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ABSTRACT

Aspects of American education that have particular importance to student exchange programs are discussed in order to assist non-Americans. In addition to philosophical assumptions underlying American education, attention is directed to organization and control, different kinds of institutions and programs, methods of measuring student performance, and quality control mechanisms. Specific topics include: college administration and external and internal controls of higher education institutions, admissions, accreditation, external standardized examinations, credit by examination, classroom examinations, grading, student retention, and costs and financial aid. The following types of schools are covered: elementary and high schools, two-year colleges, four-year liberal arts colleges, other four-year colleges, universities, and other institutions. Programs at the following levels are considered: high school diploma, associate degree, bachelor's degree, master's degree, doctor of philosophy degree, professional degrees, special degrees related to the medical field, non-degree-seeking students, and adult and continuing education. Included are a secondary school record transcript, a glossary, and a diagram illustrating the structure of United States education. (SW)

# DIVERSITY, ACCESSIBILITY, AND QUALITY

## *A Brief Introduction to American Education for Non-Americans*

CLIFF SJOGREN

*Director of Admissions*
*The University of Michigan*

College Entrance Examination Board
*New York, 1986*

The College Board is a nonprofit, membership organization that provides tests and other educational services for students, schools, and colleges. The membership is composed of more than 2,500 schools, school systems, colleges, and education associations. Representatives of the members serve on the Board of Trustees and advisory councils that consider the programs of the College Board and participate in the determination of its policies and activities



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# PREFACE

As explained in the Introduction by Cliff Sjogren, this book is an updated and revised version of the original work of the same title published in 1977 by the College Board. That version was developed to assist in bilateral discussions on the educational systems in the United States and the Federal Republic of Germany, and the purpose of these discussions was to determine, where possible, the comparability of degrees, courses, and diplomas between the two countries. The project was developed in the 1970s by the College Board in cooperation with the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs (CU) of the United States Department of State, which also funded the project. The activities at that time were coodinated by Sanford C. Jameson, Office of International Education of the College Board, and Richard Strauss, Director of the Office of Western European Programs of CU. The Bureau is now part of the United States Information Agency (USIA).

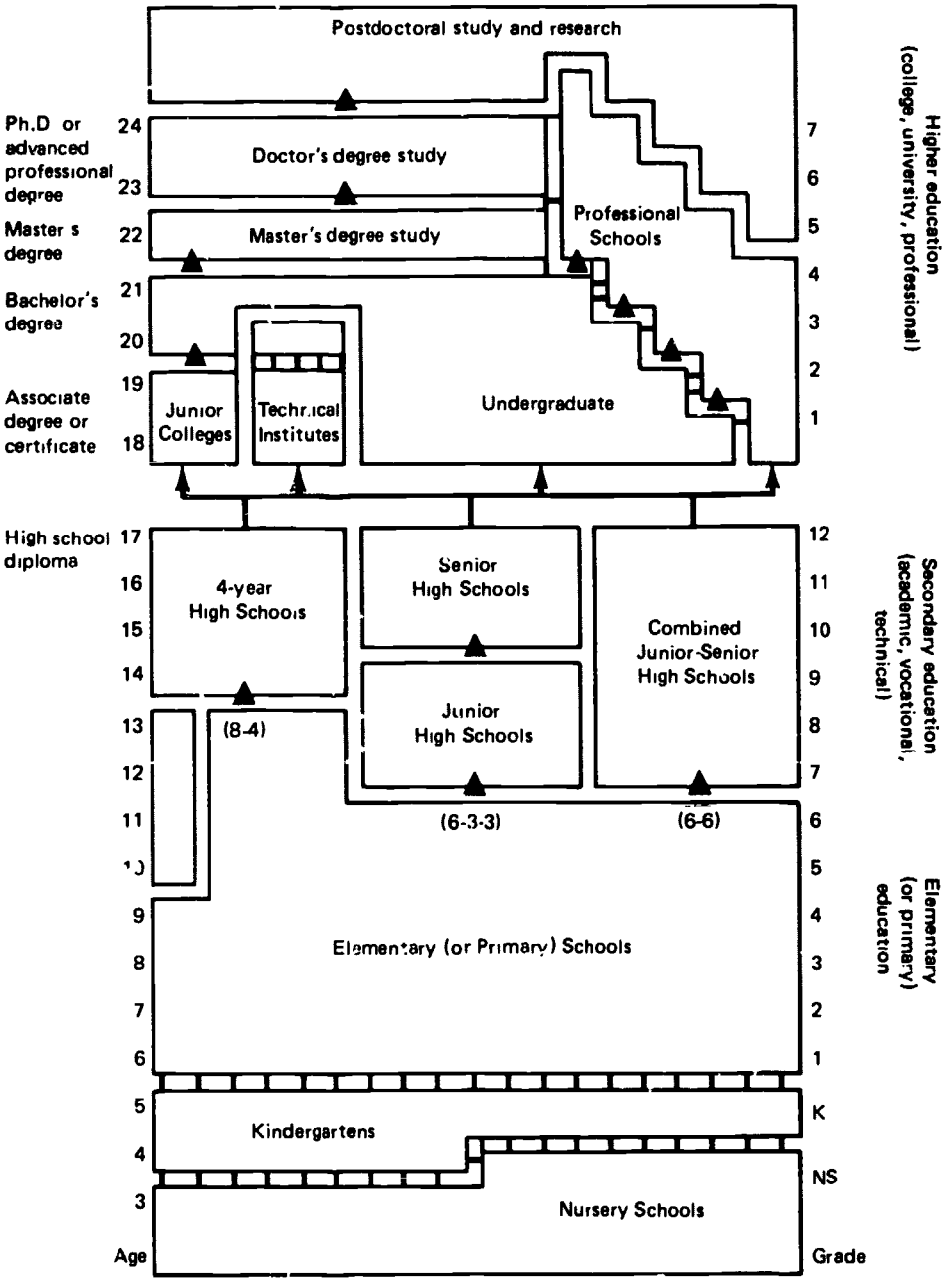
It was decided in 1985 to publish a more up-to-date version, under the auspices of the College Board Advisory Committee on International Education (ACIE), because it is believed that this brief description of selected characteristics of American education will continue to be useful in similar discussions with other countries and will provide useful insights into the system for educators, government officials, and others abroad who are concerned with this subject.

We are once more greatly indebted to Cliff Sjogren, Director of Admissions of The University of Michigan, who undertook the work of updating his original 1977 version of the book. Seamus P. Malin, Assistant Dean of Admissions and Financial Aid at Harvard-Radcliffe Colleges, who has served as chairman of ACIE, also deserves our special thanks, as well as Pat Wyatt, editor at the College Board, for the valuable advice and significant editorial assistance they provided.

The College Board is pleased to offer this book once more and trusts that it will continue to be of assistance to non-Americans interested not only in the essence of the educational system in the United States but also in programs of student exchange.

Sanford C. Jameson
Office of International Education
The College Board

# The Structure of Education in the United States




From U.S. Office of Education, Digest of Educational Statistics, 1972 (OE 73-19104) Washington, D.C.. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, p. 33.

# 1.
# INTRODUCTION

The intention of this book is to describe briefly for non-Americans some selected characteristics of the American education plan. We should like to point out that for the purposes of this book, the terms America or American used here refer only to the United States of America. This is a revised and updated report of the original work *Diversity, Accessibility, and Quality: A Brief Introduction to American Education for Non-Americans*, written in 1977 and published by the College Board. The earlier publication was written as a background paper for the German-American Educational Equivalency Project, a cooperative effort between educators of the Federal Republic of Germany and the United States, to help clarify for each other certain aspects of their respective educational plans.

This book examines those aspects of American education that have particular importance in programs of student exchange but are frequently misunderstood by non-Americans. Included are brief descriptions of the philosophical assumptions underlying American education, its organization and control, descriptions of different kinds of institutions and the programs they offer, methods of measuring student achievements, and quality-control mechanisms.

The extraordinary diversity and vitality of American education must be appreciated before attempting to understand it. Issues are continually debated, and educational change occurs frequently. Readers should recognize, therefore, that this introduction must be considered only as a point of departure for further discussion and reading. (Editor's note: Because of the decentralized nature of American education at all levels, it is referred to here as a plan, rather than the more commonly used term, system).

Education in the United States can be characterized as diverse, comprehensive, reasonably democratic, and complex. Its diversity is in large measure owing to the difference in the geography of the country and the vastness of its size, and to the ethnic heritage brought to its shores by wave upon wave of immigrants. The educational interests of students on the Pacific coast may be significantly different from those of students 3,000 miles away on the

Atlantic coast. And the interests of students in the heartland of the nation may be different from those of students on both coasts. Thus, the legislative patterns of state and local jurisdiction of education, and an administrative tradition of flexible educational structures, combine to allow institutions to be responsive to local needs as well as to cultural and ethnic values and aspirations.

There is ease of access to most educational institutions in the United States, and adjustments are made in order to accommodate those who may have lacked educational direction or motivation in the earlier years of their lives. American education assumes that its participants will utilize supportive assistance, such as counseling and guidance services, yet at the same time exercise their own self-direction in such areas as career- and academic-program choices. The plan provides for lateral movement, discourages "dropouts," approves of "stopouts," or temporary "leave-takers," and is firmly committed to continuing and lifelong education. Degree credits may be obtained through on-campus study, foreign study, external examinations, and various programs of independent study, including courses offered "on the job." Many people take advantage of the educational opportunities offered them. The United States Office of Education reports that nearly one in three Americans are either students, teachers, or educational administrators. More than 60 million students are enrolled in the nation's elementary, secondary, and postsecondary institutions.

