

All About Student Visas

For student related information, visit the [EducationUSA website](#) created by the Department of State, [Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs](#) to learn about educational opportunities for undergraduate and graduate study, opportunities for scholars, financial aid, testing, admissions, and much more. For a brief overview, visit the America.gov article [Basics on U.S. Visas](#).

The first step for a prospective nonimmigrant student is being accepted for enrollment in an established school which is [SEVP certified](#). In general, for academic students, including those in language training, F visas are the appropriate category, and for nonacademic vocational students an M visa is the appropriate category.

If you are going to the U.S. primarily for tourism, but want to take a short course of study which is recreational, and the course is less than 18 hours per week, you may be able to do so on a visitor visa. If your course of study is 18 hours or more a week, you will need a student visa. When traveling to the U.S. to attend seminars or conferences for credit towards a degree, then you'll need a student visa.

When Do I Need to Apply for My Student Visa?

- **Students are encouraged to apply for their visa early to provide ample time for visa processing. Students may apply for their visa as soon as they are prepared to do so.**
- **Students should note that Embassies and Consulates are able to issue your student visa 120 days or less, in advance of the course of study registration date.** If you apply for your visa more than 120 days prior to your start date or registration date as provided on the Form I-20, the Embassy or Consulate will hold your application until it is able to issue the visa. Consular officials will use that extra time for application processing.
- **Students are advised of the Department of Homeland Security regulation which requires that all initial or beginning students enter the U.S. 30 days or less in advance of the course of study start/report date as shown on the Form I-20.** Please consider this date carefully when making travel plans to the U.S.
- **A beginning student who wants an earlier entry into the U.S. (more than 30 days prior to the course start date), must qualify for, and obtain a visitor visa.** A prospective student notation will be shown on his/her visitor visa and the traveler will need to make the intent to study clear to the U.S. immigration inspector at port of entry. Before beginning any studies, he or she must obtain approval for a change to Exchange Visitor status, filing [Form I-539](#), Application for Change of Nonimmigrant Status and pay the fee. Also you must submit the required Form I-20 to the Department of Homeland Security office where the application is made. Please be aware that one cannot begin studies until the change of classification is approved.
- Continuing students may apply for a new visa at any time, as long as they have been maintaining student status and their SEVIS records are current. Continuing students may also enter the U.S. at any time before their classes start.

What is SEVIS and SEVP? What should you know about it?

The Student and Exchange Visitor Program (SEVP) is designed to help the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and Department of State better monitor school and exchange programs and F, M and J category visitors. Exchange visitor and student information is maintained in the Student and Exchange Visitor Information System (SEVIS). SEVIS is an Internet-based system that maintains accurate and current information on non-immigrant students (F and M visa), exchange visitors (J visa), and their dependents (F-2, M-2, and J-2). SEVIS enables schools and program sponsors to transmit mandatory information and event notifications via the Internet, to the DHS and Department of State (DOS) throughout a student or exchange visitor's stay in the United States. Select [SEVIS](#) to go to the DHS, U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement Internet site and learn more.

All student applicants must have a SEVIS generated I-20 issued by an educational institution approved by DHS, which they submit when they are applying for their student visa. Your school is

responsible for entering your information for the I-20 student visa form into SEVIS. The consular officer will need to verify your I-20 record electronically through the SEVIS system in order to process your student visa application. Unless otherwise exempt, all F-1 or M-1 principal applicants must pay a SEVIS I-901 fee to the DHS for each individual program. See the [SEVP Fact Sheet](#) for a fee list. See [SEVIS-901 Fee](#) for further information on how to pay the fee.

Qualifying for a Student Visa

The Immigration and National Act is very specific with regard to the requirements which must be met by applicants to qualify for the student visa. The consular officer will determine whether you qualify for the visa. Additionally, applicants must demonstrate that they properly meet student visa requirements including:

- Have a residence abroad, with no immediate intention of abandoning that residence;
- Intend to depart from the United States upon completion of the course of study; and
- Possess sufficient funds to pursue the proposed course of study.

