



USC University of  
Southern California

# First-Generation Students at USC:

Strategies for Success



2023-2024



At USC, about **23%** of first-year undergraduates are first-generation students.



**At USC, we define first-generation students as those whose parents do not have four-year degrees. Even if you have older siblings who are currently attending or have graduated from college, you are considered part of the first generation to enroll in, and eventually complete, college.**

**We are proud to have you here at USC. We have many resources and support services to help you navigate your college experience, and this guide will help prepare you for success at USC.**

# Transitioning from High School to College

## Class Times and Scheduling

Perhaps one of the biggest adjustments will be the idea of going to class at different times throughout the day, even well into the evening, even though most classes will not meet every day of the week. Unlike high school classes, university classes are offered at various times during the day, beginning as early as 8:00 a.m. and sometimes even going as late as 10:00 p.m., Monday through Friday. This means that you will need to manage your time differently, as you will have various gaps during the day. What will you do to use that time wisely (including taking time to eat)? Make sure to be mentally and physically ready to address this change in your routine.

## Professors and Teaching Assistants (TAs)

Some courses, such as General Education (GE) and other large lecture classes, will have a professor and teaching assistants (TAs). TAs tend to be graduate students (often PhD students) who are in the process of becoming a professor or researcher. Sometimes, the TAs will be just as involved as the professors, and they may be the ones to grade assignments and examinations. Be sure to get to know the professors and TAs for your classes, and don't hesitate to seek assistance from them.

## Assignments and Due Dates

Submitting assignments (such as homework, lab work or other materials required by a class) on time, by the deadlines, is your responsibility. Professors may not provide you with constant reminders of due dates. Be sure to review the syllabus (every class has one!) and note deadlines and important dates.

## Do you consider yourself an independent learner?

If not, what's your plan for becoming one? What are some of your other learning styles? How can they help you be successful in a college environment?



## Grades

Outstanding grades are often harder to earn in college. Not only is the work faster paced and more challenging than in high school, but some professors may not adhere to the grading systems that you were familiar with in the past. Some college courses may grade on a curve, while others may follow a specific set of points or a scale. Depending on the class, a “B” might be considered a superior grade. Always check your syllabus for details about grading. If you have questions, talk with your professors and teaching assistants about grades and review their expectations and standards for outstanding work.

## Choosing Classes and Registration

Each semester, you will be assigned a specific time and date to register for the following term. Until you have earned 24 units of credit at USC, you will need to meet with your academic advisor to complete your course registration. Once you have earned 24 units, you will register on your own, while still receiving assistance from your academic advisor.

## General Education Courses

At USC, all students are required to complete a specific set of liberal arts courses called General Education. These courses help ensure that you are knowledgeable about a range of subjects and that you graduate as a well-rounded individual. You will want to create variety in your schedule by balancing your major-related coursework with General Education classes, increasing your exposure to different disciplines each semester.

## Ask for Help!

This is a big one. Many times, college students do not realize how much assistance is available to them. Our mission is to ensure student success, and we do that by offering a variety of resources to support your endeavors. Don't let your assumptions about college, competition in the classroom or the need for help prevent you from seeking assistance. In fact, students who seek out support, create study groups, speak to their instructors and ask the most questions ultimately do the best. The next time you hear the word “resource,” don't brush it off. Take note of what the resource is and how it can help you in the future!



## Important Note

You should always speak to your academic advisor (at least once a semester) to make sure you are on track. Ideally, you should do this a few weeks before your registration day and time.



## Staying on the Path to College Success

**Utilize resources:** There are a multitude of support services on campus and online designed to promote and guide student success. Many of these resources are listed at the end of this guide. Before the school year begins, we encourage you to explore these websites to better understand the resources provided.

**Visit your professors during office hours:** This is a great opportunity to ask for help on course materials or simply to get to know your professors better. Check your professors' course syllabi for the times they are available to meet with students outside of class.

**Make appointments with your academic advisor:** Academic advisors are USC staff members who help students select their courses and navigate their undergraduate academic experience. Not only do advisors make sure students stay on track for graduation, but they are able to connect students to a variety of opportunities.

**Use a planner, phone calendar or paper calendar to stay organized:** A college schedule is very different from what you might have been used to in high school. Use a paper or digital calendar to keep track of your class schedule, assignments due and any other responsibilities, such as club meetings or part-time work.

