



# If You Want to Study in the United States

If You Want to Study in the United States: Getting Ready to Go



GETTING READY TO GO: PRACTICAL INFORMATION  
FOR LIVING AND STUDYING IN THE UNITED STATES

# 4

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## Acknowledgments

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## *Preface*

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*Getting Ready to Go: Practical Information for Living and Studying in the United States* is one of a series of four introductory booklets produced by the U.S. Department of State to provide objective and practical advice to prospective international students and scholars on studying in the United States. The booklets may be downloaded from the Internet at [www.educationusa.state.gov](http://www.educationusa.state.gov), and print copies are available at EducationUSA advising centers worldwide. To find the center nearest you, contact a U.S. embassy or consulate, or consult the list available on the EducationUSA website.

The four booklets cover the following areas:

### *Undergraduate Study*

How to choose and apply to U.S. bachelor's and associate degree programs, plus information on technical and vocational educational opportunities in the United States.

### *Graduate and Professional Study and Research*

How to research and apply to U.S. master's, doctoral degree, and postdoctoral programs, plus information on certification and licensing procedures for professionals who wish to further their education or practice in the United States.

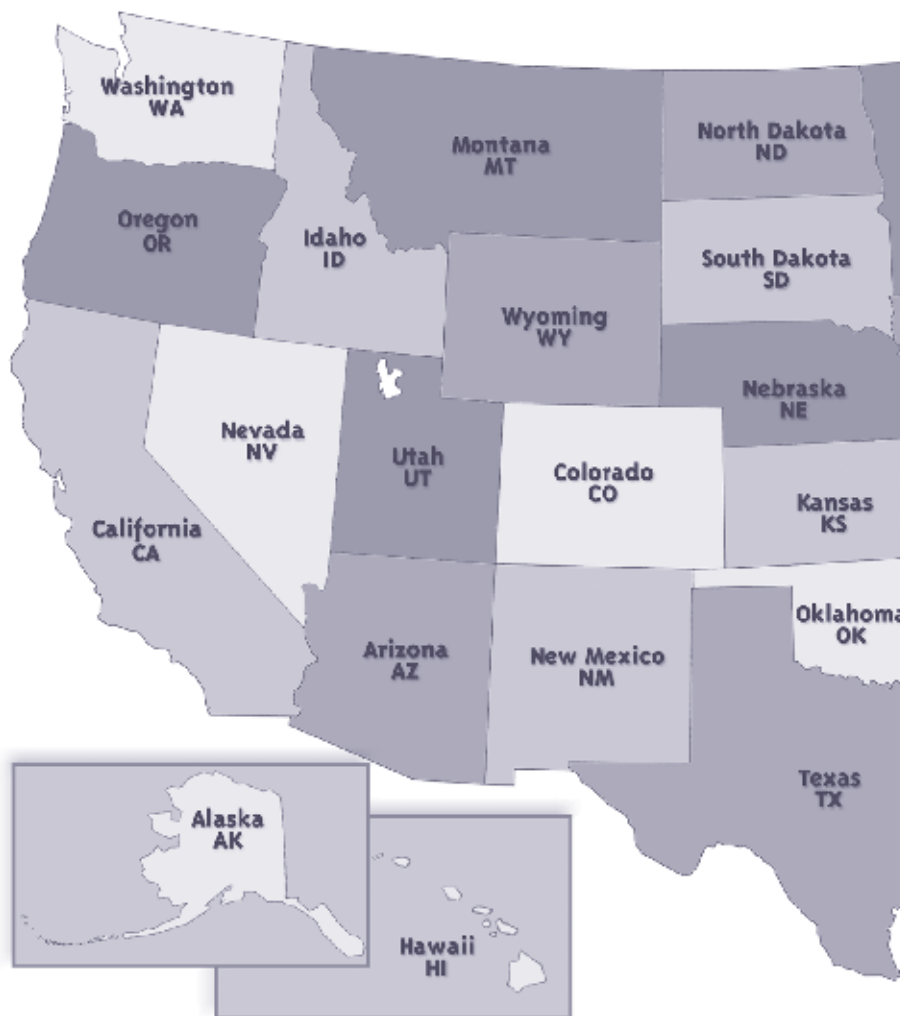
### *Short-Term Study, English Language Programs, Distance Education, and Accreditation*

Information on opportunities to study in the United States for up to one year, plus an overview of studying toward a degree, diploma, or certificate from outside the United States through distance education programs. The booklet also includes detailed information on accreditation of U.S. higher education institutions.