Applying for a Student Visa

As part of the visa application process, an interview at the embassy consular section is required for visa applicants from age 14 through 79, with few exceptions. Persons age 13 and younger, and age 80 and older, generally do not require an interview, unless requested by embassy or consulate. The waiting time for an interview appointment for applicants can vary, so early visa application is strongly encouraged. Visa wait times for interview appointments and visa processing time information for each U.S. Embassy or Consulate worldwide is available on our website at [Visa Wait Times](#) , and on most embassy websites. Learn how to schedule an appointment for an interview, pay the application processing fee, review embassy specific instructions, and much more by visiting the [Embassy or Consulate website](#) where you will apply.

During the visa application process, usually at the interview, an ink-free, digital fingerprint scan will be quickly taken. Some visa applications require further [administrative processing](#) , which takes additional time after the visa applicant's interview by a Consular Officer. Also, because each student's personal and academic situation is different; two students applying for same visa may be asked different questions and be required to submit different additional documents.

Required Documentation

Each applicant for a student visa **must** submit these forms and documentation as explained below:

- **Form I-20A-B, Certificate of Eligibility for Nonimmigrant (F-1) Student Status-For Academic and Language Students or Form I-20M-N, Certificate of Eligibility for Nonimmigrant (M-1) Student Status for Vocational Students.** You will need to submit a SEVIS generated Form, I-20, which was provided to you by your school. You and your school official must sign the I-20 form. See the previous section for SEVIS information.
- **Online Nonimmigrant Visa Electronic Application, Form DS-160.** Visit our DS-160 webpage to learn more about the DS-160 online process.
- **A passport** valid for travel to the United States and with a validity date at least six months beyond the applicant's intended period of stay in the United States (unless country-specific agreements provide exemptions). If more than one person is included in the passport, each person desiring a visa must complete an application.
- **One (1) 2x2 photograph.** [See the required photo format explained in nonimmigrant photograph requirements](#) ;
- **A MRV fee receipt** to show payment of the visa application fee.
- **The SEVIS I-901 fee receipt.**

All applicants **should be prepared** to provide:

- **Transcripts and diplomas** from previous institutions attended;
- **Scores from standardized tests** required by the educational institution such as the TOEFL, SAT, GRE, GMAT, etc.;
- **Financial evidence** that shows you or your parents who are sponsoring you have sufficient funds to cover your tuition and living expenses during the period of your intended study. For example, if you or your sponsor is a salaried employee, please bring income tax documents and original bank books and/or statements. If you or your sponsor own a business, please bring business registration, licenses, etc., and tax documents, as well as original bank books and/or statements.

What are the Required Visa Fees?

- **Nonimmigrant visa application processing fee** - For current fees for Department of State government services select Fees. You will need to provide a receipt showing the visa application processing fee has been paid, when you come for your visa interview.
- **Visa issuance fee** – Additionally, if the visa is issued, there will be an additional visa issuance reciprocity fee, if applicable. Please consult the Visa Reciprocity Tables to find out if you must pay a visa issuance reciprocity fee and what the fee amount is. If there is a fee for issuance for the visa, it is equal as nearly as possible to the fee charged to United States citizens by the applicant's country of nationality.

Spouses and Children

Applicants with dependents **must** also provide:

- Proof of the student's relationship to his/her spouse and/or children (e.g., marriage and birth certificates.);
- It is preferred that families apply for F-1 and F-2 visas at the same time, but if the spouse and children must apply separately at a later time, they should bring a copy of the student visa holder's passport and visa, along with all other required documents.

Additional Information

- No assurances regarding the issuance of visas can be given in advance. Therefore final travel plans or the purchase of non refundable tickets should not be made until a visa has been issued.
- Unless previously canceled, a visa is valid until its expiration date. Therefore, if the traveler has a valid U.S. visa in an expired passport, do not remove the visa page from the expired passport. You may use it along with a new valid passport for travel and admission to the United States.