According to the American Council on Education, an umbrella organization for a number of higher-education professional associations, there are more than 4,000 postsecondary institutions in the United States that are either accredited by some recognized accrediting agency or are candidates for accredition (see section on Accredition, page 24). These institutions include traditional colleges and universities, most of which are accredited by regional associations, trade and technical schools, bible and business colleges, and other specialized institutions.

Approximately 1,000 recognized institutions, most of which are called community colleges, offer two-year degrees, many of which can be applied to a four-year bachelor's degree program at a university. About 750 additional institutions offer programs up to four-year or five-year bachelor's degrees. More than 500 institutions support master's degree programs, and over 300 offer doctorate programs.

While slightly more than one-half of all institutions in the United States are privately controlled, or independent, the overwhelming majority of students attend public institutions.

Access to higher education for all Americans, regardless of their particular circumstance in life, continues to improve, as a combination of federal government policies and an attentive national conscience creates an environment that encourages expanded educational opportunities.

The structure of American education seems well suited to a vast and pluralistic nation. Out of its experience, purposes and goals have emerged that have been viewed by the eminent educational historian R. Freeman Butts in terms of a new quadrivium: academic discipline, social efficiency, individual development, and vocational competence, and a new trivium of freedom, equality, and justice.[1] Tensions sometimes exist because of the relative priority given to each of these goals, but, for the most part, the tension has been creative and constructive. The structure of education in the United States has managed to provide relevant learning experiences for the vast majority of Americans, and at the same time has created an environment that allows considerable numbers of intellectually gifted students to emerge and gain international prominence among the world's scientific, economic, social, and political leaders.

[1]R. Freeman Butts, "The Search for Purpose in American Education." *The College Board Review*, No. 98, Winter 1975-76, p. 3.

# 2.
# THE ORGANIZATION AND CONTROL OF EDUCATION

## 2.1 PRIMARY AND SECONDARY EDUCATION

The responsibility for providing public education at the primary, secondary, and postsecondary levels in the United States lies with the individual states. Historically, however, this responsibility has been delegated to local school-district jurisdictions for schools at the primary and secondary levels. These local districts support their schools and pay their teachers through local taxation which is supplemented by considerable state aid along with limited assistance, usually for specific purposes from the federal government.

School districts are of various sizes. Some are very small and include only one or just a few townships. Others are made up of entire counties, and some are even larger. Some large cities have decentralized their systems by dividing them into two or more semi-autonomous school districts. The number of districts varies state by state, from a single district in Hawaii to more than 1,200 in Nebraska. Coordination among school districts is maintained through accreditation mandates (see page 24), conditions of state and federal funding, and the common need to prepare students for higher education and employment.

## 2.2 HIGHER EDUCATION

### 2.2.1 External Controls of Institutions of Higher Education

Institutions of higher education, both public and private, receive their authority to function and to grant degrees from the

state in which they are located. This authority is given either in the state constitution or, more often, by an act of the state legislature. The federal government exercises no direct control over the establishment of institutions or over the standards they maintain, except in the case of those located in regions under immediate federal jurisdiction or those concerned with the preparation of career officers for the armed forces. In specific areas, such as enforcement programs for the education of minorities and handicapped students, the federal government's influence can be strong.

Nearly all institutions receive some financial support from both the state and the federal government, although public institutions generally receive a substantially higher percentage of their operating expenses from public funds. Other sources of income for both public and private institutions are tuition and fees, endowments, and contributions from philanthropic foundations and private individuals. There is, however, no official or implied distinction in the quality of education provided by public and private institutions.

### 2.2.2 Internal Control and Administration of Institutions of Higher Education

The principal internal policy and financial decisions affecting colleges and universities in the United States are made by their boards of trustees (sometimes called boards of regents or, less frequently, boards of directors). The procedure for selecting these board members is, in most instances, stated in the institution's founding charter, and depending on the institution, the members will serve either specific, limited terms, or they may be appointed for life. Public institutions may have trustees who are elected or who have been appointed by the governor of the state; private institutions, either with or without religious affiliation, usually have board members who directly represent the institution's founding body. In recent years many boards of trustees, both private and public, have attempted to build into their membership a wide representation of the diverse elements that make up the institution's academic and social environment.

The board of trustees usually delegates the day-to-day administration of the institution to a president or chancellor of the institution. The president, in turn, is usually assisted by one or more vice presidents. College and university presidents have had a significant impact on the development of higher education in the United States. Some of the larger universities delegate all strictly educational activities to a provost or an academic vice president; in smaller institutions the officer in charge of academic affairs is usually called the dean. Other administrative officers include the

registrar, who is in charge of keeping official student records; the director of admissions, who administers student recruitment programs and the admission of students; the business officer, who is concerned with the overall financial condition of the institution; the vice president for student affairs, who coordinates nonclassroom activities on campus; the director of development, who is responsible for fund raising and public relations; and a director of financial aid, who administers institutional and government student grants and loans, some on-campus employment, and in some cases, merit scholarships.

Generally, faculty members have a significant influence, both directly and indirectly, on the governance of the institution. They usually participate in this process through the faculty senate, departmental organization, committee work, and in some instances, collective bargaining units. Students may also have some influence on institutional policy by serving as voting representatives on various adminstrative and academic boards.

# 3. TYPES OF INSTITUTIONS

America's educational diversity is illustrated vividly by its wide variety of institutions. Moreover, classifications are difficult to make because of decentralized administration and control. For example, some elementary schools include grades one through eight, whereas others may go only through grade six or seven. There are numerous institutions that are called universities but do not offer degrees beyond the master's, and a few that offer no degrees beyond the bachelor's. There are also some colleges that offer recognized doctorates. Finally, there are a few prestigious degree-granting institutions that are called institutes, of which the California Institute of Technology and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology are examples. Care must be taken, therefore, to avoid generalizations about institutions based on their official titles.

## 3.1 ELEMENTARY AND HIGH SCHOOLS

Completion of elementary school and high school (or secondary school) almost always requires at least 12 years of education. After an optional year in kindergarten, students will enter grade 1, or first grade, at the age of six. Compulsory attendance regulations vary slightly among states, but students are usually required to remain in school until the age of 16. Students completing the full high school diploma program usually graduate at the age of 17 or 18.

Several plans for dividing elementary school, junior high school, and high school are used. Probably the most common is the 6-3-3 plan (six years of elementary school, three years of junior high school, and three years of high school). Others include the 8-4, 7-2-3, 6-2-4, and 6-6 plans.

## 3.2 TWO-YEAR COLLEGES

The community college is the most common two-year institution of higher education. Public community colleges usually offer academic programs suitable for transfer to four-year institutions, as well as terminal technical and vocational courses. Students may complete the first two years of preprofessional studies, for example in preparation for medicine, law, or business, in two-year institutions. These public institutions usually serve local populations within specific areas, such as one or more school districts or one or more counties. Fees are minimal and residence halls are rare because the institutions primarily serve commuting populations.

There are a few private two-year colleges. Graduates of these are generally prepared to transfer to four-year colleges and universities for completion of their academic programs.

## 3.3 FOUR-YEAR LIBERAL ARTS COLLEGES

The primary role of the liberal arts college is to offer programs of general undergraduate education. These programs include studies in the humanities, language arts, social sciences, and physical and natural sciences, as well as up to four years of preprofessional studies. The liberal arts college offers courses leading to four-year or occasionally five-year bachelor's degrees only and are almost always nonpublic or independent. Many students enroll in liberal arts colleges to complete their preparatory courses for graduate and professional schools. Major universities maintain undergraduate liberal arts programs that are similar to the programs offered by the four-year colleges.

## 3.4 OTHER FOUR-YEAR COLLEGES

There are numerous state and private four-year colleges that offer only special programs or provide special training along with liberal arts. Many of these institutions were former teacher-training colleges that expanded their course offerings. Credit from these institutions in appropriate programs is usually recognized by

universities for transfer credit and for admission into graduate and professional studies.

## 3.5 UNIVERSITIES

Universities are generally defined as institutions that offer both undergraduate education (postsecondary education leading to the bachelor's degree) and graduate and professional education (post-bachelor's-degree education). Such institutions usually offer the bachelor's, master's, and doctor's degrees. They may also offer professional programs such as medicine, law, and engineering. Students may complete all or part of their preprofessional training at the undergraduate level in the university, or in other institutions.

## 3.6 OTHER INSTITUTIONS

There are also many types of institutions that, although important as educational facilities, do not normally enroll students seeking academic training. These institutions provide, but are not limited to, secretarial training, trade and vocational programs, some adult education and extension services, and certain health-related programs. Some offer very specific training, such as computer programming. Many of these institutions are profit-making, or proprietary. A few of these institutions are formally accredited by appropriate accrediting agencies, although the work completed and degrees or credits granted are not normally acceptable for transfer to an established degree-granting college or university for further study.

# 4.
# PROGRAM DESCRIPTIONS

## 4.1 HIGH SCHOOL DIPLOMA

The comprehensiveness of education in the United States is reflected in its high schools. Traditionally, students have been expected to complete a minimum of 16 academic, or Carnegie, units during the final four years. Increasingly, state and local school jurisdictions are raising minimum requirements to as many as 18 or more units before a diploma can be awarded. A unit represents a one-hour period per day per five-day week for 36 weeks (or approximately 180 periods). Typically, students enroll in five or six courses each semester, accumulating 20 or more units in grades 9 through 12. Within the unit requirements, a student will be required to complete a set of prescribed courses. For example, a school may require three units of English, two units of social studies, including a course in United States history, two units of mathematics, and two units of science. Further, a student will select one or two majors and one or two minors. A major is generally three or more units in a subject area, such as English, social science, a foreign language, mathematics, etc., while a minor is usually two units in one or more of the other areas. Major and minor requirements can be satisfied by the required courses. Students may also complete their major and minor requirements in vocational or technical courses, such as commercial studies, industrial arts, and home economics, although only a small number of those courses are normally elected by students who plan to enroll in selective colleges and universities.

