

# Southern California Seminary

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## *Immigration Information for F-1 Students*

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*It is your responsibility to understand and comply with the terms of your immigration status during your stay in the United States. A violation of the immigration regulations (for example, failure to maintain a full-time credit load or unauthorized employment) could jeopardize your F-1 status and legal stay in the U.S. Review this information carefully and contact **International Student Office** if you have questions.*

## What is F-1 "Status"?

"Status" is your nonresident category officially granted by an immigration official. To be in F-1 "status" means that you are legally in the U.S. and have benefits and restrictions specified in the immigration regulations for the F-1 visa category. You gain status either by entering the U.S. with F-1 documents (described below) or, for people already in the U.S. in a different status, by applying to U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services for a change of status.

### Period of authorized stay

Your admission to the U.S. is for "duration of status," that is, for the length of your F-1 status. F-1 status covers the period when you are a full-time registered student making normal progress toward your degree (or exchange program), plus an optional period of practical training following completion of studies, plus a 60-days "grace period" to prepare to depart the U.S. or change to another status. Your length of authorized stay is not related to your F-1 visa expiration date. The F-1 visa is specifically for *entry* into the U.S. The F-1 visa might expire before your status expires, and your status might end before your visa expires.

## Documents

Federal law requires you to carry "registration" documents at all times, including your I-20 and passport with I-94 card attached or F-1 admission stamp (depending on what you received upon your last entry to the U.S.). Below is an overview of the documents related to your F-1 status. For day-to-day purposes, we suggest that these documents be kept in a secure location such as a bank safe deposit box, and you should carry photocopies. However, if you are traveling outside the San Diego area you should carry the original documents with you. If you are traveling by air, train, bus or ship, you may be required to produce these documents before boarding. Keep photocopies of all your documents in a separate location in the event your documents are lost or stolen.

### Passport

Your passport must be valid at all times. Keep your passport and other important documents in a safe place, such as a bank safe-deposit box. Report a lost or stolen passport to the police because your government may require a police report before issuing a new passport. To renew or replace your passport, contact your country's consulate in the U.S.

### Visa

The visa is the stamp that the U.S. consular officer placed on a page in your passport. The visa permitted you to apply for admission into the U.S. as an F-1 student, and need not remain valid

while you are in the U.S. (Canadian citizens are not required to have a visa.) If your visa expires while you are in the U.S., the next time you travel abroad you must obtain a new F-1 visa before returning to the U.S. Exceptions to this rule exist for short trips to Canada, Mexico, and the Caribbean islands. Visas can only be obtained outside of the U.S. at a U.S. consulate.

## I-20 Certificate of Eligibility

Issued by SCS, this document allows you to apply for an F-1 visa if you are outside the U.S, apply for F-1 status within the U.S., enter and reenter the U.S. in F-1 status, and prove your eligibility for various F-1 benefits. The I-20 indicates the institution in which you are permitted to study, your program of study, and the dates of eligibility. The I-20 must remain valid at all times. You must request a new 1-20 prior to its expiration date. Allowing the I-20 to expire before you complete your academic program is a violation of F-1 status.

The I-20 is a printout from your SEVIS (Student Exchange Visitor Information System) record. **SEVIS** is an internet-based database that allows schools and federal immigration agencies to exchange data on the status of international students. Information is transmitted electronically throughout an F-1 student's academic career in the U.S. Each student has a unique SEVIS ID number, which is printed on your I-20 in the top right corner.

## I-94 Arrival & Departure Record

When you enter the U.S. you are issued either an admission stamp in your passport **or** Form I-94, a small white card usually stapled to the passport opposite the visa stamp. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) is currently transitioning to electronic arrival/departure records for air and sea ports of entry. For most travelers arriving by air or sea, a paper I-94 card will not be issued. Instead, the CBP official may issue an admission stamp in the passport. Travelers at land borders will continue to receive paper I-94 cards.

