

# What to Expect: Attending U.S. Universities For The First Time

*Everything you should know about attending U.S. colleges  
for both United States and International students!*

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When attending college, there are many things you can look forward to expecting!

It is an exciting time, but also one that might come with other emotions such as nervousness, uncertainty, loneliness, confusion, and so much more. College can be the best and worst times of your life potentially, but it's an experience that you will never forget! If this is your first year of college, you are a first-generation student, or you are going to school in the U.S. for the first time, you may have MANY questions about what to expect once you arrive. Below are some topics that you might find helpful once you walk onto that campus for the first time!

## ★ Grading Differences

<https://foundation.ifma.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/International-Grade-Equivalencies.pdf>

- Each country uses a slightly different grading system! The above link provides a variety of countries and the approximate equivalent grade you can expect within the U.S. university systems!
- Some examples are the following but there are over 14 pages with so many other countries listed at the link above!

### France Educational Institutions

International Grade	US Equivalent	Note:
14-20	A	Generally, the highest grades awarded by French professors are a 14 or 15. Grades of - 25 - 9 or 10 are satisfactory. Students work to pass a course rather than to earn a high grade. French students need an overall average of 10/20 to pass the year. International students may be given a little more flexibility in this area. ISEP-France generally regards an 8 as a passing grade for ISEP students.
12-13	B+ /A-	
10 -11	B- / B	
8-9	C-/C/C+	
7-1.9	D-/D/D+	
Below 7	F	

### Germany Educational Institutions

International Grade	US Equivalent	Note:
1-1.5 (Sehr gut)	A	The equivalent to the US "D" does not exist. Students receiving a 3.0 or above are generally regarded as having an A or B average in the U.S. equivalent. Anything between 4.1-4.9 is considered good academic standing. Registrars are encouraged to look at credit and contact hours to help determine credit received.
1.6-2.5 (gut)	A/B	
2.6-3.5 (befriedigend)	B	
3.6-4.9 (ausreichend)	C	
5.0-6.0 (nicht ausreichend/ nicht bestanden)	F	
Unbenotet = not graded		
Bestanden= passed		
Teilgenommen= regularly attended		

- There is a second type of grading within the university system: **Pass/ No Pass**
  - [What You Need To Know About Pass/No Pass System](#)
- What is a P/NP Course?
  - P/NP is an option that allows you to take a class without obtaining a letter (A-F grade). Typically a Pass is the equivalent of an A-C grade while a No Pass is the equivalent of a D-F grade but this can vary based on schools.
  - Each school has different P/NP restrictions on how many you are allowed to take as P/NP as well as different deadlines to switch a Letter-Grade course to a P/NP course though so definitely make sure you know what yours is beforehand.
  - P/NP courses can be transferable to other campuses depending on the school you are looking to transfer them to, but also double check what they allow.
  - **PROS & CONS:**
    - If you receive a Pass, you get credit for the course but it has no positive effect on your GPA (Which means it will not help your GPA go up even though you did well in the course)
    - If you receive a No Pass, you get no credit but it also has no negative effect on your GPA (Which means it will not hurt your GPA even though you did not pass, your GPA will remain the same!)

## ★ Quarter System vs Semester System

<https://www.bestcolleges.com/blog/semester-vs-quarter-system/>

- **Semester System:**
  - Two 15-week terms (typically runs from late August to early May)
  - Fall/Autumn Semester (followed by Winter Break)
  - Spring Semester (followed by Summer Break)
- **Pros:**
  - More time to learn and study materials, an approximate schedule can look like the following if you have only one midterm:
    - **Week 1:** Syllabus Week
    - **Week 2-6:** Learn course material
    - **Week 7:** Midterm Exams
    - **Week 8-13:** Learn course material
    - **Week 14:** Final Exam Prep
    - **Week 15:** Final Exams
  - Or like the following if you have more than one midterm:
    - **Week 1:** Syllabus Week
    - **Week 2-5:** Learn course materials
    - **Week 6:** Midterm 1 Exams
    - **Week 7-9:** Learn course material
    - **Week 10:** Midterm 2 Exams
    - **Week 11-14:** Learn course material and Exam Prep
    - **Week 15:** Final Exams
  - Easier adjustment since most high schools and community colleges are on semester systems already

○ **Cons:**

- Switching majors can be more costly since you spend significantly longer in each course, if you switch majors and end up not needing the courses you took, you may need to stay additional semesters to make up for the time needed to take new courses
- Year feels slightly longer since you are in classes for larger chunks of the year without as many breaks (August to December, Winter Break, January- May with Spring Break around March, Summer Break)

