



CAREER CENTER
Illinois State University

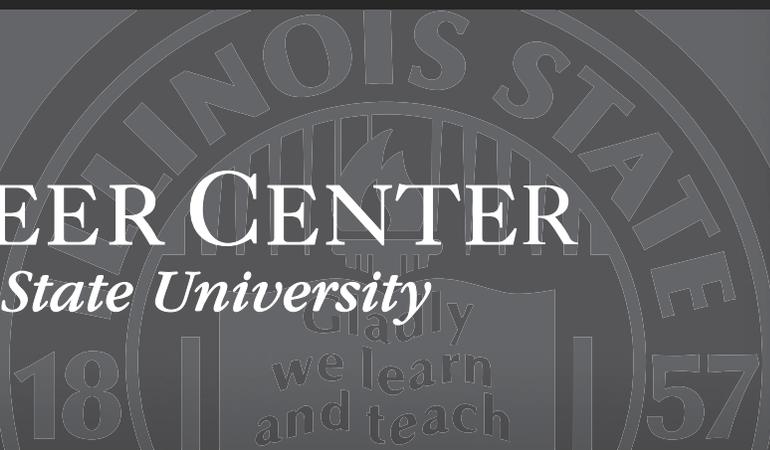
STATE
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Graduate School Guide

Tips for Those Considering or Planning on
Attending Graduate School



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Is Graduate School Right For You?

At some point in your college career, you will need to decide what to do after graduation, and that includes whether or not to attend graduate school. If you're trying to determine whether graduate school is right for you, here are some pointers to help you make a decision.

1 Should I consider going to graduate school?

*Going to graduate school **might** be a good idea if you...*

- Want to be a professor, lawyer, doctor, investment banker, or work in any profession that requires a post-secondary education.
- Wish to develop additional expertise in a particular subject or field to maximize your future earning potential and opportunities for career advancement.
- Are deeply interested in a particular subject and wish to study it in-depth — AND have the time and financial resources to devote to further education.

*Going to graduate school **might not** be a good idea if you...*

- Are trying to delay your entry into the “real world” with real responsibilities and real bills.
- Are clueless about your career goals.
- Aren't prepared to devote the time and hard work needed to succeed.
- Want to stay in school longer to avoid a poor job market.

2 Is it better to work first or attend graduate school immediately after I complete my undergraduate degree?

Work first if...

- You would like to get some real-world experience before investing the thousands of dollars in a graduate degree.
- The graduate school of your choice prefers work experience (most MBA and some Ph.D. programs require this)
- You cannot afford to go to graduate school now, and you haven't applied for any scholarships, grants, fellowships, or assistantships which could pay for a great deal of your education.

Go to graduate school now if...

- You are absolutely sure that your career option requires a graduate degree or further schooling.
- You have been awarded grants, fellowships, scholarships, or assistantships that will help pay for your education.
- You're concerned that once you start earning real money, you won't be able to return to the lifestyle of a “poor” student.
- Your study habits and mental abilities are at their peak, and you worry whether you'll have the discipline (or motivation) to write papers and study for exams in a few years.

3 What is a gap year(s) and what can I do during that time?

- A gap year is simply a portion of time between undergraduate and graduate school during which people take time off from taking classes.
- During this time, people explore areas of interest for the benefit of becoming more career focused, mature, and confident.
- There are a number of options for a gap year such as working or participating in the Peace Corp or AmeriCorps. The Peace Corp and AmeriCorp offer graduate students opportunities to combine their Corp experience with their graduate studies. They also both offer financial aid opportunities during and after completion of the programs.
- If you have decided to take a gap year there are many resources available for you to decide what to do during that time such as:

Volunteer Resources:

- Gapyear.com: gapyear.com
- Global Volunteers: globalvolunteers.org
- Global Health Corps: ghcorps.org
- Habitat for Humanity: habitat.org
- Idealist.org: idealist.org
- Jesuit Volunteer Corps: jesuitvolunteers.org
- The United Nations Volunteers: unv.org
- Volunteer Adventures: volunteeradventures.com
- Volunteer International: volunteerinternational.org

Teaching Resources:

- CIEE Teach Abroad: ciee.org/#teach
- Dave's ESL Cafe: eslcafe.com
- National Association of International Educators (NAFSA): nafsa.org
- NYC Teaching Fellows: philadelphiateachingfellows.org/
- Teach for America: teachforamerica.org
- The DC Teaching Fellow: dcteachingfellows.org
- The Teaching Opportunity Program: top.cuny.edu
- World Teach: worldteach.org

Work Resources

- Bill Emerson National Hunger Fellowship: hungercenter.org
- Camp Counselors USA: ccusa.com
- Chemonics International Entry Level Professional Program: chemonics.com
- Club Med: clubmedjobs.com
- Conservation Directory: nwf.org
- Cool Works: coolworks.com
- Directors Guild Assistant Directors Training Program: trainingplan.org/index.html
- Eckerd Youth Alternatives: eckerdyouth.org
- Kraft Foods: hotdoggerblog.com/be-a-hotdogger
- National Park Service: nps.gov/personnel
- The US Agency for International Development (USAID): usaid.gov/careers
- U.S. PIRG: uspig.org
- White House Intern Program: whitehouse.gov/government/wh-intern.html

4 What are the pros and cons of going to graduate school full-time vs. part-time?

Benefits of attending graduate school full-time:

- You'll be able to complete your degree sooner.
- You can totally commit your intellectual, physical, and emotional energy to your education.
- Ideal if you want to expedite making a dramatic career change.

Benefits of attending graduate school part-time:

- Work income helps pay for your education.
- You can take a very manageable course load.
- You can juggle family responsibilities while completing your degree.
- Allows you to work in the function/industry/career of your choice while continuing your education.
- Employer will often pay for part (or all!) of your graduate degree.

What to Do After Deciding to Attend Graduate School

Congratulations on deciding to attend graduate school! The next step in the graduate school process is to start researching what type of degree you are planning on pursuing, what type of institution you would like to attend, and possibly scheduling a campus visit to learn more about the program.

1 What type of degree are you planning to pursue?

Master's Degree (MA, MS, MSW, MEd, MSN, MBA)

- 2-3 years beyond Bachelor degree
- Focus on synthesizing experiences
- Can consist of 30-36 hours of courses only, a comprehensive exam, or thesis

Doctoral Degree (PhD, EdD, MFA)

- 2-4 years beyond Master's degree
- Focus on research and scholarship
- Consists of a final dissertation

Professional Degree (MD, JD, AuD)

- 2-6 years beyond a Bachelor degree
- Focus on professional competencies
- Consists of final certification

2 What should I consider when researching graduate schools and programs?

It's important to remember that it's the program that is first priority. The school is the second thing to consider when planning to attend graduate school. Make sure to have conversations with faculty, staff, alumni, mentors, and current graduate students at both your current and potential future institutions to inquire about the different degrees and programs you are considering. You should also contact the university's graduate school coordinator to help guide you through the process and answer any questions you might have. Also consider the following when selecting and researching a graduate program:

- Prominence and/or accreditation of the program
- Length of the program
- Course selection
- Theoretical, research, or pragmatic approach to the subject matter
- Clinical experiences and/or practical applications of studies
- Philosophical and professional attitudes of the faculty and department
- Current research, publications, and professional involvement of the faculty
- Specialties and interests of the faculty
- Required background and credentials of the students
- Availability of career services and academic support services
- Financial aid opportunities, cost, and residency requirements
- Student and campus culture
- Size, geographic location, and type of community
- Availability of housing
- Alumni success

There are many helpful resources to consider when researching graduate schools and programs such as:

- Peterson's Guide to Colleges: petersons.com
- Gradschools.com: gradschools.com
- Princeton Review: princetonreview.com
- GraduateGuide: graduateguide.com
- U.S. News: grad-schools.usnews.rankingsandreviews.com/best-graduate-schools

3 Is attending an online graduate school a good value?

Attending an online graduate school can be a great way to further your education. There are several questions to consider before making a final decision to attend an online graduate program or not.

- Does a graduate level program exist in my professional discipline?
- If a program exists, is it accredited?
- How will an online degree be received in my professional field?
- Will I gain practical experience through an online program?
- Will my learning style allow me to succeed in an online program?
- Do I possess strong enough computer and internet skills to be able to be successful in an online program?