Entering the U.S. - Port of Entry

A visa allows a foreign citizen coming from abroad, to travel to the United States port-of entry and request permission to enter the U.S. Applicants should be aware that a visa does not guarantee entry into the United States. The Department of Homeland Security, U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) officials have authority to permit or deny admission to the United States. Student visitors must have their Form I-20 in their possession each time they enter the United States. In advance of travel, students should review important information about [Admissions/Entry](#) requirements, as well as information related to restrictions about [bringing food](#), [agricultural products](#) or other [restricted/prohibited goods](#) explained on the Department of Homeland Security, Customs and Border Protection website. Upon arrival (at an international airport, seaport or land border crossing), you will be enrolled in the US-VISIT entry-exit program. In addition, some travelers will also need to register their entry into and their departure from the U.S. with the [Special Registration](#) program. If you are allowed to enter the U.S., the CBP official will determine the length of your visit on the Arrival-Departure Record (Form I-94). Since Form I-94 documents your authorized stay in the U.S., it's very important to keep in your passport.

Staying Beyond Your Authorized Stay in the U.S. and Being Out of Status

- It is important that you depart the U.S. on or before the last day you are authorized to be in the U.S. on any given trip, based on the specified end date on your Arrival-Departure Record, Form I-94.

Information on successfully [maintaining your immigration status](#) while a student or exchange visitor can be found on the Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) website.

- Staying beyond the period of time authorized by the DHS causes you to be out-of-status in the United States, which is a violation of U.S. immigration laws. This may cause you to be ineligible for a visa in the future for return travel to the U.S. Select [Classes of Aliens Ineligible to Receive Visas](#) to learn more.
- Staying unlawfully in the United States beyond the date Customs and Border Protection (CBP) officials have authorized, even by one day, results in your visa being automatically voided, in accordance with immigration law, INA 222(g). In this situation, you are required to reapply for a new nonimmigrant visa, generally in your country of nationality.

What Items Do Returning Students Need?

All applicants applying for renewals must submit:

- All items listed in the Required Documentation section and;
- A new I-20 or an I-20 that has been endorsed on the back by a school official within the past 12 months.

Students Away from Classes More Than Five Months

Students in or outside the U.S., who have been [away from classes](#) for more than five months, will likely need a new visa to enter the U.S.

How long may I stay on my F-1 student visa?

When you enter the United States on a student visa, you will usually be admitted for the duration of your student status. That means you may stay as long as you are a full time student, even if the F-1 visa in your passport expires while you are in America. For a student who has completed the course of studies shown on the I-20, and any authorized practical training, the student is allowed the following additional time in the U.S. before departure:

- F-1 student - An additional 60 days, to prepare for departure from the U.S. or to transfer to another school.
- M-1 student - An additional 30 days to depart the U.S. (Fixed time period, in total not to exceed one year). The 30 days to prepare for departure is permitted as long as the student maintained a full course of study and maintained status. An M student may receive extensions up to three years for the total program.

As an example regarding duration of status, if you have a visa that is valid for five years that will expire on January 1, 2009, and you are admitted into the U.S. for the duration of your studies (often abbreviated in your passport or on your I-94 card as "D/S"), you may stay in the U.S. as long as you are a full time student. Even if January 1, 2009 passes and your visa expires while in America, you will still be in legal student status. However, if you depart the U.S. with an expired visa, you will need to obtain a new one, applying at an Embassy abroad, before being able to return to America and resume your studies.

Optional Practical Training

Students who are authorized for Optional Practical Training (OPT) must have an I-20 endorsed for OPT, and provide a USCIS-issued Employment Authorization Document (EAD). When authorized, Optional Practical Training (OPT) is temporary employment that is directly related to the eligible F-1 student's area of study. To learn more about OPT, please visit the [USCIS Website](#) and the [ICE international Students](#) webpage.

Further Visa Inquiries

- Questions on visa application procedures and visa ineligibilities should be made to the U.S. Embassy or Consulate abroad by the applicant. Before submitting your inquiry, we request that you carefully review this web site and also the Embassy website abroad. Very often you will find the information you need.

- If your inquiry concerns a visa case in progress overseas, you should first contact the U.S. Embassy or Consulate handling your case for status information by selecting [U.S. Embassy or Consulate](#).

Recognize and Avoid Status Violations

By violating the requirements that govern your immigration status, you may jeopardize your ability to remain in the United States as a student or exchange visitor. Examples of violations include the following:

- Failure to enroll by the date specified by your school or exchange visitor program.
- Unauthorized employment during your stay.
- Failure to leave the United States following completion of your course, exchange visitor program, or program-related employment.
- For academic students (visa category F-1): Failure to maintain a full course load without prior authorization for a reduction from your designated school official.