○ **Quarter System:**

- Four 10-week terms (typically runs from mid-September to early June)
  - Fall/Autumn Quarter (followed by Winter Break)
  - Winter Quarter (followed by short Spring Break)
  - Spring Quarter (followed by Summer Break)
  - Summer Quarter (**OPTIONAL**)

○ **Pros:**

- Shorter terms means you can take more courses throughout your time in college, you can experiment with the variety of courses offered to you!
- You are only expected to take approximately 3-4 classes per quarter depending on the college requirement for course units.
- Years feel like they go by very quickly since you are in classes for smaller chunks of time (Late September-December, Winter Break, January-Late March, Spring Break, April-Mid June, Summer Break)

○ **Cons:**

- Shorter terms means you have a short amount of time between starting a course and exams.
- Typically exams happen halfway through the term if you only have one midterm. You can expect a typical schedule to look like this:
  - **Week 1:** Syllabus week
  - **Week 2-4:** Learn course material
  - **Week 5:** Midterm Exams
  - **Week 6-8:** Learn course material
  - **Week 9:** Final Exam Prep week or Early Exams
  - **Week 10:** Final Exams
- If you have more than one midterm, typically you can expect a schedule like the following:
  - **Week 1:** Syllabus Week
  - **Week 2-3:** Learn course material
  - **Week 4:** Midterm 1 Exams
  - **Week 5-6:** Learn course material
  - **Week 7:** Midterm 2 Exams
  - **Week 8-9:** Learn course material and Final Exam Prep
  - **Week 10:** Final Exams



## ★ Some Other Helpful Tips to Remember In College!

- Get **AS MUCH** experience in your interested field as possible- It can be difficult to get jobs outside of college with your new degree without some built up experience!
  - Internships (Paid or Non-Paid)
  - Volunteer Opportunities
  - On Campus Jobs
  - Related Clubs
- Some professors are not as strict as your high school/ secondary school teachers say they might be (but it is always possible that they are!)
  - Keep an open mind when entering your first day of class and don't be nervous about how intimidating it might be, you might find that it's not as intimidating as you anticipated!
- Read your syllabus carefully!
  - Your syllabus will include important exam dates, projects due dates, and reading assignments so don't just skip over it!

## ★ Resources for LGBTQIA+ Students

- Many schools have their own resources for LGBTQIA+ Students to provide safe spaces, healthcare, and other clubs or spaces specifically designated for anyone who considers themselves part of this community!
  - The Best Colleges for LGBTQ+ Students 2021  
<https://www.bestcolleges.com/features/best-colleges-for-lgbt-students/>
- Additionally there are federal laws put in place to protect LGBTQIA+ Students, some of which I have outlined below!
  - **Matthew Shepard and James Byrd, Jr. Hates Crimes Prevention Act**  
<https://www.justice.gov/crt/matthew-shepard-and-james-byrd-jr-hate-crimes-prevention-act-2009-0>
    - The act provides more leeway for federal law enforcement officials to investigate crimes that local authorities have dismissed or closed, allocates funding to aid the prosecution of hate crime perpetrators, and requires the FBI to maintain statistics regarding hate crime incidence rates for different vulnerable groups.
  - **Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972**  
<https://www.justice.gov/crt/title-ix-education-amendments-1972>
    - Title IX prohibits sex-based discrimination of any individual attending a federally funded educational program. These programs include public colleges and universities, as well as elementary and secondary schools and vocational training programs offered by individuals or organizations that receive federal financial assistance. This law [does not extend](#) to private undergraduate colleges or private schools that are controlled by religious organizations

## ■ **Anti-discrimination Laws**

<https://www.lambdalegal.org/states-regions/in-your-state>

- In addition to federal measures like the two listed above, many nondiscrimination laws exist at the state level. Lambda Legal, a nonprofit organization that advocates for LGBTQ+ civil rights, highlights some of these nondiscrimination laws. You can also check your state government website to see what additional protections exist for LGBTQ+ students.

## ★ **Get In Contact With Your Professors or TA's!**

- Go to their Office Hours to get help with assignments, to discuss exams, or to get to know them. There can be great benefits to staying in contact with your professors.
  - The more you get to know them, they will feel more comfortable writing you letters of recommendations for jobs or internships.
  - They might know about internship opportunities that are open or available to you.
  - They may also provide research assistant opportunities for research they are conducting academically.
- Some professors stay after class for a few minutes and will allow you to ask questions following lecture or section! Take advantage of that for urgent questions!

