

UNDERGRADUATE STUDY IN US: APPLYING FOR A STUDENT VISA

After you have been accepted by the university of your choice, you face one final task: applying for your student visa.

The most common student visa is the F-1, though a small number of students travel to the United States on an M-1 visa if they are completing a program of hands-on technical or vocational training, or on a J-1 visa if they are on a sponsored exchange program.

You can obtain more information on the visa application process in general and the specific requirements at the United States Education Foundation in India (USEFI) centres in Delhi, Mumbai, Calcutta, Chennai, Bangalore, Hyderabad, and Ahmedabad or your nearest US embassy or consulate.

There are several things you can do to increase your chances of a favourable visa decision: First, start the process as early as possible, Second, assemble all the documentation that can help make your case. Third, make sure you are well prepared to attend the visa interview.

To apply for an F-1 student visa you must have a valid I-20 A-B form, for the J-1 visa you must have the DS-2019 (formerly called IAP 66), and for the M-1 visa, an I-20M-N form. The American college will send you the appropriate form after you have been admitted and after you have certified your available finances. These forms are issued by the school or university and demonstrate that you have been accepted for study there. An applicant coming to the United States to study must be accepted for a full course of study by an educational institution approved by the US Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) (formerly called INS)

When your form arrives, check the following:

- Is your name spelled correctly and in the same form as it appears on your passport?
- Is the other information correct: date and country of birth, degree program, reporting date, completion date, and financial information?
- Is it signed by a college official?
- Has the reporting date ("student must report no later than...") passed? If so, the form expires and cannot be used after the reporting date.

If your I-20 A-B, I-20M-N, or DS-2019 is valid, you are ready to apply for the visa.

You will need to apply for your student visa at the U.S. embassy or consulate with jurisdiction over your place of

permanent residence. Although visa applicants may apply at any U.S. consular office abroad, it may be difficult to qualify for the visa outside the country of your permanent residence.

Required Documents

To apply for a U.S. student visa at a U.S. embassy or consulate, you need to pay non-refundable application fee, and submit the following documents:

—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. All students, must be registered in the Student and Exchange Visitor Information System (SEVIS), an Internet-based system that maintains accurate and current information on non-immigrant students and exchange visitors. Your school is responsible for entering your information for the I-20 student visa form into SEVIS.

—A visa application Form DS-156, together with another Form DS-158. Both forms must be completed and signed. Every applicant must also submit another Form DS-157. These forms are available without charge from all U.S. consular offices. The forms can also be downloaded from the website of the embassy.

—A passport valid for at least six months beyond the date you will initially enter the United States;

—Documentation of the visa application fee payment (Rs 4400 usually payable via demand draft). To be paid before submitting the application.

—Documentation of payment of the Student Exchange Visitor Information System (SEVIS) fee (\$100 non-refundable) or SEVIS I-901 fee receipt. The SEVIS fee must be paid before making a visa application.

—One photograph, 2 by 2 inches (roughly 50 mm square) for each applicant, either in color or black and white, showing full face, with a white or off-white background. (Head coverings and hats are only acceptable due to religious beliefs, and even then, may not cover any portion of the applicant's face) The photograph must have been taken within the last six months. Photograph must be submitted stapled or glued to the application DS-156.

—Evidence of academic credentials qualifying you for admission; This includes marksheets, Transcripts and certificates from previous institutions attended;

—Evidence of sufficient knowledge of English. Proof of the required scholastic preparation in English is usually established by the I-20 from the institution involved and the entries on the form. You also need to submit scores from standardized tests required by the educational institution such as the TOEFL, SAT etc.;

—Evidence of sufficient financial support;

—Evidence of sufficient ties to your home country

After getting all the documents in order, you need to arrange a visa interview appointment with the embassy or consulate. Visit the website of the embassy or consulate office, from where you intend to apply for further information on the application and appointment process.

In order to issue your visa, the consular officer must be satisfied on three counts:

First, are you a bona fide student? The officer will look at your educational background and plans in order to assess how likely you are to enroll and remain in college until graduation. In the interview be prepared to discuss the reasons you chose a particular college, your anticipated major, and your career plans. Know the academic program to which you have been admitted and how it fits into your career plans. Bring school transcripts, national examination results, and SAT or TOEFL scores, and anything else that demonstrates your academic commitment.

Second, are you capable of financing your education? The U.S. government needs assurances that you won't drop out of school or take a job illegally. Your I-20 form will list how you have shown the university you will cover your expenses, at least for the first year.

If the support is from either your parents or an individual in India, the applicant must produce bank books and statements or other documents showing a total amount in rupees equal to the dollar cost of the first year, and evidence regarding sources of funds for subsequent years.

Bank statements alone are seldom considered credible enough evidence to demonstrate sufficient finances. Only when coupled with highly credible documentation, which can substantiate the source (for example, job contracts, letters from an employer stating what the parent's job is, how long they have worked at that organization, and how much they earn, income tax documents, pay stubs, or deposit slips), will a bank statement be accepted.

If your family can only show enough income to support you in the United States, the officer will wonder how the family will survive at home.

Your chances are improved if your parents are sponsoring your education. If anyone other than your parents is sponsoring you, you should explain your special relationship with this person, justifying a commitment of thousands of dollars to your education. The sponsor must also provide a letter from his/her bank indicating that the sponsor has sufficient funds to cover the costs involved, together with a

current notarized Affidavit of support stating willingness to finance the applicant's educational expenses.

If you are receiving funding from your U.S. university, your home university, your employer, or from the government, be prepared to present the appropriate letters or documents that verify this fund.

If your financial status is an issue, you may want to pay tuition to the school in advance and present the receipt to the consular official. The official will almost certainly respect this gesture.

Third, are your ties to home so strong that you will not want to remain permanently in the United States? Consular officers are required by U.S. visa law to consider all applicants for non-immigrant visas as intending immigrants until they can convince the consular officer that they are not.

Overall, you must be able to show that your reasons for returning home are stronger than those for remaining in the United States. The law states that you must demonstrate sufficient economic, family, and social ties to your place of residence to ensure that your stay in the United States will be temporary. Economic ties include your family's economic position, property you may own or stand to inherit

Economic ties also include your own economic potential when you come home with a U.S. education. The consular officer will be impressed to see evidence of your career planning and your knowledge of the local employment scene. You may be asked about your specific intentions or promise of future employment, educational objectives, grades, long-range plans, and career prospects in your home country.

For family and social ties, the consular officer may ask how many close family members live in your home country, compared to those living in the United States, and your relationship with family members living in India and abroad. What community or school activities have you participated in that demonstrate a sincere connection to your town or country? What leadership, sports, and other roles have distinguished you as a person who wants to come home and contribute your part?

The visa interview usually lasts an average of three minutes, so you must be prepared to be brief yet convincing. Because of the volume of applications received, all consular officers are under considerable pressure to conduct a quick and efficient interview. They must make a decision, for the most part, on the impressions they form during the first minute or two of the interview. Consequently, what you say first and the initial impression you create are critical to your success. Keep your answers to the officer's questions short and to the point.

Be confident, do not hide the truth, or lie—U.S. consular section staff have a lot of experience and can easily identify when people are not being truthful about their visa application.

Lastly, do not engage the consular official in an argument.