

YOUR GUIDE TO STUDYING IN THE STATES

F-1 Postsecondary

Based on the student type and education level you selected, below is an overview of important information for you to know. This guide includes information about every step in the international student process, from researching a program to graduating and departing the United States.

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Prepare

If you want to study in the United States, the first step is to research the school or program that most interests you. The United States has several postsecondary options for F-1 international students, including community colleges and undergraduate-and graduate-level programs. Visit the [Programs of Study](#) page to learn more about these options.

- **Visit EducationUSA**

The [U.S. Department of State's EducationUSA](#) helps international students learn about the types of education available in the United States, including community colleges, bachelor's degree programs, master's degree programs and more. EducationUSA also has resources about [financial aid](#) and even has a [Find Financial Aid tool](#) for undergraduate and graduate degree-seeking international students. To learn more about how EducationUSA can help you, visit the [EducationUSA website](#) or one of more than 400 [EducationUSA advising centers](#) around the world.

- **Apply to an SEVP-Certified School**

Only schools certified by the Student and Exchange Visitor Program (SEVP) can accept international students. You can use the Study in the States [School Search](#) page to make sure the school you are interested in attending is SEVP certified. Using the page, you can search by school name, location, education or visa type.

Once you confirm that your school of choice is certified to accept international students, follow the instructions on the school's website to apply for admission. Remember that it is common for postsecondary schools in the United States to require standardized tests for admission, so plan accordingly.

- **Receive Your Form I-20**

Once accepted into an [SEVP-certified school](#), you will receive a [Form I-20, "Certificate of Eligibility for Nonimmigrant Student Status,"](#) from your [designated school official \(DSO\)](#). DSOs work at SEVP-certified schools and are there to help you understand and follow the rules for studying in the United States. It is important that you know who your DSO is and how to contact them.

The Form I-20 is an important document that you should keep safe, as you will need it throughout the international student process. For more information about the Form I-20 and when you need it, please visit the [What is the Form I-20?](#) page on Study in the States.

- **Bring Your Dependents**

As an F-1 international student, you may bring your spouse (for example, husband, wife, legal partner) and children with you while you study in the United States. However, they will also need to receive a Form I-20 from your DSO and follow specific rules while they are here. Visit the [Dependents](#) page for more information about bringing family to the United States.

Travel

Traveling to the United States requires that you take certain steps before your arrival. It is also necessary to be prepared and organized when you arrive at the U.S. port of entry. Additional travel information can be found on the

- **Pay Your I-901 SEVIS Fee**

After you receive your Form I-20, the next step is to pay your I-901 SEVIS Fee. Regulation requires that all international students pay this fee before the Department of State issues them a visa. Visit the [Paying the I-901 SEVIS Fee](#) page on Study in the States and watch the [I-901 SEVIS Fee payment tutorial](#) to learn about each step of the payment process.

Remember to keep your I-901 SEVIS Fee payment receipt and be sure to check that the Student and Exchange Visitor Information System (SEVIS) identification (ID) number on the receipt matches the SEVIS ID number that appears on your Form I-20. Please [contact SEVP](#) if the SEVIS ID number on these two documents does not match, or if you encounter other issues in the process.

- **Apply for a U.S. Visa**

After being accepted to an [SEVP-certified school](#) and getting a receipt for payment for the [I-901 SEVIS Fee](#), you [can apply for a visa](#) at a U.S. embassy or consulate. Visit the [U.S. Department of State's website](#) for more information about applying for an F-1 visa. You can also find your nearest embassy or consulate by visiting the [U.S. Embassy website](#).

Once you receive your visa, check to make sure that you received the right type of visa (F-1) and that your name and date of birth are correct and match the information in your passport. Remember that a student visa does not guarantee entrance into the country, but it does give you permission to arrive at a U.S. port of entry.

- **Arrive at U.S. Port of Entry**

You may enter the United States up to 30 days before your official program start date listed on your Form I-20. When you arrive at the U.S. port of entry, you will meet a U.S. Customs and Border Patrol (CBP) officer who has the authority to admit or deny your entrance into the country. You must present the CBP officer with your Form I-20, as well as your valid visa and passport. It is also a good idea to have your acceptance letter from your SEVP-certified school, your [evidence of financial support](#), and the name and telephone number of your DSO. Be sure to keep these documents and information in your carry-on luggage, as you will not be able to access any of your checked baggage until after you pass through the U.S. port of entry.

A CBP officer may direct you to [secondary inspection](#) and interview you further to determine if you may enter the United States. If you do not have all your documents or if the officer cannot verify your information, they may deny you entry into the country or issue you a Form I-515A, "Notice to Student or Exchange Visitor." If you receive a Form I-515A, you must work with your DSO to respond to it within 30 days. Visit the [What is the Form I-515A?](#) page for more information.

- **Receive a form I-94**

If CBP admits you into the country, they will give you an admission stamp in your passport and issue an electronic [Form I-94, "Arrival and Departure Record."](#) The [Form I-94](#) includes information about when you were admitted, what status you must maintain (F-1) and how long you can stay in the United States. The CBP officer will inform you where to find your electronic Form I-94. You should verify that the "Admit Until" date on your

Form I-94 and admissions stamp on your passport lists “D/S” (that means, [Duration of Status](#)) and not a specific date. For more information about the Form I-94 and the arrival process in the United States, visit the [CBP website](#).

