Abstract
This file is created to answer questions about applying to universities in North America. It has been tried to answer the questions based on our personal experiences. You can find information about how to apply for graduate school and also some information about after you received your admission. This document is a collective effort of few Iranian students studying abroad to help Iranian applicants by giving them a better insight into the application process. The major contributors are listed in a separate section.

There are many resources on the web about applying, but to my best knowledge none of them is written for Iranians. Here are some of links which you might find helpful:

General information for applying to graduate school:
http://about.embark.com/grad/

A helpful website to locate a university (a slow website): http://www.gradschools.com/
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1 INTRODUCTION
In the beginning of this document, it has been tried to give justification about why such a document was needed.

Many of students who study in North America are confronted by lots of emails from their friend back home about studying abroad. Obviously it is quite time consuming to respond them one by one and with details. This document is going to answer general questions on this matter. Obviously, it is not possible to address all specific questions in here, as they highly depend on individual personal situations. This document is trying to address general questions in an organized manner.

There are some moral issues about creation of this document, which I will try to answer in the introduction. I might be blamed of paving the way for the Iranian students to go abroad and as a result, indirectly increasing the so-called "brain drain" and in the same time providing American industries with Iranian labor. Here is how I respond to these questions:

a. Right to choose
I respect the right to choose. No matter where someone has been born, they should be able to get what they want and deserve, but of course in the rational framework.

b. Affecting Iranian Society
Although today the percentage of Iranians abroad who are going back to Iran is extremely low, it does not mean that it will remain the same indefinitely. Also, I remind the reader that many of Iranian universities' faculty members have graduated outside Iran and have returned back home and created the Iran's modern universities.

c. Creating Competition
Existence of different options for Iranian students makes it hard to confine them in low standard programs. It creates a force to improve the graduate study in Iran. There should be a competition in attracting the students, otherwise good students will not be respected enough in Iran.

d. Creating Different Options
This document will focus more on helping the students to find out what is best for them, by giving a better insight into studying abroad and finding out about advantages and disadvantages of doing so. I will also try to gather information about different universities, to let students pick what is best for them. So this document provides a better transparency on the issue, which is an important feature of a civil society!

2 COMPARING STUDYING INSIDE IRAN AND ABROAD
If you choose to study in Iran, you are living in your own country. So during your graduate study, you will not need to spend some of your energy adapting to a new environment. On the other hand, living abroad gives you a unique experience, which you can never obtain by just living in Iran. Especially, interacting with a diverse body of foreign students is something that cannot be experienced in Iran.

If you are not a very social person, by going abroad for your study, you put yourself in danger of being alone and facing strong depression. It affects your studies and you will gain much less than what you should from your study. In Iran, because of your family and your friends and warm Iranian culture there is a low chance of loneliness.

[Human's notes] This is the same for those Iranian students who go to another city for their studies. So, I think the most important factor in depression/loneliness is the difference of the "the way of life" in the two different societies.

If you have been a pop star in Iran, an "olympiadist" or a high ranking student in universities' entrance exam, you will be disappointed when you learn that they hold an exhibition for a gorilla just because he can take the pen and draw some line on the paper, but nobody cares about your designing an integrated circuit. So, if your engine was working because of appreciation you were receiving from your dad and mom and the smile of the girl next door when you were going to school, it will shut down here; you even might go down the hill.
In general, faculty members in Iranian universities are quite smart. The existing problem is lack of communication with outside world and money for research. As a result, researchers do not work on the hot topics of the day. Many of magazines are published in America, so they cannot publish their paper, because they are not working on topics, which are considered important at the time. As it is, publication is a measure of scientific activity. Because we are way behind in science, we cannot determine the research direction and up to the moment we do not have enough momentum and publicity in the world, we should pay the price of leaving this toothers.

[Human Alborzi's notes] Well, to be honest, I should add non-productive to the word smart above. I am not going to fully diagnose the reason of non-productiveness in Iranian "smart" academicians, but among many reasons, I can add: financial problems, being productive is not as valued in Iran as US. So, being a graduate student in Iran, you might face more problems in getting your work published in good journals than a student who studies, say, in the US. This is not just for Iranian students; even European students with so much communication with their American counterparts are treated unfairly in this matter.

[Human Alborzi's notes] It is mostly about presence in the editorial board of the journals, and the programming committees of the conferences. Those people are the ones who accept or reject papers and no one else. There is nothing neither fair nor unfair in accepting or rejecting a paper because the people who have the authority do not like it. Europeans/Iranians want to have their papers in the journals, well, join the boards/committees, there is nother way.

[Amir Togha's notes] In America, sooner or later, you will be hit by the so-called "culture shock", and an important aspect of "the shock" that will probably affect you as a student (especially if you are a lazy, but talented one) is the prevalent attitude in American culture towards working. Unlike in Iran, where we have sayings like "kaar maal-e teraaktor-e", and derogatory terms like "khar-khun" for labeling those who work their butts off are a common part of school culture, and you can be shamed if people find out that you have been working hard, and one can boast about not having opened the book at all to prepare for the exam, and working hard is a sign of lack of intelligence (which makes a lot of sense to us, because it is a mentality deeply rooted in our collective conscience!), in America, hard work is highly valued (which may have to do with their Protestant cultural heritage), and talent and "zerangi" alone are not appreciated at all.