In large high schools it is not unusual to find between 20 and 30 offerings of English, with prerequisites for many of them based on the demonstrated abilities of the students. Standard titles of such courses include English Composition, American Literature, and Creative Writing, but often English credit will be earned in courses with titles such as Mass Media, Argumentation, Contemporary Au-

thors, Journalism, Modern Readings, Black Literature, Humanities, and Radio Speech. Likewise, social-studies credit may be given for courses called Social Problems, Humanities, Communism, History of Minorities in the United States, Asian Studies, and Contemporary Issues. Generally, courses in natural and physical sciences, mathematics, and foreign languages are designated with standard titles.

Evaluators of American high school diplomas should be aware of the varying standards both within and among high schools. The diploma itself is not necessarily a demonstration of satisfactory ability or of suitability for study at the higher-education level. It is nearly always awarded to students who remain in the system for 12 years, and students are rarely asked to leave school. Importance, therefore, must be attached to a number of other factors: (1) quality of courses selected and satisfactorily completed; (2) quality of the high school; (3) grade-point average; (4) class rank; and (5) standardized-examination scores. (These items are discussed in detail in the following sections, as well as in the next few paragraphs.)

Clues about the quality of courses selected can often be obtained from the school or from the student. Many schools publish informative profiles that describe their course offerings, grading plan, and other academic characteristics. Courses that are designated by the school as college preparatory, honors, enriched, accelerated, advanced, or, Advanced Placement (courses offered by the College Board through the Advanced Placement (AP) Program and described under the section on Testing on pages 28 and 29), are usually those elected by the best students. Although college-preparatory classes might include 50 percent or more of all classes offered by the school, the other designations noted above are normally reserved for the most demanding 10 to 15 percent of the course offerings. Furthermore, serious motivated students *usually* elect such courses as advanced mathematics, chemistry, physics, and a foreign language, whereas less academically motivated students will *usually* avoid all or most of these courses.

On occasion, students will enroll in programs of independent study or other alternative programs. Because of the variety of plans and the varying level of quality found in these programs, no attempt will be made to describe them here. It is sufficient to state that they should be looked at carefully, and students seeking advanced training should be neither accepted nor rejected without a careful evaluation of their previous educational experiences.

Some high school students will enroll simultaneously in a local four-year or community college during their senior year. General-

ly, college credit earned under such an arrangement is accepted by the college or university in which the student subsequently enrolls as a degree candidate.

Significant differences in quality exist among high schools. Some of these differences are obvious, others are subtle. It must be remembered, however, that high schools should not be judged only on the basis of their college-preparatory program. Many communities reflecting local needs quite properly choose to enrich the vocational and technical offerings in their schools, sometimes at the expense of their college-preparatory programs.

The General Education Development Test (GED) administered by the American Council on Education, One Dupont Circle, Washington, D.C. 20036, is a widely accepted school-equivalency certificate. The GED yields both raw and percentile scores in five general areas of knowledge and is frequently presented by applicants for admission and employment who left high school before completing diploma requirements. It is considered by most private and government employers as the equivalent of a high school diploma, but is seldom considered as a qualitative measurement by college admissions personnel.

Finally, the high school diploma does not in itself guarantee admission to all or even most colleges and universities although it is frequently one of several criteria for admission.

## 4.2 ASSOCIATE DEGREE

The Associate of Arts (A.A.) or the Associate of Science (A.S.) degree is usually earned at a community college after two years of study. In many instances it represents the same level of educational achievement as the first two years in a four-year college or university. Some A.A. and A.S. degrees may be considered valid educational credentials that can be applied toward meeting bachelor's degree requirements; other A.A. and A.S. degrees may be terminal and not appropriately applied to further study. Students frequently enroll in a local community college with plans to enroll in a preselected four-year institution after they have completed the two-year course of study. They also have an assurance that all credit will be transferable. Some examples of terminal courses are aviation technology, food distribution, secretarial science, automobile mechanics, and landscape technology. Courses taken for these programs are sometimes accepted at four-year institutions.

Community colleges vary in size, curricular emphasis, and purpose. There is little question, however, concerning their impact on education in the United States. Approximately one-half of all students entering higher education for the first time enroll in public community colleges. Included in the approximately 1,000 two-year colleges in the United States are several with enrollments of over 10,000 students.

As with nearly all diplomas and degrees in the American educational structure, the Associate of Arts degree represents a wide range of completed course work and achievement standards. With proper course distribution and an adequate quality of achievement, the Associate of Arts degree is considered the equivalent of the first two years at a four-year college or university. Above-average grades in community colleges sometimes result from minimal competition due to open-door admissions policy practiced by most community colleges.

## 4.3 BACHELOR'S DEGREE

The bachelor's degree normally requires four years of academic study beyond the high school diploma. Accelerated learning plans, credit by examination, year-round study plans, and other innovations enable a few students to complete the program in less than four years.

Generally there are four fundamental educational requirements for the bachelor's degree, each occupying approximately one-fourth of the student's course selections. They are (1) a major (or concentrated area of study); (2) general education, or distribution courses (which usually include English, sciences, mathematics, social sciences, humanities, and may include a foreign language); (3) supporting, or cognate, courses that relate to the major area of study (such as mathematics for an economics major); and, (4) electives (courses selected by the student, often in subjects not related to the major, to fulfill the total credit-hour requirement). Students assume a major responsibility for their course selections, although concentrations must be approved by the appropriate department, and the students' choices must include the general-education requirements that are usually set by the college or university

The two most common bachelor's degrees are the Bachelor of Arts (B.A.), and the Bachelor of Science (B.S.). The former may require foreign-language proficiency and more general education requirements in all of the major disciplinary areas, whereas the

latter usually places a greater emphasis on the sciences. Other common bachelor's degrees include the B.Ed. (Education), the B.F.A. (Fine Arts), the B.Mus. (Music), and the B.B.A. (Business Administration). The B.Arch. (Architecture) is often a five-year program, and the B.D. (Divinity) and the LL.B. (Law) are professional bachelor's degrees for which a B.A. or a B.S. is required by most institutions before admission to the program.

Students normally choose their majors, or concentrations, before their third year. They may be selected in the traditional disciplines such as chemistry, economics, mathematics, English, and history. They also may be selected from such areas as journalism, engineering, computer science, classical studies, and modern dance. Some students will choose interdisciplinary concentrations in which they draw courses from two or more departments to form their programs. Examples include East Asia studies, international relations, sports management, and environmental studies. In the example of environmental studies, a student may enroll concurrently in courses in liberal arts, engineering, natural resources, and architecture. A degree in environmental studies could lead to a career in environmental planning and urban development. Occasionally students will complete a double major by electing two areas of concentration.

In a bachelor's degree program, a student usually enrolls in four or five courses, of 13 to 17 credit hours, each term. Most institutions follow the *semester system*, which consists of two 14- to 18-week terms each academic year. Institutions on semester plans usually offer a fraction of a semester (one-half or two-thirds) during the summer months. The *trimester system* consists of three equal terms during the calendar year, which includes the summer term, and each term is equal in educational value to a term in the semester system. The *quarter system* consists of four terms during the calendar year of about 12 weeks each. Typically, students enroll in three quarters each academic year. A quarter-credit hour carries the value of two-thirds of a semester hour (for example, nine quarter-credit hours equal six semester-credit hours).

Normally, 120 semester-credit hours, or eight semesters, are minimum requirements for a degree in a semester or a trimester calendar system. Normally, 180 credit hours are the minimum number required of students graduating from an institution employing the quarter system. Many bachelor's degree programs (for example, pharmacy, engineering, architecture) require four-and-a-half or five years (or 135 to 150 semester-credit hours) to complete, although the number of credits required for a degree varies widely among institutions.

As a general guideline, students will spend from two to three hours of course work preparation outside class for every hour spent in class.

Educational experiences are measured in terms of credit hours attempted and earned regardless of the academic-year pattern. Credit earned in the summer or other special sessions has the same value as credit earned during traditional terms. Also, credit earned by a student who takes a part-time academic program, usually from one to three courses a term, is recognized in the same way as credit earned by a student who is enrolled full time.

The B.A. honors degree designates a high level of performance and does not imply additional course work. Standards for honors degrees vary among institutions, but they are usually awarded to students who place in the top 10 to 20 percent of their graduating classes. Sometimes honors degrees are awarded to students who achieve certain grade-point averages. The terms *summa cum laude*, *magna cum laude*, and *cum laude* are usually used to designate honors degrees.

Evaluators of American bachelor's degrees should in every instance make an analysis of the courses completed, the grades obtained (especially in the student's major), and other factors such as the quality of the institution and the career objective of the student.

## 4.4 MASTER'S DEGREE

A master's degree requires at least one full academic year of course work, and frequently more, beyond the bachelor's degree. A thesis is normally required, and occasionally a comprehensive examination of general knowledge and proficiency in a foreign language are required. Admission to a master's degree program is almost always based on the nature, content, and quality of the applicant's undergraduate degree and the results of a standardized examination.