The transition began April 30, 2013. You might receive either a paper I-94 card **or** an F-1 admission stamp in your passport (no card), depending on when you travel to the U.S. and where you arrive. The admission stamp or I-94 card records the date and place you entered the U.S., your immigration status (for example, F-1 or F-2), and authorized period of stay (indicated by "D/S", meaning "duration of status"). Be sure to check the stamp to make sure it is correct. If you receive a paper I-94 card, keep it stapled in your passport. A \$330 fee is required to replace a lost, stolen or damaged paper I-94 card. Consult your International Student Advisor if you lose your I-94 card.

You might need a printout of your I-94 information to apply for various benefits such as a Social Security Number, or CA driver's license. You can obtain a printout of your I-94 record at [CBP.gov/I94](http://CBP.gov/I94).

## SEVIS I-901 Fee

Before attending the visa interview in your home country, you must pay a \$200 SEVIS fee directly to the US Department of Homeland Security. There are three ways to pay the fee: [www.ice.gov/sevis/i901/](http://www.ice.gov/sevis/i901/)

- 1) Complete the Form I-901 and mail it with a money order in US dollars;
- 2) Pay at the local Western Union Quick Pay in your country's local currency;
- 3) Pay online with a credit card at [www.fmjfee.com](http://www.fmjfee.com) (this is the fastest method).

When paying online, please allow three business days for your payment to be processed before going to your F-1 visa interview. It is important that you save the receipt and keep it in a safe place. You may be asked to show the receipt during your visa interview, at the US port of entry or after you are in the US.

Effective July 31, 2013 the Student and Exchange Visitor Program (SEVP) will no longer mail Form I-797C "Notice of Action" for the I-901 SEVIS fee payment.

The payment confirmation you can print from the [FMJfee website](#) will replace the Form I-797C. The printed confirmation will serve as proof of payment for the I-901 SEVIS fee.

Attached is the updated paper Form I-901 that no longer contains a field for expedited receipt delivery. The paper Form I-901 will be available from the [SEVP website](#).

If you have questions regarding any of the changes described in the attached notice, please contact the SEVP Response Center at 703-603-3400 or the I-901 Case Resolution Unit at [fmjfee.sevis@ice.dhs.gov](mailto:fmjfee.sevis@ice.dhs.gov).

## Events That Require You to Update Your I-20

Many kinds of updates must be reported to the Department of Homeland Security through SEVIS and must be changed on your I-20. Notify your International Student Advisor of the following changes and request an updated I-20. Keep every I-20 for your permanent record, even after you graduate. Do not discard the old ones, even from previous schools. School files are archived and destroyed after several years, so it is your responsibility to keep your I-20s in case you need them to apply for future immigration benefits.

### Program Extension

If you are unable to complete your course of study before the completion date noted in item 5 on your I-20, you must request an extended I-20 before your current I-20 expires. For more information see your Academic, as well as International Student Advisor

### Changing Schools

You must be registered fulltime at the SCS, since SCS issued your I-20 and oversees your SEVIS record. If you decide to transfer to another school, contact your International Student Advisor prior to completing your current module at SCS.

### Change of Level

If you will complete your current program of study and plan to continue at SCS in another program (for example, change from a Master's degree program to a PhD program), your I-20 must be updated. For more information, see your Academic as well International Student Advisor.

### Change of Major

If you change your major, you need the International School Advisor to issue a new I-20 for you after the change is officially recorded in Academic office.

## Change of Funding

If there is a substantial change in the source or amount of your funding, report this change to International Student office and a new I-20 will be issued to you. For example, if you receive a scholarship or lose a scholarship through your department, but your I-20 indicates that you use personal funds to pay for expenses, you should request a new I-20.

## Name Change

The name on your I-20 should match the name on your passport. If you change any part of your legal name—first/given name, middle name, or last/family name—on your passport, this change should be reflected on your I-20. Conversely, if you want a different name on your I-20, SCS will wait for you to change your passport first, before updating the I-20. Note that SEVIS is a separate database from the SCS database.

