Applying for Your F-1 Student Visa

Student Applicants - Overview

Please read this U.S. Department of State update for general information on how to apply for an F1 visa (if you are applying for a J-1 exchange visitor visa, the process is similar).

In most countries, first time student visa applicants are required to appear for an in-person interview. However, each embassy and consulate sets its own interview policies and procedures regarding student visas. Students should consult U.S. Embassy web sites or call for specific application instructions.

Keep in mind that June, July, and August are very busy months in most consular sections, and interview appointments are often difficult to get during that period. Students need to plan ahead to avoid having to make repeat visits to the Embassy. To the extent possible, students should bring the documents suggested below, as well as any other documents that might help establish their ties to your country and local community.

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.
- The consular officer may need to get special clearances depending on the course of study and nationality of the student. This can take some additional time. For more information on applicants who may have additional processing requirements see Special Processing Requirements.
- 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, the Embassy or Consulate will hold your application until it is able to issue the visa. Consular officials will use that extra time to accomplish any of the necessary special clearances or other processes that may be required.
- Students are advised of the U.S. 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 a change of classification, filing Form I-539, Application for Change of Nonimmigrant Status, and also submit the required Form I-20 to the Department of Homeland Security office where the application is made. Please be aware that there is an additional fee for this process, and that one may not begin studies until the change of classification is approved. The University strongly recommends that you DO NOT try to enter on a Prospective B-2 visa as their is no guarantee you will be able to change your Immigration status from a B-2 to an F-1 visa to attend school and you may be required to return home to get a student visa.
- 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 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 Department of Homeland Security and Department of State (DOS) throughout a student or exchange visitor’s stay in the United States.

All student applicants must have a SEVIS generated I-20 Form issued by an educational institution approved by DHS, which they submit when they are applying for their student visa. The consular officer will need to verify your I-20 record
electronic through the SEVIS system in order to process your student visa application. Unless otherwise exempt, participants whose SEVIS I-20 was issued on or after September 1, 2004 must pay a SEVIS I-901 Fee to the Department of Homeland Security for each individual program. The fee may be paid either through a special website, via Western Union, or by mail. You can find additional SEVIS fee information here (http://uhaweb.hartford.edu/intcenter/SEVISfee.htm).

What is Needed to Apply 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. 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. It is important to remember that applying early and providing the requested documents does not guarantee that the student will receive a visa. Visa wait times for interview appointments and visa processing time information for each U.S. Embassy or Consulate worldwide is available on the DOS website at Visa Wait Times (http://travel.state.gov/visa/temp/wait/tempvisitors_wait.php), and on most embassy websites. During the visa application process, usually at the interview, an ink-free, digital fingerprint scan will be quickly taken. Some applicants will need additional screening, and will be notified when they apply. 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 documents. For that reason, the guidelines that follow are general and can be abridged or expanded by consular officers overseas, depending on each student's situation.

All applicants for a student visa must provide:

- **Form I-20A-B, Certificate of Eligibility for Nonimmigrant (F-1) Student Status-For Academic and Language Students.** You will need to submit a SEVIS generated Form, I-20, which was provided to you by your school. You must sign the I-20 form prior to applying for your visa. All students, as well as their spouses and dependents 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 and their dependents (F/M-2 visa holders). The University is responsible for entering your information for the I-20 student visa form into SEVIS. Students will also have to pay an SEVIS I-901 fee for each program of study.

- A completed application, Nonimmigrant Visa Applicant, Form DS-156, together with a Form DS-158. Both forms must be completed and signed. Some applicants will also be required to complete and sign Form DS-157. A separate form is needed for children, even if they are included in a parent's passport.

- An interview at the embassy consular section is required for almost all visa applicants. The waiting time for an interview appointment for applicants can vary, so early visa application is strongly encouraged. During the visa interview, an ink-free, digital fingerprint scan will be quickly taken, as well as a digital photo. Some applicants will need additional screening, and will be notified when they apply.

- 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.

- 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, a visa issuance fee if applicable (Please consult the Visa Reciprocity Table (http://www.travel.state.gov/visa/reciprocity/index.htm)) and a separate SEVIS I-901 fee receipt. While all F visa applicants must pay the MRV fee, including dependents, only the F-1 principal applicants must pay the SEVIS fee.

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 owns a business, please bring business registration, licenses, etc., and tax documents, as well as original bank books and/or statements.

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 nonrefundable 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 a 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 must have their Form I-20 in their possession each time they enter the United States. Upon arrival to the U.S. 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.

What Items Do Returning Students Need?

All applicants applying for visa renewals must submit:

- A passport valid for at least six months.
- An application Form DS-156, together with a Form DS-158. Both forms must be completed and signed. Some applicants will also be required to complete and sign Form DS-157. Blank forms are available without charge at all U.S. consular offices and on the Visa Services website under Visa Applications Forms.
- A receipt for visa processing fee. A receipt showing payment of the visa application fee for each applicant, including each child listed in a parent’s passport who is also applying for a U.S. visa, is needed.
- A new I-20 or an I-20 that has been endorsed on the back by a school official within the past 12 months.

All applicants applying for renewals should be prepared to submit:

- A certified copy of your grades from the school in which you are enrolled.
- Financial documents from you or your sponsor, showing your ability to cover the cost of your schooling.

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.

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