Master's degree programs vary considerably among the approximately 900 institutions that award them. The number of degree designations is very large, but for the most part the degrees are the Master of Arts (M.A.), Master of Science (M.S.), or professional designations, such as Master of Nursing (M. Nurs.), Master of Business Administration (M.B.A.), or Master of Landscape Architecture (M.L.A.). Programs leading to the degree usually require one or two years of advanced study, based on graduate courses, seminars, and colloquiums, and in many cases, research, or independent cre-

ative scholarship. Frequently, particularly in the sciences or engineering where a Master of Science is the degree choice, a thesis based on research is required, and in the majority of cases an oral or written (or both) examination is required. The Master of Fine Arts (M.F.A.) is considered the final degree in the studio and performing arts. Unlike most master's degree programs, a large portion of the requirements is based on demonstrated ability in the chosen field. Requirements may differ not only among institutions but among disciplines within an institution as well.

Usually one-half to two-thirds of the course work will be in the major subject. The remaining course work will consist of supporting courses and electives. The thesis is usually based on a limited amount of research, but it could also be based on an acceptable application of research techniques that develop new data and information. The quality of writing is evaluated, as is the ability of the writer to present and effectively examine the topic.

Completion of a satisfactory master's program is often prerequisite to entering into study at the doctoral level. Master's degrees may be earned in as many as 100 programs in some large public universities. For the most part these will be either Master of Arts or Master of Science degrees, and there is no consistent way to distinguish between the two. The master's degree marks the first specialization beyond the traditional bachelor's degree and is required for entry into many professions.

## 4.5 DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY DEGREE

A Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D.) degree requires a minimum of three years of full-time study but often takes up to five or six years to complete. The average amount of time is approximately four-and-a-half years of full-time study, of which the earned master's degree usually accounts for one year if the course work is applicable. Work at the doctoral level is highly individual and is performed under the close supervision of a committee, which continuously evaluates the doctoral candidate's work. The committee consists of at least three professors within the area of study and one more from a supportive field in which the candidate is required to demonstrate competency.

Candidates usually prepare for their preliminary or qualifying examinations during the later stages of their course work. Preliminary examinations measure the candidate's general knowledge of

the field as well as his or her mastery of the pursued discipline. These examinations indicate preparation for independent and original work designed to extend the student's knowledge in the field. A Ph.D. degree is almost always a research-oriented degree.

A proposal for a dissertation is prepared by the student and presented to the committee for criticism Students are often required to rewrite parts or all of their proposal several times before their committees are satisfied. Proposals include a statement of the problem to be examined, hypotheses to be investigated, and the investigative methodology to be applied.

When the dissertation is completed, the student presents and defends it before an examining committee of the graduate school faculty. The vast majority of students who take these orals complete the requirement successfully. The high success rate can be attributed to the voluntary and involuntary attrition that occurs at various earlier stages. In fact, only a small number of students admitted to Ph.D. programs actually earn degrees. Careful and critical counseling, along with the continued rigorous application of standards, yields highly qualified degree recipients. As at all other levels of American education, the standards of the institution along with other qualitative indexes suggest that Ph.D. degrees have varying values. At the doctoral level, however, the differences diminish significantly.

Publication of the complete dissertation is no longer required, but publication of an abstract of the dissertation is required. Dissertations are usually filed in the library of the college at which the degree was awarded and are made available, on request, by a national microfilm service that stores and distributes film and paper copies of the complete dissertation.

Honorary doctorates are sometimes awarded to men and women of some distinction. Although such doctorates are not acceptable as scholarly credentials, a holder is recognized symbolically as worthy of the highest academic honor.

## 4.6 PROFESSIONAL DEGREES

Students who seek admission to professional schools for the study of medicine, law, business, education, and dentistry usually do so after completing their bachelor's degree. However, some professional programs may be entered prior to the completion of the bachelor's degree. Admission to most professional degree programs is very competitive. It is not unusual for some of the prestigious

professional schools to receive dozens of applications for each place available.

The quality of the previous institution attended, the grades received, and the scores on national, standardized professional-school examinations are the major criteria for admission. Certain prescribed courses are required before consideration for admission to professional schools is given. Professional programs may require up to four years beyond the bachelor's degree, with internships sometimes extending the time required by another one or two years.

Admission to medical schools is seldom granted to candidates with less than a bachelor's degree, although a limited number of institutions offer programs that integrate premedical and medical study. After a minimum of three years in medical school a student must satisfactorily complete the internship requirement to qualify for the medical degree (M.D.). Students frequently continue formal study in a specialized area of medicine before entering residency, the final phase of the program.

Law schools normally require a bachelor's degree for admission to the three-year program. As is true with medical study, an external examination is required, and competition for admission to most law schools is severe. The degree is called the Doctor of Jurisprudence (J.D.), although recipients of the J.D. are seldom referred to as doctor.

Holders of professional degrees in dentistry (D.D.S.), law (J.D.), medicine (M.D.), and veterinary medicine (D.V.M.), must in all cases pass state examinations before they are permitted to practice their profession. Holders of the D.D.S., M.D., and D.V.M., are referred to as doctor. Those who wish to pursue academic careers within these four fields often also earn the Ph.D. degree.

The Doctor of Business Administration (D.B.A.) is the highest academic degree in business and is normally sought by those preparing for teaching and research careers in the field. The D.B.A. may be considered to be on the same level as the Ph.D. degree.

It is not unusual for holders of professional degrees to return for Ph.D.s in order to qualify for a teaching position on a professional-school faculty. Other professional-school degrees include those in social work, public health, education, and library science, as well as those at the bachelor's degree level described earlier in the fields of architecture, divinity, etc.

Foreign students are seldom admitted to medical schools and rarely to law and dentistry programs. In other professional degree programs, including business administration, the competition for places among foreign students is very keen.

## 4.7 SPECIAL DEGREES RELATED TO THE MEDICAL FIELD

Two examples of degrees related to the medical field are those in podiatry and chiropractic. Some of the work in such programs may be taken at a university. The degrees allow the practitioner to treat only a designated part of the body. These programs require fewer years of preparation and are not viewed as equal to the medical degree (M.D.). State licensing may be involved for certification purposes.

## 4.8 NON-DEGREE-SEEKING STUDENTS

Most American colleges and universities allow students who are not candidates for degrees to take courses. Reasons for this "unclassified" or "special student" status are many and varied and include the following: (1) for self-enrichment; (2) for certification requirements for teaching or some other profession; (3) to demonstrate readiness to be considered favorably as a degree-seeking candidate; (4) to remove deficiencies for graduate or professional-school admission consideration; (5) because employment status precludes full-time study; and (6) for specific training programs for foreign students.

Sometimes credit earned as a non-degree-seeking student will apply to degree requirements when and if the student applies and is accepted as a degree-seeking candidate. Because non-degree-seeking students do not normally have their previous educational credentials evaluated in detail, there can be no guarantee by the institution that their course work is appropriate for their educational goals.

## 4.9 ADULT AND CONTINUING EDUCATION

Most public and some private colleges and universities administer special educational programs for older students. Courses may

be offered at extension centers throughout the area served by the institution, which may be an entire state, or within community-college districts. The courses may also be offered on campus during regular hours, or during evenings and weekends. Most students elect only one or two courses each term. Students may elect courses that can be applied to a degree, or they may enroll in specialized courses that are generally not applicable to a degree program.

# 5.
# ADMISSIONS INFLUENCES AND PROCESSES

## 5.1 ADMISSIONS OVERVIEW

Admission to a college or a university in the United States is considered a privilege and not a right. Most institutions, however, endeavor to establish fair and reasonable admissions policies consistent with the mission and role of the institution. Colleges and universities with open-door or nonrestricted admissions practices usually employ an easily understood admissions process. It is usual for those institutions to admit students soon after applications are received, keep admissions open until classes begin, and admit all secondary school graduates without regard to previous grades and test results. Institutions with selective admission policies, however, often require applications six months or more in advance of the enrollment period, delay decisions until the entire applicant group can be evaluated, and place varying degrees of importance on grades, examination results, and other factors.

The proper evaluation of student performance in the American structure of education requires an understanding of the dynamics of the qualitative indexes that are used in the measurement of academic performance. In the United States, the certificate earned is of limited importance when compared with other evidence of the student's qualifications for continued education or employment.

American education is characterized by a complex and sometimes bewildering array of grades, aptitude and achievement tests, accreditation systems, enriched or honors courses, wide-ranging institutional standards (both among and within institutions!), voluntary and involuntary attrition patterns, varying admissions practices, class ranks, grade-point averages, personal recommendations, and extracurricular activities. It is not possible to generalize about

the quality of education based on the size of the institution, type of support, geographic location, or even by examining courses elected by the student. Serious evaluators of student performance must become acquainted with the overt and implied rules used in the process. Symbols can be misleading. There are no shortcuts, nor are there easily applied formulas that can yield a reliable quality index. As a result, Americans as well as non-Americans may misjudge the level and value of a student's scholastic performance and academic and career promise.

Despite the complexity of the student-evaluation structure, it seems to work quite well. As has been stated, American education is highly decentralized, and its many components enjoy varying degrees of autonomy. This autonomy fosters diversity, which in turn encourages educational administrators to provide relevant experiences for the students they are obliged to serve. Multiple measurement instruments and standards applied to student evaluation are, therefore, a complex but desired feature of American education.

Students entering higher education in the United States should become familiar with the diversity of standards that exists among institutions. Admission is not the end but only a means to the end. Although some critics claim that some American educators practice an "easy in–easy out" scheme, the process is much more complicated than that. Institutions with relaxed admissions requirements often maintain very high academic standards. Some major public universities are obligated by state charter to admit all in-state students who hold high school diplomas, and older students without diplomas. Yet graduation from those institutions could represent a level and quality of performance comparable to institutions with more rigorous admissions requirements. Attrition rates are generally higher among open-door colleges and universities because those institutions strive to give all students a chance to demonstrate their educational readiness. Some have unfairly called them "revolving door" institutions because of the high attrition rate. Most community colleges have open-door admissions policies for all or most of their programs.