4 How do I schedule a campus visit?

Consider setting aside some time to visit the campuses of the programs of which you are most interested to learn more and get a feel for the culture of campus. If necessary, reserve your accommodations prior to your visit. Consider coordinating your visit with a graduate open house and/or scheduling a time to meet one-on-one with faculty, staff, or current students in the program. You may also consider requesting to observe a graduate class. Make sure to prepare a list of important questions to ask during your visit. Finally, you may consider taking an informal or formal campus tour to learn more about campus and gain an opportunity to talk with current students and faculty.

The Application Process

Just like when applying to an undergraduate institution, applying to graduate school takes time, organization, and commitment.

1 What is involved in the application process?

The application process for most graduate programs includes taking one or more standardized exams, completing an application, creating a cover letter and graduate resume or curriculum vitae, requesting and collecting letters of recommendation, preparing a personal statement, and requesting and sending your undergraduate transcript(s). The Career Center at ISU is here to assist you in all of these areas. They hold an array of workshops throughout the year, provide appointments to review your resume, curriculum vitae, and/or personal statements, and provide individual career advising. Call or stop by the Career Center for more information or to make an appointment today!

2 What is the timeline of the application process?

JUNIOR YEAR:

- Attend Career Center graduate school workshops
- Research graduate program options and requirements that align with your interests
- Call or email schools that have programs you may be interested in
- Research and register for appropriate graduate admissions tests
- Consult study books, begin taking free practice tests, and attend prep courses
- Create a first draft of your personal statement to use when applying

May-August

- Take required graduate test and request that your scores be sent to the appropriate schools. If you have not registered for the test yet, register and prepare for them now.
- Visit prospective campuses and talk to students/faculty involved in the programs you are interested in
- Identify faculty and/or professionals to ask for recommendation letters

SENIOR YEAR

- Attend Career Center graduate school workshops
- Research graduate program options and requirements that align with your interests
- Call or email schools that have programs you may be interested in
- Research and register for appropriate graduate admissions tests
- Consult study books, begin taking free practice tests, and attend prep courses
- Create a first draft of your personal statement to use when applying

August-October

- Attend Career Center graduate school workshops
- Take required graduate admission test if you have not already done so (6 months before earliest application deadline is ideal as it takes 4 weeks for official scores to arrive at designated school)
- Get organized and create a separate file for each institution you are applying to
- Edit personal statement by consulting with writing experts and faculty
- Request faculty and/or professionals write letters of recommendation
- Research and apply for financial assistance

November-December

- Order official transcripts from the Registrar's Office and request they be sent to the appropriate schools
- Finalize personal statement
- Edit, complete, and submit your application materials in advance of the deadline
- Apply for financial aid opportunities such as scholarships and graduate assistantships

January-March

- Contact schools to confirm receipt of application and completion of file
- Visit schools of interest to narrow your search
- Finalize all financial aid paperwork and fill out FAFSA
- Schedule all admissions interviews and prepare questions for each school to gain more information about their programs

April-May

- Research acceptances to verify your choice
- Mail acceptance materials to the program of your choice and notify all other schools of your decision
- Submit all required paperwork and payments to the chosen institution
- Make living arrangements
- Write thank-you notes including an update on your search status to those who wrote recommendation letters on your behalf

3 What is typically required for a graduate school application?

Standardized Exams

Many graduate school programs require submitting the results of a standardized test. Some of the most common standardized tests are:

Test	Web site	Offered	Length of Test
DAT (dental)	ada.org/dat.aspx	Daily (computer-based)	4 hrs. 15min.
GMAT (business)	mba.com/mba/TaketheGMAT	Daily (computer-based)	3 hrs. 20 min.
GRE general (grad program)	gre.org	Daily (computer-based)	4 hours
GRE subject (grad program)	gre.org	Nov., Dec., April	2 hrs. 50 min.
LSAT (law)	lsac.org	Feb., June, Oct. & Dec.	3 hours
MCAT (medical)	aamc.org/students/mcat/start.htm	22 times/year (computer-based)	4 hrs. 30 min.
OAT (optometry)	ada.org/oat/index.html	Daily (computer-based)	4 hrs. 45 min.
PCAT (pharmacy)	PCATweb.info	June, Oct. & Jan.	4 hrs. 30 min.
Praxis I® (education)	ets.org/praxis	Daily (computer-based)	4 hrs. 30 min.
Praxis II® (education subject tests)	ets.org/praxis	Sept., Nov., Jan., Mar., Apr., June & July	1-4 hours

Be sure to plan ahead to take the specific test required for your particular program. In your planning, make sure to include study time. Many of the standardized tests have pre-set days and times for which you can register and take the test. There is also a fee associated with each test. For more information about these tests check out Kaplan, Princeton Review, and ETS.