### *Getting Ready to Go: Practical Information for Living and Studying in the United States*

Help with planning your move to the United States after you have been accepted to a U.S. university or college. This booklet provides advice on applying for a visa, moving to the United States, and what to expect when you arrive on campus.

# The United States



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## *Introduction*

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Congratulations — you are about to leave to study in the United States! With all the changes you are about to experience, this is probably both an exciting and an uncertain time for you. *Getting Ready to Go: Practical Information for Living and Studying in the United States* provides important information to help make your experience in the United States the best it can be.

From resources to help you prepare before you leave, to guidance on what you will need during your trip to the United States, to advice on aspects of everyday life as a U.S. student or exchange participant, the information in this book will be useful to you throughout your experience. The more you prepare, the easier your transition will be, and the more you will profit from your time in the United States.

Good luck!



## Sources of Predeparture Help and Information

In planning your move to the United States, you may wish to seek assistance from a professional international student adviser. This kind of help is available from EducationUSA advising centers worldwide, as well as from international student advisers at colleges and universities throughout the United States.

### EducationUSA Advising Centers

*“It is difficult to overestimate the help and support I got from the advising center. The center was my first and primary source of information about the American educational system.”*

*“The books, magazines, and the Internet access at the center proved extremely useful, and the staff assisted me very much in achieving my goals.”*

— Business student from Russia

Choosing the best program for you will require commitment and careful planning, but nearly 450 EducationUSA advising centers worldwide are ready to help you with information and advice. These centers have directories, program guides, and admissions test information, as well as trained educational advisers who want to help you and your family with the process of choosing and applying to programs. Some centers run

events like college fairs or seminars. Introductory information in the form of video or group presentations, website access, and independent resource libraries is available free of charge, but payment may be required at some centers for additional services.

All EducationUSA advising centers are supported by the U.S. Department of State, with the goal of providing objective information on the range of study opportunities available in the United States; however, the names of the centers and the organizations that run them vary from country to country. To locate the center nearest you, contact your closest U.S. embassy or consulate, or consult the list available on the EducationUSA website <http://www.educationusa.state.gov>.

### **International Student Advisers**

On almost all U.S. university campuses, the international student adviser (ISA) is the main source of assistance, advice, and other personal support you might need while you are in the United States. You may also wish to contact the ISA before you depart if you have questions about preparing for your trip or what you might need when you arrive on campus. The ISA is usually based in an International Student

Office, or department with a similar name, and is the person responsible for your orientation on arrival and for helping with visa and tax issues. If there is no official international student adviser at your college or university, there will be some other person assigned to work with international students, at least on a part-time basis.

When you receive your acceptance letter, you should receive the name of the international student adviser or a person who acts in this capacity. If no name is listed, ask your admissions officer or check the school's website. Be sure to let your adviser know when you plan to arrive in the United States so that he or she can plan to meet you and make sure that the appropriate person reports your arrival to the Department of Homeland Security.

### **Useful Websites**

EducationUSA  
<http://www.educationusa.state.gov>

If You Want to Study in the United States On-line  
<http://www.educationusa.info/pages/students/research-references-study.php>

Directory of EducationUSA Advising Centers  
<http://www.educationusa.state.gov>  
(Click on "Find an Advising Center.")



## Predeparture Planning

### Documents to Bring

Plan to bring any important documents that relate to your legal, medical, and academic history with you to the United States. Carry all important documents with you while traveling to the United States and once you arrive; do not put them in your suitcase. Do not loan or give them to anyone unless that person can show some form of identification stating that he or she is authorized to receive them.

### Legal Documents

As a foreign national entering the United States, you must have

the following documents, which define your legal status. You will need them to enter and stay in the United States, and to reenter if you leave the country at any point during your exchange experience. It is important that you keep these documents valid at all times.

