

AN INTRODUCTION TO THE F-1 INTERNATIONAL STUDENT

A guide to assist Clemson University departments with their international student population

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I. Introduction

As the number of international students in the US returns to its pre-9/11 level, and the commitment the US Government has shown towards once again making the US a top academic destination for the world's brightest, the CU community needs to have an understanding of the regulatory and procedural concepts affecting our largest international population, the F-1 non-immigrant student.

The purpose of this handbook is to provide CU faculty and staff working with the international population exposure to a brief/general description of the status, its concerns, as well as of the steps taken by the Office of International Affairs once the international student has been admitted until their departure from the university.

II. Glossary of Terms

GLOSSARY OF TERMS	
Adjudicated	When the student's immigration documents have been "stamped" by the immigration official at the POE as having met the requirements for entering the US in F-1 status.
Department of Homeland Security (DHS)	The government agency that oversees various aspects of security in the US, including immigration.
Department of State (DOS)	The diplomatic wing of the government. Oversees the operations of diplomatic missions, including issuance of visas.
Domestic Student	A term used to describe a student who is a US Citizen through birth or naturalization. Not an international student.
F-1	The non-immigrant status used by the majority of international students in the US. Students holding this status are issued a Form I-20 by International Student and Scholar Services.
Form AR-11SR	A DHS change of address form required to be completed and submitted by individuals from certain countries. Students wishing to know if they must complete this form should contact OIA.
I-20	Officially called a "Certificate of Eligibility For Nonimmigrant (F-1) Student Status," it is the document issued by the US school to assist the student in applying for their F-1 visa. The I-20 lists the student's biographical, academic, and financial information. The document is time-sensitive and must be updated to reflect correct information.
I-901	The form used to pay the SEVIS Fee.
I-94 Card	Officially known as the "Admission and Departure Record", this small piece of paper is adjudicated and given to the student at the POE, It is this document that verifies the student's status and grants permission to remain in the US.
International Student	A term used to describe a student who is a citizen of a country other than the US.
Non-Immigrant	Foreign individuals who entered the US with no immigration intent. These individuals are expected to return home following the completion of

	their studies.
Port of Entry (POE)	The entry point where the international student was admitted to the US. A POE can be an airport, seaport, or land crossing.
Practical Training (CPT/OPT)	An immigration benefit for F-1 students authorizing off-campus employment in their field of study.
Reinstatement	The process requested by an F-1 student to the USCIS to regain their lawful status in the US should it be terminated for failure to maintain it. In most cases, the student may remain registered for courses pending the outcome of the application.
SEVIS	Student and Exchange Visitor Information System. The online database that tracks non-immigrants in the US in F-1 or J-1 status. OIA staff are required to submit information on a regular basis to SEVIS.
SEVIS Fee (I-901 Fee)	A one time fee all new F-1 students are required to pay prior to their initial visa application.
SEVIS ID	The unique identification number assigned to the F-1 student once their information has been submitted to SEVIS. This number is required for visa application.
Special Registration	Upon inspection at the POE, certain individuals will be told that they are subject to special registration. Those individuals will be required to check in with the local USCIS office to validate their residency in the US.
Status	The immigration classification given to the foreign individual once they have cleared the immigration inspection at the US port of entry. Status is granted based on the visa issued to the student and the immigration document provided by the US school.
Technology Alert List (TAL)	Certain fields of study/research are considered of a sensitive nature or have the possibility for negative use. These fields are listed on the TAL and require a longer visa processing time/security check.
US Citizenship and Immigration Service (USCIS)	The section of the DHS that is in charge of the processing of immigration requests and enforcement of regulatory matters. F-1 student applications for various immigration benefits are sent to the USCIS for approval.
US-VISIT Program	The US Visitor and Immigrant Status Indicator Technology Program. An electronic check-in/check-out system managed by DHS to collect information on visitors to the US. The system is used at the POE.
Visa	The stamp in the international student's passport issued by a US Embassy of Consulate abroad. The purpose of the visa is for entry into the US only. Expiration of the visa is not detrimental to the student's legal stay.