## ★ **Get To Know Your Campus On Your Free Time**

- Chances are your campus will be pretty large!
  - Your lectures will be in different buildings from your sections or labs so you will be traveling to many different places on your campus right away. Taking the time to walk the campus and your schedule will help!
- You may also find some great places where you can get some work or relaxing done in between classes!

## ★ **Get To Class A Bit Early**

- Lectures fill up fast!
  - Some lecture rooms can be large, you'll want to get an ideal seat. Decide whether you want an aisle seat, a front row seat, a backrow seat, or a middle seat, show up a little early so you have your choice.
- You'll want to get your note-taking items out prior to lecture start time (laptop, notebook, pens/ pencils) because your professor will likely start right away!

## ★ **Stay Up To Date On Readings**

- It will be easy to fall behind. Courses move quickly and often require a lot of reading.
  - With multiple courses at a time, keeping up with a social life, and potentially working a job or two, it can be hard to keep up but it is important not to fall behind as exams and assignments will likely be based on a combination of lectures and readings.

## ★ Not Sure About Your Major? That's OKAY!

- You might not be sure about which major you want to start in, that is alright! Many people know what they want to do initially so they can choose their specific major. However, many do not know what they want to do and in the first year, this is the perfect time to experiment.
  - Take a variety of courses, see what courses you do well in, see where your interests are and eventually you'll have a better idea of what to declare your major as
  - The great thing about most colleges is that you can choose to be an "undeclared" for a certain length of time while you figure out what you are most interested in!
- You can also decide to change your major if you pick on and end up realizing later on that you don't love it as much as you think you do! Just try not to wait too long as it can be too hard to finish the new major once you are in your last 2 years of college.

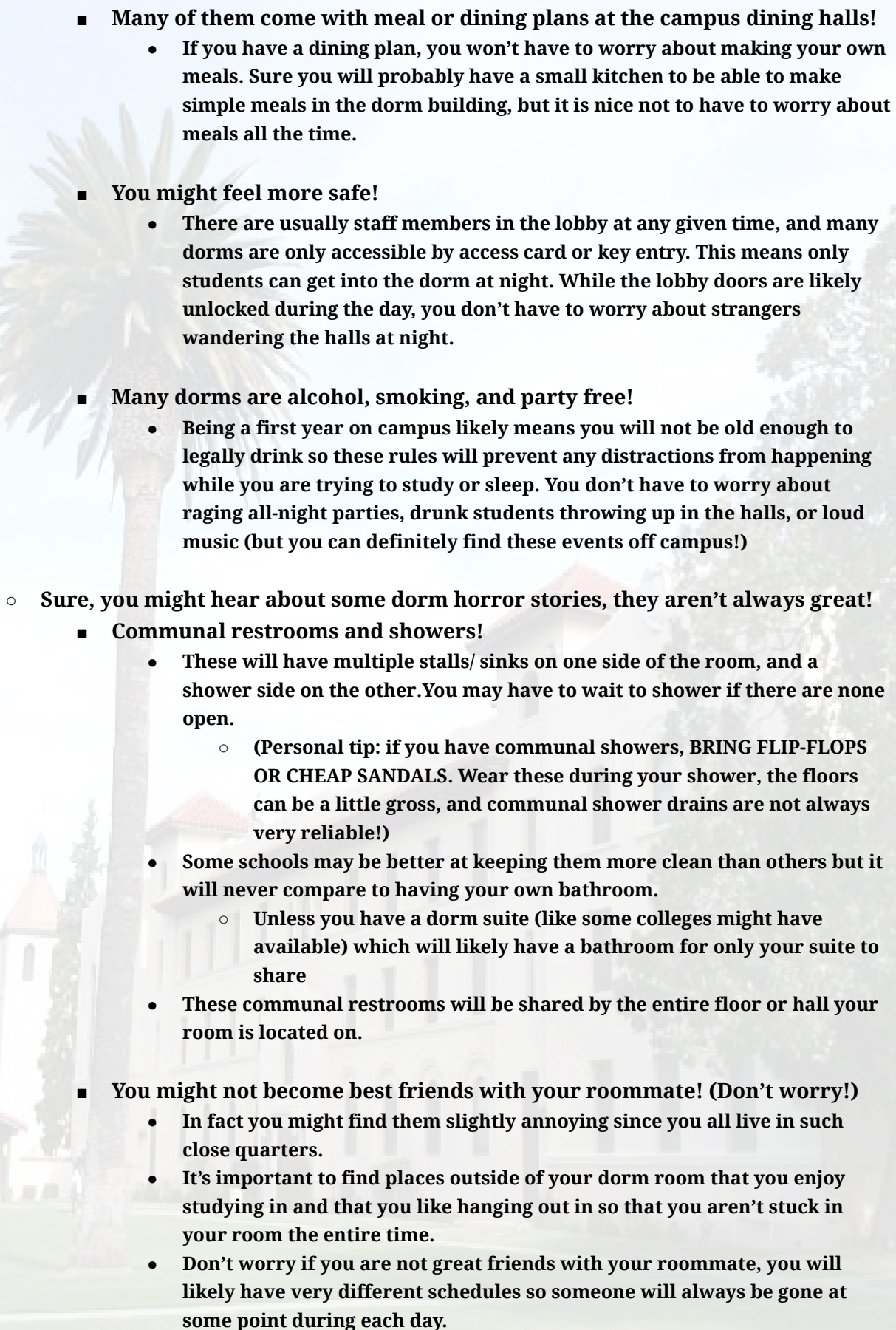
## ★ Making Friends!