Cover Letters

A cover letter is your introduction to the institution for which you are applying. Its purpose is to get the rest of your application materials seen and to demonstrate that your qualifications and experiences match the required qualifications and experiences needed in the program to which you are applying. Be sure to customize your letter for each application. A cover letter guide and sample is on the Career Center website.

Curriculum Vitae (CV)

A curriculum vitae is similar to a resume, as it includes biographical information about one's educational and work background. However, a curriculum vitae is used primarily for educational institutions, applications for professional (academic, teaching, or administrative) positions, admissions to a professional or graduate level program, and/or for professional positions in which advanced levels of education and experience are required.

Graduate School Resumes

Applied graduate school programs such as business and technology, typically do not require a curriculum vitae, but instead a graduate school resume. A graduate school resume is like a resume you would submit to an employer for a job. Be sure to reference the resume writing guide and samples on the Career Center website.

Letters of Recommendation

Almost every graduate program requires letters of recommendations. Applicants are normally asked for 3 letters of recommendation and it's recommended that you only send the number of letters requested. If possible, you should request letters from professionals who know you well and have experience in the field in which you are applying. It is important to note that you may be asked to waive your right to read the letter before it is sent; therefore it is recommended that you are strategic in who you ask to write for you. It is also recommended that you ask if the writer is willing to write a favorable letter for you.

In order to get to know professors it's recommended to speak up in class, take multiple courses from the same professors, and visit them during their office hours. You can also provide each letter writer with information relevant to your prior experiences such as your resume, personal statement, and reminders of personal experiences and discussions. To request a letter, try to meet with the person face-to-face at least 2 months before you need the letter to allow for ample letter writing time. It is also recommended to write thank-you notes to letter writers.

Personal Statements

A personal statement is an opportunity to sell yourself through writing to the admissions committee during the graduate school application process. You will normally be asked to either respond to a very specific question provided in the application or given freedom to choose what to write in the personal statement. Be sure to see "Writing a Personal Statement" for more information on writing your personal statement.

Portfolios

Typically fine arts graduate programs require the submission of a portfolio as part of their application process. A portfolio is used to summarize your exceptional academic work. There are many online portfolio options available. Be sure to do research on the portfolio that best suits your needs and the requirements of the graduate program for which you are applying.

Transcripts

Most graduate programs require applicants to submit an official undergraduate transcript with their application. You can request a transcript from Illinois State University's Registrar in person or online. There is a small fee associated with the transcript request and it is essential to make sure all your financial obligations with the university are settled in order to have your request fulfilled. Be sure to plan accordingly as it normally takes 2-3 days to process a transcript request.

Graduate School Interviews

As part of the application process, you may be asked to interview for a position in the program to which you are applying. You will be asked an array of questions throughout the interview. The interviewers will normally look at three things during an interview: (1) your answers to the questions, (2) your organization of thoughts, and (3) how well you express yourself through your answers.

At the end of the interview you will normally have an opportunity to ask questions of the interviewers. These questions can help you determine if the school and/or program fits with the goals you have set for yourself. They can also show the interviewers your extent of interest in the program.

Writing a Personal Statement

A personal statement is your opportunity to sell yourself in the graduate school application process

1 Are there different types of personal statements?

Personal statements generally fall into two categories: (1) a general, comprehensive personal statement that allows you maximum freedom in terms of what you write and is the type of statement often prepared for standard medical or law school application forms or (2) a response to very specific questions that are often asked in business and other graduate school applications during which you should respond specifically to the question(s) being asked of you.