Study

While studying in the United States, it is important to maintain your status which relates to the purpose or reason for why you want to come to the United States. As an F-1 student, your primary purpose for coming to the United States is to complete a full course of study at an SEVP-certified school. This means you must not take any action that detracts from fulfilling this purpose and follow the regulations associated with studying in the United States. Additional information can be found on the [Maintaining Your Status](#) page.

- **Enroll in a Full Course of Study**

The definition of a full course of study for an F-1 student at a postsecondary school depends on the type of school you attend and the degree you seek. F-1 undergraduate students at a college or university must take at least 12 credit hours per term, while F-1 undergraduate students at a conservatory or seminary and F-1 graduate students must take a full course of study as certified by the institution.

If you are unsure if your class schedule meets the requirements for a full course of study, talk to your DSO. If meeting this full course load requirement is difficult for you, talk to your DSO immediately to discuss if you are eligible for a reduced course load. Learn more about this requirement by visiting the [Full Course of Study](#) page.

- **Attend and Pass Your Classes**

Attend all your classes, and make normal academic progress. Do not drop classes without first speaking with your DSO. If school is too difficult, speak with your DSO immediately to figure out your options. If you believe that you will be unable to complete your program by the end date listed on your Form I-20, talk with your DSO about requesting a possible program extension.

- **Take An Annual Vacation**

You are eligible to take an annual vacation after completing an academic year at an SEVP-certified school, and once every year after that if you maintain your status and register for classes in the academic term following your annual vacation. Talk to your DSO to learn when you are eligible for your annual vacation.

- **Transfer to Another SEVP-Certified School**

You may transfer to a new school if you decide that you would like to attend another SEVP-certified school.

You must apply and be accepted into another SEVP-certified school before you begin the transfer process. If you want to transfer, talk with your DSO and visit the [Instructions for Transferring to Another School as an F-1 Student](#) page.

Student Benefits

While studying in the United States, you can apply for certain benefits. These student benefits are not granted by SEVP and require students to apply to other U.S. government agencies to receive them.

- **Apply for a Driver's License**

Driving a car without a driver's license is illegal, but F-1 students are eligible to apply for such a license. To acquire a driver's license, you must apply for one at your local Department of Motor Vehicles (DMV), which can have a different name in some states. For more information about this process, please talk with your DSO and visit the [Apply for A Driver's License](#) page.

- **Work in the United States**

You may apply for on-campus employment up to 30 days before the start of classes. To apply, talk to your DSO. If approved, your DSO will provide you with a letter of approval, and you should ask for a similar document from your employer. If you participate in on-campus employment, you may not work more than 20 hours per week when school is in session. If you have additional questions, please visit the [F-1 Student On-Campus](#) page on ICE.gov/SEVP.

Off-campus employment is work that takes place outside of a school campus. Off-campus employment is only available to you if you have completed at least one full academic year of your program of study and have an economic hardship that qualifies for the U.S. Department of Homeland Security's [emergent circumstances](#). To work off campus, you must receive approval from your DSO, obtain an updated Form I-20 and apply for and receive employment authorization from U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS). Visit the [Working in the United States](#) page for more information.

- **Participate in a Training Opportunity**

As an F-1 student, you may be eligible to participate in paid training opportunities that relate to your program of study. You can participate in optional practical training (OPT) and curricular practical training. However, eligibility restrictions apply. To learn more about what may apply to you, visit the [Training Opportunities in the United States](#) page.

Additionally, some F-1 students who earn a degree from an accredited, SEVP-certified school in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) fields may apply for the STEM OPT extension after completing an initial period of post-completion OPT. To learn more, please visit the [STEM OPT Hub](#).

- **Apply for a Social Security Number**

All students who receive wages from an employer, either by working or participating in a training opportunity, must apply for a Social Security number (SSN). If you apply for an SSN for on-campus employment, you will need the approval letter from your DSO and a letter of approval from your employer. In all other instances, you will need your employment authorization document from USCIS. For more information about this process, please visit the [Obtaining a Social Security Number](#) page.

If you receive non-wage income while in the United States (for example, scholarships, grants, interest on stocks,

gambling/lottery winnings) and are not eligible for an SSN, you must apply for an [Individual Taxpayer Identification Number](#).

Change Status

If you want to change the purpose of your visit while in the United States, you (or in some cases, your employer) must file a request with USCIS on the appropriate form before your authorized stay expires. USCIS recommends that you apply as soon as you determine that you need to change to a different nonimmigrant category. If USCIS denies your application, be prepared to leave the United States when your current status expires. Additional information can be found on the [Change of Status](#) page.

- **H-1 B and the Cap Gap Extension**


If you are an F-1 student seeking to switch nonimmigrant classification from F-1 student status to H-1B temporary employment status after completing a program of study or post-completion OPT, talk to your DSO about the cap gap extension.

The cap gap extension may allow you to extend your F-1 status and/or authorized period of post-completion OPT until you transition to the H-1B status. This transition occurs on Oct. 1 each year. Additional information can be found on the [H-1B and Cap Gap Extension](#) page.

Depart

If you have maintained your status and finished a program of study or your authorized period of post-completion OPT, and you do not transfer to another SEVP-certified school, you have a 60-day grace period to depart from the United States. Failure to depart within this grace period could adversely impact your ability to re-enter the United States under a different nonimmigrant or immigrant classification.

[Print Guide](#)

 Official website of the Department of Homeland Security

STUDY in the **STATES**





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