[Human Alborzi's notes] In America the terms, geek and nerd are the same derogatory terms in Iran, however they are used in a harsher way, and more broadly. No matter in US or in Iran, a student whohoes an exam without studying hard for it (and without cheating) is very well received by his/her fellows. Working hard in both countries are also acceptable. However, the subject of humiliation in both cases is not having a social life and being one-dimensional. That is in both countries, a person who does not know anything but studying is not appreciated.

[Amir Togha's notes] No matter how talented you are, you cannot count on impressing your (American) professors and colleagues by merely proving your talent; you have to work hard, or at least pretend so. (Never make the mistake of telling them that you have not studied at all. Instead, although it may sound ridiculous and ludicrous to you, you should tell them about how much "dood-e cheraaghi" you have swallowed. (Sounds like, after all, Iranians used to value hard work too! Whatever happened to that, I have no clue of, but it could be another instance of British conspiracy: "kaar, kaar-e ingilisaa -st!") They will like you a lot more.

[Human Alborzi's notes] Another point of difference between is the matter of cheating. While studying in University of Tehran, Electrical Engineering Dept. 1367-1371, cheating was a permissible thing, and morally acceptable among most of the students. (Well, it was very hard to do in some courses, but if someone did it, most fellow students, did not care that much about it). In US, cheating in homework, exams, and projects is frowned upon by almost everyone.

3 HOW TO APPLY
In this chapter, you will find out what you need for applying. Universities have different requirements. The main items are application form, English test, GRE, recommendation letters, transcripts.
There are many resources on the web about applying, but to my best knowledge none of them is written for Iranians. Here are some links, which you might find helpful:

http://about.embark.com/grad/

A helpful website to locate a university (a slow website): http://www.gradschools.com/

A nice website: http://archaeology.about.com/education/archaeology/library/nicholls/bltoc.htm

### 3.1 Application Form

I will discuss possible applying strategies, but in the beginning, it is always good to start requesting plenty of these nicely colored applications forms and see how they look like. Start writing to the departments you are interested as early as mid-September. Sometimes, you can request them through the web. You can goto the admission office link or you can go to the website of the department you want to apply to. As far as I know, many of universities are still using the old system in which you should send them a paper letter to request an application form. They probably want to prevent random people from getting these booklets.

Please do not ask your friends in the US to do it. It is wasting time of your friend for a job that you can do easily. It is better to save them for more critical situations or when your letters have been lost. You can find addresses of the universities through the web. I have provided the links below. Also, I remember there was this big directory of graduate schools in the main library of Sharif University. I do not know if they still have it. Although it might be a few years old, it is still usable. The addresses don't change so quickly.

[Houman Alborzi's notes] I used the printed version of "Graduate programs in Engineering and Applied Sciences", published by Peterson's (http://www.petersons.com) studies in North America", a copy of which was available in the ministry of higher education (MHE) in meydoone-takhti. They now have the same information available on their website.

Filling application form takes a long time, but it is a good exercise for Iranian students who rarely have filled application forms in their life. You should start filling them as early as November. Don't wait for your GRE or TOEFL score.

[Houman Alborzi's notes] It is good to fill the application with much care and detail, however do not try to be very exact in all the details, it really does not matter.

Be mindful of deadlines. If you are applying for starting your study in fall of the next year, the deadlines are usually January. Some awkward universities, which want to show that they are different, have earlier deadlines, including Harvard. Many of Canadian schools have the deadline on February 1st. You can find out the deadlines from admission office website or the application form.

These days you can apply for some universities through web:

http://about.embark.com/grad/links/Acememb.asp?type=GRAD

### 3.2 English test

American universities usually ask you to take TOEFL. Canadian universities are more flexible. Some of them accept Michigan Test, but you should find out about it in their application form. Unfortunately, TOEFL is not given in Iran. Registering for TOEFL is more difficult than getting an admission from somewhere. You cannot register by yourself, because they do not even accept addresses from Iran. Yes, it is sad, but I do not think you can expect what was considered "The Great Satan" to treat you better than this. So you should find someone outside Iran to register for you. The easiest way to register is by phone or fax, using credit card. Here is the website's address:

http://www.toefl.org/

Your friend or relative can use their own address. It is better if you look at this web site and download the application and after filling it up fax it to your friends, because otherwise it will be a difficult task for them to find out about the details. Always remind yourself that they are extremely busy and they only have 10 minutes to do your job (even if he is your pesar-khaale!), so provide them with enough information. Do not expect them to know everything only because they live abroad or even that they have taken this test before.

To get to the test center you need a ticket, which will be sent to you after you register for TOEFL. Since someone else is registering you, there is a chance that it gets lost in mailing, but you do not need to worry. You just need to know your ticket number, which can be found out by calling TOEFL (or GRE).
If you are looking for a cheap place to take your exam go to Turkey. You can go by bus, which take about 40 hours to Ankara from Tehran.

[Hayman Alborzi's notes] Considering that it usually takes your more effort to go abroad and re-take an exam, try to do your best in your first exam. So, if you can afford it, you should try to spend a little more money to make sure you are taking the exams in a relaxed condition. Get to the test-taking city a few days earlier; add a few more days if you are going by bus.

[Hayman Alborzi's notes] Both GRE and TOEFL are now available through computer-based tests (CBT). Most likely, you can obtain a copy of preparation software for these tests to prepare yourself for the exams.

### 3.3 GRE

Graduate Record Examination (or GRE in short) has two parts: General Test and Subject Test. Both of them are multiple choice (MC tests). Many universities require you to take GRE general test and in some cases also subject test. GRE general test has three sections: Quantitative, Analytical, and Verbal.