III. What is F-1 Status?

Before we begin, a point of clarification needs to be made. While the phrase, “I am on an F-1 visa,” is often stated by our international students, we need to understand that Clemson University is not concerned with the international student’s *visa*, but rather, their *status*.

A *visa* is a document that the international student obtains from a US Embassy or Consulate abroad for the purpose of gaining entry into the US. Once the student has entered the country, expiration of the entry visa is permitted without risk of unauthorized stay. Once the student has cleared immigration at a port-of-entry, they are granted F-1 *status* in the form of an adjudicated document called an I-94 (their I-20, which will be discussed later, is also stamped). It is after “going through” immigration that the students gain their F-1 status which remains valid during the period of their studies.

With the concept of *visa v. status* understood, we can examine the definition of an F-1 student. Per the Immigration and Nationality Act (INA), an F-1 non-immigrant student is: *an alien having a residence in a foreign country which he has no intention of abandoning, who is a bona fide 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... (INA Sec.101(a)(15)(F))*. Therefore, we can describe an F-1 student is an individual from a foreign country, who is not a US Citizen or Permanent Resident (“Green Card”), and has met the minimum admissions requirements to CU. In addition, this individual understands that their visit to the US is of a temporary, academic (full-time degree-seeking), nature only and they will return home following the completion of their degree. The F-1 status is not to be used for employment purposes, internships, or non-degree programs. This status is also used by intensive English programs.

IV. How does an international student obtain F-1 status?

The process of obtaining F-1 status begins with the student. Students wishing to enter the US must first gain admission to a full-time, degree-seeking academic program that has been approved by the US Department of Homeland Security (DHS) to admit students in F-1 status.

The student’s academic credentials must be evaluated and the level/ability of English proficiency acceptable to meet the academic requirements of the program for which they have applied.

If the student has met the minimum requirements and is granted admissions by the University, their application information is forwarded to the Office of International Affairs (OIA) for review. OIA must verify that the necessary information is found to process a Form I-20. Part of the documentation required is evidence of financial support demonstrating the ability of the student to meet all estimated financial needs for at least

one academic year. In some cases, the student will submit a CU Form GS-50, *Financial Certification Form*, and financial document with their application. If they have not, OIA will contact the student as to what steps to take, in regards to demonstrating financial support, so the I-20 may be issued.

If other required information, such as places of birth/residence/citizenship, or questions about spelling of names or dates of birth, etc., is missing or requires clarification, OIA will contact the student via email if a valid email address is provided.

V. SEVIS

SEVIS (Student and Exchange Visitor Information System) is a computerized system in the US to track information of non-immigrant students and Exchange Visitors attending programs of study in the country. Designated School Officials (DSO) are required to report specific information such as arrival/departure, registration, school transfer, no-show, leave of absence, extension/termination of educational program, change of major, change of academic level, dependent/family information and work authorization among others.

Once the documentation has been reviewed and is found acceptable, OIA enters the student's information into the SEVIS system. It is this process that begins the notification of the related US Government departments (Homeland Security, State) that CU has admitted an international and is expecting that individual to enter the US under its immigration program.

After the information is submitted to SEVIS, a Form I-20 is issued and a SEVIS Identification Number (SEVIS ID) is issued. The SEVIS ID is unique to the student and their admission to CU. *(In many cases, international students have applied to multiple US universities and, if admitted, were issued a different SEVIS ID and I-20. While multiple admissions and SEVIS IDs are possible, the student will need to make a decision as to which institution they will attend prior to visiting a US Embassy or Consulate for their visa application.)*

The CU I-20 is sent to the student via US Air Mail. Included, but not limited to, with the I-20 is information on pre-departure steps, SEVIS Fee, immunization, housing, and what to do when once the student has arrived on campus. The documents can be sent via an express service should the student provide a service account number.

VI. Obtaining the visa

After the student has received the I-20 and reviewed the information on the document, they will need to set an appointment to meet with a Visa Officer at a US Embassy or Consulate. While all embassies fall under the jurisdiction of the US Department of State (DOS), each Visa Office may have its own operating procedures and can vary from mission to mission. Students should visit the website of the mission they wish to visit to

understand the procedure for that particular office. A list of all US Embassies/Consulates can be found by visiting <http://usembassy.state.gov>.

