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Graduate Studies in the United States



Why this Handbook?

Published by
Tibetan Scholarship Program Alumni Association (TSPAA)
in March 2021

Design and Layout by
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Printed at
Imperial Printing Press, Dharamsala

Funded by



Pursuing a higher education in the United States is no longer a frightening venture but rather an option that is increasingly being availed by Tibetans in exile. The application process to universities in the U.S. is markedly different from those that are in place in India and Nepal, with various criteria and requirements such as TOEFL, GRE, Statement of Purpose, etc. So, therefore this handbook is an attempt to provide an overarching framework to help prospective students plan for their education in the United States as well as point them towards various resources that they can access in order to ensure a successful academic and personal experience.

This handbook has been compiled by the 2017 - 2019 cohort of the Tibetan Scholarship Program (TSP), as part of the Youth Outreach Program under the Tibetan Scholarship Program Alumni Association (TSPAA).

The content of this book is geared towards providing some useful information to anyone who wishes to study in the United States at the graduate level. Therefore, the readers can use this book as a guide to apply for U.S. colleges as well as prepare for the life that follows. However it should not be considered as a comprehensive source of information but rather as a brief manual.

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1- UNIVERSITY APPLICATIONS

It is unquestionably a difficult procedure to apply to a university or a college in the U.S. It can be a nerve-wracking experience to keep track of application deadlines, select the appropriate university, prepare for standardised exams, get letters of recommendation and other among a host of application requirements.

Therefore, there is a need to do some research on the application process, the various specifications and the procedures required before applying to a university.

(a) Admission Cycle:

Call for applications are announced by most universities three times a year for various courses in the U.S. It depends on the preferences of students for which admission cycle they choose to apply but usually they will have to apply atleast a year before they plan to enroll.

Fall Semester / Quarter:

- The Application forms are usually available from August and the deadlines are usually set for December or even January, but each university and program will have their own specific time frame.
- The Semester starts in late August while the quarter begins by late September and ends in December or early January.
- Numerous scholarships are available during this

semester/ quarter

Spring Semester / quarter:

- The application deadlines vary a great deal among respective universities so it would be prudent to refer to the specific university websites / resources for details
- Spring semester starts in January and ends in early May.

Summer Semester / quarter:

- Summer semester is the shortest of all.
- It starts in June and ends in July.
- Some special programs are taught this semester.

"The application in the United States involves a considerable amount of time and effort, you must give yourself enough time to thoroughly research the institution and program that will best serve your academic and professional goals. Always remember that the best way forward is to begin the process early."

Tenzin Dolma



(b) Application Requirements

- Standardized Tests Scores (TOEFL, GRE, GMAT)
- Official Transcripts
- Letters of Recommendation
- Statement of Purpose
- Personal Essay
- Proof of Funds
-

(c) Factors to consider for college selection and application

- Academic standards (rankings) of the universities
- Academic field (major) you are interested in
- Degree, department, faculty, advisors
- Cost of education and personal living cost along with financial aid and scholarships
- Location and region of the universities, both in terms of opportunities available as well as personal preferences
- TOEFL and GRE scores

2- TEST OF ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE (TOEFL)

TOEFL is a test to measure the English language ability of non-native speakers wishing to enroll in English-speaking universities. The test takes about 3 hours to complete and it is conducted by the Educational Testing Service (ETS).

Types of TOEFL test:

(i) Internet based test (TOEFL iBT)

The TOEFL iBT test has 4 sections of 30 points each : Reading, Listening, Speaking, and Writing.

SECTION	NUMBER OF QUESTIONS	TIME ALLOTED	SCORE
Reading	3-5 passages, containing 12-14 questions each	60-100 minutes	30
Listening	6-9 passages, containing 5-6 questions each	60-90 minutes	30
Speaking	6 spoken tasks	20 minutes	30
Writing	2 writing tasks	50 minutes	30

(ii) Paper-based test (TOEFL PBT)

The TOEFL PBT score ranges from 310-677

- A listening section lasting between 30-40 minutes and consisting of 3 parts
- A structure and written expression section

lasting 25 minutes which includes 15 exercises of sentence completion and 25 examples for error identification

- A reading section which lasts 50 minutes and includes answering 50 questions on various reading passages
- A writing section which lasts 30 minutes and involves writing one essay containing around 250-300 words

The main difference between the two formats is the spoken section of the test which is replaced by structure and written expressions section in the paper-based test.

