

Appendix F

Information About Student Visas

The following information was adapted from a handout that Karen Edwards, the dean of international student affairs at Grinnell College, uses with her faculty, staff, and administrator colleagues. Her goal in sharing this information is to raise awareness about the many factors impacting students' academic and cocurricular planning based on immigration status.

Although most of the information here is likely to stay the same, visa regulations do change from time to time. Thus, it is important to consult with your institutions' offices (or officers) for international student support, as noted in Chapter 5. Updated information about U.S. visa policies for international students can also be found at <https://studyinthestates.dhs.gov>. Another useful resource for international offices, faculty, and staff supporting international students is the Association of International Educators, also known as NAFSA (www.nafsa.org).

What Is an F1 Visa?

The most common type of visa for international students is an F-1 Visa—that is, a nonimmigrant visa that allows international students to enter the United States and study at institutions certified by the Student and Exchange Visitor Program (SEVP). Students can only apply for an F-1 visa *after* being accepted to an accredited U.S. institution and being issued the Form I-120. Note that there are other types of visas (e.g., J-1) that some international students, such as short-term exchange students, may hold. It is also important to keep in mind that specific immigration status is confidential.

What Are the Most Important Policies for F-1 Visa Holders?

1. Full-time enrollment is required, with few exceptions.
 - a. Students must be enrolled full-time as undergraduate, graduate, or nondegree-seeking students at an accredited institution (e.g., college, university, seminary, language training program) that awards a degree, diploma, or certificate.

- b. Students can seek reduced course load authorization in three scenarios: first-semester language difficulties, a documented medical condition, or the final semester before graduation.
 - c. Only one online or distance education class or three credits per academic term may count toward the “full course load” requirement.
- 3. International students can typically participate in off-campus study opportunities, but there are visa issues to consider, and advanced planning is essential.
- 4. F-1 students who are considering a personal, medical, or military leave or a mid-program transfer to another U.S. school should consult the institution’s office for international student support. Approval is required, and students cannot typically stay in the United States during a leave.
- 5. Enrolling in a summer class at another U.S. school may be allowed, but campus employment could be limited to the student’s primary institution.
- 6. On-campus employment is limited to 20 hours per week while school is in session. Students may be able to work more hours during breaks. Off-campus employment options vary from institution to institution, so check with the institution’s office of international student support. On-campus employment eligibility ends with graduation so alumni who pursue post-baccalaureate positions must secure authorization (typically via Optional Practical Training [OPT]; learn more at www.uscis.gov/working-in-the-united-states/students-and-exchange-visitors/optional-practical-training-opt-for-f-1-students).
- 7. Choosing a “major” introduces additional nuances for F-1 students because it may limit their access to U.S. work opportunities. Practical training benefits are only applicable when work is directly related to the declared major. In addition, make note of the following:
 - a. All majors have access to 12 months of employment authorization via OPT.
 - b. STEM majors may be eligible for up to 24 additional months of authorization via STEM OPT (see the list of programs at www.ice.gov/doclib/sevis/pdf/stemList2022.pdf).
 - c. Education licensure is available to F-1 students. U.S. licensure is recognized in some other countries, but there are unique considerations. Interested students should consult with the office for international student support.
 - d. International students who are interested in attending U.S. medical schools should consult early on with international student offices and health professions staff at their institution, as acceptance rates are extremely competitive, and most U.S. medical schools are closed to noncitizens.
- 7. Students wishing to engage in unpaid or volunteer endeavors should also consult their institution’s office for international student support.
- 8. Before an enrolled F-1 student may work off campus (broadly defined, for paid or unpaid experiences), they may need to secure Curricular

Practical Training (CPT) authorization. The institution's office for international student support may be able to authorize CPT for eligible students who secure an internship. Eligibility for CPT requires at least two consecutive semesters in F-1 status, and the work must be directly related to the student's declared major. CPT is required if and when the student is inside the United States, regardless of the employer location.

9. The office for international student support should provide assistance to F-1 seniors and alumni who pursue postgraduation options in the United States.
 - a. Seniors who will proceed to graduate studies in the United States must request a Student and Exchange Visitor Information System (SEVIS) Release.
 - b. Seniors who will pursue U.S.-based work in their major must apply for 12 months of Post-Completion OPT. (It is recommended that students begin the application process as soon as the regulations allow, as processing times can vary.)
 - c. Eligible alumni who wish to apply for 24 additional months of STEM OPT also work with the office for international student support throughout the full authorization period.
10. F-1 students who graduate early must shorten their F-1 program via the office for international student support.

NOTE: F-1 students who will not graduate on time must process a program extension *prior to* the I-20 end date. It is possible that a program extension requires funding documentation, and it may jeopardize Post-Completion OPT. A program cannot be extended for online courses.