Please note that this is not a complete listing of potential status violations. Check with your designated school official or exchange visitor responsible officer for more information.

Note: Non-immigrant students or exchange visitors who fall out of status for reasons beyond their control may be eligible to apply for a reinstatement of status. The student or exchange visitor must work with the school or program official to determine if reinstatement is an option.

BASIC F-1 VISA TERMINOLOGIES

Department of Homeland Security (DHS)

The Department of Homeland Security oversees three agencies:

- United States Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) is responsible for citizenship, asylum, lawful permanent residency, employment authorization, refugee status, inter-country adoptions, replacement immigration documents, family and employment immigration related, and foreign student work authorization.
- Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) is responsible for immigration investigations, detention, removal, intelligence, and SEVIS.
- Customs and Border Protection (CBP) is responsible for immigration inspections at U.S. ports of entry, border patrol, and custom services.

U.S. F-1 Visa

It is a computer-generated entry permit that is issued by the U.S. Embassy or Consulate abroad for you to enter the U.S. to begin your studies. The only time you are required to have a valid visa is when you are entering the U.S. from another country. For more information about visa applications please visit the U.S. Department of State at www.travel.state.gov. You can stay in the U.S. on an expired F-1 visa as long as you have maintained your valid F-1 student status.

I-94 Arrival/Departure Card

You received a small white index card upon your arrival to the U.S. You are admitted for duration of status, which is abbreviated by CBP officers as “D/S” on both forms I-94 card and I-20. Duration of status means the period that you are pursuing a full course of study, plus any Optional Practical Training following completion of the course of study. This card is very important as it is needed for on-campus employment, application for a Social Security number, and a driver’s license.

SEVIS I-20 Form

You received an I-20 form after being admitted to the University. You need to present this form to the U.S. embassy or consulate in your home country to apply for your F-1 student visa. This form contains your

study information such as your major, degree objective, start and end dates of your program, and other personal information relevant to your F-1 status.

I-20 Extension

If you are unable to complete your degree program by the end date on your I-20, you must request for an extension of your I-20 with our office at least one month before it expires. Failure to apply for I-20 extension in a timely manner will result in termination of your F-1 status.

Travel Abroad

To re-enter the U.S. after a trip abroad, you must present the following documents at Port of Entry:

1. Valid passport (*for at least 6 months into the future*)
2. Valid F-1 student visa
3. Valid SEVIS I-20 endorsed for travel by someone from the higher ed institution (*each signature is valid for six months into the future even though the I-20 says one year*).

If you are engaging in post-completion OPT you also need to carry your:

- Employment Authorization Document (EAD)
- Proof of employment letter

Automatic Visa Revalidation for F-1 Students

Automatic visa revalidation allows F-1 students to enter the U.S. from Canada, Mexico, or one of the adjacent islands to the U.S. (other than Cuba) on an expired F-1 visa if the trip is not exceeding 30 days. However, you must have a valid SEVIS I-20 endorsed for travel by DCISS, valid passport, original I-94 card and an expired F-1 visa stamp.

Automatic Visa Revalidation for F-1 Students continued

If you meet one of the following criteria, you will NOT be able to use automatic revalidation.

- You applied for a new F-1 visa and it has not been issued
- You applied for a new F-1 visa and were denied
- You have a terminated or completed SEVIS record
- You have been out of the U.S. for more than thirty days
- You are citizen from one of the following countries: Cuba, Iran, Sudan, Syria

MAINTAINING F-1 STATUS

Mandatory Check-In

As a newly admitted F-1 student, you are required to check-in with the higher ed institution international/student affairs office upon arrival. Failure to check-in will result in termination of your F-1 student status. You are required to bring photocopies of the following documents to the check-in session:

1. Initial or transfer I-20
2. Front and back sides of I-94 arrival/departure card
3. F-1 visa
4. Valid passport

Address Reporting

In compliance with the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS), you are required to have valid addresses recorded during your studies. DHS may terminate your immigration status automatically if you do not maintain your address information with your higher ed institution in this proper format.

While you are holding a F-1 visa, you are required to provide your College/University the following addresses and keep them up to date:

1. Mailing Address: is used as your local U.S. address for immigration purposes. This is where you are residing while your college/university is the sponsor of your visa. This address cannot be your home country address, out of state address, department address, office or post office box.
2. Permanent Address: address in your home country. This address cannot be a U.S. address or a post office box.