The majority of private and public colleges and universities employ moderately selective admissions practices. Most applicants are admitted based on the relatively high probability of their academic success. Such institutions usually enroll many well-qualified students as well as some who are minimally qualified. But the majority of applicants are usually those who were average to above-average high school students.

Many colleges and universities in the United States are considered to be highly selective and competitive in their admissions practices. Such institutions attract students primarily from the top 10 percent of their high school graduating classes or, in the case of graduate schools, students with a 3.00 or better grade-point average. Test scores and the quality of previous educational experiences are important. Competitive admissions suggests that the number of qualified applicants exceeds the number of places available, which necessitates the rejection of a few to several qualified candidates. Also, admission is sometimes competitive for particular curriculums in open-door and moderately selective institutions. In recent years, for example, most institutions found it necessary to refuse qualified applicants to engineering, business administration, computer science, and several health-related programs because of space limitations.

Although the degree of selectivity should never be the sole criterion in the selection of an institution, it can offer some insight into the qualifications possessed by the student populations. Good students tend to attract good instructors, who in turn tend to attract financial support from alumni, business, industry, and government. Prestigious institutions, therefore, are those that have three important ingredients: distinguished instructional staffs, well-qualified students, and at least adequate funding. A mistake that is frequently made is an assumption that the true quality of an institution is directly related to its prestige. Excellent educational experiences can be had in all recognized institutions, and students are advised to use criteria other than prestige in the selection of a college or university.

Students seeking transfer from one institution to another must have a transcript of courses and grades sent to the admitting institution. The original academic record remains in the registrar's office of the institution where the courses were completed. An official transcript, an exact copy of the original record, contains the signature of the registrar, or some other official, and usually a raised seal of the institution. It is usual to accept official transcripts for educational and employment purposes. The student can easily have a transcript sent directly to an institution or an agency from each secondary school, college, and university he or she attended. A transcript that has been in the possession of the student will usually lose its official status. If there is any reason to believe that a transcript might be fraudulent, it should be returned for verification to the registrar who is responsible for the original document.

# 5.2 ACCREDITATION

Accrediting has been defined by the United States Department of Education as "the process whereby an agency or association grants public recognition to a school, institute, college, university, or specialized program of study which meets certain established qualifications and educational standards, as determined through initial periodic evaluations. The essential purpose of the accreditation process it to provide a professional judgment as to the quality of the educational institution or program(s) offered, and to encourage continual improvement thereof."[2]

As was noted earlier, United States' institutions vary widely in the quality of their programs, and there is no centralized authority for educational matters. Although states assume a major responsibility for educational mattters, standards are usually monitored and evaluated by various accrediting bodies. There are many recognized voluntary accrediting associations, and the reader is advised to obtain the publication, *1984-85 Accredited Institutions of Postsecondary Education; (Programs and Candidates)*, obtainable from The Council on Postsecondary Accreditation, One Dupont Circle, Washington, D.C. 20036, which lists all the accrediting agencies—general, institutional, and specialized—that are recognized by the American Council on Education. In 1984, the Council on Postsecondary Accreditation (COPA) recognized 11 accrediting bodies that include most traditional colleges and universities, six of which are regional and five of which are specialized. They are:
*Regional*—Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools, New England Association of Schools and Colleges, North Central Association of Colleges and Schools, Northwest Association of Schools and Colleges, Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, and the Western Association of Schools and Colleges.
*Specialized*—American Association of Bible Colleges, Association of Independent Colleges and Schools, Association of Theological Schools, National Association of Trade and Technical Schools, and the National Home Study Council

The publication, *Transfer Credit Practices of Designated Educational Institutions—An Informational Exchange*, published by the American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Of-

[2]U.S. Department of Education, *Nationally Recognized Accrediting Agencies and Associations: Criteria and Procedures for Listings by the U.S. Commissioner of Education and Current List.* Washington, D.C.: June 1975, p. 8

ficers, One Dupont Circle, Washington, D.C. 20036, outlines the policies and practices of a major institution in each state that are used to award credit for transfers from other institutions within that state.

While both of the above-mentioned publications can be helpful if used properly, institutions in the United States must take care in assessing each student's record, and offer admission and award credit consistent with individual institutional policies. A student's coursework that might not be accepted for transfer credit by one university could be accepted by another with full justification.

The procedure for accrediting an institution of higher education typically involves five steps: (1) the establishment of standards; (2) an institutional self-study in which its performance is measured against established standards; (3) on-site evaluation by a team of outside educators selected by the accrediting agency; (4) publication of the fact that the institution met the standards; and (5) periodic reevaluation of the institution's programs.[3]

Probably the most visible purpose of accreditation is to enable students to move freely from one accredited institution to another, although the student may sometimes lose some credits in the process. Further, state and professional certification regulations usually include stipulations that candidates must complete their training in accredited institutions. Financial aid, from both government and private sources, is usually awarded only to those students who attend recognized or accredited institutions.

Accreditation, especially of the specialized sort, does not guarantee that all or even any credit can be applied to an academic program. Recognized accrediting agencies oversee such areas as applied business, bible-college education, technical education, and respiratory therapy, and much of the credit earned in those types of institutions is not appropriate for many academic degree programs.

There are a number of profit-seeking organizations, referred to as "degree-mills," that require students to do a minimal amount of work and in some cases none, in order to be awarded a "degree." Laws are lax in some states, and organizations like these are difficult to control. Many of them administer "courses" solely by mail, whereas others actually send the diploma by return mail on receipt of a fee. Such organizations damage the image of American education, and caution should be exercised in accepting degrees or other forms of credentials of certification from unknown institutions. Correspondence with a senior university in the state in which the questionable institution is located will usually yield

[3]Ibid., p. 2

the accreditation status of the institution. The publication referred to earlier, *Accredited Institutions of Postsecondary Education (Programs and Candidates)*, will also be helpful.

## 5.3 TESTING

It has been suggested in this book that high schools as well as colleges differ widely in academic standards, grading practices, and other measurements of educational performance. Few standard measurements exist. In an educational structure that applies selectivity as an entrance characteristic, there needs to be a standard against which all candidates for admission are compared. In the American educational structure, testing assumes that role. In this book, testing is categorized as follows: (1) external standardized examinations; (2) academic credit by examination; and, (3) classroom examinations.

### 5.3.1 External Standardized Examinations

External examinations are administered to students from early elementary years through the graduate school application process. Elementary and high school examinations are used primarily to place students in appropriate courses and by school districts and states in their various student-performance-assessment projects. Examples of such tests are the Iowa Tests of Basic Skills, California Tests of Mental Maturity, Henmon-Nelson Test of Mental Ability, Iowa Tests of Educational Development, Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children, and the Stanford-Binet Intelligence Test. These examinations are sophisticated and statistically reliable objective instruments that may be administered to each child as frequently as once a year. They are usable as tools for student guidance and counseling but are seldom useful to admissions officers. Although they are national standardized tests, they are usually administered by local school officials and scores may be reported in percentiles based on local as well as national normative data.

There are several important external tests administered to high school students and used by colleges and universities in the admissions process. Few if any institutions of higher education make admissions decisions solely on test scores, but those that employ selective criteria use tests in varying degrees to aid the prediction of academic success of their applicants. Even open-door institutions frequently require preadmissions or preenrollment tests for counseling and academic placement purposes.

Although entrance examinations have been used historically in admissions decisions, it has been only since the turn of the century that reliable standardized examinations have been available. The College Board pioneered standardized college admissions tests in the United States and is now one of two major national testing agencies that specialize in college admissions examinations. The College Board, through the Admissions Testing Program (ATP), offers the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT), the Achievement Tests (ACH) in several disciplines, and the Preliminary Scholastic Aptitude Test/ National Merit Scholarship Qualifying Tests (PSAT/NMSQT). The SAT is a widely used college and university entrance examination that measures verbal and mathematical skills. Further information about the examination can be obtained from: The College Board ATP, CN 6200, Princeton, New Jersey 08541-6200.

The American College Testing Program (ACT), P.O. Box 414, Iowa City, Iowa 52243, the other major testing agency in the United States, offers a series of examinations used for college admissions and course placement that measure a student's skills in English, mathematics, social studies, and natural sciences. Both the College Board and the American College Testing Program offer many additional services to students and institutions that assist in the admission and placement processes.

Aptitude- and achievement-test results are valuable as supplements to school grades, but they are not reliable indicators of educational potential when used alone. High test scores on secure and reliable instruments such as the SAT and the ACT are significant, but low scores can be open to questions. Low scores may be the result of low achievement or apititude, or they may be the result of any one or a combination of the following factors: lack of test-taking experience or sophistication; misunderstood test directions; low level of proficiency in English; physical problems, including sight and motor deficiencies; and significant cultural differences that may exist between the normative population and the student tested. The last item is particularly important when evaluating tests taken by low-income students, black and Hispanic students, foreign students, and students from families of recently landed immigrants. The results may still, however, be of predictive value for culturally diverse populations if used by properly trained admissions personnel.

Standardized admissions tests, although sometimes controversial, continue to be useful and appropriate measurements of ability when combined with other relevant admissions criteria. Indeed, these tests actually assist in the democratization of higher education by identifying capable students who may not have performed

well in high school, who may have elected commercial or technical courses instead of college-preparatory courses, or who may have attended small or unaccredited high schools.