## Full-time Registration Requirements and Exceptions

In general, F-1 students must be registered full-time. This is defined as 12 or more credits during a trimester (3 modules) for undergraduate students and 9 or more credits each three trimester (3 modules) for graduate students. Do not register for fewer than the required number of credits or withdraw from a course without first receiving permission from International Student Office. Part-time studies could jeopardize their stay in the U.S. and make you ineligible for F-1 benefits.

### On line courses for F-1 Students

Only one online class may count towards the minimum credit amount during any three trimester sessions in fall and spring (two per year maximum.) Example, If you take an on line course in module one, you would not be eligible until module four in the spring to take another on line course.

### Exceptions to the Full-Time Requirement

- **Reduced Course Load (RCL) for Specific Academic Reasons**

You must obtain a letter from your academic adviser or class professor explaining that one of the following reasons apply to you. Note that the first three reasons are primarily for new students beginning their studies, since the exception reasons refer to “initial” difficulty.

The international student advisor will review the letter, evaluate whether or not a drop will be allowed, and if approved, will print a new I-20 for you with the RCL authorization dates. An academic RCL is only allowed one module per degree level. You must request the RCL and receive approval from the international student advisor before the end of the module in which you need the approved RCL.

1. Initial difficulty with the English language
2. Initial difficulty with reading requirements
3. Unfamiliarity with American teaching methods
4. Improper course level placement

- **Reduced Course Load (RCL) for a Documented Medical Condition**

You must submit a recommendation letter to International Student Advisor from a "licensed medical doctor, doctor of osteopathy, or licensed clinical psychologist." A reduced course load due to a medical reason may be authorized multiple times so long as the aggregate period does not exceed 12 months. Regardless of the date during the module you request the RCL, it will cover the entire module and will subtract three months from your 12-month allowance. You must request the RCL and receive approval from the International Student Office before the end of the module in which you need the approved RCL. We will issue a new I-20 for you authorizing the RCL.

- **Annual Vacation Module**

An annual vacation module is a module spent in the United States while not registered for full-time credits. You are eligible for vacation if you have completed one full-time academic year (5 consecutive modules) prior to the vacation and intend to register for the following term. During your vacation module, you may either enroll part-time or not at all.

Summer is the default vacation, and it is not necessary to notify the International Student Office if you take summer as your vacation module

- **Final Module**

You may take as few credits as required to complete your degree as long as you register for at least one credit at SCS. An online class or a CPT-related credit cannot be the only class on your final module schedule. Please notify your adviser and DOS before your graduating trimester//final module enrollment.

- **Thesis/Dissertation Credits**

Graduate students registered for thesis or dissertation credits may register for fewer than 9 credits and be considered full-time for immigration purposes.

## **Employment**

"Employment" is any work performed or services provided (including self-employment) in exchange for money or other benefit or compensation (for example, free room and board in exchange for babysitting). Unauthorized employment is taken very seriously by U.S. immigration officials; familiarize yourself with your F-1 employment eligibility options and **always** contact the DSO before accepting any work that you are not sure is authorized.

- **If your I-20 was issued by the Southern California Seminary, you may work on campus up to 20 hours per week (part-time) while school is in session, and more than 20 hours per week (full-time) during a vacation modules and between modules, provided you continue as a student the following module.**
- **Employment *off-campus* must be authorized in advance and in accordance with specific procedures outlined in the federal regulations. For more information see the DSO.**
- **"Volunteering" at job that is traditionally paid may be considered a violation of status. Don't work "for free" without first consulting your DSO adviser.**

