

A Successful Start in the USA

A Guide for Swiss Students, Researchers and Engineers



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Embassy of Switzerland
USA - Washington, D.C.
Office of Science, Technology and Higher Education

Preface

Switzerland and the USA are well connected in many areas, also prominently in science, technology and higher education. All Swiss universities have several cooperation or exchange agreements with U.S. universities. Both Swiss and U.S. companies have built research facilities in the other country. Prominent examples are Novartis in the Boston area, IBM in Rueschlikon, and Google in Zurich.

There are three Swiss offices in the USA dealing primarily with science, technology and higher education. The **Office of Science, Technology and Higher Education within the Embassy of Switzerland in Washington, D.C.**, focuses on science policy, whereas **SHARE in Boston** and **swissnex in San Francisco** are platforms for Swiss education, research, art and innovation. All three offices aim to combine the knowledge, energy and competencies of Switzerland, the USA and Canada, while being jointly operated by the Swiss Federal State Secretariat for Education and Research and the Department of Foreign Affairs.

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The current (2006) edition of this guide represents the first update since the original 1997 edition was launched by A3SFIT, the American Alumni Association of the Swiss Federal Institutes of Technology (ETH Zurich/EPFL). It takes into account the changes in the USA as well as changes in Switzerland. For the USA in particular, these changes involve the far-reaching adjustments prompted by the September 11, 2001 attacks. In Switzerland, the main features of the higher education landscape were modified and considerably modernized through the creation of the Universities of Applied Sciences (UAS or *Fachhochschulen/Hautes écoles spécialisées*) as well as the adjustment to Bachelor's and Master's programs as a result of Switzerland's implementation of the Bologna Declaration.

This is also the place to thank Stefan Günther, who was responsible for updating this guide. He served as an intern in the Office of Science, Technology and Higher Education at the Swiss Embassy from January 2006 to June 2006. My colleagues and I would like to thank all the people who supported and contributed to this project, which was financed by the State Secretariat for Education and Research.

I would like this guide to help all those concerned in overcoming the biggest obstacles, and I hope that their stay in the USA will be a complete success.

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August 2006

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I. INTRODUCTION

The USA is the global leader in research and education. With some 4,000 institutions of higher learning, the USA offers countless possibilities to students, lecturers and researchers. Swiss researchers and students are still strongly attracted to the USA, even if more and more Swiss are spending their years abroad in the EU (European Union) area, in Asia and in Oceania. At present, several thousand Swiss are in the USA as students, lecturers, researchers and scientists.

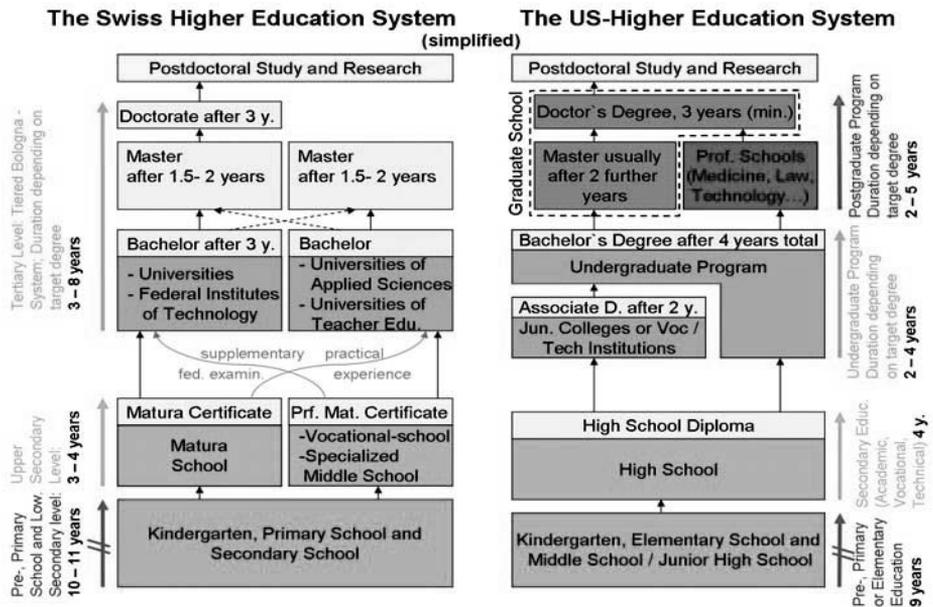
A stay in the USA to pursue studies or research is highly recommended, since there is a very competitive environment at the numerous top universities and research institutions. However, the differences between the Swiss and U.S. educational systems should not be underestimated. The two systems originated and evolved in separate ways with few comparable institutions. The main problem in transferring from Switzerland to the USA involves the recognition of degrees and diplomas from Swiss institutions of higher learning or from Swiss secondary schools.

The problems connected with transferring and starting out in a new environment can be resolved. However, it is particularly important to remember that it is necessary to make careful preparations well in advance. For example, it is essential to keep oneself informed in advance about the admissions procedures of the individual institutions of higher learning and the formalities for entering the USA.

This guide provides general information and advice and aims to facilitate the transfer and start for Swiss students, lecturers, researchers, engineers and architects within the USA.

II. EDUCATIONAL SYSTEMS IN SWITZERLAND AND THE USA

The educational systems of Switzerland and the USA differ considerably in their structure and areas of emphasis. In switching from one system to another, those differences frequently lead to problems, particularly in the recognition of course credits, degrees and diplomas. In order to resolve those problems, it is important to understand both educational systems with their differences.



A. SWITZERLAND

In Switzerland, the school system is organized into various levels: Pre-School, Primary School, Lower Secondary Level, Upper Secondary Level, and finally the Tertiary Level. The cantons are responsible for Primary School and the Lower and Upper Secondary Levels. At the Tertiary Level, there are seven regional Universities of Applied Sciences (UAS), ten Cantonal Universities and two Federal Institutes of Technology (ETH Zurich/EPFL).

Compulsory schooling forms the basis of the Swiss educational system. It generally lasts nine years, split between the primary and lower secondary levels. In the majority of cantons, primary school lasts six years. It is followed by lower secondary school which generally lasts three years. Completion of this stage of education ends mandatory school attendance.

Schooling at the upper secondary level generally lasts three to four years, leading to an upper secondary school qualification, entitling students to enter tertiary education. Upper secondary schools which award the Maturity Certificate are called Matura Schools. Graduates with a Maturity Certificate or *Baccalauréat* (*Maturitätszeugnis*, *Certificat de Maturité*, or *Attestato di Maturità*) have access to traditional academic universities. In addition, these graduates may also enter a University of Applied Sciences after completing a one-year internship or work-placement assignment.

Vocational/professional education is a special feature and strength of the Swiss system and represents an upper-secondary-level alternative to the *Matura* School. In a two- to four-year apprenticeship, students receive profession-specific education and training. During their formation, apprentices also have the possibility of obtaining a Professional *Baccalauréat* or “Professional Maturity Certificate” which entitles them to study at a University of Applied Sciences. Furthermore, after passing a supplementary examination, these students also gain the right to attend a traditional university.

For a long time, the *Höhere Wirtschafts- und Verwaltungsschulen* or *HWV* (Higher Economic and Administrative Schools) and the *Höhere Technische Lehranstalten* (Higher Technical Institutes), *HTL* or *Technikum* or *Tech* for short, provided the only opportunities for academic continuing education after an apprenticeship in Switzerland. When the Federal Act on the University of Applied Sciences went into effect on October 1, 1996, the approximately 70 higher colleges (technical, engineering and IT (information technology), science, business, music, social sciences, art and design, health, and so forth) were combined into seven regional Universities of Applied Sciences. Teacher training colleges (*Pädagogische Hochschulen*), which have recently undergone major changes, are also considered as institutions of higher learning, similar to the Universities of Applied Sciences.

In signing the Bologna Declaration in 1999, Switzerland made the commitment to introduce a two-cycle higher education system as well as a transparent credit system (European Credits Transfer System, ECTS). Those are the central elements in creating a European Higher Education Area which grants students greater mobility through comparable degrees.

The Rectors’ Conference of the Swiss Universities (*Rektorenkonferenz der Schweizer Universitäten CRUS*) and the Conference of the Universities of Applied Sciences Switzerland (*Konferenz der Fachhochschulen der Schweiz KFH*) are cooperating closely on the implementation of the Bologna Declaration in Switzerland. In 2002-2003, they issued, the relevant legally binding guidelines for the Universities of Applied Sciences, the Universities and the Federal Institutes of Technology.