2 The Do's and Don'ts of writing a personal statement:

Things to DO in a personal statement:

- Answer the questions that are asked.
- Discuss why you are interested in the school and some of their unique features.
- Write about what interests and excites you related to the graduate program.
- Focus on the positive and discuss your future goals.
- Create an outline to keep your essay organized, coherent, and concise.
- Provide an opening paragraph that includes an interesting intro that “hooks” the reader and includes a thesis that tells the main point of the statement.
- Proofread for grammar, syntax, punctuation, word usage, and style.
- Use readable fonts and conventional spacing and margins.
- Provide evidence to support your claims by using examples to demonstrate your abilities. Evaluate rather than describe your experiences.
- Use a mix of long and short sentences as well as speak in the first person active voice (I...).
- End your essay with a conclusion that refers back to the intro and restates your thesis.
- Proofread and revise your statement at least 3 times as well as having others review it.

Things NOT to do in a personal statement:

- Preach to your reader—you can express opinions, but don't come across as extreme.
- Talk about politics, religion, or money as a motivator.
- Use boring clichéd intros or conclusions such as “Allow me to introduce myself...” or “In sum, there are three reasons you should admit me...”.
- Get the name of the school wrong.
- Be wordy or use jargon—don't try to impress the readers by using words you just looked up.
- Give excuses for a low GPA.
- Simply summarize your resume.
- Lie, embellish the truth, or say you are going to do something before coming to the university.

3 Preparing to Write Your Statement

Spend time reflecting on what you know about yourself, how family members, professional or others, and faculty have influenced your decision. It may be useful to develop an outline of what you want to convey to admission committees. Include qualities and skills you believe you possess, and include evidence of these through activities and experiences.

These might include:

- Special emphasis within your major and/or minor
- Courses taken
- Independent study
- Study abroad
- Internships
- Significant work experience
- Experiences working with people
- Research experience
- Teaching experience
- Student government or leadership activities
- Community service or volunteer experience

Your essay should distinguish you from others and define your individual character by explaining the significance of activities and educational experiences to you. By reflecting on the meaning of your values, skills and interests, you can write a personal statement that will reveal who you are, and not just what you have done. Describe how these experiences taught you important life lessons and clarified your career goals. Develop themes of community involvement, the role of working within teams, motivation and personal drive that have prepared you for the rigors of graduate school. Summarize these ideas through your decision to pursue an advanced degree.

4 What types of questions can help get me started writing my personal statement?

- What about this program is attractive to you?
- What characteristics, experiences or skills might distinguish you from other candidates?
- What are your specific research interests and how do they fit with this program and faculty?
- What work or internship experiences of yours relates to this graduate program?
- How does your undergraduate work relate to this program?
- Are there any outstanding academic or personal achievements that might be worth mentioning?
- Are there any personal or academic challenges that you have had to overcome?
- How does this graduate program connect with your career goals?
- What are the most compelling reasons that a graduate program would want you instead of your competition?
- Are there any problems on your academic record that should be explained?
- Are there any life events which have particularly motivated you?
- What are some traits, work habits, or attitudes that you possess that could contribute to this program?

5 What does a sample personal statement look like?

Introduction paragraph:

The first sentence should be unique and compelling, possibly thought provoking or attention-grabbing. After gaining the reader's attention, connect your opening to the actual program and position for which you are applying. Be sure to mention the specific name of the program or university as well as the title of the position or degree you are seeking. These first few sentences may also explain your desire or motivation that influenced your interest to study the subject. Be sure to end this paragraph with a thesis statement that tells the main point of the personal statement as a whole.

First body paragraph:

This paragraph as well as consecutive body paragraphs should address specific questions from the application if provided and should include detailed evidence to support the thesis statement made at the end of the introductory paragraph. The paragraphs should flow by using transitions and resolutions. Your personal experiences and the reasons for wanting to attend the school can be discussed here as well.

Second and consecutive body paragraphs:

Each body paragraph should be specifically focused and support an introductory topic sentence. The topic sentence should show the theme of that particular paragraph. Throughout the paragraph you may be addressing your qualifications and establishing fit, explaining why you are interested in the program, detailing your long term goals, background, skills, etc. Regardless, keep your examples relevant to supporting your qualifications. Make sure to show instead of tell. Each paragraph should also have a conclusion sentence which ends each paragraph with a meaningful point that provides a transition to the next paragraph.

Conclusion paragraph:

In the final paragraph, tie together the various examples and claims you have raised in the essay such as your experiences or accomplishments mentioned. You should also reiterate your interest in this specific program or position. You might also mention how this job or degree is a step towards reaching your long-term goal. Make sure to state all this in a conclusive and brief manner. Finally, end on a positive note with one or two unique, compelling, thought-provoking, or possibly attention-grabbing sentences. Remember to remind the admissions committee of your interest, qualifications, and future goals as a result of not only being admitted into the program, but also your plans to apply this advanced education.