In addition to the visa application and supporting DOS materials, the international student will need to bring the following with them to their interview:

- a. Form I-20
- b. Form I-901 receipt for payment of SEVIS Fee
- c. Letter of admission to Clemson University
- d. Proof of funding for one academic year (documents must be originals, less than six months old at the time of application)

Please note, admission to CU and issuance of an I-20 does not guarantee issuance of an F-1 visa. A student may be denied a visa for a number of reasons such as:

- a. insufficient funding/questionable source of funds
- b. student does not show strong ties to home country
- c. student cannot provide documents to show complete of undergraduate degree (if admitted to graduate program in US)

All reasons for denial are presented in written format to the applicant. If a student is denied a visa on their initial application, they are not prevented from a subsequent application to meet the deficiencies of the previous application.

Students are encouraged to make their visa appointments as early as possible to prevent any delay in their entry into the US. There are times, however, when a delay is inevitable due to security checks based on the student's field of study or the need for a background check. Individuals from Cuba, Iran, Iraq, North Korea, Sudan, and Syria are subject to a security and background check, as well as males ages 16-45 from certain countries. In addition, some fields of study/research fall under the *Technology Alert List* and are considered of a sensitive nature or could be used in an ulterior, negative manner. In cases like these, CU cannot intercede on the student's behalf as such checks are permissible through regulation.

VII. After the visa is issued

After the visa has been issued, the student should make travel arrangements that will result in arriving in the US no earlier than 30 days prior to the start of the academic term, as listed on the I-20, for which they have been admitted. Attempting to enter the US prior to the 30 day period may result in refusal of entry and the return of the student to their country.

Once the student arrives at their port-of-entry, they will be interviewed by an immigration official as to their purpose for entering the US. At the same time, the student's information will be entered into the US-VISIT program. The US Visitor and Immigration Status Indicator Technology Program (US-VISIT) is an electronic entry-exit

tracking system managed by the US Department of Homeland Security. Under the system, biometric and documentary information on the non-immigrant is collected at the time of entry and, in some case, exit. *NAM2006*

After meeting with the immigration officer, the student's I-20 and passport will be stamped with the date and immigration status of entry. In addition, the student will receive a stamped I-94 card. This card demonstrates the student's non-immigrant status in the US and is the document that provides permission to remain in the US during their period of study.

VIII. Arrival on campus

When the student has arrived at CU, they will need to visit the Office of International Affairs to check-in. When they visit, they will need to bring their immigration documents (passport, visa, I-94 card, I-20) so we may make copies for our records. In addition, the student will complete a personal information sheet to update OIA records.

After the student's registration for the term has been verified, OIA will activate the student's record in the online SEVIS system. At this time, the student's residential address will be forwarded to SEVIS.

Students will also be encouraged to attend the international student orientation, presented by the Office of International Student Programs, as information on maintaining their non-immigrant status will be presented.

IX. Maintenance of status

In addition to the student meeting their academic goals and responsibilities, an international student must understand that they are responsible for the maintenance of their F-1 non-immigrant status.

To maintain their lawful F-1 non-immigrant status, the student must take the following steps:

a. Always be enrolled full-time. At CU, a minimum of 12 credit hours is necessary to be considered full-time. If the student is a graduate student with a 50% assistantship, registration for 9 credit hours will meet this requirement. During the summer, registration is not required to maintain status.

If a graduate student has met all of their credit hour requirements and is working on the completion of a thesis/dissertation/project, they may register for zero credit hours and maintain their non-immigrant status. *Please note, financial aid requirements may be different and require registration.*

b. Please do not work without authorization from OIA or the Department of Homeland Security. Employment must be limited to 20 hours per week during the academic year.

c. The I-20 must be kept current. If there are any changes to the academic program, such as level or field of study, the document must be updated to reflect the change prior to the semester the new program takes place.

d. The I-20 must remain valid. If the student's I-20 is set to expire before the completion of their academic program, the student will need to request an extension of the document *before it expires*.

e. Report any changes in residential address to OIA with ten days of the move. A PO Box or CU departmental address are not acceptable for this requirement. Individuals subject to *Special Registration* will need to submit a form to the US Department of Homeland Security. Certain non-immigrants will be subject to "special registration". While there is not set list of countries from where these individuals come, students from Iran, Iraq, North Korea, Sudan, and Syria are subject to "special registration". Others will have a notation on their I-94 card that informs them if they are subject. In addition to notifying OIA of their change in address, these individuals will need to complete a Form AR-11SR (<http://www.uscis.gov/files/form/ar-11sr.pdf>) and return it to the US Department of Homeland Security.