Across all tertiary education sectors, the new system is based on a first cycle (Bachelor) comprising 180 ECTS credits, and a second cycle (Master) comprising 90 to 120 ECTS credits. While all Universities of Applied Sciences began their Bachelor programs in autumn 2005, not all of the traditional universities have completely introduced the new tiered study programs yet. By 2010, all institutions and study programs will be revised completely.

B. USA

From elementary school to the university level, the American educational system is similar to the Swiss system, as it is decentralized, pluralistic and diverse. Hence, it comes under the direction of the counties and states. Furthermore, since there is no government monopoly, individuals and groups of all kinds are entitled to establish educational institutions at all levels. Education is both publicly and privately governed, financed and administered. However, unlike Switzerland, private schools, colleges and universities play a central role.

1. Institutions of Higher Learning

There are more than 4,000 higher education institutions in the United States. Degree-granting institutions in the United States are called colleges, universities and institutes. Colleges and institutes are in no way inferior to universities. As a general rule, colleges tend to be smaller than universities and usually do not offer doctoral degrees. A university, on the other hand, offers a wide range of graduate programs, including doctoral degrees. Universities that emphasize research as well as teaching and universities that offer doctoral programs are usually referred to as research universities. However, there are numerous institutions called “universities” that do not offer degrees beyond the bachelor’s or master’s degree. In addition, some colleges also offer degrees beyond the bachelor’s including doctorates.

Public colleges and universities are governed by and often receive their primary financial support from the state and local governments. Public institutions are non-profit and designated as state, land-grant or community institutions.

Private colleges and universities are ruled by their own governing boards. For teaching, they receive little or no direct financial support from government sources. There are two types: non-profit and profit-making (proprietary).

Colleges: Colleges can be generally distinguished between (1) two-year colleges, and (2) four-year colleges.

(1) **Community colleges** provide two-year associate degree programs, usually called the Associate of Arts (A.A.) or Associate of Science (A.S.) degrees, as well as technical and vocational programs. Community colleges can be public or private institutions and are sometimes called junior colleges or two-year colleges.

(2) The primary role of the **four-year colleges** is to offer programs of general undergraduate education. These programs usually consist of two years of general education, in the humanities and social sciences, followed by two years of more specialized study in a narrower academic discipline, generally referred to as a “major” or major field of study. The traditional degrees are the Bachelor of Arts (B.A.) and the Bachelor of Science (B.S.). The **liberal arts college** offers programs in the liberal arts at the postsecondary level. In an effort to provide a “well-rounded” education, they encourage, and often require, their students to take a substantial number of classes in topics which may not be related directly to their professional goals.

Universities: A university is made up of a group of schools usually including an undergraduate liberal arts college, graduate schools and professional schools. Some technological and professional programs, such as agriculture, business administration, engineering, nursing and teaching, are offered at both **undergraduate** (postsecondary education leading to the bachelor’s degree) and **graduate** (post-bachelor’s degree) levels. Other professions, such as medicine, dentistry and law, are studied only at the graduate level. In addition to the bachelor’s degree, universities also offer the master’s degree and most of the doctorates. Research universities are those which focus on research and graduate education at the doctoral level.

Institutes: Some institutions of higher learning, specializing primarily in technical fields, are called institutes instead of colleges or universities. They also grant bachelor's, master's and doctoral degrees. The most prominent example is the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT). However, there are many other institutes of technology, as well as fashion institutes, art and design institutes and so forth. Some **research centers** are also called institutes and may offer undergraduate and graduate degrees or research and training opportunities. These institutes may or may not be affiliated with universities, colleges or institutes.

2. Degrees

- **Associate Degree**

The associate degree is awarded upon completion of the requirements of a two-year pre-baccalaureate program and is generally granted by junior or community colleges. However, the degree is also offered by many four-year colleges and universities. It is usually awarded in arts (A.A.) or science (A.S.). An associate degree is sometimes validated as equivalent of the first two years of a bachelor's program depending on the institution.

- **Bachelor's Degree**

Although the traditional bachelor's degree is in arts (B.A.) or science (B.S.), some colleges and universities award bachelor's degrees which identify the specific area of study. The Bachelor of Fine Arts (B.F.A.) degree generally indicates that the focus has been in an area of performance (painting, acting, or dancing) rather than in an area of research. The first year of a bachelor's degree program is called the "*freshman year*," the second "*sophomore year*," the third "*junior year*," and the fourth "*senior year*."

- **Master's Degree and Professional Degrees**

The master's degree, again traditionally a Master of Arts (M.A.) or a Master of Science (M.S.), can also be awarded in professional areas such as engineering (M.Eng.), law (LL.M.), business administration (M.B.A.), education (M.Ed.), nursing (M.S.N.), fine arts (M.F.A.) or social work (M.S.W.). These are the most commonly awarded master's and professional degrees. A Doctor of Medicine (M.D.) is also a professional degree and is awarded after successful completion of a medical school. Each master's degree indicates at least one year of study at the graduate level (beyond the bachelor's degree). Not all master's degrees require a thesis, although the M.A. and M.S. degrees generally do.

- **Doctoral Degree**

The Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D.) is the highest academic degree awarded by universities in the USA. This degree indicates at least two or three years of course work beyond the bachelor's degree, successful completion of extensive written and oral comprehensive examinations, and a major research project in the form of a dissertation. The dissertation determines the amount of time spent in earning the Ph.D. and varies from discipline to discipline. In addition to the Ph.D., the most commonly awarded doctorates include the Doctor of Education (Ed.D.) and Doctor of Law (J.D.). All require substantive course work beyond the master's level and comprehensive examinations. Certain doctoral degrees other than the Ph.D. may or may not require a dissertation.

- **Specialist**

The degree of Education Specialist (Ed.S.) is granted by some universities. It indicates specialization beyond the master's level in a field of education, such as administration or curriculum.

3. Accreditation

As previously mentioned, higher education in the USA does not come under the responsibility of the federal government. This means that institutions of higher learning can be established and run by anyone at any time without going through a federal approval or recognition process. Therefore, in addition to the great majority of trustworthy institutions of higher learning, there are also various more

doubtful institutions on the market. Some institutions are run like a business and will market themselves to high-paying foreign students.

Although the federal government has no jurisdiction over higher education, it only makes its financial support available to institutions of higher learning which meet certain quality standards. Since federal funding involves substantial contributions (approx. 10% of the budget), institutions of higher learning have a great incentive to prove that they have met the required quality standards.

At the institutional and operational levels, the procedure is as follows: there are only two federally authorized bodies, the U.S. Department of Education (USDE) and the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA). Both can recognize private accreditation organizations, which in turn, accredit programs and institutions of higher learning. The recognition procedure for private accreditation organizations allows the federal government to set minimum quality standards.

Accreditation is an important factor in higher education in the USA. On the one hand, accreditation by a known accreditation organization guarantees certain quality standards and consequently, also ensures that an institution can be distinguished from other institutions of higher learning (see Chapter IV, Section A). On the other hand, it enables an institution to become eligible for federal funding programs.

In short, the accreditation process comprises two stages. First of all, an institution of higher learning must be accredited by a **private** accreditation organization. If the private accreditation organization is recognized by one of the **federally authorized** organizations (CHEA, USDE), it may gain access to federal funding.

C. DIFFERENCES BETWEEN THE SWISS AND U.S. EDUCATIONAL SYSTEMS

Now that both educational systems have been presented, the most important differences should be pointed out.

- **Admission**

Admission to universities is handled differently in both countries. In Switzerland, the Maturity Certificate or, after passing a supplementary federal examination, the Professional Maturity Certificate entitles a person to study at one of the universities. A *Numerus Clausus* [restricted entry] is permitted only if there are too many students and not enough places available in a field of study. In the USA, a high school diploma does not guarantee access to a college, nor does a bachelor's degree guarantee access to a master's degree program. Applying to study at a U.S. institution of higher learning is far more than an administrative procedure, and is comparable to applying for a job. Each institution of higher learning establishes its own admission guidelines, with the exception of community colleges, which have an "open door" policy.

In cooperation with individual colleges, universities and institutes, certain community colleges offer transfer programs which enable students to switch to the corresponding institution of higher learning. Regardless of those transfer programs, which usually allow students to go into the third year of a bachelor's degree program at the partnering (usually the local state) university, the admissions decision still rests with the responsible board of the college, university or institute.

