team of staff to support foreign students, as well as academic advisors for all students. (See *Chapter Eight – Before You Go – Visa Application and Other Important Steps* for more information.)

The grading system

Although American college students have final and midterm exams, their course work is also monitored and graded throughout the

academic year, as is participation and attendance at many colleges. These grades make up their GPA (Grade Point Average), so if you don't apply yourself at all times, you don't do very well.

The teaching style

US colleges typically do not teach via lectures supplemented by smaller group sessions (tutorials). For most classes, students attend lectures and are given homework assignments. If the class is small enough discussion is encouraged and you will have an opportunity to clear up confusion and ask questions. In large classes there are often hundreds of students in the room or lecture theater, and if you don't understand something it is your responsibility to seek help either from the professor or the TA (teaching assistant).

Academic pressure

If you haven't yet finished high school think carefully about when you would apply to a US college. The application process can be stressful and time-consuming and might be too much to handle along with your final exams. As most US colleges require ACT or SAT scores, this means you have to take them before you can apply anywhere, which in turn means taking them when you are also taking high school exams. As these tests are very different from what you may be used to, they might require months of extra study and perhaps tuition before you are ready to take them. Some foreign students take a year off after high school and apply to US colleges then.

Geographic and cultural considerations

Although you'll probably have a ball while at college in the USA, you will also be a long way from home, family, friends and all that is familiar. As any expat will tell you, this can take its toll.

Distance

American students will probably leave campus for Thanksgiving (in November) and spring break for example, but if you have already flown home for the winter break and have another flight to pay for at each end of the summer, your travel coffers may be empty. Although this doesn't seem to put many international students off, it is definitely something to bear in mind, especially if you're a real home bird.

Language

Even if you speak English, American English has its own peculiarities and vocabulary. Although writing papers and taking tests won't be quite the challenge it is for non-English-speaking students, there is definitely a learning curve ahead. Foreign speaking students need to be able to take classes and write papers in American English. Many American universities require non-English speakers to pass an English language test for admission, but they have large departments devoted solely to supporting their international student body, including language needs.

Culture

Cultural differences are a major factor for foreign students. Again, even if you think you come from a similar background (i.e. the UK), think again. Student life in the USA is very different – the legal drinking age in the country is 21, so there are no student bars on campus. Local bars will *card* you (i.e. ask for proof of age) and refuse under-21s alcohol. Being caught drinking underage anywhere could result in disciplinary and/ or legal action, which in turn could result in the loss of your student visa and deportation at your own expense. According to Rendy Schrader, Director, International Students and Scholars Advising, Indiana University, “British and Canadian students often experience more culture shock because they did not anticipate having any problems at all.”

If nothing in this chapter has put you off, you're now ready for the following chapters, which deal with the above topics in more detail.