## **Travel: Returning to the U.S. After a Temporary Absence**

When F-1 students wish to leave the US temporarily and return to continue studies at the institution in which they are enrolled, they must secure the necessary documents to 1) permit entry to another country and 2) permit re-entry to the United States. For entry into another country, the student is responsible for investigating that country's entry requirements well in advance of traveling; students can access that information from foreign embassies at [www.embassy.gov](http://www.embassy.gov). In order to re-enter the US in F-1 status, the student must present all of the following:

1. a valid I-20 with current DSO signature from the school he/she is entering to attend
2. a valid F-1 student visa stamp
3. a valid passport or travel document

A student who has completed his or her program of study has no basis for re-entry to the US as an F-1 student, unless he or she has been admitted to a new program of study and has the new Form I-20, OR he or she is returning to an authorized OPT job after completion of studies.

### **Your Form I-20**

If you travel outside the US while you are in F-1 status, your I-20 must be signed on page 3 by a DSO from the school that issued your I-20. Your valid I-20 with a DSO's signature confirms that you are maintaining your F-1 status and are eligible to re-enter the US. The signature is valid for one year.

1. Page 3 must be signed for travel authorization
2. Absence from US must be less than five months
3. You must allow DSO to check your passport and visa for validity before traveling

Notes: It is not necessary to reprint an I-20 for a travel signature unless all signature lines are full.

Transferring students should present the new I-20 from the new school when re-entering.

## Form I-515A

A student who re-enters the US without required documentation may be allowed entry by the Port-of-Entry official using Form I-515A (formerly I-515). This allows a student to enter for up to 30 days within which time the student will report to the DSO for required documentation. The 30-day period will be reflected on a date-certain I-94 card (not stamped "D/S"). In most cases, Form I-515A is used when the student did not obtain a DSO signature on page 3 of the I-20 or he/she lost the I-20. If a DSO signature was not obtained prior to departure, the POE officer will issue the I-515A to allow the student to enter and obtain the proper signature. If the student has lost the I-20, the DSO will re-print a copy for processing. The Form I-515A along with required documentation must be processed at the Washington DC address.

## Five-month rule

An F-1 student who remains outside the US for five or more consecutive months, even with a valid travel signature, will need a new initial attendance I-20 for re-entry. A common example is a leave of absence when the SEVIS record has been terminated. The previous I-20 is no longer valid for re-entry. Payment of SEVIS fee is required for new initial attendance I-20.

## Your F-1 Visa Stamp

A valid visa stamp in your passport is also required for re-entry. If your visa stamp has expired, you will need to go to a US Consulate outside of the US to apply for a new visa.

Note: Canadian citizens are not required to have a visa but will have an I-94 card.

## Automatic Visa Revalidation (in contiguous territory and adjacent islands)

After initial entry to the US, an F-1 student who has a single-entry visa or an expired multiple-entry visa may re-enter the US without obtaining a new visa under the following conditions:

1. Travel is solely to a contiguous territory (Canada or Mexico) or adjacent islands (excluding Cuba)
2. And travel is for a period not exceeding 30 days.
3. The student has retained the I-94 arrival/departure card with F-1 D/S entry noted
4. The student's I-20 is properly endorsed
5. The student has not applied for a new visa at the US consulate with the result being either a denial or delay of more than 30 days
6. The student is not a citizen of Iran, Iraq, Libya, Sudan, North Korea, Cuba or Syria
7. **\*\*Post-completion OPT only\*\***--the student has a valid EAD card and employer's letter showing evidence of employment or job offer

For travel to contiguous territories or islands adjacent to the US, travelers should have all of the above. However, you will not be able to re-enter the US if you have a newly-issued passport which does not have any US visa stamps; therefore, you should carry both the expired and the new passport.

Note: You may be required to have an entry visa for the contiguous territory. Neither your US visa nor your I-20 automatically grants you entry. Contact the Mexican or Canadian consulates for info.