One should keep in mind that a degree earned at a community college is not generally accepted at colleges, universities and institutes which do not take part in that specific transfer program.

- **Academic Year**

The differences between the academic year in Switzerland and the academic year in the USA are being reconciled. As of the 2007/2008 school year, the academic year in Switzerland will begin in September and end in May, just as in the USA. For all universities, information on the lecture-free period during the transitional year (2007) can be found on the homepage of the Rectors' Conference of the Swiss Universities at www.crus.ch and on the homepages of the Conference of the Universities of Applied Sciences Switzerland at www.kfh.ch.

- **Length of Registration and Admissions Procedures**

In Switzerland, registration and admissions procedures generally do not take longer than four months, with the exception of nine months for medical studies. In the USA, registration and admission procedures take considerably more time. The Education USA website (<http://educationusa.state.gov>) recommends that foreign students contact the individual institutions of higher learning approximately eighteen months before the planned studies begin, so that there is enough time to submit all of the necessary documents and to complete the required tests.

- **Credit System**

The European Credits Transfer System (ECTS), which is recognized in the “Bologna Area,” is also used in Switzerland. It is based on the work load that students must complete in order to complete a program. According to the ECTS, a program corresponds to a specific total number of credits (Bachelor = 180, Master = 90-120 credits). The U.S. also uses a credit system for students to complete a program. However, in the USA the credit systems of the individual institutions vary considerably.

- **Doctoral Programs at Graduate Schools**

In Switzerland, until now, the path to a *Doktorat* goes via a *Lizentiat*, *Diplom* or most recently, a Master’s degree. In the USA, after earning a bachelor’s degree, students who are interested in a doctorate apply to be admitted into a graduate program. A doctoral graduate program lasts longer than a master’s program and is also organized differently. Within such a graduate program, stronger emphasis is placed on research and a potential academic career. Depending on the graduate program, the students can also earn a master’s degree as an intermediate degree.

- **Cost of Studies and Cost of Living**

There is a marked difference between the tuition fees of Swiss institutions of higher learning and their U.S. counterparts. The annual tuition fees in Switzerland range between SFr 1,000 and SFr 2,000. According to the Education USA website (<http://educationusa.state.gov>), the average annual tuition fees in the 2005/2006 academic year were \$2,200 for a two-year public community college, \$5,500 for a four-year public institution, and \$21,200 for a four-year private institution. However, this difference changes as soon as the cost of living is taken into account. In Switzerland, costs between approximately SFr 18,000 and SFr 28,000 annually must be expected, while the average cost of living annually in the USA is \$10,000. Consequently, the total cost for an academic year in Switzerland ranges between SFr 19,000 and SFr 30,000, and between approximately \$12,000 and \$31,000 in the USA. However, one should keep in mind that the tuition fees of the renowned institutions (Association of American Universities, Ivy League, and so forth) are much higher.

- **Scholarships and Loans**

In Switzerland a minority of students rely upon scholarships to finance their studies (16% in 2004/2005 according to the Swiss Federal Statistical Office). By contrast, scholarships and student loans are very widespread as a means of finance in the USA. A great majority of students have access to countless types of scholarships, with the universities and colleges themselves granting a substantial number of scholarships. Generally, however, students also obtain additional or exclusive student loans. These can be divided into public loans and private loans. Both types have advantages over “normal” loans, since the interest rate is lower and the repayment conditions are generally more flexible.

- **Teacher/Student Ratio**

There are some marked differences between the teacher/student ratios in Switzerland and those in the USA. In Switzerland, one professor in the humanities and social sciences teaches an average of 60 students, whereas the highest values can be 1:180 in media sciences and law. At the Swiss Federal Institutes of Technology, the teacher/student ratios average 36 students per professor. However, there are more teaching assistants and lecturers (*Oberassistenten/innen* or *Privatdozenten/innen*) involved in teaching than in the USA. For its various institutions (private or public, two-year or four-year), the USA exhibits average teacher/student ratios of 1:16. Thus, on average, a professor at a two-year public institution teaches 18 students, at a four-year public institution 15 students, at a two-year private institution 20 students, and at a four-year private

institution 13 students. Hence, there are also large lecture classes in the USA especially for introductory classes, e.g. economics or sciences.

III. RECOGNITION OF SWISS QUALIFICATIONS IN THE USA

Anyone who is either planning to study or work in the USA will sooner or later face questions concerning the recognition of his or her Swiss degrees. In general, the recognition process is much more complex than usually assumed. In the USA, there is no centralized federal agency which is responsible for agreements on equivalency of academic credentials, or for directives to educational institutions on admission criteria for applicants from other countries. Likewise, there is neither a legal basis for a comparison between degrees earned in the USA and in Switzerland, nor is there a bilateral agreement between the two countries concerning the mutual recognition of degrees. Consequently, there is no comparative list enumerating the degrees and their equivalents.

Even though Switzerland has introduced a two-cycle educational system with the Bachelor at the end of the first (three-year) cycle and the Master at the end of the second (two-year) cycle, neither degree is automatically recognized as equivalent to the U.S. bachelor's and master's degrees. Since the introduction of the Bachelor and Master degrees in Switzerland is relatively recent, institutions of higher learning in the USA have not yet been able to establish recognition and admission standards for the new Bologna degrees. Until such standards have been established, the admissions process might continue to be long, complicated, and different for each applicant.

The procedure for having a Swiss qualification recognized or at least receiving its U.S. equivalent is called a **transfer credential evaluation**. The goal is to obtain a **transcript and eventually a confirmed degree equivalent of your Swiss educational credential which will be accepted in the U.S.** A transcript is a copy of a student's academic record, which usually means all courses taken, all grades and honors received, and degrees conferred. An official transcript is prepared and sent by the issuing school or university with a school official's original signature. For a transfer credential evaluation, you will be required to provide your Swiss transcript. For all new Bologna degrees, this will not cause any problems since they are accompanied by a detailed transcript. All others with degrees from the old system (*Diplom* and *Lizenziat*) will be required to either translate their transcripts of their studies themselves or have them translated into English by a professional translator and then have the English version of their transcript notarized by their home university.

A transfer credential evaluation in the U.S. is either done by the institution of higher learning, some private credential evaluation agencies or some accreditation services connected with certain professional associations (see below).

A. RECOGNITION ISSUES AT COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES

With very few exceptions, colleges and universities are autonomous, with rules, regulations and important decisions made by their individual board of trustees. Therefore, academic policies are established independently. These include guidelines regarding undergraduate and postgraduate admission, the transfer of academic credits, course requirements for approved academic programs, or the time-table for admissions.

A transfer credit evaluation or an accreditation evaluation in general, is either done at the college or university itself or by a third party. Within a university, it is done by a transfer credit evaluator in the admissions, registration or international student office or by a faculty member at smaller institutions. Third party evaluation is done by a private credential evaluation service upon the recommendation or referral of the institution.

A college or university which uses third party credential evaluation services might send the candidate's documents directly to a private service it trusts, or the candidate may be given the address of the private credential evaluation service to which he or she can send the documents for evaluation. In either case, the student will have to pay the fees.

As mentioned above, there is a strong emphasis on providing certified documentation which is as detailed as possible, not only final exams and grades, but also courses (including the number of hours) and descriptions of the study content. A grade-point average equivalent to a U.S. standard is determined by the institution or program.

B. RECOGNITION ISSUES IN LICENSED PROFESSIONS

The process of obtaining recognition of a qualification for a specific profession in the USA is basically very similar to the one in Switzerland.

In the USA, each state has its own board for each licensed profession: In some careers for example, there is a national licensing board, i.e., for architects and engineers. However, the work done in the national licensing board is coordinated with the state licensing boards. The state board sets the rules for education and training or additional conditions for access to the particular profession. Being licensed in one profession in one particular state does not automatically and necessarily provide recognition in another.

Within the context of this guide, it is not possible to list each licensed profession for each state in the USA. Therefore, it is best to contact the authorities in the capital city of the relevant state. They can provide information about how to proceed and which state licensing board must be contacted for more details. The state licensing board may ask the candidate for an evaluation of his or her Swiss qualifications by a foreign credential evaluation service.

A very helpful reference is the *Occupational Outlook Handbook* (www.bls.gov/oco/home.htm) published annually by the U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics. It provides valuable information about a great number of professions in the USA, the education and training required, the addresses of the professional associations, how to apply for a job, the job opportunities and the potential salary.