- valid passport issued by your country (must not expire for at least six months beyond your entry date);
- nonimmigrant visa stamped inside your passport by a consular officer of a U.S. embassy or consulate (see chapter 3 for detailed instructions on how to apply for a visa);

- Certificate of Eligibility (I-20 or DS-2019 form);
- Arrival-Departure Record (I-94 form): you will most likely receive your I-94 on the airplane. Fill it out and be prepared to give it to the immigration officer who assists you when you arrive at the airport (see chapter 3 for more information and a sample I-94 form).

It is also a good idea to bring an official copy of your birth certificate, as you may need it when applying for various forms of identification and other documents in the United States. If you are married and your spouse will accompany you, bring a copy of your marriage certificate or other proof of marriage. Be sure to obtain notarized translations of these certificates if they are not in English.

### Certificates of Immunization and Vaccination

Most U.S. colleges and universities have specific immunization requirements you must meet before you can enroll in class. These often include proof of immunity to measles, mumps, and rubella. Many schools also require either a recent (within six months to a year) PPD skin test or chest x-ray to screen for

tuberculosis infection. Check with your international student adviser if you have questions. While requirements vary from school to school, one useful way to record and keep track of your immunizations is to use the standard “International Certificate of Vaccination or Prophylaxis” issued by the World Health Organization (WHO). This yellow card should be available from your doctor or from the public health service in your country. For more information, visit the World Health Organization homepage on international travel and health at <http://www.who.int/ith/>.

### Prescriptions for Medication and Eyeglasses

When you enter the United States, you must declare any medications you are carrying to the customs officials at your port of entry. Certain drugs may not be brought into the country. If you have questions, check with the U.S. embassy or consulate before you leave home. If you take prescription medicine on a regular basis, bring a sufficient supply and a copy of the prescription, written in English. If you depend on eyeglasses, it is a good idea to bring an extra pair, if possible, and a copy of your eyeglass prescription, written in English.

### Medical and Dental Records

If possible, bring detailed and up-to-date medical and dental records for you and any dependents traveling with you. These records should reflect recent visits to health care professionals for general examinations, blood tests, dental and eye checkups, x-rays, and other procedures. This will help your U.S. doctors better understand past diagnoses and treatments, and help you avoid paying to repeat tests in the United States.

### Academic Documents

Bring official transcripts from secondary schools, colleges, or universities, as well as syllabi, catalogs, bulletins, course descriptions, or other relevant materials issued by the school you attended most recently. These records can help the Admissions Office and academic departments if questions arise concerning academic credit or placement in courses at your U.S. college or university.

### Contact Information

Be sure to carry the name, address, and telephone number of the individual at your U.S. university to contact in case of a travel delay or emergency. Also include the name, address, and telephone

number of a contact person at home and the name, address, and telephone number of your country's embassy or consulate in the United States and/or another entity, such as an educational mission or sponsoring agency.

### Financial Issues

#### Budgeting for Your Stay

When figuring out how much money you will need to finance your stay, look at the cost estimates that appear on the I-20 or DS-2019 form that accompanies your letter of admission. These estimates are usually accurate, and international students are expected to have funds to cover the full amount shown. You might also ask your international student adviser, an EducationUSA adviser, or your sponsor for advice on how much money you will require. Use the list below to guide you as you prepare your budget.

**Tuition and Fees:** Tuition, fees, and other educational costs vary greatly. To understand these costs and your financial obligations, check your I-20 or DS-2019 form and study the admissions material from your university or college. If you have questions, ask the Admissions Office, your sponsor, or your international student adviser.

**Living Costs:** University catalogs and websites are good sources of information on current living costs. Your EducationUSA advising center may also have information on the latest monthly living expenses by city or institution. Be sure to take into account the extra expenses of vacation periods. Most university dormitories and eating facilities close during breaks, which means you will need to pay for a place to stay and for your meals if your school does not keep a dormitory open for students who are unable to go home. Ask your international student adviser about what to expect so you can make appropriate arrangements.