Quantitative is about easy calculus. As an Iranian, you are expected to get 760-800 out of 800. If you get less you have probably failed math in all years of high school or you are in love with someone or you have high fever.

Analytical is the decent part of this test, which you can really improve by practicing. This part tests your ability to understand structured sets of relationships, analyze and evaluate arguments, identify central issues and hypotheses. The major problem is that you cannot read the material as fast as an American. You should try to get more than 650 out of 800.

Verbal is last part, which is the most stupid part of GRE! If you get 450 out of 800, it means that you are fairly good in English vocabulary. To improve your score in Verbal section you need to spend a very long time and receive a good English education. But many people believe that it is not that important to have a good score in Verbal part. Although GRE's General Test sucks, in many cases it is the only thing in which admission committee does have trust. So you should not screw up the exam, especially on Quantitative section.

[Hayman Alborzi's notes] 450 means you English vocab is good as a non-English speaker, I have seen Iranian people getting scores as high as 600. However, most Chinese and Indians get scores as good as 700-800. If you are trying to get to a very competitive program, starting a few years early to work on your English vocabulary pays well. The more competitive a program is, the more number of excellent applicants to that program. In those cases the admission committee starts using non-proven filters such as GRE scores to be down the pool of applicants. However, in some departments, they do not expect a high GRE verbal score from certain countries (like Iran). That is, if they had admitted a few students from those countries and they did as good as the rest (or better), they lower their expectation for GRE verbal scores from those countries. Conclusion: Start a few years early to improve your GRE verbal score to be able to compete with other International students who do the same.

The cost for GRE general registration is around $125.

Some departments require you to take the Subject Test. My own opinion is you'd better take this test even if they do not require it. It is your strong point. The score is out of 990. Also they give you a percentile, which shows where you are compared to others. If you are above 85 you have a good chance of getting into a decent American school.

The cost to take GRE's Subject Test is around $150. Here is GRE website: [http://www.gre.org](http://www.gre.org)

### 3.4 Letters of Recommendation

You need to get three letters of recommendation from your professors. Iranian professors are not normally good in writing recommendations. First they think they should be completely honest and they write what you really are with your positive points and negative points. In recommendation letters, there is no need for writing negative points. They should just support your positive points with giving evidences and keep silent about your weak points. Admission committee members are smart enough to figure out that you are not that good about something when it is not mentioned in your recommendation letter.

Unfortunately still many faculties in Iranian universities are facing with the dilemma of whether you should go abroad to pursue your studies and that shows itself in the vague and not well written
recommendation letters. You should convince them that writing bad recommendation letters does not prevent you from going abroad; it just makes you end up in a worse university than what you really deserve and I suppose they don't like that to happen.

Do not ask "famous" professors to write recommendation letters for you, if they do not know you well, because they will write stupid stuff about you, such as "This is a good boy", "She is smart", or "He is the best". Recommendation letters need to have more details about your personality and your work. If you know some of your younger faculty members who know you better ask them to write you a recommendation. You can ask them to read this document, they might find it helpful. Many of the faculty members in Iran, even if you think everybody know them in the world, are completely unknown in the other side of the Atlantic Ocean, even in the universities that they have graduated couple of decades ago. Tosdive this problem ask them to put a short letter about themselves and which school they have graduated from, what their field of study is and a list of their important publications.

Also, if they are young and friendly and do not easily get offended, ask them politely to edit their recommendation letters and make it free from obvious grammatical errors before sending them out. Also it is good if you give them your resume, which enables them to remember what you have done. Sometimes they cannot remember exactly who has done what.

It is good if you give them your resume, which enables them to remember what you have done. Sometimes they cannot remember exactly who has done what. By giving your resume to them, they can support your claims in your resume. It is very important to support you with evidences. For example, saying "He is a smart student" can be replaced by "He asked quite relevant questions in my Quantum class, which showed his interest in the subject and his talent".

Usually, you do not need to send the recommendation letters with your application forms. You can send them separately. Some professors prefer to send them themselves, so give them envelopes with enough postage and written address on it. Do not bother them too much. Remember that there are probably other students who ask them for recommendation letters too.

[Human Alborzi's notes] If you have read a few recommendation letters from Iranian professors, you see that all of them look the same. This is in fact what an American prof. in my department told me. A good recommendation letter should contain facts about the individual. Usually the longer the letter, it shows more respect of the writer of the letter toward the students and the letter itself. So, it is good to ask the prof much in advance to write the letter. Another point is that, Iranian profs do not read recommendation letters for admission of their students, so they really do not know what is good to put in such a letter. Your project/thesis advisor is definitely one the people that should write such a letter. Other good candidates are profs with non-academic positions, such as department chair or head of research labs. If you have TAed for some profs, include one of them as well for writing the letter. It really does not matter how famous a prof is when writing letter, there are very little chances that the person reading the letter knows the Prof. Instead, try to get your letter be done by people who are most likely to write good letters for you.

I remind you not to push anybody for writing a recommendation letter for you. The results could be terrible! Here is some hints for the person who is going to write a recommendation letter:

http://www.jobweb.org/catapult/reftips.html

3.5 Personal Statement

Personal statement is a text one or two pages long, about what you want to do and how much you are prepared to pursue your ambitions. You should try to explain your interests. You should connect together different working experiences you have had, to give a perfect picture of what you have done and their relevance to what you want to do in the future.