**Get involved in student organizations:** USC has more than 1,000 student clubs and organizations. Although this may seem overwhelming, this wide variety means that most students will find their niche on campus. We encourage you to check out the Involvement Fair, which happens at the beginning of each semester. This is a great opportunity to learn about the various organizations at USC and to join the ones that interest you. You can always start with one or two organizations, and then add more as you progress through your studies at USC.

# Financial Fitness

Understanding and managing your finances is a major part of college life. You will face new financial responsibilities, including paying for tuition and completing financial aid forms. Several resources exist to help you maintain financial fitness and manage the ways in which you spend your money.

## Here are some tips to help get you started:

**Create a budget** for yourself and stick to it.

**Always look for student discounts.** The USC Ticket Office offers discounts for items such as movie tickets and other activities. Research bargains and all the ways you can save money on activities. In addition, USC provides and hosts activities that you can participate in for little or no cost, such as those offered through your residence hall or Campus Activities. Stay up-to-date with campus events.

[ticketoffice.usc.edu](http://ticketoffice.usc.edu)  
[campusactivities.usc.edu](http://campusactivities.usc.edu)  
[calendar.usc.edu](http://calendar.usc.edu)

**Buy used or discounted books.** Check the USC Bookstore for used copies and/or visit Amazon for discounts. Alternatively, see if the books are available in any of the campus libraries.

[uscbookstore.com](http://uscbookstore.com)  
[amazon.com](http://amazon.com)  
[libraries.usc.edu](http://libraries.usc.edu)

**Be careful with credit cards.** Using credit can help you in a pinch, but it can become a trap if you're unable to pay off balances each month. Don't take on more debt than you're able to repay.

**Save the dates.** Check the Financial Aid Office's website or Twitter feed for dates and deadlines, and keep track of them in your calendar.

Talk to a financial aid counselor about what kinds of aid you may qualify for. You might be surprised at how much aid is available to you. Be sure to submit your financial aid and scholarship applications by the posted deadlines. Missing a deadline could mean missing out on a good opportunity!

[financialaid.usc.edu](http://financialaid.usc.edu)  
[twitter.com/uscfinancialaid](https://twitter.com/uscfinancialaid)

**Assess what's important.** Think about what you spend your money on and what matters most to you. Consider how peer pressure and certain assumptions about spending money and material possessions can get in the way of making smart financial decisions. Choose to spend your money on the things that are most important to you and that add value to your college experience.





# Breaking Down the Code: Glossary of College Terminology

**Academic Advisor:** A full-time, professional staff member who individually assists students with their course plans and college progress. They advise students on what classes to take, as well as other opportunities at USC. Students are assigned an academic advisor by the time they attend orientation.

**Bachelor's Degree:** A four-year degree obtained at a college or university. After you complete your degree requirements at USC, you will have earned a bachelor's degree.

**College or School:** An academic division within the larger context of USC. For example, the USC Dornsife College of Letters, Arts and Sciences is the college for majors in the humanities, social sciences and natural sciences. The Viterbi School of Engineering is the school for engineering majors.

**Co-requisites:** Courses that must be taken either before or in the same semester as a particular course in a prescribed sequence of courses.

**Course Number:** A number assigned to each course offered at the university. It consists of the academic department abbreviation and a three-digit number that indicates the particular class and its level of difficulty. For example, the course number for Principles of Microeconomics is ECON 203. "ECON" indicates that it is an economics course. Courses at the 200-level are typically sophomore- or second-level courses.

**Course Withdrawal:** When a student decides to no longer take a course that they have already enrolled in. Depending on when the student withdraws from the course, the course may or may not appear on a transcript and the withdrawal may or may not affect the student's grade point average.

**Curriculum:** The prescribed classes in a program of study needed to complete a degree at a given institution.

**Dean:** A senior university administrator. Every college or school at USC has a dean.

## Do you have a system for taking class notes?

What if the lecture is three hours long and the instructor talks fast? Could you keep up? What tools do you have in mind when thinking about note-taking?





**Department:** A smaller unit within a college or school at USC. For example, psychology and biology are departments within the Dornsife College of Letters, Arts and Sciences.

**Discussion Section:** Most large classes at USC will have an associated discussion section. These smaller and shorter sessions allow students to review and discuss the material taught in the course that week. Teaching assistants usually lead these sections.