It is recommended that ETH Zurich and EPFL graduates, particularly architects and engineers, also contact the **A3SFIT** at <http://www.angelfire.com/sc3/a3sfit/>. In addition to useful tips, the American alumni organization of both Swiss Federal Institutes of Technology also offers assistance in questions concerning the recognition of degrees and diplomas in the USA.

C. CREDENTIAL EVALUATION AND INFORMATION

Since there are so many private credential evaluation organizations, it is essential to select the right one for you. We strongly advise you to contact the relevant institution of higher learning or state government (for licensed professions) to learn which private service is recommended and accepted.

Below you will find a small selection of the organizations which provide general information and recognition services.

1. Credential Evaluation

The following organizations are just a few of the various organizations throughout the USA. These credential evaluation associations and services are among the most recognized by numerous institutions of higher learning and private-sector companies. For additional resources please go to **A3SFIT** at <http://www.angelfire.com/sc3/a3sfit/>.

- **Association of International Credential Evaluators, Inc. (AICE)**
AICE is a California-based organization of credential evaluating services and consultants.
www.aice-eval.org
- **National Association of Credential Evaluation Services (NACES)**
NACES is an association of private foreign educational credential evaluation services committed to formulating and maintaining ethical standards in the field of foreign educational evaluation.
www.naces.org

- **World Education Services (WES)**

WES is the largest academic credential evaluation service in the United States and a recognized authority in the field of international credential evaluation. WES evaluations are accepted by hundreds of U.S. academic institutions, as well as by licensing and certification boards, major corporations, and government agencies such as the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS).

www.wes.org

2. Information

The following three organizations provide information about the credential evaluation process and higher education in the USA.

- **U.S. Network of Education Information / U.S. European Network of Information Centers (USNEI / U.S. ENIC)**

The U.S. ENIC was established in 1996 within USNEI. It has several offices throughout the USA and is the central point of contact and referral for different services in connection with recognition questions. Its employees do not evaluate credentials themselves, but can provide assistance in finding the right authority or person in the USA.

<http://www.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ous/international/usnei/edlite-about.html>

- **Swiss European Network of Information Centers (Swiss ENIC)**

The Swiss ENIC provides information and advice to authorities, institutions and individuals on all questions connected with academic recognition problems. Upon request, it issues (nonbinding) recognition recommendations to academic institutions and employers.

The Swiss ENIC maintains regular contact with the admissions offices of the Swiss universities and Federal Institutes of Technology. It is a member of the international network of information centers on recognition questions of the Council of Europe and UNESCO (ENIC network).

<http://www.crus.ch/deutsch/enic/index.htm>

- **EducationUSA**

EducationUSA is a global network of more than 450 advising centers supported by the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs at the U.S. Department of State. These centers offer information about educational opportunities in the United States and guidance on how to best access those opportunities.

<http://educationusa.state.gov>

IV. SWISS STUDENTS IN THE USA

Admission to a college or university in the United States is considered a privilege, not a right. In general, higher education institutions endeavor to establish fair and reasonable admission policies, consistent with the mission and role of the institution.

Many colleges and universities, as well as scholarship sponsors, require applicants to take entrance examinations. These provide a common measure for comparing the qualifications of applicants and are helpful in the evaluation of academic potential. The most important examinations are the SAT, GMAT, and GRE (see Chapter IV, Section C.).

Since the higher education system in the United States offers many options, starting from the number of institutions to the different degrees, it is important to choose carefully.

A. FINDING THE RIGHT INSTITUTION

In a country with over 4,000 institutions of higher learning, students want and need to know how to determine the most credible institutions. The ranking system is the most common method for classifying institutions.

There are also many private consultants and companies offering career planning and other services. Their aim is to help students and parents to find the solutions they need to achieve their educational and career goals.

Pro memoria: Reminder: For students who wish to study abroad, the easiest and cheapest way is usually through an exchange program offered by your home university in Switzerland in collaboration with an American partner university.

1. Ranking Systems

Ranking systems allow students to make comparisons between institutions by indicating the difference in quality and services. Therefore, they are helpful tools in the selection process. Nevertheless, in considering rank, one must remember there are two major problems with rankings: (1) the quality and reliability of the ranking system, and (2) the criteria defining the ranking. Over the years, there have been some serious and reliable ranking systems such as *U.S. News & World Report* (http://www.usnews.com/usnews/edu/college/rankings/rankindex_brief.php) and *The Center* (<http://thecenter.ufl.edu/index.html>). *The Center* focuses mainly on research institutions, and you have to pay a fee to access the full ranking from *U.S. News & World Report*. Different ranking systems display different results depending on the emphasis of the criteria.

2. University Associations

University associations are also a helpful source in the selection process. Some of the organizations, such as those below, count the most prestigious and successful institutions of higher learning among their members.

- **Association of American Universities (AAU)**
AAU is an organization of research universities devoted to maintaining a strong system of academic research and education. It consists of 60 U.S. universities and two Canadian universities, more or less evenly divided between public and private.
www.aau.edu
- **National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges (NASULGC)**
Founded in 1887, the National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges (NASULGC) is the nation's oldest higher education association. A voluntary association of public universities, land-grant institutions and many of the nation's public university systems, NASULGC campuses are located in all 50 states, the U.S. territories and the District of Columbia. Dedicated to supporting excellence in teaching, research and public service, NASULGC has been at the forefront of national educational leadership for over a century.
www.nasulgc.org
- **Council of Graduate Schools (CGS)**
CGS draws its institutional membership from colleges and universities significantly engaged in graduate education, research, and scholarship. Currently, CGS membership includes over 470 universities in the United States and Canada, and 11 universities outside North America. Collectively, CGS institutions annually award over 95 percent of all U.S. doctorates and approximately 85 percent of all U.S. master's degrees.
www.cgsnet.org
- **American Council of Education (ACE)**
ACE aims to foster greater collaboration and new partnerships within and outside the higher education community to help colleges and universities in their cooperation.
www.acenet.edu
- **Ivy League**
The Ivy League consists of eight private institutions of higher learning located in the eastern United States. They are among the most prestigious and selective schools in the USA, and they are consistently close to the top in college and university rankings. The members include: Brown

University, Columbia University, Cornell University, Dartmouth College, Harvard University, Princeton University, the University of Pennsylvania, and Yale University.
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ivy_League

3. Classification

The Chronicle of Higher Education (www.chronicle.com) reported on, and published, a new classification system for institutions of higher learning based on the categorization by the Carnegie Foundation. The idea behind the new system is that the decision on whether to attend an institution of higher learning should not be based on rankings, however reliable they might be, but on the needs and interests of the individual student. It classifies the higher education institutions into different groups such as:

- **Doctorate-granting Universities**
Institutions were included in this category if they awarded at least 20 doctorates in 2003-04.
- **Master's Colleges and Universities**
Institutions qualified for this category if they awarded at least 50 master's degrees in 2003-04, but fewer than 20 doctorates.
- **Baccalaureate Colleges**
Institutions were included in this category if bachelor's degrees accounted for at least 10 percent of all undergraduate degrees and they awarded fewer than 50 master's degrees (2003-04 conferrals).
- **Special Focus Institutions**
The special-focus designation was based on the concentration of degrees in a single field or set of related fields, at both the under-graduate and graduate levels.
- **Associate's Colleges**
Institutions were included in this category if their highest degree conferred was the associate's degree or if bachelor's degrees accounted for less than 10 percent of all undergraduate degrees (2003-04 degree conferrals).

This new classification system can be found at www.carnegiefoundation.org. Even though it will take time to establish the new system, in the end, it will help to improve the decision- making process.

4. Accreditation

Accreditation denotes the certification of the academic quality of an institution of higher learning. A school, university or college can only be accredited by special private accreditation organizations (see Chapter II, Section B. 3.). It is essential to evaluate and check the reputation and accreditation of schools which are potential choices, since accreditation organizations set standards that member schools have to meet.

There are three types of accreditation organizations: **regional accreditors**, **national accreditors**, as well as **specialized and professional accreditors**. The latter accredit specific programs or schools such as law schools, medical schools and engineering schools. All three types assure institutional quality, can enable institutions to get federal funding, ease student transfers and create employer confidence.

Below you will find a small selection of the recognized accreditation and information associations of higher learning in the United States.