In writing your interests you should not be too general or too narrow-minded. It might not be good to say "I love physics". This is a statement which does not carry any information and they already expect you to like your major when you are applying for it. Writing something like "I have done research on Astrophysics, Particle Physics, and Condensed Matter" indicates that you do not know what Physics is or you do not have any idea how wide these branches of physics are. It also shows you are just a student who has been to a couple of lectures and is fascinated by these subjects, but does not have any clue what they are. A more accurate statement can be "Considering my background and my interest, I will focus on Number Theory in my PhD". You might find better sentences.
[Houman Alborzi's notes] The personal statement is your only piece of creative writing in your application packet. You should cover the following topics in it: Why grad school. Why abroad. Why the school you are applying to. Why the major/program you are applying to. Why are your strong points. Why are your weak points. Any excuses for any weak points in your application packet, (low GPA, GRE, ..., bad grades in courses and so on). Why are you going to do after getting your degree. The goal is to convince the admission committee that by admitting you over others they produce a better PhD holder at the end. They love hard working people. They love people who can write well in English. They are professors and love people who like teaching. They are researchers and love people who like research. Keep all these in mind when writing your statement. But, be honest. It is very easy to smell dishonesty.

[Houman Alborzi's notes] A peculiar thing of Iranian personal statements I have read is that they all start with a far recollection of the person's childhood. I did it myself, and have seen it all the others I have read. Well, I don't why, but it is really funny to see the same format among the statements.

You may have the impression that if you claim something about your interest, they will force you to work on it during your program. Although, it is always good to be honest and straightforward. But sometimes you are not really sure what you want to do for your PhD, and then do not be afraid. If you take up something in the beginning, there is always a chance to later switch to other subjects in the same department. Also, people do not look at your personal statement every day to see what you have claimed when you were applying.

If you are highly interested to get into a specific university, it is a good idea to prepare a separate Personal Statement for them and describe why you are interested to get into their program and how your skills and experiences are appropriate for that department.

A good source for writing personal statements from Writers' Workshop in University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign:
http://www.english.uiuc.edu/cws/wworkshop/tips/writtechperstate.htm

Here are some nice tips for you to write your Personal Statement from Rensselaer Writing Center:
http://www.rpi.edu/dept/lit/writecenter/web/gradapp.html

Here is very good one from Purdue writing center:
http://owl.english.purdue.edu/handouts/pw/p_perstate.html

3.6 Curriculum Vitae

Curriculum Vitae or resume is about what you have done in past few years. You need to write about where you have studied, your publications, teaching experiences, work experiences, skills, conferences that you have attended, ... The best way to learn about it is looking at what others write in their CV. Here I include a few links, where you can see CV of some people that I found on the Internet.

Here is a helpful site for creating your resume from MIT Writing Center:

[Houman Alborzi's note] CV's are not as important as personal statements. And, most schools do not require them. And there is not much to put in CV, which is not in the application form. However, In my opinion, they only reason of adding CV is to present the application form in a more readable format, and to add stuff which you think are important and should be considered. Put your konkoor ranking there if it is a good one; list all your publications if any, any non-academic activities you had. People like to see people as humans with diverse abilities. For example, if you like acting in plays/painting/sports mention them in your CV.

Another source:
http://www.english.uiuc.edu/cws/wworkshop/tips/writtech.resumes.htm

Here are some tips for preparing a resume from Rensselaer Writing Center:
http://www.rpi.edu/dept/lit/writecenter/web/resume.html
4 LIVING EXPENSES, TUITION AND FINANCIAL SUPPORTS

You have two kinds of expenses, living expenses and tuition. If you get financial supports from university, they cover your tuition. In many private American universities, when you have support from the university, they pay the tuition directly without your notice. But in the State Universities, like UCLA, Texas A&M and University of Toronto, They give you the whole money and you go and pay your tuition. This doesn't mean you are receiving less money than others. Living expenses is the other part of your expenses. It includes rent, food costs, phone and electricity bills,...

[Houman Alborzi's notes] The living expenses are usually of concern after being admitted to a graduate program. Usually the stipend for graduate assistants is enough to cover the living expenses in the school.

4.1 Living Expenses

4.1.1 Housing

Housing is quite important, because you need a quiet and nice place after a long day in school. Rent is your major expense when you leave your parents' house. If you are single, you have better options; you can live on-campus in a dorm or you can find a room in an apartment off-campus. Housing Offices in universities are responsible for helping students to find a place to live. Some universities, such as MIT, make sure that any first year graduate student who wants to live on-campus will be able to do so. On-campus dorm usually constitute of big hallways with lots of rooms, where you might share a room with someone else or you might get a single room. You can check the prices for living on-campus in the website of that university or in their brochure. They usually charge you somewhere around $350 - $450 for a single room. (If you are going to Canada, read all these numbers as Canadian dollar).

[Houman Alborzi's notes] University of Maryland, College Park (UMCP) has very limited housing options for graduate students. Michigan State University (MSU) however had plenty of on-campus options.

Now, what if you have decided to live off-campus? If you share, say, a 3 bedroom apartment with 2 other people and have your own separate bedroom, you probably should pay something around $300 - $500 per month, depending on where you live. If your university is located in downtown of the city and you are looking for somewhere close to university you should consider it to be on the more expensive side. But if the university is located in suburbs, you have chances to get a better deal. I have heard that people, in the middle of America, rent a one-bedroom apartment for as low as $400.