You can register for the test through the official website of ETS and you can choose your test date and center. It cost around \$185 for one test.

"TOEFL is not only a test of your English but also a test of your patience and your persistence."
Tsering Yangdol



Useful References:

- <https://www.ets.org/toefl>
- <https://www.princetonreview.com/k12/toefl-test-prep>
- <https://magoosh.com/toefl/toefl-practice-test/>
- <https://www.manhattanreview.com/free-toefl-practice-test/>
- Barron's Toefl Reference Practice and Guide Book

3- GRADUATE RECORD EXAMINATION (GRE)

GRE is an important step in the graduate school application process. The GRE is a multiple-choice, computer-based, standardized exam that is developed and administered by ETS to provide graduate school with a common testing standard for comparing applicants' qualifications and preparedness for graduate-level academic work. The GRE measures your command of basic arithmetic, algebra, geometry, and data analysis, as well as college-level English proficiency.

More importantly, it measures your ability to think critically, and solve problems as well as analyze and evaluate written material.

The GRE exam will take around 3 hours and 45 minutes to complete and this time doesn't include your check-in time at the testing center.

It is strongly recommended that you register early for your preferred GRE test date so that you can pick a date that allows ETS ample time to process your scores and send them to the institutions to which you will apply. It can take 10 to 15 days to do so.

GRE TEST SECTION BREAKDOWN			
SECTION	NUMBER OF QUESTIONS	TIME ALLOTTED	SCORE RANGE
ANALYTICAL WRITING	1 Argument essay, 1 Issue Essay	30 minutes per essay; 60 minutes total	0 to 6
VERBAL REASONING	6 text completion + 4 sentence equivalence + 10 reading comprehension = 20 total questions	two 30-minute sections; 60 minutes total	130 to 170
QUANTITATIVE REASONING	7-8 quantitative comparison + 12-13 problem solving = 20 total questions	two 35-minute sections	130 to 170

The computer-delivered GRE is administered year-round at various testing centers and on select dates as determined by ETS.



" Make google your best friend and use all of its free resources especially the search engine itself and YouTube to prepare for TOEFL, GRE, SOP, Interviews and for documentation tasks as well. Throughout my TSP journey, I used free and updated resources available in the internet for 80% of my preparation."

Lobsang Wangmo

Useful References:

<https://www.ets.org/gre>

<https://www.manhattanreview.com/free-gre-practice-questions/>

<https://www.princetonreview.com/grad-school-advice/gre-practice-questions>

<https://www.kaptest.com/gre/free/free-gre-practice-test>

<https://magoosh.com/gre/gre-practice-test/>

4- STATEMENT OF PURPOSE(SOP)

A statement of purpose (SOP), which is also known as (a letter of intent or a research statement) introduces your interests and experience to the admissions committee. For research-focused programs, like most Ph.Ds and many master's degrees, your statement of purpose will focus primarily on your relevant past experience, your current research or academic goals as well as your future plans after the degree is completed.

The SOP remains the most important element of the admissions process as well as the most personal as it is that aspect of the application which is produced specifically for the purpose of admission. It allows the admissions committee to gain an understanding into your background and it serve as a narrative to your entire application. In essence, a well-drafted statement of purpose could highlight your strengths as well place your weaknesses in a better light.

Writing the Statement of Purpose

Part 1: Introduce yourself, your interests and motivations.

Part 2: Summarize your undergraduate and previous graduate experience.

Part 3: Discuss the relevance of your recent and current activities.

Part 4: Elaborate on your academic interests.

Remember that SOP should be between 500 and 1,000 words on average. However, it is recommended that you refer to the specific requirements of the respective schools.

5- LETTER OF RECOMMENDATION

Colleges and universities usually require three or more letters of recommendation to be submitted with an application. Teachers, mentors, or employers usually write these letters to highlight a student's accomplishments and help them get accepted to that institution.

At least one letter should be submitted from a past or current professor or academic advisor. Another could be from someone in a slightly different role, including an employer, a research advisor, a senior colleague, or a professor from a different department or class.



No matter who it is, the recommender should know the applicant and recognize their accomplishments. It also helps if the recommender understands some details about the program to which their candidate is applying.

What should a letter of recommendation include?