**Travel Insurance and Health Insurance:** You will need travel insurance to cover the trip from your home to your U.S. campus. You will also need health insurance for the duration of your stay in the United States. Health insurance plans vary in cost. (See “Health Insurance” later in this chapter.)

**Baggage Insurance:** Baggage insurance protects you against loss, damage, or theft of your baggage. It is reasonably priced and available at travel agencies and airport kiosks. If a piece of your luggage is lost, immediately file a claim at the airline’s desk at the airport. It is a

good idea to write down the name of the person who helps you and the work address and telephone number where you can reach him or her later. The airline will try to locate the bag (which may simply have been routed to the wrong destination) and will send it to your U.S. address when it is found. The airline will pay to you replace the bag if it is not found after a certain length of time.

**Books and Supplies:** Students in the United States must buy their textbooks, which can be very expensive. Most institutions have on-campus bookstores where you can buy new books or purchase used books at a lesser cost. (You may also be able to sell your books back to the bookstore at the end of a semester at partial value.) The cost of textbooks and supplies varies depending on your field of study. Liberal arts students can expect to spend as much as \$800 a year for textbooks. If you are planning to study in a field that requires special supplies, such as engineering, art, or architecture, your expenses are likely to be higher. Books and textbooks for engineering students may cost an additional \$250 to \$350 per year, and books for medical, pharmacy, and law students are often even more expensive. You may also be required to buy or obtain access to a personal computer.

**Transportation:** The living costs quoted by most universities do not include trips between the United States and your home country. Be sure that your annual budget includes expenses for return travel between your home country and your school. If you plan to live off campus and commute to the university, you should add in your commuting expenses.

**Communications:** Budget carefully for communications such as telephone calls and postage.

**Personal Expenses:** Personal expenses include the cost of clothing, toiletries, and other basic goods and services. If you have dependents — a spouse and/or children — or if you have special medical needs, you will need substantial additional funds to meet your living expenses. Most institutions can provide an estimate of students' basic costs.

**Incidentals:** Consider your personal needs such as laundry, stationery, photos, dining out, and entertainment.

**Travel:** If you intend to travel, remember to include the cost of your trips.

**Taxes:** If you are receiving a scholarship or assistantship from your U.S. university, keep in mind that

the federal and state governments usually tax these awards. Income or awards from your home country may also be taxable.

### Arrangements with Your Bank

Before you travel to the United States, contact a major bank in your home city. Find out how you can have additional money sent to you while you are in the United States. It is usually safest to have money sent electronically from your home country bank to your U.S. bank once you have opened a U.S. account. (See chapter 7 for information on opening a U.S. bank account.) Ask what the fees are for transferring money and how long it might take for the money to reach you. Be sure to get any information you will need to transfer funds to the United States, such as your international bank account number and the bank's identifier code (BIC or SWIFT).

### Travel and Settling-in Costs

Before you leave, determine how much money you will need during the first few weeks of your stay in the United States. You will likely need funds to pay your first semester tuition fees, plus room and board if you plan to live in a dormitory. If you plan to live off campus, you will need money for apartment and (possibly) utility

deposits, living expenses while you look for housing, and for transportation. Your international student adviser can help you assess the costs of living off campus. You will also have expenses for books, school supplies, and fees.

You should have \$100 to \$200 in small cash denominations (\$20, \$10, \$5, \$1) to use for things like taxis, meals, and telephone calls during your journey. You can change U.S. paper money into smaller denominations and coins at almost any store, but small stores and vendors may have difficulty changing bills larger than \$20. Do not carry large amounts of cash, since it can be easily lost or stolen.

Since it may take several weeks to open a bank account and transfer funds from your home country bank, you will need to plan ahead. If you have a bankcard from your home country, find out if it is valid in the United States. If it is, you will not need to carry as much money with you when you travel. If you do not have a bankcard, or your card is not valid in the United States, you will need to carry money with you. If you must carry large sums of money, it is probably safest to purchase a prepaid debit card or use traveler's checks.