[Houman Alborzi's notes] 1 BR apartments range from $400 to $1500 (and more) in college towns. Do not expect to have your own 1BR apartment. Even if you can afford it, you are wasting your money, unless you have a very good reason for doing so. Try to share a house or apartment with someone else. When telling people that I share my place with others (I did that after the first semester in US), they usually show their concern about the roommate. Is the other person Iranian or not, and how I trust them to live with me. A non-Persian-speaker roommate (which is the general term for a person who shares a house, an apartment, or a room with you) usually forces you to practice more of your English, and if the other person has a good command of English, it will make your English better too. You can also exchange little bits of your cultures. So, a non-Iranian roommate will at least be a good experiment. Trust? Well, I don't know the answer. But, you do not need the trust in most cases, leave that to law.

If you want to choose between living on-campus and off-campus, you should look at a few factors. Living on-campus usually means you are closer to your work place. You get better chance of finding friends and learning about other cultures and improving your language skills. On the other hand, you might get a less expensive housing, if you try off-campus. Also, you can find a place you really like. It also reduces your stress, because you go out of your work environment and you can breathe a fresh air. Also, you have a chance to choose your roommates. Anyway, my own advice is to try to live on-campus for the first semester, because living outside has more difficulties and you do not want to be left without a place when you arrive. In some cases finding a place to live might take as long as a month. So, if Housing Office in your university helps you to get an on-campus housing try it and have your place ready when you arrive. Try not to choose the dorm, which have mandatory meal plan. There are usually better food options outside of dorm.
4.1.2 Food

Although food does not seem to be a major issue, many international students suffer from eating disorders. Try to learn as many Iranian foods that you can, before coming here. Try to learn the ones that do not take time to cook, including berenji, kookoo, aab goosht, taas-kabaab, margh, ... Cost of food varies depending on person. Rice and meat are not expensive here, but fruits are very expensive with a low quality compared to what you eat in Iran (Thanks to Genetics Engineering, all fruits are made tasteless)! The cost of food is somewhere around $150-$300 per month. If you cook yourself, it is healthier and cheaper. If you consume the so-called fast foods such as McDonald, it is more expensive and not healthy at all. If you are a perfect Muslim and want to remain one, you can find halal meat, if you live in big cities.

[Houman Alborzi's notes] If you think you are going to cook your food, consider living in an apartment over a dorm room. Most dorms offer very little kitchen facilities, and they are not convenient.

4.1.3 Entertainment

If you have lived with your parents in your undergraduate years, this will be your first time out of home and because you cannot go home frequently enough, you need to be more careful about your mental health, and not to get depressed. Fortunately, in many universities in the west coast and also the east coast, there are many Iranian students around, so it is very likely that you even find your old friends. But you cannot and you should not spend all your time with Iranians. You should use the opportunity to learn about other cultures, history, art, ... and of course it means you should spend more money. You can gotomovie theaters, museums, science museums, ... Also you might go to restaurants frequently with your international friends to get a chance to learn what they have to say about their country and even discussing American social life (Gheibate Amricaayihaa ro kardan). Depending on your activities, it can cost you somewhere around $100-$150 per month.

[Houman Alborzi's notes] There are many cheap ways of Entertainment available by school. Like discounted movie shows, plays, free music performances, sporting competitions and so on. Eating out is certainly not a cheap form of entertainment.

4.1.4 Phone Bills

Phone bills constitute a considerable part of your expenses. Calling inside US is pretty cheap, but calling Iran is pretty expensive. It costs around 60 cents per minute. Probably the in average phone bills can cost around $50 per month. If you have time, it is better to get an email account in Iran for your family, and then you will need to call them less. You can write major events in your emails. Establishing an email account is what you can do before coming to North America.

You might even be able to find a fast Internet connection in Iran, and then you can use PC2Phone services, which enables your family to call you through their PC at home.

4.1.5 Medical Insurance

It is mandatory to have medical insurance. You cannot be an international student without medical insurance. Universities usually have their own medical insurance plans, so you get a bill from university to pay your medical insurance. They usually charge around $250 per semester. So if you stay here for the whole year, you should pay around $750 for two semesters plus summer.

Medical insurance is the most useless thing in America. Your main medical expenses are caused by your crooked teeth and squint eyes, which are not covered by medical insurance. So before coming here make sure to see a dentist and ask them do what is necessary to do. If you use eyeglasses, buy another extra pair. Also try to vaccinate against any possible diseases. Vaccination is not as cheap as it is in Iran.

[Houman's notes] You do not have much of choice in Medical insurance. Usually the school provides to you a package, which you have to accept it. However, the package may come with options. For example, UMCP, provides GAs with optional dental care, and a choice of different medical providers.

4.2 Financial Support

For living and paying your tuition, you need money and considering the fact that students are not legally allowed to work outside of their campuses, you need to have financial support. Also when you apply for visa they ask you to show that you have enough funds to pay for tuition and living expenses in here. When you
get an admission from a university, they will tell you whether your admission is with financial support or not. If you have financial support from the university, it can be in the form of Fellowship, Teaching Assistantship, or Research Assistantship. If you get an admission without financial support, you should start looking for a connection in that department and try to find a professor who is ready to give you Research Assistantship. If you cannot find any, then you should pay your tuition and your living expenses by your own.

4.2.1 Fellowship
Fellowship is the best kind of support you can get, because they will not ask you to work in return. Especially in the first year, when you have lots of courses, it gives you the chance to focus on your courses. Fellowships are very rare and you get one if they really love you.