- **Accreditation Board for Engineering and Technology (ABET)**
ABET, Inc., is the recognized U.S. accreditor of college and university programs in applied science, computing, engineering and technology. Accreditation ensures the quality of the postsecondary education that students receive. ABET was established in 1932 and now comprises a federation of 28 professional and technical societies representing the fields of applied science,

computing, engineering and technology.

www.abet.org

- **National Architectural Accrediting Board (NAAB)**

The National Architectural Accrediting Board (NAAB) is the sole agency authorized to accredit U.S. professional degree programs in architecture. Since most state registration boards in the United States require any applicant for licensure to have graduated from an NAAB-accredited program, obtaining such a degree is an essential aspect in preparing to practice architecture as a profession.

www.naab.org

- **New England Association of Schools & Colleges (NEASC)**

NEASC is the nation's oldest regional accrediting association whose mission is the establishment and maintenance of high standards for all levels of education.

www.neasc.org

- **Middle States Commission on Higher Education (MSCHE)**

The MSCHE is a voluntary, non-governmental, peer-based membership association dedicated to educational excellence and improvement through peer evaluation and accreditation.

www.msche.org

- **Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities (NWCCU)**

NWCCU is an independent, non-profit membership organization. Furthermore it figures as the regional authority on educational quality and institutional effectiveness of higher education institutions in the seven-state northwestern region of Alaska, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, Oregon, Utah and Washington.

www.nwccu.org

- **Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS)**

SACS is the recognized regional accrediting body in the eleven U.S. southern states of Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas and Virginia. Besides this, the SACS also figures as the accrediting body in Latin America for those institutions of higher learning which award associate, bachelor's, master's or doctoral degrees.

www.sacscoc.org

5. Recognition of Accreditation Organizations

Accreditation organizations are accountable to the institutions and programs they accredit, as well as to the public and the government. In addition, accreditation organizations undergo a periodic external review of their organizations based on specific standards known as "recognition" (see Chapter II, Section B. 3.). This recognition is carried out either by the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA), or the United States Department of Education (USDE) and opens the way for government financial aid.

Although accreditation is strictly a non-governmental activity, recognition is not.

- **Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA)**

CHEA is a private, non-governmental national coordinating body for national, regional and specialized accreditation. It provides a list of accreditation organizations recognized by CHEA.

www.chea.org

- **U.S. Department of Education (USDE)**

The Department of Education provides a list of regional and national accrediting agencies recognized by the U.S. Secretary of Education. These agencies are considered reliable authorities concerning the quality of education or training offered by the institutions of higher learning or higher education programs they accredit.

www.ed.gov/admins/finaid/accred/index.html

CHEA and USDE recognize many of the same accrediting organizations, but not all. CHEA recognition confers an academic legitimacy on accrediting organizations. USDE recognition is required for accreditation organizations whose institutions or programs seek eligibility for aid funds.

B. ADMISSION OF FOREIGN STUDENTS

Colleges and universities in the USA differ in their admissions procedures and requirements for foreign students. Applicants should be sure to follow the specific instructions given by each institution when applying for admission. Keep in mind that receiving an application for admission does not guarantee admission.

Applying to study at a U.S. institution of higher learning is far more than an administrative procedure and is more comparable to applying for a job.

The application procedure not only includes the actual “application for admission” form, but also some or all of the following items. Each institution will specify which documents and information it requires.

1. Application fee
2. Motivation letter (very important part of the application; be aware of the different styles of writing [see Chapter VII, Section F.])
3. Copies and certified translations of official records of the applicant’s previous education (work load of courses, descriptions of study content, official descriptions and so forth)
4. Certified evaluation for equivalency (credential evaluation)
5. Evidence of English proficiency, usually in the form of TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) scores
6. Results of academic entrance examinations (see Chapter IV, Section C.)
7. Letters of recommendation (be aware of the different standards; [see Chapter VII, Section F. 1.])
8. A statement of the applicant’s financial resources for studying in the United States
9. Financial aid application forms if financial aid is sought
10. One or more statements or essays on specific topics, usually as part of the application for admission form
11. Evidence regarding the applicant’s current visa status

A potential student is advised to begin the application process between 1½ and 1 year in advance in order to obtain all academic records and arrange for the necessary tests.

C. EXAMINATIONS

The various tests students must take are a very important aspect of an application. The most important are outlined below. However, high scores on one or more of the required tests do not guarantee acceptance by the higher education institution.

English Examination: Applicants whose native language is not English are required to submit results of an examination of their language proficiency. Most United States colleges require the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL). The TOEFL is administered by the Educational Testing Service (www.ets.org) six times a year in 180 countries around the world. In Switzerland, test centers are located in Geneva, Kilchberg (ZH), Lausanne, Leysin, Montagnola, Montreux and St. Gallen. By the end of 2006, the ETS should have introduced the new Internet-based TOEFL test (TOEFL iBT). This Internet-based test does not mean it will be possible to take the test from any computer with internet access. The test will still be administered from certain predetermined test centers (in April 2006 the only TOEFL iBT test center in Switzerland was located in Zurich). More than 5,000 colleges, universities, and licensing agencies in 90 countries accept TOEFL scores. However, upon admission an undergraduate student might be required to take further ESL (English as a Second Language) tests or classes.

Other examinations: In addition to certified English proficiency, various other tests are also required for admission to many colleges and universities in the United States.

1. Undergraduate Students

Most first-year undergraduate applicants will be required to take one or more of the tests described below. These tests are either sponsored by the College Entrance Examination Board or the American College Testing Program.

- **Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT)**

The College Board's Scholastic Aptitude Test is a three-hour-and-45-minute test that measures verbal and mathematical abilities. Additional one-hour subject tests may also be required in various subjects such as chemistry, mathematics, history, certain foreign languages, and so forth. The test is offered seven times a year in the United States and other countries.

www.collegeboard.com

- **American College Testing Program (ACT)**

The American College Testing Program is made up of a multiple-choice test and an optional writing test. The multiple-choice test covers four skill areas: English, mathematics, reading, and science. The optional writing test measures skill in planning and writing a short essay. The test is offered in various countries throughout the world.

www.act.org

2. Graduate Students

Since most academic graduate departments within a university establish their own admissions requirements, including admission tests, it is necessary to write directly to the institution to find out which tests are required for entering students. This is particularly true for graduate students seeking admission to programs such as mathematics, history, engineering, physics, and chemistry, where some departments within an institution will require one or more of the Graduate Record Examinations. Students who seek entrance to certain first professional degree programs, such as Law, Medicine, or Business Administration, have to meet different and more specific test requirements.

- **Graduate Record Examinations (GRE)**

The Graduate Record Examination Test is composed of a general test and a subject test. The general test measures critical thinking, analytical writing, verbal reasoning, as well as quantitative reasoning skills. The subject test measures the student's achievement in one of the following eight disciplines: **Biochemistry, Cell and Molecular Biology, Biology, Chemistry, Computer Science, English Literature, Mathematics, Physics** or **Psychology**. Each subject test is intended for students who have majored in or have extensive background in that specific area.

www.ets.org

- **Law School Admission Test (LSAT)**

The Law School Admission Test is a half-day, standardized test, required for admission to all American Bar Association (ABA)-approved law schools, most Canadian law schools, and many non-ABA-approved law schools. It provides a standard measure of acquired reading and verbal reasoning skills that law schools can use as one of several factors in assessing applicants. The test is administered four times a year at hundreds of locations around the world.

www.lsac.org

- **Medical College Admission Test (MCAT)**

The Medical College Admission Test (MCAT) is a standardized, multiple-choice examination designed to assess problem solving, critical thinking, and writing skills in addition to the examinee's knowledge of science concepts and principles prerequisite to the study of medicine. Almost all U.S. medical schools require applicants to submit MCAT scores. Medical college

admission committees consider MCAT scores as part of their admissions decision process.

www.aamc.org

- **Graduate Management Admission Test (GMAT)**

The Graduate Management Admission Test is a standardized assessment that helps business schools assess the qualifications of applicants for advanced study in business and management. Schools use the test as one predictor of academic performance in an MBA program or in other graduate management programs. The GMAT exam measures basic verbal, mathematical, and analytical writing skills.

www.gmac.com

D. FINANCIAL AID

It is expensive to study in the USA. In addition to the “normal” living expenses, it is particularly important to consider the high tuition fees. The institutions of higher learning try to alleviate this situation by offering students numerous scholarships. Such scholarships include support for exceptionally talented students, students from marginal groups, students who are talented in sports, and so forth. In certain cases, you do not have to specifically apply for these scholarships, which are given out directly by the institutions of higher learning; you receive them automatically on admission to the higher education institution.