The referral letter should cover a range of skills, from academic abilities to research experiences, to applied experiences in and out of class. The recommender should clearly answer some specific questions such as:

What is the recommender's relationship with the student?

Why should the graduate faculty listen to his / her opinion? (include recommender's status, title)

What makes this student special? (discuss students' characteristics, qualities, traits)

What specifically did this student do to stand out? (discuss accomplishments, habits in class)

What makes this student qualified for graduate school and for this program? (include specific courses or interests of the student in addition to abilities and traits)

6.MAKING THE MOST OF SCHOOL

(i) Academic Development

There are several out-of-class support systems and opportunities for your academic as well as personal growth made available by the universities. These support/resources include: academic mentors (faculty, deans, administrators, peers), writing centers and the library resources.

- Library Resources**

The Library is the center of every student's academic life in the university, from access to books to serving as study centers. Apart from the usual norm of borrowing library books, the university's library have other valuable resources that one can avail of, namely:

1. **Inter - Library Loans :** Major libraries in the U.S. have collaborations with each other, so that students can file in a request for a book, journal, etc. that may be available in another library outside of one's university.
2. **Subject Specialists:** Most libraries have numerous subject specialists that students can meet through the library's network. Subject specialists are experts in their various disciplines and area studies and students can book appointments with them to get guidance on research papers, assignments, reading lists, etc.
3. **Study Spaces:** Most libraries have common areas

where students can study but you can also reserve private rooms for yourself or for your group discussions. The latter usually requires advance reservations through your library websites.

- Writing Centres**

Most universities have writing centers to help guide students in writing their research papers, assignments, etc. In particular, the advisors in the writing centers will meet the students to help them with formulating clear sentence structures, editing, developing coherent arguments, etc. Writing centers also organize numerous workshops or presentations on various aspects of developing sound academic writing. The input of the students' own ideas and arguments in their work is highly expected, particularly at the graduate level. In this regard, it is of vital importance that students consult with their academic advisors and professors along with the writing center to avoid unintentional plagiarism.

Plagiarism refers to the dishonest practice of taking ideas or information from other sources without acknowledging them in one's work while presenting them as one's own. U.S. universities are extremely strict when it comes to academic integrity, and plagiarism is considered an important area of concern. The penalty for plagiarism when it comes to assignments, papers, etc. are usually high, with students facing suspension or even expulsion from the school along with receiving a failing grade.

- **Office Hours**

Professors usually hold office hours every week, outside of the class schedule, where students can meet them to discuss their classroom commitments and other academic concerns. Office hours are important since they allow students access to one - on - one interactions with their professors and can be used to receive personal feedback on their academic performance along with developing a good relationship with their professors that can later on lead to a good Letter of Recommendation and networking opportunities.

- **Seminars and Workshops**

The departments in the university organize seminars and workshops related to various topics that serve as great platforms to listen and interact with scholars from different disciplines. Along with insightful presentations, these events are great networking opportunities and can also provide the students with platforms to present their own ideas and papers which serve as a great boose to their academic career.

(ii) Professional Development

An education in the U.S. involves both academic as well as professional development, with the objective of laying the foundation to a successful career. There are numerous resources one can avail of through the universities in order to develop their professional skills.

- **Career Center**

All Universities have a career center for the students and in many cases for their alumni, which serves as an important medium to access resources related to preparing for life after college. Career Centers will have career counsellors that students can meet in order to discuss their career / internship opportunities as well as receive feedback on their resumes, personal statement essays, etc.

Furthermore, career centers organize numerous workshops on resume and CV writing, networking, professional skill development such as public speaking, etc. as well as campus placements.

" Penning down your personal statement and/or SOP is an act of creativity yet one bounded by pragmatism. The creative impulse flows through how you wish to paint your story and your dreams on the canvas of your essay; pragmatism draws the boundaries of that story, as you have to decide what aspects of your life, ideas and opinions would make the best mixture to paint that perfect picture which will be viewed by the admission committee."

Tenzing Wangdak



- **Internships**

Many programs in the U.S. have mandatory internship requirements towards the fulfilment of the degree that can be met during the academic sessions or during the summer/winter breaks. International students can apply for internships that are related to their respective fields of study and these opportunities can

be found through the career centers, the respective departments, or other personal networks. Internships are usually unpaid but some may offer a nominal stipend.