- Making new friends can be difficult, especially on a large campus. You would think that means plenty of opportunity to make friends but that is not always the case!
  - Don't worry though, in time you will find your friends. One tip is to **GET INVOLVED**! Maybe you are more introverted and the idea of ice-breaker games wants to make you hide in your room alone. I get it, I really, really do! However, this might be your best bet for making quick friends. Your first week might be overwhelming, there will be a lot of social events, both around campus and in your dorms. Your classes will want to get to know you, as well! So you will have many opportunities for socializing with strangers.
- Just remember, everyone else is nervous and alone too. Everyone else is looking for friends just like you are so even though you might feel awkward, lean into it, everyone else is likely feeling awkward too!
- Also, your roommate might end up your best friend or you may not get along, but trying to be friends will be one of the best ways to immediately feel like you are less alone on campus!

## ★ Dorm Life at Four-Year Campuses

- Chances are you will be living in a dorm for at least the first year on campus.
- Dorms can be great for a few reasons:
  - They are way more social than apartments!
    - You will likely have 1-3 roommates in your dorm room so you will always have someone around. Your roommates might even become your best friends. You will likely also get to know your neighbors just by walking in the halls, passing in the restrooms, and at the various social events held for residents!



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- **Many of them come with meal or dining plans at the campus dining halls!**
    - If you have a dining plan, you won't have to worry about making your own meals. Sure you will probably have a small kitchen to be able to make simple meals in the dorm building, but it is nice not to have to worry about meals all the time.
  - **You might feel more safe!**
    - There are usually staff members in the lobby at any given time, and many dorms are only accessible by access card or key entry. This means only students can get into the dorm at night. While the lobby doors are likely unlocked during the day, you don't have to worry about strangers wandering the halls at night.
  - **Many dorms are alcohol, smoking, and party free!**
    - Being a first year on campus likely means you will not be old enough to legally drink so these rules will prevent any distractions from happening while you are trying to study or sleep. You don't have to worry about raging all-night parties, drunk students throwing up in the halls, or loud music (but you can definitely find these events off campus!)
  - **Sure, you might hear about some dorm horror stories, they aren't always great!**
    - **Communal restrooms and showers!**
      - These will have multiple stalls/ sinks on one side of the room, and a shower side on the other. You may have to wait to shower if there are none open.
        - (Personal tip: if you have communal showers, BRING FLIP-FLOPS OR CHEAP SANDALS. Wear these during your shower, the floors can be a little gross, and communal shower drains are not always very reliable!)
      - Some schools may be better at keeping them more clean than others but it will never compare to having your own bathroom.
        - Unless you have a dorm suite (like some colleges might have available) which will likely have a bathroom for only your suite to share
      - These communal restrooms will be shared by the entire floor or hall your room is located on.
    - **You might not become best friends with your roommate! (Don't worry!)**
      - In fact you might find them slightly annoying since you all live in such close quarters.
      - It's important to find places outside of your dorm room that you enjoy studying in and that you like hanging out in so that you aren't stuck in your room the entire time.
      - Don't worry if you are not great friends with your roommate, you will likely have very different schedules so someone will always be gone at some point during each day.

- **Communication is huge!**
  - If you are not okay with something, let your roommate know, and allow for compromise. It will be like sharing a small room with a sibling. Their stuff might be in the way, they may wake up early or go to bed late. Agree to have some communication about expectations and be open to hear theirs.
  - If compromise is not possible and you have serious roommate issues, contact your RA (Resident Assistant) who can help, that's part of their job!