In addition to scholarships from the institutions of higher learning, there are also limited additional possibilities for financial support that can be granted by public (e.g., Fulbright Program) or by private institutions. In this case it is crucial to be well informed in advance. Important points of contact include:

Swiss Government/ Fulbright Scholarships: For Swiss nationals living in Switzerland interested in pursuing postgraduate studies in the U.S., please contact the Rectors' Conference of the Swiss Universities, Grants and Exchange programs: <http://www.crus.ch/engl/> Phone: +41 (0) 31 306 60 31, Fax: +41 (0) 31 302 68 11. E-mail: stip@crus.ch

Swiss Benevolent Societies: Swiss nationals living in the U.S. may apply for support for undergraduate studies at their local Swiss Benevolent Societies located in Washington D.C., San Francisco, Chicago, and New York (for more details, visit: http://www.eda.admin.ch/washington_emb/e/home/culedu/educat/schol.html)

To learn more about the availability of special programs, please contact either SHARE in Boston (www.shareboston.org), swissnex in San Francisco (www.swissnex.org) or the Office of Science, Technology and Higher Education at the Swiss Embassy in Washington, D.C. (www.swissemb.org/scitech).

Exchange programs between Swiss and American universities are the easiest and most advantageous way to study in the USA. It is recommended that students find out whether their home university offers such programs. As a rule, the tuition fees will be paid in Switzerland, enabling the student to study at the American partner university without additional fees. Consequently, the student can save a lot of money through exchange programs. Furthermore, the student can obtain extensive assistance in organizing his or her stay to pursue studies.

E. ASSESSMENT OF STUDENT WORK

The faculty at most colleges and universities in the United States grade students' academic work with the letters A through F. Almost everything a student does for a class will influence his or her final grade. Examinations and tests, essays or written assignments, laboratory reports, laboratory or studio work, class attendance and class participation may all be used to determine the final grade.

1. Grades

The following is a general-percentage/letter-grade scale for classes taken at U.S. institutions of higher learning:

100 – 90%	= A (superior)
89 – 80%	= B (above average)
79 – 70%	= C (average)
65 – 69%	= D (below average)
< 65%	= F (failure)

The undergraduate student is expected to maintain a “C” average or better to remain in good academic standing. A student whose average drops below “C” will be placed on probation, usually for one term. If the grades are not up to a “C” average by the end of the probationary period the student could be expelled from the school.

Graduate students are expected to maintain a “B” average or better to remain in good academic standing.

2. Grade-Point Average (GPA)

Each student completes his or her degree with a grade-point average. A cumulative grade-point average is the GPA for all courses taken throughout the degree program. Most universities use a GPA scale of 4.0, but a few universities use a scale of 5.0. To figure out the GPA, take the numerical value assigned to your letter grade for each course (typically 4 points for an "A," 3 points for a "B," and so on), then multiply this number by the number of credits each course is worth. Finally, add these numbers together and divide by the total number of credits for all courses. For example:

Letter Grade	Numerical Value	Number of Credits	Total
A	4.0	3	12
B	3.0	3	9
C	2.0	3	6

27 divided by 9 = 3.0 GPA

V. SWISS POSTDOCS AND VISITING SCHOLARS

A research stay in the USA is still considered to be an important and sometimes even a necessary career step. Therefore, many researchers take on the challenge and look for a research opportunity in the USA.

A. POSTDOCS

The USA attracts a great number of postdocs due to the large number of institutions and the financial resources available. In addition, a postdoctorate constitutes a significant stepping stone for a future research career, while also enabling an important exchange of knowledge.

A postdoctorate in the USA requires extensive and time-consuming preparations. In particular, one should take into consideration the registration deadlines and other requirements of most of the funding institutions and research institutions. Furthermore, one must organize all of the administrative preparations for the move to the USA. Therefore, it is important to allow for enough time for the various preparations.

At this point it is worth mentioning that postdocs in the USA are perceived in a different manner to Switzerland. On general terms, a postdoc is considered a trainee in the U.S.. Furthermore, postdocs

are often expected to work long hours and sometimes on weekends. Naturally this varies depending on the institution one is working at.

1. Postdoc Preparations in Switzerland

Selecting an appropriate research institution is the first step toward a postdoctorate in the USA. In applying for a research position, it is important to be aware of the differences between the application procedures in Switzerland and in the USA (see Chapter VII, Section E.). If the first hurdle of the written application has been cleared, the next step is generally a series of personal interviews¹ at various institutions in the USA. These interviews are generally coupled with a presentation on the applicants current and future work. Such an on-site visit is highly recommended since it presents an opportunity to look at the research establishment (laboratory, equipment and computers) and to obtain an impression of the research group. Many of the interested institutions will cover part of the travel expenses.

As soon as one has been accepted by a research institution, he or she can apply for a fellowship from the Swiss National Science Foundation. It is important that the instructions and application be followed strictly. The Swiss National Science Foundation (SNF) provides some fact sheets to facilitate preparations for a research stay abroad. However, writing the detailed description of the planned research project when applying for the SNF fellowship is a demanding process.

The European Union's so-called Marie Curie Outgoing International Fellowship (http://ec.europa.eu/research/fp6/mariecurie-actions/action/fellow_en.html) offers postdocs another possibility for financial support.

In any case, the ensuing administrative work takes up the most time when preparing for a postdoctorate in the USA. It should be noted that the research institution in the USA must complete the necessary forms for the visa application and that the candidate must contact the U.S. Embassy in Bern for an appointment well in advance. In addition, the candidate has to notify the municipality where he or she pays taxes of their departure. Men require a deferment from military or civilian service.

2. Living as a Postdoc in the USA

Upon arrival in the USA, one needs not only to get accustomed to a different style of life and work, he or she also has to organize the overall stay. A Social Security number (SSN) is absolutely necessary, since it is often mandatory in order to rent an apartment, obtain a cell phone number or buy a car. It may take some time to process an application for a Social Security number (For more information, visit the Social Security Administration's website at www.socialsecurity.gov),. Obtaining adequate health insurance coverage is another critical requirement. (see Chapter VII, Section D). However, employers, or the research institution in the case of a post-doctorate, very often pay for all or part of the health insurance coverage. For questions concerning Swiss Old-Age and Survivors insurance (OASI or *AHV/IV* in German) please see Chapter VII, Section E.

Another important issue is paying taxes in the USA. For those in the U.S. on an SNF fellowship, no taxes are due during the first two years. However, once one converts from an SNF fellowship to a U.S. employer/fellowship, he or she will be required to pay taxes. This is due to the fact that there is currently no provisions within the Swiss-U.S. Double Taxation Convention exempting researchers, who are temporarily residing in the USA, from tax liability. Certain countries such as Germany, France and Spain have special agreements of that type with the United States.

Upon settling in the USA, one is required by law to register his or her residential address at the Embassy of Switzerland or the nearest consulate.

(www.eda.admin.ch/washington_emb/e/home/repclub/consul.html)

¹ See www.nationalpostdoc.org under *International Postdoc Programs & Resources – International Postdoc Survival Guide – Going in with your eyes open: What to ask before accepting a U.S. Postdoctoral.*

3. General Hints for a Postdoc

Moving from Switzerland to the USA is a great challenge. Therefore, it is advisable to obtain as much assistance as possible. Individual institutions in Switzerland, as well as in the USA, offer support such as paying for the flight, helping in the search for accommodations or contributing to general expenses to ship research documents (home university, SNF, host university and so forth).

B. FACULTY

The tenure concept is central to U.S. higher education. A professor holding tenure is virtually immune to dismissal and has an appointment for life, but only as long as his or her department is not closed. The reason for tenure is the principle of academic freedom. Tenure ensures that professors can take a position on current political or other controversies. Nevertheless, their salary is linked to their performance. In addition, professors themselves are responsible for obtaining a large part of the necessary financial resources for their research (research promotion institutions, government, private institutions and so forth).

Decisions on faculty appointments, renewal and non-renewal of contracts as well as promotions, are made by the governing board through its chief executive officer, the president or chancellor. Faculty are ranked on performance, credentials and years of service to the college or university. The most commonly used faculty titles are lecturer, assistant professor, associate professor, professor and professor emeritus. Lecturer, adjunct professor and professor emeritus, are not considered “ranks” since they are not subject to the ordinary requirements for advancement or promotion.