**Double Major:** When students are completing two majors within the same academic school.

**Drop/Add:** The first three weeks of each semester, during which students can make changes to their course schedules (add and/or drop courses) without penalty.

**Electives:** Courses that are taken to meet degree requirements but do not satisfy General Education or major requirements. Students typically choose their electives based on interest or curiosity, or the applicability to a second major or minor(s).

**Faculty:** Professors who teach courses at USC.

**Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA):** A federal law that requires universities to protect the privacy of student education records and allows students the right to inspect their own records. USC abides by FERPA and allows students to view their records as stated in the university's Student Education Records policy.

## What is your study strategy?

How do you study? Do you have specific requirements when it comes to studying, such as the type of environment, noise level, time of day, etc.?

**Federal Work-Study:** A form of financial aid that allows students to work part-time on campus and earn money for college expenses, up to a set maximum amount. Most students can earn between \$2,500 and \$3,500 per academic year.

**First-Generation:** A student whose parents do not have four-year degrees.

**First-Year Seminars:** These two-unit elective courses can be taken only during the first year at USC. These seminars offer a shorter course format and do not last the entire semester.

**General Education:** The General Education program comprises a series of liberal arts courses that all students, regardless of their majors, are required to complete. Courses are designed to ensure that you are knowledgeable about a broad range of topics and will graduate as a well-rounded individual. Students take one to two courses in each of eight categories to satisfy the requirements.



**Greek Life:** Student organizations that are referred to as fraternities and sororities. At USC, there are several Greek Councils, including multicultural and professional organizations, that oversee them. To participate in Greek life, USC students are required to have earned at least 12 units in USC coursework and maintain a 2.5 grade point average.

**Internship:** Work experience related to career goals. Internships can be paid or unpaid. Many students participate in internships at local companies to gain experience in their field of interest. Students can receive college credit for unpaid internships.

**Lab:** A hands-on portion of a course typically offered in conjunction with science lectures. Labs give students the chance to test out the theories and concepts covered in the lecture.

**Leave of Absence:** Procedure designed to allow a student to take a leave from their academic career at the university and return to their studies at a later date.

**Lecture:** Also known as a class. This is the period of a class when a professor teaches new material to students.

**Lower Division:** Refers to courses that are numbered 299 and lower. Lower-division courses typically cover broader topics and set a foundation for future courses.

**Major:** A student's main focus of study. Students must take a required set of courses to complete a major. A student earns a bachelor's degree in this particular field of study.





**Mandatory Advisement:** A requirement that all students meet with their assigned academic advisors each semester for course registration until they have completed at least 24 units at USC.

**Meal Plan:** A pre-paid account for your on-campus meals. Your semester bill will have a meal plan fee, which covers the meals you eat in the dining halls. There are various meal plan options. Some include Dining Dollars that can be used to purchase food from cafés and other eateries on campus.

**Minor:** An academic area in which a student can choose to study. Minors typically require less of a time commitment than a major (16-24 units).

**OASIS:** Stands for “Online Academic Student Information System.” OASIS is an online portal that provides students with access to their academic records, information about any restrictions (or “holds”) on their accounts, and registration information.

**OASIS for Guests:** An online portal through which authorized guests can access and view a student’s academic records. Students must grant guest access through their own OASIS accounts before a guest will be able to view any records.

**Orientation:** Orientation events serve as students’ first in-depth introduction to campus life. Orientation covers the numerous resources available and allows students to meet various staff and faculty, as well as future classmates. Students attend orientation before the start of their first semester and register for their first semester of courses.

## How will you deal with stress?

Stress is a natural phenomenon that everyone experiences. How you deal with it will be important as you transition to a new college environment. Think of four or five things that help you alleviate stress, write them down and refer to them when you need a break.





## How do you think your relationships with your family will change when you go to college?

What do you want your relationships to look like? What will you need to do to establish and maintain these new relationships?

**Part-Time:** Enrollment in fewer than 12 (undergraduate) semester units.

**Pass/No Pass (P/NP):** A grading option available to students for some courses. Students may not apply this grading option to their major and minor courses and are limited to the number of units that may count towards their General Education (GE) requirements.

**Prerequisite:** A required skillset or course history that must be completed in order to take an advanced-level course.

**Registrar:** University official in charge of keeping and maintaining student records.

**Resident Assistant (RA):** A student staff member that lives on a floor in a residence hall. The RA provides support services and mentorship to residents and ensures that policies are enforced.

