

Student Visas

Warning: Some of this information may be outdated due to the 2025 executive orders. Please consider consulting an immigration lawyer if you have questions about your situation. You can also [read the President's executive orders](#).

If you want to come to the United States to study, you have to go to a school approved by the Student and Exchange Visitor Program (SEVP). After you are accepted by your school of choice, you will work closely with them throughout your immigration process.

Student visas are available for study at any level. However, if you get a student visa to attend a U.S. high school, you must show Immigration that you have reimbursed the school for the cost of your education.

Student Visa Overview

Choosing Which Student Visa

There are two types of student visas: F-1 and M-1. The kind of study that you will undertake determines whether you will be an F or an M.

F-1 is defined as someone:

- Who has a residence in a foreign country which they have no intention of abandoning;
- Who is a student qualified to pursue a full course of study; and
- Who seeks to enter the United States temporarily and solely for the purpose of pursuing such a course of study at an established college, university, seminary, conservatory, academic high school, elementary school, or other academic institution or in an accredited language training program in the United States, INA 101(a)(15)(F).

M-1 is defined as someone:

- Who has a residence in a foreign country which they have no intention of abandoning; and
- Who seeks to enter the United States temporarily and solely for the purpose of pursuing a full course of study at an established vocational or other recognized nonacademic institution (other than in a language training program) in the United States.

Choosing a School

As previously mentioned, you must choose a school from an approved list by SEVP. Their website keeps a record of their approved schools at studyinthestates.dhs.gov. The list also tells you which schools allow students to come on an F-1 or an M-1.

After you choose a school, contact their international student office. They will need your personal information, including financial details and proof of identity. Your school will issue this information into a system called Student and Exchange Visitor Information System (SEVIS). SEVIS will generate the I-20 through the school, which is the first immigration form towards getting a student visa. This document outlines where you will study, how much it will cost, who will pay, and how long your study is expected to last. Once you have your I-20, you are ready to start applying for your student visa.

Requirements for a Student Visa

The United States Department of State issues something called the Foreign Affairs Manual (FAM). You can find it online, and review the [section about student visas](#) for reference. It lists what personal information you must show Immigration in order to get a student visa, and what the consular officers will want to know about you during your consular interview. Requirements include:

1. You speak English
 - i. Your consular interview will be in English even if the person who interviews you is a native of your country. Not speaking English can be an obstacle to getting a student visa.

- ii. Your I-20 may indicate that you need to speak English in order to pursue your proposed course of study. However, there are a couple of exceptions. If your school has accepted you after you passed the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOFEL), then the consular officer should not refuse your student visa based on lack of English. Also, if you have enrolled in a program to learn English once you get to the United States, then the consular officer should not refuse your student visa based on lack of English.

However, if your I-20 indicates that you need to speak English and you intend to start an academic program immediately upon coming to the United States, the consular officer may let your level of English skills influence their decision. It is hard to convince a consular officer that you are coming to the United States to study if you don't speak enough English to understand what is going on in the classroom. The officer is allowed to ask you to read in English from a book or a newspaper.

- 2. You have been accepted at a school as evidenced by a Form I-20
- 3. You have a residence abroad which you have no intent of abandoning
 - i. The United States Department of State defines "residence" as the place of general abode. Meaning, where you actually live. This does not mean that you must maintain an independent household. If you live with your parents, their home can be your residence.
Even if it is your parent's house, when you go to your consular interview, try to bring proof that you live there. You might want to bring pictures of your home or copies of bills or tax records.
- 4. You plan to leave the United States at the end of your approved activities.
 - i. According to the FAM, consular officers are instructed to assess the applicant's plans following their completion of study or subsequent Optional Practical Training (OPT):
 - ii. "The hypothetical possibility that the applicant may apply to change or adjust status in the United States in the future is not a basis to refuse a visa application if you are satisfied that the applicant's present intent is to depart at the conclusion of his or her study or OPT."
- 5. You have enough money to support yourself while you are studying in the United States.