- **Networking**

Having an effective network of professional peers and mentors is important, particularly in terms of availing of opportunities outside of the classrooms. Therefore, participating in workshops, conferences, etc. can be great ways to meet people and build one's network. Towards that purpose, having one's updated resume prepared in advance and a professional email account are useful preparatory tools when meeting other people.

7. FINANCIAL AID

There are numerous financial commitments one needs to consider and prepare for before working towards a graduate degree. Some of the common financial costs associated with the life of an international student are

- Application fees
- Test/entrance exam fees (e.g., TOEFL, GRE)
- Visa / SEVIS fees
- Tuition
- Room and board (accommodation and food)
- Books and supplies (including laptop, stationary, project materials, etc.)
- International travel costs to and from the U.S.
- Travel within the United States
- Health and medical insurance
- Personal expenses (including clothing, telephone charges, entertainment, and leisure).

Sources of Financial Aid

Institutional Financial Aid: Many U.S. colleges offer financial aid to international students. However, the number of such scholarships /aid are limited and the majority of them are meant for graduate studies. In most cases, international students need to demonstrate their ability to financially sustain themselves during their studies before being formally accepted by the University.

Some universities such as Harvard University, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Princeton University, Yale University Amherst University, Amherst University offer full financial aid to international students who are admitted into their programs.

Furthermore, universities such as Emory University and Berea College also offer generous financial aid to their students. In most cases, financial aid applications are automatically linked to the college applications and so the best option is to contact the Admissions office of the University / College for detailed information.

Useful References:

<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/student/advice/scholarships-available-us-international-students>

<https://www.nafsa.org/about/about-international-education/financial-aid-undergraduate-international-students>

Scholarships and Financial Grants

Although International Students are ineligible to apply for U.S. Federal grants, there are numerous external scholarships that one can consider. For Tibetan students, the website of the Department of Education, CTA is one of the best sources to look into, along with other general scholarship websites/links, some of which are posted below. The International Education Financial Aid (IEFA) and International Scholarships are

two websites that provide comprehensive information on scholarships available to international students.

Useful References:

<https://sherig.org/en/category/announcement/scholarship/>

<https://www.iefa.org/>

<https://www.internationalscholarships.com/>

Employment Opportunities

International Students can only work for a maximum of 20 hours per week and employment needs to be either through the college/university or internships. However, most internships are usually unpaid and campus jobs do not pay much either, so they should be considered as only supplemental to one's financial requirements.

8. PERSONAL WELLBEING

In order to achieve a productive academic and professional growth, one needs to pay particular attention towards their personal well being as being in a new country and coping with an unfamiliar lifestyle can be a stressful experience.

Personal wellbeing includes your physical and mental health which can be enhanced by participating in recreational activities, student clubs, etc.

(i) Student Health Centers

Student Health Centers are available in all universities and they attend to the students' physical or mental health.

Mental health support includes individual or group counseling services, short-term or long term support on any issues related to stress, anxiety, depression, family and relationship problems, suicidal thoughts, alcohol or drug related problems, etc. Medical health services help students with any acute to chronic medical problems and also provide health education. In most cases, your health insurance should cover all or a majority of these expenses.

The services can be availed through scheduling appointments on the health center's webpage on the university's official website.

(ii) Recreational activities

"Time spent enriching your non-school hours is never a waste." - Robin Sharma.

College is not just about your classes and grades. Beyond that, there is a great opportunity to explore your talents and skills.



Engaging in recreational activities makes you efficient during your working or school hours. You can fulfill your interests through a range of activities from being a part of a musical band or taking up Judo classes in your college. Additionally there are theater clubs, athletic clubs, various classes on dance, theater, sports, etc.

Universities in the U.S. also celebrate various cultures, religions, LGBTQi communities in the form of movie nights, seminars, coffee hours, salon parties etc.

So therefore pick up a hobby and go for it. Initially, it might take some time to look up, find the location, register and figure out your schedule to squeeze in the recreational activities. However, once it is set, it will be both a fulfilling experience as well as an opportunity to unwind. For instance, if you like swimming, you

should look up the pool timings, find a time that suits your schedule and prepare accordingly.