Enrollment

To maintain your F-1 status, you are required to pursue a full course of study and make normal academic progress towards completion of your degree program. Undergraduate students are required to register for a minimum of 12 units each quarter. Summer enrollment is optional.

Reduced Course Load (RCL)

F-1 students may take less than the required units if you meet one of the reasons below and have prior approval by your Academic Counselor and DCISS F-1 counselor .

1. Academic Difficulty (*this reason can only be used one quarter per degree program at UCLA*)
2. Taking Extension courses (*can only be used in the final quarter. Students need to submit proof of class registration. This only applies to undergraduate students*)
3. Illness or medical condition (*students must include a letter from Student Health Center, or Counseling and Psychological Services, or a private licensed physician*)
4. Final Quarter

Leave of Absence (LOA)-Graduate Students

F-1 graduate students who have completed all coursework requirements including electives, passed all required exams and advanced to candidacy, may be eligible for academic LOA to conduct research that is required as part of their thesis, or dissertation. Federal policy governing students on F-1 visa are restricted to certain LOA conditions. Therefore, your higher ed institution in consultation with Graduate Division will individually evaluate each student's LOA request to determine if such requests meet federal (and University) eligibility criteria. Students with personal LOA requests may be required to remain outside of the U.S. for a specific duration in order to remain in compliance with F-1 regulations. You are required to meet with an F-1 counselor at DCISS for an approval by the quarter's official add/drop deadline. Failure to comply will result in the termination of your F-1 status.)

Leave of Absence (LOA)-Undergraduate Students

F-1 undergraduate students are eligible for LOA due to personal reasons. All LOA requests must be filed in person with an F-1 counselor by the quarter's official add/drop date. Failure to comply will result in termination of your F-1 status. Please be advised that personal LOA applicant may be required to remain outside of the U.S. for specific duration.

EMPLOYMENT FOR F-1 STATUS

F-1 students are allowed to work in the U.S. with the proper authorization from your higher ed institution or U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS). There are two types of employment available to you:

1. On-Campus Employment
2. Practical Training

On-Campus Employment

F-1 students are permitted to work part or full-time on the premises/campus, while you are maintaining your F-1 status. You can work on-campus without obtaining employment authorization. You are allowed to work a total of 20 hours per week during regular school quarters. During summer and winter vacations,

you can work beyond 20 hours per week. On-campus employment may include teaching assistant, research assistant, reader, campus library, or food/dining services, etc.

Practical Training

F-1 students may engage in off-campus work with prior authorization to gain practical experience in your field of study. There are two types of off-campus work authorization: Curricular Practical Training (CPT), and Optional Practical Training (OPT).

Curricular Practical Training (CPT): is an off-campus work authorization that is approved by your academic departments for you to engage in internship that is required or an integral part of your academic program.

Optional Practical Training (OPT): is a 12-month fulltime work authorization approved by USCIS to work in the field of study upon completion of your degree program. OPT requires USCIS authorization, which can take up to 4 months to obtain. Speak to an F-1 counselor to learn more about eligibility, different types of OPT, when and how to apply.

Severe Economic Necessity Employment

F-1 students may be eligible to apply for off-campus employment authorization based on severe economic hardship after being in F-1 status for one academic year. You cannot begin the off-campus employment until you have received the Employment Authorization Document (EAD) from USCIS.

In addition to being in F-1 status for one academic year, you need to demonstrate that there is an unforeseen severe economic necessity beyond your control and that other employment opportunities are not available or insufficient, and that employment will not interfere with your full time study. Please meet with your higher ed institution's F-1 counselor for more details.

SOCIAL SECURITY NUMBER

F-1 students are eligible to receive a Social Security Number if they will receive payment for on or off campus employment with the proper authorization from your higher ed institution or USCIS. Students with scholarships/fellowships should request an ITIN number.

COMPLETION OF STUDY

Grace Period

Upon completion of degree program or authorized practical training you are allowed an additional 60-day grace period to prepare for your departure from the U.S., to transfer to another academic program, or to change status to other non-immigrant classification.