- i. According to the FAM, you must prove that you have sufficient funds when you apply for a U.S. student visa. It doesn't mean you have to have cash immediately available. However, you must provide credible, documented evidence that you will have enough money to pay for your living expenses for one year of studies.
 - ii. If you plan to study for more than one year, you need to prove that aside from unforeseen circumstances, you will have enough money for each subsequent year. These funds can come from the same source or another reliable source that you can identify with documentation.
 - iii. You can use your parent's or your own bank statements and pay stubs or taxes. If you will be living with a relative who will support you while you are here, bring their information and a statement from them that you will be living with them.
6. You are prepared for your course of study.
- i. In other words, you are ready to be a student. Generally, the fact that a school has accepted you and issued the I-20 is enough to show that you are qualified to start your course of study. However, when they decide whether to grant or deny your student visa, the consular officer can consider three things:
 - a. If you have successfully completed a course of study equal to what would normally be required of a U.S. student seeking enrollment at the same level;
 - b. If you lied on your application. For example, if you submitted fake transcripts of previous or related study or training (meaning they were forged or altered) which the institution has accepted as valid; and
 - c. If your school or institution accepted your fake records of previous education or training to fulfill its normal requirements when, in fact, you have not met those requirements.

Before You Apply for a Student Visa

Make sure that your passport is valid for at least six months after the date of your intended travel to the United States.

Applying for a Student Visa

Your Consulate's Website

Visit usembassy.gov to find the web page for your country's U.S. Consulate. Some larger countries, such as India, have more than one consulate, so make sure you determine which consulate processes applications for your area.

Once you have found the U.S. embassy page for your country and area, you will see several tabs. Choose the "visa" tab. From there, you can choose between immigrant and nonimmigrant visas. Student visas are nonimmigrant visas, so choose "nonimmigrant" visa. This page should provide links to information you will need that is specific to your country. A number of embassies have a Global Support Services (GSS) website where they provide the full application instructions.

Each consulate works a little differently, and they change their processes from time to time. Therefore, pay close attention to what the website tells you to do. Your friends might tell you information from their experiences, but it may not be relevant anymore. Trust the current information listed on the website.

The website will let you know if you need a consular interview, which is required of most applicants. If you need an interview, your consulate's website will help you schedule one. First, you will complete and submit an electronic form called the DS-160. Your consulate should also help you set up a courier service to return your passport after your interview. Lastly, they will tell you exactly what you need to bring to your consular interview. It is important to follow their instructions, because if you make a mistake, you have to make another appointment. In some cases, Immigration may just deny your student visa altogether.

Civil Documents by Country

The U.S. Department of State provides a list of acceptable documents [on their website](#) for each country that has a relationship with the United States. For example, if you are looking for what documents you need to prove a marriage, start by selecting your country and then scroll until you see the marriage certificate section. There you will find the documentation you need to give U.S. Immigration that is specific to your country. This resource can also be helpful if you need to find out how to get a copy of a divorce, birth, adoption, or death certificate from your home country.

Form DS-160

Completing the DS-160 can be a little frustrating. The system will save your information each time you complete a page and move onto the next one. However, if you take too long on any individual page, the system can time out and you will lose all the information you had on that page. To prevent this, periodically hit the “save” button.

Another useful tip: it helps to have all the information that you will need ready in one place before you start filling out the form. Refer to the Department of State’s [DS-160 “Frequently Asked Questions”](#) section for more information. This page will also tell you what documents and information you need to complete the DS-160. Preparing ahead of time will help make the process as painless as possible.

Please note, the DS-160 must be completed in English. Also, once you hit submit you cannot correct any errors. So carefully proofread your form before you submit it. However, you can also correct any errors at your consular interview.

After Applying for a Student Visa

Important Details on Your Student Visa

When your interview is over, the consular officer will keep your passport. The consulate will then return your passport with the visa added to one of the pages. There are some important details on your student visa that you should note.