(iii) International Student Center

The international student centers in the universities have designated separate offices and student bodies to assist international students in adjusting to the new environment. Services provided by International student centers include assistance in preparing legal documents for visas, employment and taxation, housing and welfare, etc. A visit to the center will provide you a great opportunity to connect with other international students also.



“Never forget to visit your favorite eateries, join poetry recitations, and take a walk along the river. Because, a key to success in college and beyond is your optimal overall wellness.”

Tenzin Chemey

Learning Amidst COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic has forced teachers and students to shift their classrooms and teachings online.

(i) Common challenges faced holding online classes:

Technological know-how :

Most of the schools in the United States have their own learning management portal. The University will

provide you with a username and password. When you login to your account, the courses that you have enrolled in would have already been uploaded to your profile. Your professors will upload the assignments in the portal and you need to upload your work there. You will also be able to view your grades in the portal.



Since the outbreak of the pandemic, most of the schools have started providing online courses. Therefore, getting a hang of the virtual learning process is important to be able to make the best use of it.

Some of the most frequently used online learning platforms are :

Zoom: how to use zoom

<https://support.zoom.us/hc/en-us/articles/201362193-Joining-a-meeting>

Google Meet: how to use Google Meet

<https://apps.google.com/intl/en/meet/how-it-works/>

Likewise, there are many other video conferencing platforms that your school or professor might prefer to

use. It is important to know about these online tools and do some trials in advance before the start of your actual classes. Google and Youtube are great sources of information on how to start setting up your online platforms.

Time Management

Managing your time while studying remotely could be an additional challenge during the pandemic. Hence, having a daily planner would be helpful. Productive people are highly efficient with their time.

Stress management

If you are experiencing mental stress and problems due to your school workload, relationship problems or any other reasons, remember that you are not alone and that these feelings are normal. You can set up virtual appointments and drop- ins with counselors, participate in virtual support group meetings and virtual wellness programs. Strict confidentiality is maintained in all of the above meetings. Therefore, it is safe for you to share your problems.

Some useful tips on managing a stressful environments are listed below:

- COVID-19 has made learning difficult and it is important to set realistic learning goals depending on your situation and resources.
- Breaking down your problems into smaller chunks

will ensure more productivity and less anxiety.

- Don't forget to practise your daily dose of self care activities- going for a walk, meditating, cooking, reading, journaling, and etc.
- Know that even though virtual classes may make it seem like you are alone with your problems in your home, distant from schools and friends, remember, help is only some few clicks away. If you need any help, do not hesitate to reach out and seek help. You will be surprised by how generous people are and how easy it is.
- To deal with distraction, set a separate time in your day and a silent workspace in your home solely for attending online class and studying.
- Lastly, it is important to stay connected with your friends and families.

Useful references:

- <https://childmind.org/article/self-care-in-the-time-of-coronavirus/>
- <https://www.usnews.com/education/best-colleges/articles/how-to-overcome-challenges-of-online-classes-due-to-coronavirus>
- <https://www.usf.edu/education/about-us/news/2020/tips-success-online-classes.aspx>

9. THE TIBETAN SCHOLARSHIP PROGRAM

The Tibetan Scholarship Program (TSP) remains one of the most well known academic programs within the exile community towards the purpose of pursuing a graduate degree in the United States. Inaugurated in 1988, the program has been sponsored by the U.S. Department of State's Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs and is administered through a Cooperative Agreement with the Tibet Fund in collaboration with the Central Tibetan Administration's Department of Education. Every year, approximately six applicants from India and one from Nepal are selected to complete a Master's Degree Program in the United States. This Program is a great platform for pursuing a higher education in the United States while also receiving a fully funded scholarship.

The Applications are usually announced by mid December, with the deadlines being drawn around mid - March. The selection process involves a written exam on Tibetan culture and history, two rounds of TOEFL tests - IBT & PBT and an interview but there have been changes to this process, so it would be useful to refer to the application package for the latest information. Applicants must also have completed atleast four years of academic work post high school.

Further information on eligibility as well as the application forms can be accessed either through

the websites of The Tibet Fund or the Department of Education, which are listed below:

www.tibetfund.org

www.sherig.org

The information provided in this booklet is relevant to the purpose of applying for TSP, along with applying for U.S. graduate schools in general. You can also reach out to the TSPAA for any assistance or queries through our website and / or email, which are listed below:

<http://www.tspalumni.org/>
tspalumni@gmail.com