Prepaid debit cards are accepted instead of cash by most U.S. busi-

nesses. When you buy a prepaid debit card, you pay a specific amount of money, which is added to your account. You may then use the card to make payments until your card balance is zero; if you wish to continue to use the card, you must add more money to the balance or purchase a new card. If you cannot purchase a prepaid debit card in your home country or online, you can find them in most U.S. airports. (See chapter 7 for more information on prepaid debit cards.)

While less convenient than ATM or debit cards, traveler's checks are also a safe way to carry money while traveling, since they are insured against theft, loss, and damage. With proper identification, you can cash them easily in most U.S. stores. You can purchase traveler's checks from travel agents and in most banks. At the time of purchase you will be asked to sign your name on each traveler's check. Sign each check once, as directed. When you cash each check, sign it a second time to verify that you are the person to whom the check was issued. Sign your name as it appears on your passport, "in English."

### Monetary Restrictions

The U.S. government does not restrict the amount of U.S. cur-

rency a nonresident, noncitizen may take or send to the United States for educational expenses. It does require, however, that individuals report the transfer (into or out of the country) of cash or other financial instruments valued at \$10,000 or more. Ask the U.S. embassy or consulate in your country for more information about this requirement.

Many countries do have currency exchange restrictions. If your country has such restrictions, you may have to request permission to take currency out of the country. For more information, contact the government office that issues passports in your home country.

### Insurance

Below is a list of the insurance you should have while in the United States. Your international student adviser can help you find more information about each type.

- **Health insurance:** provides coverage for medical care in the United States. More detailed information about health insurance, including the types of insurance available, is below.
- **Travel insurance:** covers you during your journey from your home country to the United States.
- **Life insurance:** insures your life. If you should die, benefits are paid to the person you name as your beneficiary.
- **Personal property insurance:** insures items you bring to the United States against loss, theft, or damage. It is not advisable to bring expensive jewelry or other valuable personal belongings with you to the United States.
- **Automobile insurance:** covers your automobile and injuries to persons in the event of an accident. If you buy an automobile in the United States, most states require that you carry automobile and liability insurance. If you rent a car, you can pay a supplemental fee for insurance coverage, or your personal car insurance/credit card company may cover your use of the rental.

### Health Insurance

The United States does not have a government medical plan or health care service that covers the whole population. Instead, most people have private health insurance.

The U.S. Department of State requires students on J-1 exchange visitor visas to have insurance that covers health and accidents, medical evacuation, and repatriation of remains. The U.S. govern-

ment has no specific health insurance requirements for students on F-1 and M-1 nonimmigrant visas. However, most educational institutions require international students to prove they have a certain amount of health insurance (determined by the university) before they are allowed to enroll in classes.

Although you can purchase health insurance in your home country, many plans will not adequately cover your health care needs during your stay in the United States. Many U.S. health care providers are also reluctant to bill foreign insurance companies for health care charges. They prefer to receive payment directly from the patient and let the patient seek reimbursement from the foreign insurance company. Unless you are certain that the policy is equal to or better than the policies of U.S. health care insurance companies, and that your home-country health insurance policy can be billed in the United States, you should probably purchase health insurance after you arrive in the United States.

If your university or colleges does not offer its own health insurance plan, you will need to obtain coverage from an outside source. Ask your international student adviser for more information.

## Academic and Language Preparation

If you do not have solid academic skills, particularly those that relate to your field of study, you may take longer to adapt to the pace and demands of university work in the United States. Ask your current teachers and advisers to evaluate your academic strengths and weaknesses and for suggestions on how to improve the weaker skills before coming to the United States. Review your school's catalog for detailed information on the instructional facilities and teaching resources, as well as the course requirements and descriptions, so you know what to expect when you arrive on campus. Most schools post their catalogs online, and many EducationUSA advising centers have copies of college and university catalogs in their libraries.

If you have been admitted conditionally or as a "special student," you must fulfill certain requirements before you will be considered a degree candidate. Review the terms stated in your admission letter and talk to your EducationUSA adviser and international student adviser about what will be expected of you.