First, make sure that all the information on your visa is correct before you travel to the United States. You cannot correct errors on a visa from within the United States.

Second, your school will be listed on the bottom. This is the only school where you have permission to study in the United States. You cannot change schools without submitting the proper forms and having them approved.

Lastly, your visa is valid between only certain dates. Meaning, you can travel only during these dates. Also, you can travel to the United States up to 30 days before your stated start date of school. If you return to your home country for vacation and your visa has expired, you will not be allowed back into the United States.

Arriving in the United States

When you arrive in the United States, you will present your visa and your I-20 to the Customs and Border Protection (CBP) officer. The officer will stamp your passport and put D/S (duration of status) as your allotted time in the country. As long as you continue making successful progress towards your studies, you maintain lawful status in the United States.

One of the first things that you should do when you arrive is to print a copy of your I-94 card. This is something that you must do yourself. The CBP officer will not give you one. You can print out your I-94 from the [CBP's website](#). Every time you re-enter the United States, you need to print out a new I-94. It should also state D/S as the expiration date.

After Your Studies

After you finish your studies, you may be eligible for Optional Practical Training (OPT). However, it must be within your course of study. In other words, you could not work as a mechanic if your area of study was philosophy.

To apply for OPT with Immigration, you will work with your school again. You cannot begin working until your application is approved and you have obtained a work permit. Don't forget to apply for a social security number, too. Your OPT income will be taxable.

Frequently Asked Questions

Last updated on August 11, 2025.

What are some reasons they should NOT deny my student visa?

They should not deny your student visa because:

- A similar course of study may be available in your home country. For example, you could study biology at many universities outside of the United States.
- There is not a demand in your home country for the skills you will obtain in the United States.

What if my student visa is denied?

You are allowed to reapply right away, but you will have to start with a new application. Immigration should explain why they did not approve your student visa. When you reapply, make sure you address the issues that Immigration outlined in their denial.

What is considered a full course of study?

The definition of a full course of study can slightly vary depending on your area of interest. It can also change depending on the level and type of education. For example, if you are studying science, you will likely have classroom hours and required hours working in a lab.

Work closely with your designated school official (DSO) to ensure you maintain a full course of study.

Do I have to study full time during the summer vacation?

As long as you re-enroll for the fall semester, you do not have to study full time during the summer vacation.

Can I reduce my course load?

Your designated school official (DSO) can reduce your course load if:

- You struggle with English and the teaching methods in the United States;
- There are documented medical reasons that you cannot study; or
- You are at the end of your studies and you do not need a full course load to graduate.

Can I work?

No. However, you can have an on-campus job if it fulfills a scholarship, fellowship, or assistantship you accepted in order to pay for your academic program. You would still be required to maintain full-time status as a student.

Can I get a driver's license as a student?

Yes, in Wisconsin you can get a driver's license as a student. See our DMV blog post for more information.

Am I required to show that I have medical insurance while I'm studying in the United States?

No. The FAM states:

"F and M students and their dependents are not required to have U.S. medical or travel insurance in order to qualify for a visa."

Can I bring my spouse and children if I come on a student visa?

Yes, you can. However, to qualify as derivatives, your children must be unmarried and under the age of 21. If they get married or turn 21, they will have to apply for their own status in the United States. Also, your spouse and children will not be eligible to get work permits under your student visa. They can, however, get state IDs or driver's licenses.

To travel to the United States, your spouse and children will need their own I-20's and should print out their own I-94 cards.

If I am from a visa waiver country, do I still need to get a student visa?

Yes. The visa waiver program allows you to enter for no more than 90 days and cannot be renewed. Also, you may not enroll in academic study on the visa waiver program. It is also not intended for full time study.

If you come to the United States on a visa waiver, you could, however, take a class for fun. For example, if you come to vacation in the United States, you could take a cooking class or a painting class as part of your trip.

How long can I stay inside of the United States after my studies and OPT are complete?

60 days.

[Visa Processing Options for Status, Visas, Permits & Papers](#) [Immigration](#)

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