Almost everything previously stated about college entrance examinations may be applied to those examinations used for selection to graduate and professional schools. The most common test used for admission to graduate study is the Graduate Record Examination (GRE). The GRE is required by a very large proportion of the country's graduate schools. That examination covers most fields leading to the academic master's and doctor's degrees. Other tests often used for postbaccalaureate admissions include the Graduate Management Admissions Test (GMAT), the Law School Admissions Test (LSAT), the Medical College Admissions Test (MCAT), and the Miller Analogies Test. All but the MCAT (administered by ACT) and the Miller Analogies Test are administered through the services of Educational Testing Service (ETS) of Princeton, New Jersey, the same agency that administers the College Board testing programs.

Because admission to most graduate and professional schools is highly competitive (the number of qualified applicants greatly exceeds the places available), the examinations mentioned in the previous paragraph may be used as screening devices rather than as instruments to predict academic success. This is particularly true in admissions practices used by professional schools. As at the undergraduate level, however, factors such as unusually high previous academic performance or other relevant experiences may sometimes offset low examination scores.

External testing agencies (the College Board, Educational Testing Service, the American College Testing Program, and others) require fees for examinations. Furthermore, some institutions require "posting" fees if credits earned by external examinations are to be applied to official records.

### 5.3.2 Credit by Examination

A key feature of undergraduate education in the United States is the practice of awarding academic credit for successful performance on subject examinations. Credit may be awarded on the basis of centrally administered, national examinations, or by departmental examinations developed and administered internally. The most popular national examinations that gain college credit for students with satisfactory scores are those of the Advanced Placement (AP) Program, and the College-Level Examination Program (CLEP), both administered by the College Board. Some institutions also give

credit for and/or exemption from some first-year course requirements for the College Board Achievement Tests and the ACT examinations.

Advanced Placement is described by the College Board as "a program of curriculum enrichment that begins in high schools that offer college-level studies to able, interested students."[4] AP develops, administers, and grades examinations in several subject areas. Examinations are nationally administered within a specified two-week period each year in May. According to the College Board, 205,650 students took 280,972 examinations during the May 1985 test dates. In 1976, only about 100,000 students sat for the examinations. In some of the nation's most prestigious colleges and universities, as many as one-third or more of the entering students receive credit for their AP results, with some students earning sufficient credit to be placed in the second year. AP Examinations may be ordered (by April 1 of each year) and administered (in early May) by any school or other educational authority throughout the world. Interested students are, however, advised to make appropriate arrangements well beforehand.

The College-level Examination Program is co ised of a series of General and Subject Examinations that te college-level knowledge that has been gained either at high school or through work or other experiences.

Most colleges and universities will recognize for advanced placement and credit the results of some foreign school-leaving examinations that have been successfully completed, such as the British General Certificate of Education (Advanced Level), and the German *Abitur*. Also, in many institutions the International Baccalaureate will either yield first-year credit for Higher Certificates passed at a specific standard (usually a 4 or 5), or placement in the second year for satisfactory completion of the full diploma program.

The College-Level Examination Program is similar to the Advanced Placement Program but it has an added flexibility. It does not require formal course experience as does AP. It is an appropriate test for students, usually older than the typical first-year students, who are self-taught or have learned academic skills on the job, through military service, or by some other means. CLEP offers two types of tests: General and Subject Examinations. The general examinations measure college-level achievement in five basic liberal arts areas: English composition, humanities, mathematics, natural science, and social sciences-history. Material cov-

[4]*The College Board Today: A Guide to Its Programs and Services*, New York: College Entrance Examination Board, 1976, p. 4.

ered parallels that of general education courses. The more than 30 subject examinations measure achievement in specific college courses. Included among the subject examinations are accounting, computer and data processing, calculus with elementary functions, general biology and general chemistry, introductory marketing, and western civilization. Many institutions allow credit for Subject Examinations or General Examinations or both. Standards required for credit tend to follow the recommendations of the American Council on Education.

Most colleges and universities in the United States make available opportunities for credit by examination through locally prepared, administered, and graded examinations. Many of these instruments are patterned after AP, CLEP, and other achievement tests, but most rely on locally established norms. Local tests are often used for placement in a discipline without awarding credit.

Fees ranging from nominal amounts up to the amount assessed for classroom-earned credit are normally required of students. The fees cover the cost of administering the local examination and the posting of credit on the student's permanent record.

### 5.3.3 Classroom Examinations

The continual assessment of student progress that characterizes American education requires periodic testing by instructors. Tests are used for two primary purposes: (1) to give the instructor tangible evidence of a student's performance in order to award the appropriate mark or grade; and (2) to give the student an indication of his or her progress as compared to the other students in the class.

Classroom examinations may be given weekly or even more often, or they may be given only two or three times each semester. They may be essay, objective, short-answer, or open-book tests. They are not normally used as screening devices, but they are frequently useful as guidance tools to help students realistically evaluate their educational goals.

## 5.4 ASSESSING AND RECORDING STUDENT PERFORMANCE

### 5.4.1 GRADING

Course grades, or marks, are the primary instruments used in the evaluation of a student's academic performance. In various forms they are issued to students from early elementary school

through graduate school. In secondary and postsecondary institutions, grades are recorded on the student's permanent record at least twice each academic year (three times in institutions employing the quarter rather than the semester system). Grades are accumulated to determine the grade-point average (GPA) at the conclusion of each major segment of a student's education (high school graduation, bachelor's degree, master's degree, etc.).

Thus, it is not only the level of the diploma or the degree itself that must be considered for academic or job placement, but also the quality of the academic performance. Course grades and cumulated grade-point averages are convenient guides to determining relative levels of achievement.

Most secondary and postsecondary institutions in the United States use letter grades to designate the quality of achievement. The five categories with brief descriptions and typical distributions follow:

| Grade | Percentage Typically Awarded | Represents |
|---|---|---|
| A | 15% | Consistently high performance and originality |
| B | 25% | Clearly above average performance |
| C | 35% | Average performance |
| D | 15% | Minimally passing performance |
| E (or F) | 10% | Unsatisfactory performance, or failure |

While grades assigned are the sole responsibility of the instructor, and the distribution in any class may vary considerably from the typical distribution displayed above, institutions try to avoid the image of contributing to grade inflation or excessive awarding of high grades. After a decade of a gradual inflationary trend in grading, instructors at all levels of American education appear to be returning to a more conservative stance on the assessment of student academic progress. It is not uncommon, however, to find on a transcript more As and Bs than Cs, Ds, and Es, especially in the strong secondary schools and the colleges and universities with selective admissions practices.

Most institutions compute grade-point averages by assigning four points for an A grade, three points for a B, two points for a C,

and one point for a D. The points are then multiplied by the number of credits (hours) or units represented by that grade. The total number of points are then divided by the total number of credits or units attempted (including failures) to establish the grade-point average.

An example of this computation is illustrated by a typical first-semester college student's schedule:

| Course | Credits (hours) | Grade | Points |
|---|---|---|---|
| English 125 | 4 | C | 8 |
| German 200 | 3 | B | 9 |
| Physics 171 | 5 | A | 20 |
| Anthropology 112 | 3 | C | 6 |
| Computer Science 131 | 1 | D | 1 |
| Total = | 16 | | 44 |

Forty-four honor points divided by 16 credits attempted = 2.75 GPA. College and university students are usually expected to maintain at least a 2.00 GPA to remain in good academic standing. One semester of less than a 2.00 GPA might result in academic probation, and an additional semester of poor performance might result in dismissal from the institution. However, in some institutions students will accumulate several semesters of less than 2.00 GPA and remain enrolled, since practices among institutions vary considerably. Public high schools normally permit students to remain in school regardless of their performance, although most require a 1.00 GPA (D average) as the minimum standard for awarding the diploma.

Some institutions award numerical grades, but the wide variety of meaning of the grades defies generalizations. Frequently an institution will enclose an information sheet or a school profile describing the grading system and the distribution of grades. Some secondary schools, colleges, and universities employ narrative evaluations of students, a practice that, because it lacks standardization, can complicate the decision-making process for admissions personnel as they seek the best-qualified and the most-deserving students for their campuses.

The high school percentile rank (HSPR) or class rank can yield insight into the real meaning of the student's GPA. If a student presents a high GPA (say 3.50) and an HSPR at the 75th percentile, it would suggest that 25 percent of the students had a B+ average, or better. Care must be taken, however, to ascertain the degree to which honors or accelerated courses were weighted (i.e.,

assigned extra points) to allow adjustments in either the GPA or the HSPR. If the school does not provide this information, it should be requested before an evaluation is made. Class rank is frequently given as a raw number (for example, 38 in a class of 473), and the evaluator may wish to convert it to a more usable HSPR (92nd percentile). Colleges and universities seldom provide class ranks of their students.

In some institutions some or all courses are evaluated on a pass/fail basis instead of traditional grades. The main purpose of the pass/fail scheme is to encourage students to explore disciplines they might have otherwise avoided to protect a GPA. Most admissions offices at institutions in the United States consider a pass from another institution as at least a C grade and recognize the credit. Some institutions employ various adaptations of the pass/fail plan, such as pass/no entry (failures not recorded), honors/pass/fail, and credit/no credit. Pass/fail grading is controversial because of competitive admissions practices in many graduate and professional school programs. Those institutions generally place greater emphasis on standardized examinations in the absence of traditional grades.

### 5.4.2 A Case Study and Secondary School Record Transcript

Following is a transcript of a student who is a senior (twelfth grade) in an American high school. This transcript is an exact copy of the student's official record, which remains in the high school files. A raised official school seal (not visible on this sample) and a school official's signature verifies the transcript's authenticity.

