

U.S. Visa and Immigration-Related Information

What type of visa do I need to become an academic student in the United States?

Most non-U.S. citizens who wish to study in the United States will seek an F-1 (non-immigrant) student visa, but there are other visa types that are sometimes authorized for those who study in the U.S. Here is a short description of the different visa types that involve study:

F-1, or Student Visa: This visa is the most common for those who wish to engage in academic studies in the United States. It is for people who want to study at an accredited U.S. college or university or to study English at a university or intensive English language institute. To learn more, visit http://travel.state.gov/visa/temp/types/types_1268.html

J-1, or Exchange Visitor: This visa is for people who will be participating in an exchange visitor program in the U.S. The "J" visa is for educational and cultural exchange programs. To learn more, visit http://travel.state.gov/visa/temp/types/types_1267.html

What is a Visa?

A visa allows a foreign citizen to travel to a U.S. port-of entry and request permission from the U.S. immigration officer to enter the United States. It does not guarantee entry into the U.S. For more information about the definition of a visa, as well as policies and procedures regarding visas, please visit <http://www.unitedstatesvisas.gov/>

Applying for a Visa – Key Points to Keep in Mind

In order to apply for a visa at a U.S. embassy or consulate, you must first have a SEVIS (Student and Exchange Visitor Information System)-generated document (either an I-20 or DS-2019) issued by a U.S. college or university or Department of State-designated sponsor organization. You will be required to submit this form when you apply for a visa. The U.S. academic institution or program sponsor will provide you with the appropriate SEVIS-generated form only when you have been academically admitted to the institution or accepted as a participant in an exchange program. The institution or program sponsor will also send you additional information about applying for the appropriate visa, as well as other guidance about beginning your academic program in the United States. Once you have all the required documentation, you may apply for the visa, even if you do not intend to begin your program of study for several months. It is best to apply early for the visa to make sure that there is sufficient time for visa processing.

Planning Ahead for the Visa Process, Not Just Your Academic Admission

One of the most important things you can do to ensure that you will be able to arrive in time for the start of your educational program in the United States is to plan well in advance, not only for the academic portion of your U.S. program, but also for the visa process. This means you will need to request and receive the appropriate visa-qualifying document (either an I-20 or DS-2019) from the U.S. institution or program sponsor well in advance of your planned departure to the United States. You will also need to make an appointment for your visa interview. Please consult the U.S. Embassy or Consulate nearest you (you can see a list of them at <http://usembassy.state.gov/>) to find out how long it may take to get an appointment.

Applying for a Visa – Key Points to Keep in Mind

Among the things you'll need to do is pay the required SEVIS I-901 fee (currently USD \$100.00) which you can do online or by mail. For more information or to apply online, visit <http://www.ice.gov/sevis/i901/index.htm>.

You will also need to pay the visa processing fee (the procedure will differ from one U.S. Embassy/Consulate to another, so visit the website of the U.S. Embassy, and make an appointment for the visa interview (again, procedures will differ, so visit the website of the U.S. Embassy).

You should also make sure you have all the documentation you will need when you go for the interview, including the visa-qualifying document (I-20 or DS-2019), financial support documents, proof of payment of the SEVIS and visa fees, and a completed visa application form. Ensure that you complete the visa application correctly by following the Department of State website procedures carefully.

Key Information about Visas and Entering the United States

There are two additional bits of information that are useful to know. The first is that the U.S. Embassy/Consulate **cannot issue a visa more than 90 days before the actual start** of the program in the United States. However, visa applicants are encouraged to apply for their visa as soon as they are prepared to do so. Thus, if the college or university to which you have been admitted states on the I-20 or DS-2019 that the program will start on September 1, a visa cannot be issued before June 1. Second, even if you have been issued a visa to enter the United States, you will **not be allowed to enter the country more than 30 days before the start of your program**, if you are an initial entry student. Returning students do not have this requirement. Using the earlier example, if the program of study starts on September 1, you will not be permitted to enter the United States until August 1 or later.

Where can I find more information about the visa application process in my country?

Most of the procedures and requirements for applying for the various types of student visas, as well as for the Exchange Visitor visa are standardized and are described at the websites behind the “learn more” links provided above. Some procedures vary from country to country, for example, how to pay the visa application processing fee and how to make an appointment for an interview. For details on applying for a Student or Exchange Visitor visa in the country in which you are located, please visit the U.S. Embassy or Consulate nearest you.

If you have specific questions about visas that are not answered by the embassy website, please contact the EducationUSA advising center nearest you for individual guidance. For a list of centers, please visit <http://www.educationusa.state.gov/centers/>. Some EducationUSA advising centers offer workshops about the visa application process. If the advising center in your country offers such a workshop, you should sign up to attend. It is important to know all you can about this extremely important element of your proposed study in the United States. EducationUSA advisers communicate frequently with U.S. consular officers and will be able to help you prepare for the visa application process and the visa interview.

What is SEVIS?

The Student and Exchange Visitor Information System (SEVIS), administered by the Bureau of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) within the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), is an Internet-based system that maintains data on foreign students and exchange visitors before and during their stay in the United States. Visit <http://www.ice.gov/sevis/students/index.htm> for more information about SEVIS. In order to enroll students from other nations, U.S. colleges and universities must be approved by the School Certification Branch of the Student and Exchange Visitor Program (SEVP). Most U.S. institutions of higher education have received this approval.

What happens when I arrive in the U.S.?

Arriving & Studying in the U.S. - Immigration Related Information

U.S. immigration law governs the entry of all visitors to the United States, including students and exchange visitors. It details what they are authorized to do during their stay in the country. The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) is the agency responsible for ensuring that these visitors comply with U.S. law and regulations. When you arrive in the United States, you, too, will come under the authority of the Department of Homeland Security, and one of the three units within DHS responsible for non-U.S. citizens: the Bureau of Customs and Border Protection; the Bureau of Immigration and Customs Enforcement; and the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services Bureau.

On your plane to the U.S. or when you arrive in the U.S., you will receive a Form I-94 (Arrival-Departure Record). Please safeguard this form; it contains the official record of your stay in the United States.

To obtain answers to questions you may have regarding your stay in the United States (for example, travel outside the United States, employment, and much more) visit the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) website at <http://www.uscis.gov/portal/site/uscis>. After you arrive in the U.S., you may wish to direct your questions to the office at your educational institution that is responsible for services to international students. This office should be able to provide you with the answer(s) you need or refer you to a person or office that can.

What to Do When You Arrive at the College or University in the U.S.

Once you arrive on campus, you should report immediately to the office that is responsible for assisting international students and scholars. It may be called the Office of International Services, the Office of International Education, the International Programs Office, or some other similar name. Whatever the name, however, that office can help you with any questions or concerns you may have about immigration rules and regulations. Moreover, that office must report your arrival within the SEVIS system. If this report is not submitted, you may be considered to be in violation of your status in the United States, so be sure to make the international student office one of your first stops on campus.

We hope that this information has been helpful to you, and we wish you good luck as you prepare your plan to study in the United States.

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