4.2.2 Teaching Assistantship
If you are a science student, including Physics, Math, and Chemistry, it will be quite likely that financial support come in the form of TA. TAs, in the first semester, are usually in the form of grading or lab tutoring. They normally will not require you to teach a recitation (halle tamrin) in the first semester, because of your weakness in English. TA, in private universities, covers the whole tuition and your living expenses. Depending on the university, they pay different amounts of money. In MIT, TAs are around $1300 per month after tax.

Having a TA is nice in the first semester, because you have a chance to interact with others and improve your language skills and get to know some people in your department. Also, in the first semester you may not be sure about what you want to do. So having TA means you have enough time to look around and talk to many faculty members and find an appropriate supervisor. You should not rush in finding a supervisor. TA from academic point of view is a total waste of time. You may improve your social skills in the first or second semester, but afterwards the stuff you can learn from it is miniscule.

[Human Alborzi's notes] Also, if you are looking for an academic job later on, having TA experience is a good thing.

4.2.3 Research Assistantship
In engineering departments, they normally provide their students with financial support in the form of RA. Because faculty members have more grant money and they want to use their students as labor force. If you know what you want to do in your PhD and you have decided on your area of research, it is good to have RA, because you can start as early as your first semester to do research. The problem with RA is that sometimes you do not have any prior knowledge who the person who has given you the RA is; you might even have heard his name as a good engineer or scientist, but after arrival you find out that s/he is not as good as you thought or s/he does not treat her/his students well or s/he is always in the conferences and you cannot find her/his. By having RA, you are obliged to work for her/him. Although changing your supervisor is always possible, but it is not that easy. Sometimes, interrelation between faculty members might prevent you from working with somebody else in the same department.

4.2.4 What to do when you don't have financial support.
If you have an admission without financial support, then you should act quickly. Try to find Iranian students in the department you have admission from. Also you can try to find out if Iranian students from different school know anybody there. Once you find somebody send them an email and describe your situation, send them your resume and tell them your points of strength. They will try to lobby for you and find you an RA. A person from outside that department cannot be very helpful. Also, if you notice the person you have contacted is not going to lobby for you, just ask her/him for information.

Find out who is the professor close to your field. You can try to send them your resume and tell them that you have admission, and you are only looking for RA. Sometimes, they might give you 50 somebody gives you RA in these circumstances, your moral obligation to work for him afterwards is even higher, and changing your supervisor later on could turn to a scandal.

If you could not get any financial support, you should go and talk to your dad (if he is rich!) or look for some relatives abroad. Tuition is somewhere around $8000-$12000 per semester in private universities and your living expenses will be around $5000. Paying $15000 even if they live and work abroad will not be easy.
Fortunately, it is very likely that you get funding for second semester. Once you arrive here you will have more opportunities. If you do not give up, you might find some sort of financial support for the first semester, even after it has started.

5 WHICH SCHOOLS SHOULD I APPLY TO?

First you should decide on what you want to do, then depending on your interest you should look for universities. You can find out about schools by going to their web sites and see who the members of their faculties are, what their research is about, what papers they have published. Here is a link, which helps you to find out about different universities:

http://about.embark.com/grad/choose/search/namesearch.asp

Another quick way of finding the web site for different universities is going to Ask Jeeves web site (www.ask.com) and ask 'Where can I find Web sites for international universities?' then you will get a link to different universities. Or try this link:

http://www.ask.com/main/askjeeves.asp?origin=0&qSource=5&siteName=Jeeves&metasearch=yes&ask=Where+can+I+find+Web+sites+for+international+universities?

If you want for the departments, try subject search in gradschools.com:

http://www.gradschools.com/noformsearch.html

Also, you can look at their rankings. You can find links to a ranking of graduate programs of many universities based on US news magazine’s report:


The difference between top schools is negligible. Supervisor will be an important factor in your PhD, which can turn a low ranking university to a heaven or a top ranking school to hell.

No matter at what level you are, try to apply for a top ranking university and a low ranking university. You should always have one card and know that you definitely get the admission from one of the schools you apply to. In that case you will not have interruption in your studies and after coming here, you can transfer to somewhere else, if you are not satisfied.

5.1 Applying For High Energy Physics

The top universities in this subjects are: Harvard University, MIT, Princeton University, Stanford University, UC at Berkeley, UC at Santa Barbara, Caltech, Rutgers University.

In a little lower level: Columbia, Northeastern University, Yale, UC at San Diego, State University of Stony Brook.

6 COMING TO NORTH AMERICA

Once you get admitted and receive your I-20 form from the university, you should apply for visa. After collecting the visa, you will need to buy a plane ticket to fly over the Atlantic Ocean. I-20 is a form you need to show to the embassy to prove that you have admission. Your school sends you the I-20 after you accept their admission offer. Usually the deadline for accepting an admission offer is April 15.

6.1 Visa

If you come to the US, as a full time student, you need to have an F1 visa to be allowed to set foot in the American territory. In order to get your visa, having your admission letter is not enough for the embassy. Once you get the admission letter from the university, which normally happens around Persian New Year’s festivities, you will be asked to respond to the offer. Once you decide where you want to go, send a confirmation letter to the university you want to go to and also write to the university, which you do not want to go to. It is IMPORTANT to send email or a letter to the universities that YOU CHOOSE NOT TO GO TO. Because they will take Iranian applicants more seriously and will notice they are not desperate to get to somewhere.

Once you confirmed that you have accepted the offer, they will send you the I-20. It is an important document. You will get visa based on that. It tells you how much going to that university will cost you.
Now, let's go back to America...