**Second Degree:** When a student is completing two majors in separate academic schools.

### **STARS (Student Academic Record System)**

**Report:** A report that contains all USC coursework and accepted transfer work that applies to degree requirements. Students can access their STARS report through OASIS.

**Syllabus:** A document that outlines the schedule, expectations and assignments for a course.

**Teaching Assistant (TA):** Typically graduate students, TAs often support professors in the classroom and take on duties such as grading assignments and exams as well as facilitating discussion sections.

**Transcript:** The official record of the courses a student has taken and the grades they earned.

**Transfer Credit Report (TCR):** A report that contains all transferable coursework applicable to the USC degree. TCRs are generated by USC's Undergraduate Transfer Services and made available before the student's first semester at USC. Academic advisors use them to help students plan their USC coursework.

**TrojansAlert:** USC's emergency alert system. Students receive text messages and emails if there is emergency activity on or near campus.



**Undergraduate Students:** The student population earning bachelor's degrees at a university.

**Units:** The number of college credits that students may earn for a course. In general, one unit is equivalent to one hour (per week) of course time. USC courses can range from one to four units, with most being three or four units. Note that most four-unit courses at USC meet for only three hours per week.

**Upper Division:** Refers to courses that are numbered 300 and higher. Upper-division courses typically cover more specific, specialized topics with the expectation that students have acquired a foundation of knowledge before taking the course.

**USC Catalogue:** The university's official online document of record. It covers the university's admission, academic and financial aid policies. It also defines degree and major requirements for all majors and minors offered during that academic year. [catalogue.usc.edu](http://catalogue.usc.edu)

**USC Student Handbook:** USC's online student handbook that serves as a guide to all university policies. Look for it at [policy.usc.edu/studenthandbook](http://policy.usc.edu/studenthandbook).



# Departments and Services

**Admission**  
[admission.usc.edu](http://admission.usc.edu)  
(213) 740-1111

**American Language Institute**  
[ali.usc.edu](http://ali.usc.edu)  
(213) 740-0079

**Asian Pacific American Student Services**  
[apass.usc.edu](http://apass.usc.edu)  
(213) 740-4999

**Athletic Administration**  
[usctrojans.com](http://usctrojans.com)  
(213) 740-3843

**Bookstore**  
[uscbookstore.com](http://uscbookstore.com)  
(213) 740-0066

**Campus Activities**  
[campusactivities.usc.edu](http://campusactivities.usc.edu)  
(213) 740-5693

**Campus Tours**  
[admission.usc.edu/meet-us](http://admission.usc.edu/meet-us)  
(213) 740-6605

**Career Center**  
[careers.usc.edu](http://careers.usc.edu)  
(213) 740-9111

**Cashier's Office**  
[sfs.usc.edu](http://sfs.usc.edu)  
(213) 740-7471

**Center for Academic Support**  
[undergrad.usc.edu/services](http://undergrad.usc.edu/services)  
(213) 740-1741

**Center for Black Cultural and Student Affairs**  
[cbcsa.usc.edu](http://cbcsa.usc.edu)  
(213) 740-8257

**Financial Aid**  
[financialaid.usc.edu](http://financialaid.usc.edu)  
(213) 740-4444

**First Generation Plus Success Center (FG+SC)**  
[firstgenplussc.usc.edu](http://firstgenplussc.usc.edu)

**Fraternity and Sorority Leadership Development**  
[greeklife.usc.edu](http://greeklife.usc.edu)  
(213) 821-1639

**Housing**  
[housing.usc.edu](http://housing.usc.edu)  
(213) 740-2546

**International Services**  
[ois.usc.edu](http://ois.usc.edu)

**Kortschak Center for Creativity and Learning**  
[kortschakcenter.usc.edu](http://kortschakcenter.usc.edu)  
(213) 740-7884

**Latinx/Chicanx Center for Advocacy and Student Affairs (La Casa)**  
[lacasa.usc.edu](http://lacasa.usc.edu)  
(213) 740-1480