## ★ Take Care of Yourself- Mental Health MATTERS

- I can speak from experience, college can sometimes be rough. As much as I want to be able to tell you that it will be nothing but fun, I would be doing you a disservice by misleading you! Classes might be really tough, you might get really overwhelmed with the amount of readings you have to keep up with, and maybe you're not the best at taking exams.
- But... *THATS OKAY!* Just as long as you have some ways to take care of yourself along the way.
  - Remember there are many ways to get help with your courses.
    - Attend your Professor's office hours, your TA's office hours, meet up with your own classmates for study sessions, attend review sessions, etc.
  - See your academic advisor if your workload is too overwhelming!
  - Take some breaks if you have been studying or working for too long.
    - Take a walk! Your campus will most likely have plenty of beautiful sights to see.
    - If you're near the ocean, take a quick beach trip!
    - Go to a friend's house for a little bit
    - Read a book for fun
    - Watch some TV!
  - Whatever your idea of a break is, take one every once in a while so you give yourself some time away from your work. It can help clear your head and restore focus when you come back.
  - If you are struggling mentally, many campuses have mental health centers or other resources. Your mental health is IMPORTANT. It's okay to let someone know you are struggling.
    - [Mental Health Resources- California Department of Education](#)
    - [Mental Health Resources- College Forward](#)
    - [Critical Mental Health Resources for College Students](#)
    - [National Institute of Mental Health](#)
    - [Mental Health.Gov](#)



## ★ University Vocabulary You Might Come Across:

- **Academic Advisor:** Helps to create an academic plan towards graduation
- **Academic Counselor:** Supports the mental well-being of the student, achieved through advocacy, outreach, and consultation
- **Add/Drop Period:** The grace period in which students can add or drop courses at the start of the semester/quarter without penalty or fees
- **Adjunct Professor:** A professor hired in a contractual part-time position at a university
- **Co-ed:** Any programs, dormitory, or activity that includes all genders
- **Dean:** the head or president of a university
- **Dean's List:** An issued list of students who achieved high academic excellence
- **Dorms:** On-Campus Living, most often freshmen and sophomores, often includes a meal plan, many have communal or shared restrooms in the dorm hall, and communal mini kitchen
- **Emeritus Professor:** A title given to a retired professor of 10 years and who has rendered distinguished meritorious service to the University and wants to remain in academia
- **Federal Student Loans:** Money provided by the US Federal government that you DO have to pay back, has a flexible payment plan, often has a lower interest rate than a private loan, the amount you qualify for varies in a number of ways, only available to US students
- **Fraternity:** An all men's organization, the houses are individually operated by members and based on "Greek Life"
- **Grants:** Aid you do not have to pay back as long as you fulfill any requirements and successfully graduate and finish your degree
- **Lab Course:** Supplemental to your lecture course, allows for hands-on, practical learning in the course you are studying
- **Lecture:** Usually the main learning time in a lecture hall taught by a professor
- **Off-Campus Living:** Any living situation outside of campus, not arranged or facilitated by the University (with some exceptions). Apartments can be individually owned by companies, or campus owned while still "off-campus" as they are located off school grounds. Rented homes are other options!
- **Office Hours:** Times in which students can meet with their professors to ask questions, get assistance on how to be successful in the course.
- **Practicum:** Supervised hands-on learning often with someone professional in the field, a professor, a researcher, etc.
- **Resident Assistant:** A junior or senior who lives in an individual dorm room on the floor they oversee. They are the mentors and event organizers for newer students. They answer questions, resolve roommate issues, and provide lock out assistance when needed.

- **Scholarships:** Awarded money that you do not have to pay back, often only given to a few students who apply and are qualified for the specific scholarship
- **Section:** Often a smaller, separate learning course that is supplemental to the lecture and taught by Teaching Assistants or Graduate Students
- **Sorority:** An all women's organization, the houses are individually operated by members, often associated with "Greek Life"
- **Thesis:** A paper summarizing a finding on a research study at the end of graduate program (and sometimes undergraduate or honors program)
- **Work Study:** A federal program that provides Universities with funding to hire students for part-time, on-campus jobs to help them pay for tuition fees. Many receive tuition reimbursement rather than pay checks and only certain students qualify for work study.

### ★ Still Have Questions?

- I have created a google form/ survey for you to take a look at and submit questions or topics of interest you may not have found here! Please feel free to let me know if you have any remaining questions/ concerns about life at college and I will add them to this document!
  - [https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSeP48v5eHvdWp2OGuVhRNjbAdfDN4N9nennQPs2YJKdFB0P4g/viewform?usp=sf\\_link](https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSeP48v5eHvdWp2OGuVhRNjbAdfDN4N9nennQPs2YJKdFB0P4g/viewform?usp=sf_link)
- **Coming Soon!** Stay tuned for another College Guide all about the actual college application process :)