For going to the American embassy, you should set up your strategy. Try to get enough information and see what embassy is giving visa easier. Try to avoid female consuls, especially if you are female yourself. Contrary to my own advice, I got my visa from a nice lady. Trying to prove either that you will stay in America forever or you will go back home for sure will not help much. You never know what is going on in their mind. Some of them might believe that they do not need any more non-white immigrants in their country, so if they find out you want to stay they will not give you the visa. Some others might think why America should train Iranians and then send them back, so again if they find out that you are going back to your country to work they may not give you visa. So try to have all sorts of document to prove anything, which s/he might ask you to prove! Even your Qabaleh Fout.

[Houman Alborzi's note] For all non-immigrant visa cases, the visa officer should be convinced that the applicant does not have an intention of staying in US. Usually they ask you what are you going to do after finishing your studies. You should think well about this question and your answer in advance. Considering the unfriendliness of the two governments, your answer should not contain something like "I am going back to Iran to work in government office of ...."; a good answer is working in industry or academy in Iran. When I was asked of the same question with an admission to a masters degree program, I said: "I am going to get my PhD"; officer asked "And after PhD", I said "I am going back to Iran to teach in University of Tehran"; he asked "why not Sharif", I said "Well, that is my alma mater". My point is that you should be able to support your answer about your post-graduation plans.

For more information you can check out The International Students office of MIT.

6.2 How much money do you need in the beginning

I do not have an estimate about how much a plane ticket costs these days. If you want to get a one-way ticket you can probably find one for $600-$1000. If you have financial aids from your university, you do not need to bring too much money. If you have Fellowship it is likely that they pay your stipend in the beginning of month. But in many cases it is done in the end of month. So you need enough money to survive for the first month. I have written about the expenses before. If you add them up you get a number around $800. In the first month you need more money though, because you should buy some stuff, like blankets, dishes, etc. Also, depending on where you go, they might ask you for giving them deposit (مبلغ محرمان) for the housing. Deposit is usually as much as the rent of one month. They usually ask you to pay your rent in the beginning of the month, too. So you should pay twice the rent once you sign the lease. If you live on campus, you are in a better situation. In many MIT dorms, they ask for the rent at the end of the month and they even do not ask you for any deposit (They trust their students!).

There is also your medical insurance, which, as I told you before, will cost you around $250 per semester. If you add up all these figures, you get a number around $1500 for your first month. I arrived to the US with much less than that and I did not face any serious problems, but you may not be as lucky as I have been. But if you do not have that kind of money do not worry, because you may be able to borrow from your friends and pay them back before the end of the first semester (Do not forget Khoda Karime).

7 COLLECTION OF OPINIONS ABOUT DIFFERENT UNIVERSITIES

Here, you can read about different universities. These are just personal experiences of the writer of that section and this shouldn't be your only reliable information. If you are a student in North America reading this page and you are interested to write about your university, please write and send it to how to apply, it can be appended to this file with your name or without.

7.1 M.I.T.

MIT is a huge school with not many students. MIT’s spirit is dominated with science and engineering. Fashion is in its lowest possible form in MIT. Many people are walking around with T-shirts. You rarely
find people in suit and tie, except in the business school. You probably have seen MIT in "Good Will Hunting" with starring Matt Damon. I believe MIT looks like a big factory.

M.I.T is located in Cambridge. Cambridge is a section of a large city, where usually referred to as Boston area. Boston, specifically Cambridge, is full of universities and colleges. The city doesn't have a crowded downtown as New York, but it has a place, where can be called downtown. M.I.T is located close to Harvard University. It just takes 20 minutes to get there with subway. Also M.I.T and Harvard students can cross register. Many M.I.T students go over there to take Art, History, Language classes, which are more diverse than these types of classes offered in M.I.T.

M.I.T has an excellent computer network, called Athena Project. M.I.T has developed X-windows and that's what is used. There is cooperation between M.I.T and Microsoft. It is an excellent place, for computer science and electrical engineering. One of the disadvantages is that M.I.T is not close to Silicon Valley, where is on the west coast of America.

M.I.T has a large number of international students. The student groups are pretty active. There are many events all the time across the campus. In many of the events you can find free food, at least cookies. Almost for any imaginable country or religion in the world there is a student group in MIT. There is an active Iranian student association. In whole Ramadan you can eat iftar in the MIT's mosque provided with Muslim association. If you are not Muslim there are other religious students group who have their own festivities.

When it comes to sports, I found facilities in M.I.T old. Although it has couple of nice big fields to play soccer, tennis, football. M.I.T is located beside Charles River, which separates Boston and Cambridge. There are boats for M.I.T students for sailing. Massachusetts is in the north east of America. The weather is not warm here. You might find it as cold as Zanjan, but it is definitely warmer than Azerbaijan. It is 5 degrees colder than Tehran. Summer is crazy in Boston. It is very humid. If you spend your time in M.I.T offices you will be okay. The weather is much more cloudy than what you had in Iran. I don't like cloudy weather, but there are days in the year that I don't see the sky more than 10 minutes a day. Many of MIT offices don't have windows to outside!

Cambridge is considered safe place compare to the rest of America. I can't compare it with Iran, because nobody knows what is the crime rate in Iran. On campus, students are present almost entire time, day and night. Probably, it is not a good idea to go out of campus area four in the morning alone.