## “Third Country National” Visa Renewal

It is sometimes possible to receive a US visa at a US consulate in Canada or Mexico. This method is often unsuccessful and therefore not encouraged; students are strongly advised to apply for the F-1 visa from their home country. If you are denied a visa as a Third Country National applicant, you will NOT be allowed to re-enter the US and will have to return to your home country to apply for the visa.

## Your Passport

F-1 students seeking re-entry to the US must have a passport valid for at least six months into the future. In rare circumstances, a student will arrive at the port of entry either with an expired passport or without the appropriate visa stamp in the passport. In such cases, the immigration inspector has the discretion of allowing the student to apply for a waiver of either requirement using Form I-193, “Application for Waiver of Passport and/or Visa” and paying the required fee. Admitting someone in this way is a highly discretionary act, and students should not count on being granted a waiver.

### \*\*Special Notes on OPT and Travel\*\*

Students on post-completion OPT must have travel signatures revalidated every 6 months. In addition to the valid passport, current I-20 with OPT noted on page 3, and visa stamp, OPT students must also present the border agent with a valid EAD card and proof of OPT employment or an appropriate job offer letter.

You may also be asked to prove that you have sufficient funds to live in the US.

If you have applied for OPT and have not yet received the EAD card, DO NOT travel outside the US. Also, if you have received the EAD but do not have proof of a job to return to, DO NOT travel.

## Dependents (Spouse and Children)

Your spouse and unmarried children under 21 may be eligible for F-2 dependent status. Contact ISS for procedures to invite a dependent to join you in the U.S. Immigration regulations do not permit F-2 dependents to be employed in the U.S. The regulations also restrict full-time study for F-2 dependents, with two exceptions:

1. An F-2 spouse and child may enroll in courses that are a vocational or recreational in nature. Enrollment in a degree program would not be considered as a vocational or recreational.
2. An F-2 child may engage in full-time study if the study is in an elementary or secondary school (kindergarten through twelfth grade).
3. An F-2 spouse or F-2 child desiring to engage in full-time study (other than as noted above) must apply to Immigration and obtain a change of status to F-1.

## Change of Address

Any change of address must be reported to Department of Homeland Security (DHS) within 10 days. Update your local address through the DSO, and DHS will automatically be notified of the change. If you are on OPT, email your DSO adviser with your new local address. Please note that your local US address must be your physical address, not a P. O. Box. To update your permanent foreign address, which must be a non-U.S. address, email the DSO and include your name and student ID number.

## Loss of F-1 Status

If you violate the immigration regulations you may be able to regain valid F-1 status either through a reinstatement application to U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services or through travel and reentry with a new I-20/new SEVIS record. The appropriate option will depend on your individual circumstances; review the reinstatement and reentry procedures and consult your International Student Adviser for more information. A scheduled appointment with your International Student adviser is recommended as drop-in advising will not allow sufficient time to discuss this topic.

\*If you do not complete your educational objective (for example, if you withdraw from your program, or you are dismissed from SCS for academic or disciplinary reasons), you are not eligible for the 60-day grace period. Contact your academic adviser and the DSO in this situation.

## Graduation or Completion of Your Exchange Program

The end of your academic program affects your F-1 status. After you graduate or complete your exchange you have a 60-day grace period. Within this 60-day period you have the following options:

- Depart the U.S. Once you leave the U.S. (including trips to Canada and Mexico) after completing your studies you are not eligible to re-enter with your current I-20. The grace period is meant for travel within the states and preparation to depart the U.S.
- Request a new I-20 if you will continue at the SCS in a new degree program. If you are an undergraduate and will begin graduate studies, your new I-20 will be issued by the International Student Office
- If you are moving from a Master's to a PhD program, request a Change of Level I-20 from the DSO.
- Transfer your SEVIS record to a new school.
- Apply to change status to another visa category. DSO advisers cannot assist with change of status applications. If you need additional assistance, we recommend you contact an immigration attorney.

If you have questions about immigration issues, you may go to <http://www.ice.gov/sevis/students/>