6 Personal Statement Checklist

- Did I address the question?
- Did I include enough detail to support my claims?
- Did I adhere to word limits?
- Did I check for spelling and grammar mistakes?
- Will the opening paragraph interest the reader enough to read the rest of the statement?
- Does my writing suggest I am genuinely interested in the kind of work to be done?
- Is the statement positive and am I presenting the information in a Win/Win format?
- Is it single spaced throughout the paragraph and double spaced between paragraphs?
- Do all lines start on the left-hand side of the page?
- Are there two spaces between each paragraph and is the content positioned on the page well?
- Is the font consistent throughout the statement? Use a readable, professional-looking font (Times New Roman) and 12-point font.
- Are the margins consistent? One inch is standard.
- If printed, is the statement printed one sided and on resume paper?
- When preparing to mail, did I use a paper clip and not a staple?
- Did I title the page correctly?

Financing Options for Graduate School

There are a variety of ways in which you can fully or partially fund your graduate studies. Make sure to check the school and department websites regularly to find funding opportunities as well as speaking with your future institution's Financial Aid office. Remember, funding can only be provided to those students who apply!

Graduate Assistantships

Assistantships are positions offered through a university department in which the student is involved in research, teaching, and/or professional experiences related to their area of interest. Students normally work approximately 10-20 hours per week with professional staff and/or faculty members and are normally given a full or partial tuition waiver and a monthly stipend or hourly wage. Please note, the tuition waiver does not normally include funding for student fees. Be sure to apply early to these positions as competition can be intense.

Scholarships

Scholarships are generally available for graduate students through the university. Many programs also offer scholarships to students within their program. Students can also find scholarships through online searches, civic, professional, and fraternal organizations as well as many state agencies.

Grants/Fellowships

Grants and fellowships are similar to scholarships where generally no work is required. The amount of the grant or fellowship can cover the total or partial amount of tuition as well as a possible living stipend. They are normally awarded based on merit through the university, but are generally provided by private industry, foundations, or the government.

Employers

Many employers offer their employees incentives to return to school to receive a higher education degree. Be sure to inquire with your employer if they provide any funding, noting any limits to how many credit hours can be taken per semester and/or future employment obligations after receiving funding.

Loans

Loans are an additional way of funding your graduate school costs. Be sure to visit your future institution's Financial Aid office to review loan procedures and specifics, as you may need to submit supplemental forms or school-specific applications in addition to the FAFSA form.



Considerations for International Students When Applying to Graduate School

Academic Credentials

If you are an international student considering graduate school in the U.S., it is important to first consider if the bachelor's degree you earned outside the U.S. will be accepted by the U.S. graduate school to which you are applying.

If it is unclear whether or not your degree will be accepted, it is recommended that you send a short letter to the U.S. graduate school admissions office to ask them to review your credentials. Be sure to state that you will abide by the admissions committee's decision and that you are willing to provide any additional information they may need to make the most informed decision possible.

English Language Proficiency

There are two main English language proficiency exams, the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) and the International English Language Testing System (IELTS). Depending on the institution being applied to, international students sometimes have a choice as to which test they take. Regardless, international students should not take either test more than 3 times. It is also important to remember that institutions rarely budge on admitting students who do not meet the minimum TOEFL or IELTS score.

International Finances

International students face unique challenges in regards to finances. Be sure to plan ahead even if you have already received scholarships and/or grants for your graduate studies. There are many additional ways for international students to fund their studies.

- ***Employment at the University***
Many international students, because of U.S. tax and immigration laws, are unable to hold part or full time jobs while in the U.S. They can, however, hold jobs at their institution. Students should look at their university's job posting website for more specific information.
- ***Scholarships***
In addition to U.S. scholarships, international students are also eligible for scholarships from their home country. Be sure to look into this type of support from your home country's local, regional, and national sources of funding. Be cognizant of the fact that some scholarships may require a student to return to their home country for some time after they receive their degree.
- ***Loans***
Finally, it may be possible for international students to obtain a loan from a U.S. institution to fund their education. It is important to know that some loans may require the student to obtain a U.S. citizen cosigner.