### 7.2 Princeton University

Princeton University is not a big school. But it is a great one. It is the fourth oldest college in north America. (after Harvard, Yale, Columbia) the campus is said to be built in a way to look like Cambridge university (but whether it does look like that, I do not know) with old and old-looking buildings. It is located up the Delaware and paritan canal and Carnegie Lake in northern New Jersey and the campus is the main portion of Princeton town.

Princeton is located some 45 miles southwest NYC so about halfway between NYC and Philadelphia. But it is off the main road.

Anyway, as I said before, PU is not a big school, missing business school, law school, and medical school. In fact PU is most famous for its "humanities" departments. Like history, philosophy, art, archeology, music (composition), literature, languages, linguistics, and of course mathematics and physics (I think you agree that at least mathematics has a strong humanities side) of course engineering sciences can be found here, but definitely not comparable to humanities in strength. All engineering sciences are located in a not so big building called engineering quadrangle (or E-quad) off campus. Mathematics department (called fine hall or
fine tower also) is a 14-story building on Washington road on east side of the campus. It is the tallest building in Princeton township (i.e. where phone numbers begin with 609) and has a really nice view of neighboring area. From the top of fine hall you can even see world trade center twcins on a good day. Mathematics department has also the highest faculty/grad.-student ratios among mathematics departments. But it is not as big as any state university. The active branches are number theory (any kind), analysis (mainly harmonic analysis and PDE), and applied math. (Mathematical physics mainly, both in the sense of statistical mechanics and "classical" mathematical physics and string theory (which is actually more centered in physics department) (there are 3 joint professors between math and physics departments) also can be found: algebraic geometry, algebraic topology, ergodic theory and dynamical systems, logic, and combinatorics. What is really a great advantage for PU is that IAS (institute for advanced studies) is located about 5 minutes outside Princeton by bike. and there you can always find a top group of scientists researching, there are seminars every day and special schools from time to time, and if you are a graduate student in PU you are always welcome to go there.

Princeton is a quiet (more dead) town when you want to do anything non-academic. But you can always go to NYC (1:45' +$14 by train) or Philadelphia (about the same). Opportunities to have fun in these places are needless to be described. Having a car is a great experience. Because you will really need it. You might agree more with this when you realize that even to go to any supermarket of moderate size, you need to take a bus for out of town. Buses are not so frequent and it'll cost you two bucks each time. Or you can ask "friends" to give you a ride.

When it comes to the number of Iranians here I should sadly confess that I am the only one. There are a bunch of Iranians of second generation. And also a couple of guys who have been in Iran for long. But non-coming directly from Iran. There are about 7-8 Iranian professors though, with their families.

If you are a Muslim, I should say that there is a rather small association of Muslim students here. They sometimes gather to go to Friday prayers, or even have iftar on a couple of Ramadan nights. Not a big group. Mostly an Arab society.

About the weather: it's just crazy. In winter it is slightly colder than Tehran. Summers are miserable. Hot and humid. Of course much of the east coast is like this. A really good thing about Princeton is that it is absolutely safe. Walking lonely on your own in or about town is completely safe. Even say 3 after midnight. Kids, grown-ups, girls, boys, all.

Well! Hope this helps. Congratulations if you are coming. Good luck if you are considering to come!

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8 CONTRIBUTORS TO THIS DOCUMENT

a. Mehdi Yahiyejad
Dec 1999: Mehdi, a Physics graduate student in MIT, wrote the original draft.

Mehdi: Since I came to North America to continue my studies, I have been subject to a constant flow of emails filled with questions regarding the applying to graduate schools, including how to get a visa and even seeking advice on how to skip mandatory military service. As a result, I decided to write a guide to help Iranians with getting into better schools in America and having a fair access to the information. This document has been changed from its poor written original shape. I should thank Amir Togha for editing this guide. I also thank my roommate Sohil Parekh for his comments.

b. Prof. Cumrun Vafa
March 2000: Cumrun, a String theorist in Harvard, provided a ranking list of universities for students who are going to apply for Particle Physics.

d. Amir Togha
Sep 2000: Amir, a Math graduate student in George Washington University, did a great job by editing the original document, which made the document much more readable. Also, he has added a paragraph to the section "Comparing studying inside Iran and abroad".

Amir: Mehdi has undertaken a job that has been overdue for some time now. However, the original work had many English mistakes, and I have only done a minimal and quick editing because the upcoming "applying season" is approaching us fast (with a few paragraphs that I myself have added to compare the Iranian vs. American predominant attitude towards working hard). There is certainly quite a bit of room for improvement, both form-wise and content-wise, but I am responsible of all remaining errors, and I would be very thankful to readers who could notify me of them. Finally, I would like to express my thanks to my friends, Ardalan of GWU and Houman of UMD, who drew my attention to Mehdi’s truly precious writing.

e. Houman Alborzi
Sep 2000: Houman, a Computer Science graduate student in University of Maryland, wrote a number of notes on the document to give a broader view on the subject.

9 OTHER QUESTIONS
Send your questions to howtoapply@hotmail.com.

10 HOW TO SUPPORT THIS PROJECT
If you are a student in North America, you can help Iranian students who dream about coming to the US (or Canada) by writing about your university or which schools are good in your field of study. If you are a professor in North America, you can write an accurate information about admission process and what is important to admission committee. Also, you can provide Iranian students with good information about your university or field of research. Send your emails to howtoapply@hotmail.com.

Send your emails to howtoapply@hotmail.com.
Also you can fill out the form: Fill out the survey form here

11 CONCLUSION
Good luck!