X. Departure

When an F-1 student has completed their program, transfers to another school, changes immigration status, or leaves CU for any other reason, the completion of a "Departure Verification Form" is required. This form will instruct the OIA staff to take the necessary steps to complete the student's immigration record and close our file. This form is available on our website, as well as is the office.

XI. Other F-1 areas

The following are actions that may be taken by a student in F-1 status, or an individual wishing to obtain F-1 status, while in the US:

a. Change of Status: the request of an individual not currently holding F-1 status who wishes to obtain the status in order to pursue full-time degree-seeking study in the US. This process may be done within the US with a processing time of up to six months, or via travel by departing the US, obtaining an F-1 visa and returning. Certain requirements apply, including admission to CU, and **not all individuals may be able to change their status**.

b. Extension of program: if an F-1 student requires additional time, beyond the dates found on their I-20, to complete their degree requirements, an extension of the I-20 may be requested. This request may be for a period of up to one year at a time and can only be processed within 60 days of the expiration of the current document. A letter of recommendation from the department and evidence of financial support for the period of extension are required.

c. Change of program/level of study: If an F-1 student wishes to change their field/level of study, and has received approval from their college, they must request a new Form I-20 to reflect the change. Evidence of approval and financial support for one academic year are required. The request must take place before the term the change is to go into affect.

d. Practical Training: An F-1 student who has been a full-time student for at least one academic year and has maintained their status *may* be eligible for Curricular – and/or Optional Practical Training. Eligibility for Curricular Practical Training is limited to the student’s program. This training is a form of off-campus employment authorization that allows the student the opportunity to work in a position directly related to their field of study. Workshops are presented throughout the year to introduce and explain the application procedures to the students.

e. Dependents: Individuals in F-1 status may request a Form I-20 to assist their dependents in the application of a visa to enter the US in F-2 status. A dependent can be a spouse or an unmarried child (up to 21 years old). Evidence of financial support for dependent expenses, as well as the ability to continue coverage of their own expenses, will be required. Individuals holding F-2 status may not be employed or join a degree-seeking program of study. Parents, siblings, and grandparents are not considered dependents of the F-1.

f. Social Security Numbers (SSN): International students are not eligible for an SSN unless they have on-campus employment. The SSN is to be used for tax reporting purposes only and should not be used as a source of identification.

g. Reinstatement: Should an F-1 international student fail to maintain their status, an application to the Department of Homeland Security to reinstate the student’s status is required. The process may take upwards of six months for review. The application must be received by the DHS within five months of the violation. Employment violations cannot be reinstated.

XII. What the department can do

While the responsibility of maintaining status is that of the student, there are steps the academic department can take:

a. Encourage international students to visit OIA whenever a question about status, or about an action that may affect status, arises. While it may turn out that the situation is a non-issue, it is better to err of the side of caution.

b. Should a student wish to drop a course due to academic issues, please have the student visit OIA before dropping the course. Falling below full-time registration, without the approval of OIA, could result in the loss of status.

c. If the department wishes to hire an international as a student/graduate employee, please follow the steps as set by OIA's International Employment and Taxation section.

d. What may apply to a "domestic" student, may not always be applicable to an international student. Please feel free to contact OIA with any questions.

XIII. Conclusion

While, due to the nature of federal regulations, we understand the information found in this handbook is not set in stone, it does offer a useful tool for the Clemson University faculty/staff as a basic primer for understanding the nature of the non-immigrant F-1 status and its application to our community. Of course, the best resource available should any questions or concerns arise is the staff at the Office of International Affairs. Our advising staff is there not only ease the transition of our international students and keep them abreast of the aspects of their lawful stay in the US, but also to be used by CU administrators to better the University's globalization efforts and growth in the world market.