1. Lecturer

A lecturer is responsible for undergraduate education, especially for introductory/survey courses that attract large groups of students. A lecturer (Instructor, Adjunct) generally does not have research duties, and many are also graduate students who are still taking courses.

2. Assistant Professor/Associate Professor

Usually, a Ph.D., two or three postdoctorates as well as work experience are required for a professional academic position. An “unwritten rule” states that postdoctoral training should take longer than 5 years, implying professional academic employment at the end of that period. An “Assistant Professor” is on “tenure track” while an “Associate Professor” holds tenure. An assistant professorship or associate professorship implies that the faculty member has had broad and successful experience at a college or university, has made scholarly contributions to his or her discipline, and has been actively involved in the overall life of the institution. After a specified number of years at this rank, usually seven, the faculty member may apply for promotion to the rank of “Professor.” There is no limit to the number of years which may be spent at the rank of “Assistant Professor” or “Associate Professor,” nor does the denial of a promotion to the rank of “Professor” imply a termination of the contract.

3. Professor

Traditionally, professors are academic leaders who have made outstanding contributions to research as well as to the institutions at which they are employed. The professorship is not solely based upon the required number of years in the preliminary ranks. Rather, it is bestowed by the college or university upon a person whose research receives the highest rewards. The professorship is the highest academic rank awarded to an individual by a college or university and it is almost always tenured.

VI. SWISS SCIENTISTS AND ENGINEERS WORKING IN THE USA

Moving to the USA also means a big adjustment for scientists and engineers. Just as for students or postdocs, all sorts of things have to be considered, organized and clarified. The most important have already been mentioned in the various chapters.

- Recognition of Swiss Qualifications in the USA – Chapter III, Sections B. and C.
- Living as a Postdoc in the USA– Chapter V, Section A. 2.
- General Information – Chapter VII, Section A.
- Visas – Chapter VII, Section B.
- Health Insurance – Chapter VII, Section D.
- Swiss Old-Age and Survivors Insurance (OASI) – Chapter VII, Section E.
- Job Application and Resumes – Chapter VII, Section F.

VII. BASICS

Below we have outlined some key areas which should be carefully considered, if you plan to continue your education or professional life in the USA. This list is by no means exhaustive, but it indicates the most general key aspects. For additional comprehensive information on living in the U.S. see www.nationalpostdoc.org, under *International Postdoc Programs and Resources* – International Postdoc Survival Guide - *Signposts to Living in the U.S.*

A. GENERAL INFORMATION

• Money

If an applicant is coming to the USA to study, the applicant should ensure that he or she has enough money. Applicants are required to present a confirmation from their banks to the immigration office as well as to their schools

• Social Security Number

A Social Security number (SSN) is absolutely essential for an extended stay (studies, dissertation, postdoc or work). An SSN is required for rental leases, cell phone subscriptions, bank accounts, credit cards, buying a car, and so forth. Students may find that it is also required by the university (www.socialsecurity.gov).

• Credit Card/EC Card

In the USA, the credit card is the most important mode of payment. Therefore applicants should ensure that their credit card limit is sufficient. To avoid problems, applicants are recommended to contact their banks well in advance. At the beginning, in addition to a credit card, an EC Card can be very useful since it is possible to withdraw cash from most ATM's (*Geldautomaten*) for a smaller fee.

Initially it is hard to obtain a U.S. credit card, as credit-granting institutions review applications based on the individual's credit report (how well debts and credits are paid off). To establish a credit report, you can start by applying for store credit cards once you have acquired a Social Security number. Further information can be found under www.nationalpostdoc.org, *International Postdoc Programs and Resources* – International Postdoc Survival Guide – *So, Nobody will give you a Credit Card.*

• Finding a Place to Live

For those who don't have pre-arranged accommodation, they will need to make arrangements independently. It is not advisable to rent an apartment for an entire stay without visiting it first. Cities in the USA cannot be compared with cities in Switzerland. There are always areas where it is too dangerous to live, even just for a short time. It is advisable to gather information about the safe and dangerous areas in the city beforehand.

In looking for a temporary place to stay, ensure that it is in a safe area with access to public transportation and not too far away from your workplace or university. Information is provided by official visitor information centers, travel agents, employers or student contact offices.

The most common sources for finding information about apartments to rent are local newspapers, the Internet (e.g., www.craigslist.com), blackboards and by word of mouth. Similar to Switzerland, it is advisable to read the lease carefully before signing, and make sure that the notification period for cancelling the lease and the utility costs are indicated and within reasonable limits.

• **Driver's License**

An international driver's license or the new driver's license in credit card format are useful documents in the USA, not only in connection with an application for a U.S. driver's license. In general, they are accepted as identity documents making it unnecessary to always carry your passport or identity card with you.

B. VISAS

Generally, anyone who intends to come to the USA to study or to work needs a visa. For the purpose of studying in the USA there are two kinds of visas: the F1 visa for strictly academic purposes and the M1 visa for non-academic or vocational studies. If you are going to work, you will either need a J visa for exchange visitors or an H-1B visa for temporary highly skilled workers. For further information about the different kinds of visas, please visit <http://uscis.gov/graphics/services/visas.htm>, the official website for visa information.

All applicants for non-immigrant visas must prove that they do not intend to become immigrants. To qualify for a visa, you must prove that you only plan to remain in the USA for a limited time. Generally, you must provide evidence of sufficient funds for your stay, of a residence outside the USA, as well as other binding obligations which will cause you to depart at the end of your stay in the USA. Although visa applicants may apply at any U.S. consulate, it is more difficult to qualify for a visa outside of your country of permanent residence. Additional useful information can be found under www.nationalpostdoc.org, specifically under *Program and Resources – International Postdoc Programs and Resources*, where there is a *Quick Guide to Visas for International Postdocs*.

1. Mandatory Documents

Below are listed the mandatory documents which must be ready when applying for a visa. It is crucial to have all documents completed correctly since otherwise the visa process will be halted.

All Applicants:

- Original passport, valid for at least six months from the date of departure to the USA, and any expired passports with previous U.S. visas.
- Two recent passport photographs. Please note the special requirements for photographs.
- Non-Swiss citizens must bring their residency permit, border-crossing card for Switzerland, or *Carte de légitimation*.
- One completed DS-156 (personal information and history) application form for each person travelling.
- All males between ages 16 and 45 must also complete Form DS-157 (personal history and military training).
- One completed DS-158 "Contact Information and Work History for Non-Immigrant Visa Applicant" form and an electronic Student and Exchange Visitor Information System (SEVIS) confirmation for the principal applicant as well as all dependents from the school or exchange program institution.

- The original postal receipt for the application fee for the equivalent of SFr 130 per person (June 2006).
- Self-addressed stamped envelope.

Non-immigrant Visa Categories

Students (F Visas and M Visas):

- Original Form I-20 received from the school in the USA, including signature and proof of funds to finance schooling and living expenses (bank statement, tuition receipt).
- Receipt for the I-901 SEVIS fee.

Exchange Visitors (J Visas):

- Original DS-2019 received from the institution in the USA, a written statement of one's plans after his or her return from the USA, including a future work contract, if possible.
- Proof of funds, i.e., recent quarterly bank statements or tuition receipt.

United States Department of Homeland Security regulations state that holders of F, M, or J non-immigrant visas, will not be admitted to the United States until a date thirty days or less prior to the beginning of your program date, or start date, as indicated on your Form I-20 (for F visas and M visas) or DS-2019 (for J visas).

2. Information

All of the above information is provided by the U.S. Embassy in Switzerland. The Embassy is the visa-granting institution for Swiss citizens and must be contacted for the official documents and latest changes.

Embassy of the United States Bern
 Jubilaustrasse 93 (95)
 CH-3005 Bern, Switzerland
 Tel: 031 357 70 11
 Fax: 031 357 73 44 (031 357 73 98)
<http://bern.usembassy.gov>

C. STUDENT AND EXCHANGE VISITOR INFORMATION SYSTEM (SEVIS)

The Student and Exchange Visitor Information System (SEVIS), administered by the Bureau of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) within the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), is an Internet-based system that maintains data on foreign students and exchange visitors before and during their stay in the United States.

In order to enroll students from other nations, U.S. colleges and universities must be approved by the School Certification Branch of the Student and Exchange Visitor Program (SEVP). Most U.S. institutions of higher learning have been approved. To confirm that an institution has been approved to admit international students, please view the list of approved schools on the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement website at www.ice.gov.