Randi Lee (family name removed to protect privacy) ranked twelfth in a class of 26 in an independent college-preparatory school. She elected a strong curriculum that would cover four and one-half years of English and speech, mathematics through first-year calculus (note: in the United States, mathematics is seldom taught in the integrated format that is common elsewhere in the world), considerable science course work that included a laboratory course each year, various social sciences, three years of French that included pre-high-school course work, and a mix of several personal-improvement courses, such as computer science, photography, theater, health, debate, and child development. She elected two Advanced Placement courses, which are generally considered among the most rigorous courses available to high school students.

The transcript reveals important information about the high school. It is an accredited, private school from which virtually all graduates enroll in four-year colleges. Advanced Placement Program

## SECONDARY SCHOOL RECORD—TRANSCRIPT

### STUDENT INFORMATION

Last Name: | First Name: Randi | Middle Name: Lee

Home Address: | City: | State: | Zip:

Parent or Guardian:

Previous Secondary School Attended (if any): | Date Left:

Date of Birth: 9/29/65 | Sex: F | ☐ Withdrew ☒ Will Be Graduated | Month: 6 | Year: 83

### SCHOOL INFORMATION

School Name:

School Accredited By: ☐ State System ☒ Reg Accred Assoc | School Phone Number:

Public ☐ Private ☒ | Enrollment in Grades: 520 K–12 | Percent Graduates Entering College: 100 4 Yr 2 Yr Col. and Other

Passing Mark: 0 | Honors Mark (if any): A 90 B 80 C 70 D 60

### CLASS RECORD

(Include Subjects Failed or Repeated)

| YEAR | SUBJECTS | IDENTIFY LEVEL IF REMEDIAL COURSES | IDENTIFY HONORS, ACCEL. OR AP, ETC. | MARKS 1ST SEM | MARKS FINAL OR 2ND SEM | CREDIT OR UNIT | PAGE # FROM RECORD |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Eng-Rites of Passage | | | B | B+ | 6 | |
| | French II * | | | C+ | C+ | 6 | |
| 9 | Geometry * | | | B+ | A- | 6 | |
| | Biology | Lab. | | B | B | 6 | |
| | Ancient & Medieval History | | | B | B+ | 6 | |
| 19 79 | Health | | | B- | B- | 2 | |
| 19 80 | | | | | | | |
| | Eng-An American Sampler | | | B | B | 6 | |
| | Eng-Speech | | | B+ | / | 3 | |
| 10 | French III | | | C+ | C | 6 | |
| | Algebra II | | | B+ | B+ | 6 | |
| | Chemistry | Lab. | | B | B | 6 | |
| 19 80 | Photography | | | B | B | 4 | |
| 81 | Intro. to Theater | | | / | B+ | 3 | |
| | | | | | | | |
| | Eng-Shakespeare; Comedy & Satire | | | B- | B+ | 3;3 | |
| | Functions | | | A- | A- | 6 | |
| 11 | Biology II | Lab. | AP | B | B+ | 6 | |
| | U.S. History | | | B+ | B+ | 6 | |
| | Crafts | | | A- | / | 2 | |
| 19 81 | Art Service | | | B | / | 1 | |
| 19 82 | Computer | | | / | A | 3 | |
| | | | | | | | |
| | Eng-British Literature | | | | | 6 | |
| | Calculus | | AP | | | 6 | |
| 12 | Physics | Lab. | | | | 6 | |
| | Computer | | | | | 6 | |
| | Comparative Government | | | | / | 3 | |
| 19 82 | Child Development | | | | / | 2 | |
| 19 83 | Debate | | | / | | 3 | |
| | | | | | | | |

### EXPLANATION OF HONORS COURSES

Advanced Placement courses use materials and develop habits of thought which prepare a student to take an Advanced Placement Exam in the subject area if she so chooses.

*Eighth Grade
Algebra I B-
French B+

### RANK IN CLASS

BASED ON 6 SEMESTERS

☒ EXACTLY ☐ APPROX 12 IN CLASS OF 36

FINAL RANK _____

Check Appropriate Rank Information

☒ ALL SUBJECTS GIVEN CREDIT ☒ ALL STUDENTS

☐ MAJOR SUBJECTS ONLY ☒ COLL. PREP STUDENTS ONLY

Explain Weighting of Marks in Determining Rank

Please see School Statement.

32 Hon.

### OUTSTANDING ACTIVITIES HONORS AWARDS

A.F.S. Club member, 9-12; vice president, 12

Religious youth group member, 9-12; chapter executive board, 11, 12; regional social action chairperson, 12

Hospital volunteer, summers, 1979, 1980

A.F.S. summer in South Africa, 1981

Part-time day care job, 10, 11

### TEST RECORD

| Date | NAME OF TEST | How Do Std. Scores | Percentile Scores | Norm Group | Date |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 4/80 | Coop. Eng. Test PN | | | | |
| | Vocab. 78%ile., Rd. Comp. | | 78%ile. | | |
| 4/81 | Coop. Eng. Test PN | | | | |
| | Vocat., 89%ile., Rd. Comp. | | 89%ile. | | |
| 1981 | PSAT JR V46 M60 | | | | |
| | NMSQT Sel. Index | 152 | | | |

| NAME OF TEST | How Do Std. Scores | Percentile Scores | Norm Group |
|---|---|---|---|
| CEEB: 6/80 ACH 9 | BY50 | | |
| 6/81 ACH 10 | CH60 | | |
| 6/82 ACH 11 | EN65 | M259 | |
| 3/82 SAT 11 | VL60 | M530 | TSWS 58 |
| 11/82 SAT 12 | VL10 | M630 | TSWS 56 |

AP Exams: 5/82 Bio.-2

Date: 12/19/82 Signature: Suzanne W Heisley Title: College Counselor

courses are offered and it appears that the school provides its students with a full range of aptitude and achievement tests. A school profile accompanied the transcript on which was described many additional features, including qualifications of the teachers, median test results of the seniors, course descriptions, and a grade-distribution table.

On the basis of Randi's grades, test scores, the quality of her school, and the level of intensity of her courses, she would be considered a well-qualified candidate for all but 200 or so of the more than 1,000 regionally accredited, degree-granting colleges and universities. And she could be selected by any number of those 200 institutions if she were well recommended, had some interesting lifetime experiences that would contribute to the diversity of the college student population, had won a debate championship or a mathematics prize, was an outstanding athlete, possessed some other personal characteristic or skill that was valued by a particular institution, was a daughter or granddaughter of an alumnus of the institution, or some combination of these and other factors. Randi has been a hospital volunteer and was a summer exchange student in South Africa. Even a personal interview or well-prepared personal statement might favorably influence the admissions decision.

Because of the flexibility and diversity of the American educational plan, no set of courses, test scores, or other features of the student record can be considered typical. However, Randi's record suggests that she would be a serious candidate for nearly all of the country's colleges and universities. While her GPA and standardized test scores are somewhat modest, she has demonstrated that she can perform above-average work in a rigorous set of courses in a very good college-preparatory high school.

## 5.5 OTHER ADMISSIONS CONSIDERATIONS

American education provides ways for intellectually gifted students to move ahead of their classes or age groups for the purpose of increasing their learning interests and skills. From the comprehensive high schools through college and university, highly qualified students are usually encouraged to elect those courses that are the most academically challenging. Prior to enrolling in advanced courses, a student's educational competence must be demonstrated through testing or previous academic performance. Some stu-

dents are able to complete their elementary and secondary requirements in less than the standard 12 years. Moreover, bright and academically aggressive students sometimes complete their collegiate programs in less than four years. This acceleration is made possible by the flexible nature of American education.

High schools offer honors or enriched courses for those students who might benefit from them. Those courses usually enroll only the best students, and many utilize college textbooks and instructional methods. Honors programs at the college level offer special incentives for academically talented students, for example, selected library privileges, individualized curriculums, smaller classes, and tutoring. Evaluators of students who have completed honors or enriched courses should recognize the higher level of education that has generally been experienced by those students.

Letters of recommendation can be useful in student evaluations. Although most tend to be general and consistently positive, some will provide insights into a student's character and academic potential that might otherwise be overlooked. Occasionally, writers of recommendations bring attention to some unusual circumstance in the student's background that may have contributed to unsatisfactory performance, for example, illness, family conflicts, unfair instructors, or reasons for English-language problems. Letters of recommendation may assume a significant importance for a student who is seeking admission to a private institution or a public or private professional or graduate school. Federal legislation has had an effect on the practice of requiring letters of recommendation. The Family Rights and Privacy Act of 1974, commonly known as the Buckley Amendment, gives students the right of access to their educational records unless they specifically waive that right. Although students may not remove from their files letters that they think are damaging, they do have the right to add comments in which they can express their point of view. Applicants for admission are not covered by the Amendment, although in some cases all admissions papers and other documents become a part of the students' files while enrolled in the institution.

## 5.6 STUDENT RETENTION

A unique feature of education in the United States is the frequent and periodic evaluation of student performance. These evaluations are prepared by the instructional staff through grading, examina-

tions, and narrative reports. By routine verbal and written reports from each of their instructors, students in high schools are normally able to assess the quality of their educational progress at any time during the semester. Test results, grades on theses and book reports, and the quality of their contributions to class discussions provide students with tangible evidence of their progress. This system also operates at the college level but to a lesser extent.