**LGBTQ+ Student Center**  
[lgbtqplus.usc.edu](http://lgbtqplus.usc.edu)  
(213) 740-7619

**Libraries**  
[libraries.usc.edu](http://libraries.usc.edu)  
(213) 740-2543

**Native American Student Assembly**  
[nasu.usc.edu](http://nasu.usc.edu)  
(213) 740-6110

**Orientation Programs**  
[orientation.usc.edu](http://orientation.usc.edu)  
(213) 740-7767

**Overseas Studies**  
[dornsife.usc.edu/overseas](http://dornsife.usc.edu/overseas)  
(213) 740-3636

**Registrar**  
[arr.usc.edu](http://arr.usc.edu)  
(213) 740-8500

**Religious and Spiritual Life**  
[orsl.usc.edu](http://orsl.usc.edu)  
(213) 740-6110

**ROTC**  
Air Force/Space Force, Army, Navy/Marines  
[military.usc.edu](http://military.usc.edu)

**Student Accessibility Services**  
[osas.usc.edu](http://osas.usc.edu)  
(213) 740-0776

**Student Affairs**  
[studentaffairs.usc.edu](http://studentaffairs.usc.edu)  
(213) 740-2421

**Student Financial Services**  
[sfs.usc.edu](http://sfs.usc.edu)  
(213) 740-4077

**Student Health**  
[studenthealth.usc.edu](http://studenthealth.usc.edu)  
(213) 740-9355

**Counseling Services**  
[studenthealth.usc.edu/counseling](http://studenthealth.usc.edu/counseling)  
(213) 740-9355

**Testing Services**  
[classes.usc.edu/registration/placement-exams](http://classes.usc.edu/registration/placement-exams)  
(213) 740-1188

**Undergraduate Honors Programs**  
(Resident Honors Program, Freshman Science Honors, Thematic Option)  
[dornsife.usc.edu/honors](http://dornsife.usc.edu/honors)  
(213) 740-2955

**Undergraduate Transfer Credit**  
[arr.usc.edu/transfercredit](http://arr.usc.edu/transfercredit)  
(213) 740-4628

**USC Credit Union**  
[usccreditunion.org](http://usccreditunion.org)  
(877) 670-5860

**USC Card Services**  
[mycard.usc.edu](http://mycard.usc.edu)  
(213) 740-8709

**Veteran Certification Office**  
[arr.usc.edu/veterans](http://arr.usc.edu/veterans)



## Need to switch majors or add a minor?

Meet with your advisor, who can refer you to the appropriate department. You will then need to meet with an academic advisor for the program you are interested in. They can go over the program's requirements and the next steps you will need to take.

# Schools and Programs

## Accounting and Business

(213) 740-8885  
marshall.usc.edu

## Architecture

(213) 740-2723  
arch.usc.edu

## Art and Design

(213) 740-ARTS (2787)  
roski.usc.edu

## Arts, Technology and the Business of Innovation

(213) 821-6140  
iovine-young.usc.edu

## Cinematic Arts

(213) 740-8358  
cinema.usc.edu

## Communication and Journalism

(213) 821-0770  
annenbergl.usc.edu

## Dance

(213) 740-9327  
kaufman.usc.edu

## Dentistry

(213) 740-2800  
dentistry.usc.edu

## Dramatic Arts

(213) 740-1286  
dramaticarts.usc.edu

## Engineering and Computer Science

(213) 740-4530  
viterbi.usc.edu

## Gerontology

(213) 740-5156  
gero.usc.edu

## Law

(213) 764-3354  
gould.usc.edu

## Letters, Arts and Sciences

(213) 740-5930  
dornsife.usc.edu

## Music

(213) 740-8986  
music.usc.edu

## Occupational Therapy

(323) 442-2850  
chan.usc.edu

## Pharmacy and Pharmaceutical Sciences

(323) 442-1369  
pharmacyschool.usc.edu

## Preventive Medicine

(213) 740-1060  
hpdp.usc.edu

## Public Policy

(213) 740-0550  
priceschool.usc.edu



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For questions about compliance with the notice of non-discrimination, the University has designated a Vice President for Equity, Equal Opportunity, and Title IX Coordinator, Catherine Spear, who can be reached at **eeotix@usc.edu**, (213) 740-5086, USC Credit Union Building, 3720 South Flower Street, 2nd Floor, Los Angeles, California 90089-0704. For disability-related questions, the University has also designated an ADA/Section 504 Coordinator, Christine Street, Associate Vice Provost for Student Affairs–Institutional Accessibility and ADA Compliance, who can be reached at **streetc@usc.edu**, (213) 821-4658, 3601 Trousdale Parkway, Bldg. #89, Los Angeles, California 90089.