

Applying for a United States Student Visa

In order for an international student (defined as any student holding a foreign passport) to enroll at a school in the United States, they must obtain an F-1 (or student) visa. The information below explains the process of applying for a student visa and provides some useful suggestions. U.S. embassies and consulates work from the same set of rules, which are then adapted to their host countries. Therefore you should inquire in advance about individual policies.

Students should plan ahead for their study in the U.S. and should allow plenty of time for visa processing. Keep in mind, however, that you should not apply for a student visa more than 90 days before the registration date noted on the I-20 form. The timetable for visa processing can vary widely depending on the volume of applications processed by an individual consulate or embassy. Notifications of acceptance or denial can range from one to ten weeks. June, July, and August are the busiest months for visa processing.

The I-20 Form

To apply for a F-1 visa, you must complete an I-20 Form (the official name for this form is the Certificate of Eligibility for Nonimmigrant Student Status for Academic and Language Students) from the school you plan to attend. Schools may issue I-20s for one year or multiple years to cover the duration of a student's program. Schools may only issue I-20 forms after a student has completed the application process and is admitted.

After receiving the I-20, the student must apply in person for a visa at the nearest U.S. consulate or embassy in their home country. For specific information regarding consulates and embassies worldwide including addresses and hours of operation, refer to the [State Department Bureau of Consular Affairs website](#). It is always wise to call ahead to inquire whether an appointment is necessary and to confirm what documents are needed.

Documents Needed for Visa Application

The student should bring the following documents when applying for a visa:

- Completed Nonimmigrant Visa Application, Form DS-156. *This form may be completed [electronically](#), or downloaded in a [PDF format](#).*
- Completed I-20 from the school you plan to attend. Do not bring I-20s from schools you do not plan to attend.
- Passport, which must be valid for at least six months after your proposed date of entry into the U.S.
- Letter of admission from a school.

- Financial documentation that shows sufficient funds to cover the cost of tuition, room and board, books, and other related expenses.

Occasionally students will be asked to provide additional information. In order to avoid multiple trips to the consulate or embassy, you should be prepared to show other information including

- Transcripts from previous institutions attended.
- Scores from standardized tests used in the admission process, such as the Secondary School Admission Test (SSAT), Independent School Entrance Examination (ISEE), Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL), Secondary Level English Proficiency (SLEP).

The Consular Interview

In most countries, a consular interview is required. These meetings are conducted by U.S. State Department Consular Officers and take place at the embassy or consulate. Some consulates/embassies request that students submit the required documentation before scheduling the interview, while others conduct the entire process on the same day.

The purpose of this interview is for a consular officer to determine the student's academic interests and English language proficiency. It is also the consular official's job to ensure that the applicant is a legitimate candidate for a student visa and is not entering the U.S. for some other reason—such as immigration. To prove that students are seeking a visa solely for educational purposes, they will often be asked to show proof of ties to their home country. Examples of such ties might include evidence of a family business or real estate holdings in the student's home country. If close family members have studied in the U.S. previously and then returned home, this information might serve as evidence of ties to the home country.

Applicants should be prepared to answer a variety of questions. There are no set questions for the interview, but the consular official's role is to learn about you and why you wish to study in the U.S. The official will also want to know why you wish to attend a particular school. You may also be asked about the documentation you have provided, and officials may want to see copies of materials sent to the school such as transcripts and test scores.

Here are samples of questions that may arise during a consular interview:

- Tell me about this school and why you wish to enroll there. What does it offer that your current school does not?
- Where is the school located? (Be prepared to point out the location on a map of the U.S.)

- Who is the Head of School or Director of Admission?
- Why do you wish to study in the U.S.?
- How will studying at this school benefit you when you return home?

Returning Students/Visa Renewal

A student may be issued a visa for one year or for several years. It is important to check the visa carefully in order to determine whether renewal is necessary. Visa renewal applications should be made at the nearest U.S. consulate or embassy in the student's home country. Much of the same documentation is required for a visa renewal that is required when you first received your visa.

Applicants applying for renewals must submit:

- Passport valid for at least six months after proposed date of entry into the U.S.
- Two completed Nonimmigrant Visa Application Forms (Form OF-156) with photo and receipt for application processing fee
- New I-20 from school where the student is enrolled OR an I-20 that has been endorsed on the back by a school official within the last 12 months

Applicants for visa renewals should also be prepared to submit:

- Official copy of grades
- Financial documentation showing ability to cover cost of tuition, room and board, travel and other related expenses

Visa Approval

If the student visa application is approved, you will be given an F-1 visa stamp in your passport indicating:

- Where the visa was issued
- Date the visa will expire
- Number of entries permitted*
- Type of visa
- Visa number

At this time, you will also be given a sealed envelope containing both pages of the I-20.

* A multiple entry visa enables a student to enter and leave the U.S. as many times as indicated on the document. A single-entry visa will require the student to obtain a new visa every time he/she travels outside of the U.S. in order to return.

Travel to the U.S.

During the flight to the U.S., the student will be given the I-94 card (Arrival/Departure Record) to complete. At the Port of Entry, the student will go through customs and must present the following to the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) official:

- Valid passport and visa
- Sealed envelope with I-20
- Completed I-94
- Any other requested information (financial documents, admission letter, etc.)

The INS official will:

- Return the passport/visa with an INS entry stamp
- Return the departure record card with an entry stamp (usually will be stapled to the student's passport)
- Separate the I-20, keeping the first page for INS records and returning the I-20 ID to the student with the INS entry stamp in the right-hand corner

Maintaining Records

Be sure to keep your passport/visa with I-94 card, I-20 Form, and all other important documents in a safe place. Replacing these items is a complicated and time-consuming process and may create problems.

In order to avoid jeopardizing your visa eligibility, it is wise to pay particular attention to your status as an F-1 student. When you enter the United States on a student visa, you will usually be admitted for the duration of your student status. That means you may remain in the U.S. as long as you are a full-time student, even if the F-1 visa in your passport expires while you are in the U.S. If your visa expires and you leave the U.S., you will be required to apply for a new visa before returning. A student visa cannot be renewed in the U.S.; it must be done at a consulate or embassy in the student's home country. Students who have completed the program of study have a 60-day grace period before being required to exit the U.S.