A major part of the responsibility to assess continuously individual strengths and weaknesses in performance rests with each student. At the college level, it is likely that the number of students who voluntarily leave the institution is greater than the number who are asked to leave because of academic problems. A student's decision to leave is not necessarily a face-saving act but, rather, the result of a realistic examination of past performances, current progress, and future goals. Students who leave an institution may begin employment, enter military service, or they may enroll in institutions that are less demanding or offer courses in other areas of interest. The flexibility of American education allows for, and indeed encourages, student-initiated adjustment of educational goals, but the student must assume a substantial amount of the responsibility for making sound choices. High schools and colleges provide counseling and guidance services to students so that they can make accurate assessments of interests, abilities, and potential for future academic training and job placement.

A major consideration of student evaluation and performance is the effect of institutional standards on student attrition and retention. Not surprisingly, the colleges and universities with the highest admissions standards usually experience the lowest attrition rate. Voluntary and involuntary attrition at such institutions as Oberlin College, Harvard University, the University of Michigan, Stanford University, and the University of Virginia may be 5 percent or less a year because of their highly selective admission practices, whereas open-door institutions may experience more than a 50 percent loss of students yearly. Recent studies reveal that nearly three-fourths of the entering freshmen in highly selective institutions will persist through to graduation, while less than half the freshmen enrolling in open-door institutions will eventually graduate.

Because of the flexibility and diversity of th American educational plan, the choice of whether or not a student will earn a degree rests primarily with the student. Dismissal from one college or university does not prevent a student from returning at some future date or enrolling in another institution, usually under a probationary status, to reestablish his or her academic standing.

Continuing education and the return of students whose educations were interrupted are prominent characteristics of American education. A considerable amount of research has revealed that age and relevant life experiences are significant predictors of academic success, and institutions welcome nontraditional students to their classrooms. These students are enrolling in programs in areas such as the humanities, behavioral sciences, and economics, as well as taking courses to upgrade job skills, including business, engineering, nursing, computer training, and other fields that require improvement in technical knowledge. The average age of college students continues to increase.

# 6. COSTS AND FINANCIAL AID

Among the factors influencing a student's choice of a college or a university is the financial cost that must be borne. In most private and public institutions students pay tuition (or course fees) and room and board unless they are commuting to their classes from their homes. Additional funds are required for books, supplies, laundry, travel, and miscellaneous expenses. In 1985, tuition costs generally ranged from $500 to $2,500 per academic year (usually nine months) for in-state residents attending public colleges and universities. Out-of-state students (or out-of-district community college students) are usually assessed considerably higher tuition fees, ranging from 50 to 300 percent higher than the cost for in-state or in-district students. Tuition costs at private or independent institutions are the same for all students and ranged, in general, from $4,000 to $12,000 in the 1985 academic year. Room and board costs in both public and private institutions ranged between $2,000 and $3,000 for the academic year. Foreign students generally pay out-of-state fees, and institutions are increasingly assessing additional fees for non-Americans because of the extra administrative and personal services that are required.

Financial aid is normally allotted on the basis of demonstrated need. Public institutions give in-state and in-district students priority for aid. This aid is provided by institutions and state and federal government agencies through grants, guaranteed low-interest loans, and employment opportunities. It is not uncommon for colleges and universities to assist more than one-half of their students with financial aid and many students are completely supported by a combination of grants, loans, and employment.

In recent years there has been an increase in the practice of awarding grants or scholarships without regard to demonstrated need. Frequently these "no need" awards cover only a small frac-

tion of the student's required expenses and may not be renewable after the initial year of enrollment. Such awards are used primarily for the purpose of recruiting students to the institution.

# 7.
# CONCLUSION

The quality of American education is best demonstrated by its ability to educate the general population while providing a favorable intellectual environment for the creative pursuits of the curious and academically gifted students. The style and content of American education, with its diversity, accessibility, and quality, seems to be well suited to accomplish its important mission.

# GLOSSARY

**Academic year.** The period of formal academic instruction, usually extending from late August or September to May or June. It is divided into terms of various lengths, depending on the institution: early-start semesters (two terms running from late August to mid-May); traditional semesters (two terms running from late September to early June); trimesters (three terms usually running from September to December, January to April, May to August); or quarters (four 12-week terms throughout the calendar year).

**Accreditation.** The process of giving recognition to schools, colleges, and universities that meet certain educational standards.

**Admission.** Permission to enroll in a college or a university.

**Associate degree.** The certificate or diploma awarded, usually by a community college or junior college, after two academic years of college work.

**Bachelor's degree.** The certificate or diploma awarded after four or five academic years of college or university work.

**Carnegie unit.** A measurement of classroom attendence at the secondary-school level. One unit represents one hour per day each academic year, or between 180 and 190 hours of classroom contact.

**Community college.** A publicly supported, two-year college offering both transfer and terminal postsecondary courses. Appropriate course work may satisfy the first two years of a bachelor's degree and preprofessional program requirements.

**Competitive admissions.** The policy of granting admission to only the best qualified of a number of able applicants. Less-qualified candidates are not admitted due to space limitations.

**Consortium.** A group of autonomous institutions among which there are agreements to act jointly in regard to common interests such as research, management of facilities, educational programs, sharing of library facilities, etc.

**Counties.** Governmental units that usually include several communites and surrounding unincorporated areas. The state of Michigan, for example, is made up of more than 80 counties.

**Credit hour (semester hour).** A measurement of class time at the college and university level. Usually one credit hour represents one

hour each week for a semester, or approximately 16 classroom contacts. Most courses are valued at three to five credit hours. Sometimes referred to as credit, or hours.

**Doctorate.** The most advanced academic degree offered in the United States. For a comprehensive description see *The Doctor of Philisophy Degree*, published by the Council of Graduate Schools of the United States, One Dupont Circle, Washington, D.C. 20036.

**Dropout.** A student who leaves school with no intention of returning.

**Early admission.** A process whereby some highly qualified secondary school students are admitted to colleges and universities before they complete their secondary school diploma. (Also referred to as early enrollment.)

**Early decision.** A process whereby a college or university commits a place in the first-year class to a well-qualified applicant well before the time of enrollment (usually the preceding fall), and the applicant agrees to accept the invitation to enroll.

**Enrollment.** Registering for and attending classes.

**Enrollment deposit.** A fee, usually $50 to $300, paid by the student several months in advance of enrollment to ensure a place in the class. (Also called preenrollment deposit).

**Freshman.** A student enrolled in the first year of high school, university, or college.

**Grade-point average (GPA).** A measurement of the quality of a student's performance. The GPA is determined by dividing the total number of honor points earned by the number of credit hours attempted, including failures. For example, 173 honor points divided by 48 credit hours attempted yields a GPA of 3.60 (see Honor points).

**Graduate student.** A student who is enrolled in a program leading to a master's degree or doctor's degree.

**High school (secondary school) diploma.** The certificate awarded at the completion of high school. The high school diploma, by itself, does not guarantee admission to most colleges and universities in the United States.

**Honor points.** The qualitative value given to earned grades in order to create a grade-point average. Values are usually given as follows: A=4 honor points, B=3, C=2, D=1, and E=0. For example, 6 hours of A, 4 hours of B, 2 hours of C, 3 hours of D, and 2 hours of E would yield 43 honor points ($6 \times 4 + 4 \times 3 + 2 \times 2 + 3 \times 1 + 2$

× 0 = 43). Therefore, the GPA would be 43/17 = 2.53 (see Grade-point average).

**Interdisciplinary major.** A student's academic program that consists of two or more subjects

**Junior.** A student enrolled in the third year of high school, college, or university.

**Junior colleges.** Two-year postsecondary institutions, usually private, that offer transfer course work that may satisfy the first two years of a bachelor's degree and preprofessional program requirements.

**Liberal arts program.** A bachelor's degree program consisting of courses selected from among history, anthropology, literature, chemistry, English, mathematics, and other general disciplines, intended primarily to provide general knowledge. The program also satisfies preprofessional program requirements.

**Major.** The academic discipline, or group of disciplines, that constitute the primary emphasis of a student's high school, college, or university program. A major is also known as a field of concentration.

**Master's degree.** The certificate or diploma awarded after one or more years of work following the bachelor's degree. For a comprehensive description refer to: *The Master's Degree: A Policy Statement*, published by the Council of Graduate Schools of the United States, One Dupont Circle, Washington, D.C. 20036.

**Open-door admissions.** Admission granted to all applicants regardless of academic qualifications.

**Private institutions.** Colleges and universities that receive little or no direct financial support from government sources. Also known as independent institutions.

**Professional degrees.** A degree representing satisfactory academic qualifications for professional certification, for example, in the fields of law, pharmacy, business, medicine, architecture, and nursing. For a comprehensive description of professional degrees, refer to *The Professional Doctorate* published by the Council of Graduate Schools of the United States, One Dupont Circle, Washington, D.C. 20036.

**Public institutions.** Colleges and universities that receive substantial financial support from local or state government sources.

**Quarter.** An academic period, consisting of about 12 weeks, equal in value to two-thirds of a semester. Fifteen quarter-hour credits

equal 10 semester-hour credits. The calendar year under the quarter system is divided into four equal terms.

**Rolling admissions.** A process whereby admission decisions are made and reported as applications are received instead of being held until a specified selection date.

**Selective admissions.** Policy of granting admission only to those students who present academic qualifications that suggest at least a reasonable probability of academic success.

**Semester.** An academic period usually consisting of between 14 and 18 weeks. One calendar year can be divided into two semesters and a summer session equal to one-half of a semester.

**Semester hour.** (see Credit hour).

**Senior.** A student enrolled in the fourth year of high school, college, or university.

**Sophomore.** A student enrolled in the second year of high school, college, or university.

**Transcript.** A true copy of a student's official academic record.

**Trimester.** An academic period considered equal in value to a semester. The calendar year can be divided into three equal trimesters.

**Undergraduate student.** A student enrolled in a program leading to a bachelor's degree.

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