SEVIS also influences on one's visa application process since students need to have completed the I-20 Form in order to fill out the I-901 Form. The I-20 Form will be provided and usually filled out by the school to which the student is admitted. Without either of those documents an application for a visa will be denied. For further information please visit www.fmjfee.com/index.jhtml.

D. HEALTH INSURANCE

The United States does not have a government medical plan or health care service that covers the entire population. Furthermore, it is not mandatory to have basic health insurance coverage comparable to that in Switzerland. Instead, most people have private health insurance. However, most employers in the USA cover the health insurance costs for their employees, scientists and postdocs and their respective families. Considering the high cost of medical treatment and drugs, it is essential to have insurance coverage.

Since health insurance in Switzerland usually does not automatically cover medical treatment abroad, a change in terms and conditions is necessary. Like Switzerland, the USA has a variety of insurance companies with a wide range of options. Similar to Switzerland, the terms and conditions are difficult to compare and sometimes hard to understand. One must decide whether to choose a U.S. insurance company or to remain with his or her original insurance company.

For those who decide to stay with a Swiss insurance company, it is important to note that possible medical treatment may have to be paid out of pocket. The insurance company will provide reimbursement only after the receipts have been submitted.

The U.S. Department of State requires students on J-1 exchange visitor visas to have insurance coverage that includes health and accident, medical evacuation, and repatriation of remains. The U.S. government has no specific health insurance requirements for students on F-1 and M-1 non-immigrant visas. However, most educational institutions have set their own mandatory health insurance requirements to ensure that international students do not become a "public charge." Hence, they do not become dependent on the U.S. government to take care of them. International students are usually required to prove that they have a certain amount of health insurance, (determined by the university) before they will be allowed to enroll in classes. Be aware that some student exchange organizations make their health insurance mandatory.

Also note that many universities have their own medical offices for their students, even if they do not have a medical school (with services such as general care, prevention, and female care). These services, which are very convenient, are usually available. Students are recommended to check with their universities individually.

E. SWISS OLD-AGE AND SURVIVORS INSURANCE (OASI)

Those who leave Switzerland to work in the USA without being sent by a Swiss company or those not working for a Swiss-based company, are no longer obliged to contribute to the OASI (*AHV/AVS*) system in Switzerland. They pay no contributions until they return to Switzerland. However, there is an option to remain registered and continue to contribute on a voluntary basis.

Those who decide not to contribute to the OASI on a voluntary basis, will see their benefits reduced. To receive the maximum benefits, one must contribute for a certain number of years; each missing year will result in a considerable reduction in benefits. The obligation to pay contributions starts in January after one's 20th birthday and stops when a person reaches the regular retirement age.

Continuing to contribute to the OASI is advisable as it ensures a minimum retirement income. Since it is also possible to receive OASI benefits abroad, contributing on voluntary basis has no disadvantages because one would receive the same benefits as if you had moved back to Switzerland.

Individuals living abroad who decide to continue paying contributions to the OASI should contact the relevant office. For the USA, the office is located at:

Consulat Général de Suisse
Service AVS/AI de la CSC
1572, av. Dr. Penfield
Montréal, QC, H3G 1C4
Canada

For more information concerning the OASI or other insurance services, please visit www.avs-ai-international.ch, to find terms and conditions, addresses and so forth.

F. JOB APPLICATION AND RESUMES

A resume is future-oriented; it must project personality, ambitions and qualifications for the given job being sought. It reflects on the past only to reinforce what will be accomplished if one is hired. A resume should convey two major points to the reader: (1) goals and objectives, i.e., what one is looking for in his or her career, and (2) one's value as an employee (in a brief and simple summary).

The rest is only documentation to confirm that one's new objectives are consistent with his or her previous employment history and that his or her career to date supports the claims made in the summary.

In Switzerland, a conservative and reserved style is considered to be the best. In the USA, the opposite is true. A cover letter in the USA has to be very outgoing and forward, mentioning every achievement and full of superlatives.

Since this writing style is very unfamiliar to someone who is Swiss, it is highly advisable to seek help. There are many excellent books on the subject as well as companies specializing in preparing cover letters and resumes for a successful job application.

This guide does not provide examples of cover letters and resumes since there are so many different possibilities.

1. Cover Letter

The cover letter will give an employer a first impression of you. It should highlight your skills and qualifications to meet the requirements for the position offered. The cover letter and the resume should go together; that means you should use the cover letter to draw the employer's attention to the most important points in your resume and substantiate why you want the job and why you should be hired.

Even though the above-mentioned advice also applies to searching for a job in Switzerland, there are significant differences, the most important being the style of writing.

2. Resumes and Application Forms

Resumes and application forms are two ways to provide employers with written evidence of your qualifications and skills. Generally, the same information appears on both the resume and the application form, but the way in which it is presented differs. Some employers prefer a resume and others require an application form.

Also note that personal details, such as date of birth (DOB), age, marital status, photo and so forth, are not necessary on a resume in the USA, and might make potential employers uncomfortable given the fear of discrimination lawsuits.

Make sure to fill out completely application forms and follow all the instructions. Do not omit any requested information and make sure that the information provided is correct.

3. Processing

Many employers scan resumes into databases, which they then search for specific keywords or phrases. The keywords are usually nouns referring to experience, education, personal characteristics or industry buzzwords. Identify keywords by reading the job description and qualifications; use the same words as in the job ad for your resume. For example, if the job description includes customer service tasks, use the words "customer service" in your resume. Scanners sometimes misread paper resumes, which could mean that some of your keywords might not get into the database. Therefore, whenever possible also send an electronic version by e-mail. If submitting a paper resume is the only possibility, make it

scannable by using a simple font and avoiding underlines, italics, and graphics. It is also a good idea to send a traditionally formatted resume along with the scannable resume.

4. General Hints

In general, one should not apply or interview for jobs for which he or she is overqualified, i.e., one should not apply for a position as a programmer or technician if he or she is an EPF graduate or a Ph.D. One should always seek a position corresponding to his or her education.

When a position is seriously discussed, a choice is sometimes offered between salary level and pay scale. Always gently, but firmly, insist on the highest possible salary level, even if the amount of money paid is the same. Never rely on a verbal promise of a quick promotion since it has no binding value. Management changes are quick to come about and the new management generally has no idea about prior verbal agreements, and no reason to honor them. A higher salary level always leads to more salary growth, an important consideration when thinking about long-term employment.

One should always bring along all course records and diplomas to show the quality, depth and breadth of his or her Swiss education. Again, one should be careful not to understate his or her educational background since the educational system in Switzerland is highly selective.

VIII. NOTES

Useful Addresses

Embassy of Switzerland
Office of Science, Technology
and Higher Education
2900 Cathedral Ave., N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20008

www.swissemb.org/scitech
E-mail: was.science@eda.admin.ch
Phone: +1 (202) 745-7900
Fax: +1 (202) 332-0574

SHARE
Consulate of Switzerland
420 Broadway
Cambridge, MA 02138

www.shareboston.org
Phone: +1 (617) 876-3076
Fax: +1 (617) 876-3079

swissnex
730 Montgomery Street
San Francisco, CA 94111 USA

www.swissnex.org
E-mail: info@swissnex.org
Phone: +1 (415) 912-5901
Fax: +1 (415) 912-5905

**Rectors' Conference of the
Swiss Universities (CRUS)**
P.O. Box 607
CH - 3000 Bern 9

www.crus.ch
Phone: +41 (0) 31 306 60 36
Fax: +41 (0) 31 306 60 20

**Conference of the Universities of
Applied Sciences Switzerland
(CUAS)**
Länggassstrasse 23
P.O. Box 710
CH-3000 Bern 9

www.kfh.ch
Phone: +41 (0) 31 300 70 00
Fax: +41 (0) 31 300 70 19

**Swiss National Science
Foundation SNF**
Wildhainweg 3
P.O. Box 8232
CH-3001 Bern

www.snf.ch
Phone: +41 (0) 31 308 22 22
Fax: +41 (0) 31 301 30 09

Embassy of the United States Bern
Jubilaumsstrasse 93 (95)
CH-3005 Bern, Switzerland

bern.usembassy.gov
Phone: +41 (0) 31 357 70 11
Fax: +41 (0)31 357 73 44
(031 357 73 98)

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