### Typing Skills and Computer Literacy

Learn to type on a computer with an English-language keyboard before you come to the United States. Many university courses require written assignments that must be typed. You may also have to prepare a typed thesis or dissertation, especially if you are a graduate student. In engineering, mathematics, or fields that use statistics, you will most likely have to use computers to work on complex problems. You may also need computer skills to use the school's library. Some colleges and universities require all students to purchase a personal computer, and many offer informal computer courses at the beginning of each semester.

### Language Skills

Most academic institutions in the United States require international students to take an English-language examination such as the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) or the International English Language Testing System (IELTS). Some schools require a second institutional English proficiency exam before students are allowed to register for classes.

Students who speak English well do not always write English well.

Even native English speakers often need assistance with reading and writing for academic purposes. If you can read and write English easily and have a good vocabulary, it will be easier to study and to finish assignments on time.

Lectures are the most common method of instruction in U.S. colleges and universities. Professors will not reduce their normal lecture speed to accommodate you. You must be able to understand English well, and you must be able to take notes easily on the facts, ideas, and references presented in lectures.

To increase your proficiency and achieve greater success in your studies, take advantage of every opportunity to improve your language skills before coming to the United States. Speak English as often as possible, read English-language publications, and consider joining a class or study group to practice. You might also get acquainted with U.S. pronunciation and slang by watching television and movies or listening to music and radio programs from the United States.

### Predeparture Checklist

The following checklist should serve as a guide as you prepare to leave for the United States:

- Once letters of acceptance or rejection arrive, decide which university to attend, notify the Admissions Office of your decision, and complete and return any required forms. Notify those institutions you will not attend and return any official forms you will not use.
- If you are being sponsored, notify the sponsoring organization of your plans and ask about the arrangements for your trip. Contact the nearest EducationUSA advising center for predeparture information and a schedule of orientation programs.
- Request information about health insurance and enroll in a suitable plan.
- Obtain certified copies of your secondary and postsecondary transcripts, along with detailed descriptions of your courses and the books used.
- Obtain copies of important medical records, x-rays, and prescriptions. Have prescriptions written in English in generic terms.
- Check to see that your passport is valid.
- Apply to your nearest U.S. embassy or consulate for a visa after you receive your I-20 or DS-2019 form and well in advance of your departure date. (See chapter 3 for detailed information on applying for a visa.)
- Contact the International Student Office with details of your arrival plans and to confirm the details of new and/or international student orientations.
- Find out how to get to your school from your point of entry to the United States and make travel arrangements. Try to arrive on campus a few days to one week before orientation and registration begin.
- Finalize your housing arrangements. Inquire about temporary housing or other arrangements you will need if you arrive early or on a weekend.
- Organize finances: arrange to transfer funds to a U.S. bank and make sure you have funds for travel and expenses on arrival; consider buying traveler's checks to cover costs during your first month in the United States; consider obtaining a credit card, if possible.

### Review

- Make sure you have all the documents (legal, medical, and

academic) you will need to take with you.

- Assess your long-term financial requirements, as well as your immediate needs when you arrive in the United States and have not yet opened a U.S. bank account.
- Investigate health insurance policies for your time in the United States. Be aware of any requirements your university or college has for minimum coverage and find a policy that meets your needs.
- Prepare yourself for the academic and language requirements that await you. Consider improving your English, learning to type on a computer that uses English-language characters, and strengthening your study skills to make the most of your experience in the United States.

### Useful Websites

EducationUSA

<http://www.educationusa.state.gov>

U.S. Network for Education Information — Information for International Students and Professionals

<http://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ous/international/usnei/us/edlite-students.html>

Websites of U.S. Embassies, Consulates, and Diplomatic Missions

<http://www.usembassy.gov>

### Tax Information for International Students

Internal Revenue Service —

<http://www.irs.gov> (Click on “Individuals,” then “Students,” then “Foreign Students.”)

EduPASS Guide to Studying in the USA — <http://www.edupass.org/finaid/taxes.phtml>

World Health Organization International Travel and Health Page

<http://www.who.int/ith/>

U.S. Visa Information

<http://travel.state.gov/visa>



## **The Student Visa — A General Overview**

*“Because interviews are short, do your best to explain why you want to study in the United States, how you plan to support yourself while in school, and what your plans are for when your studies are finished.”*

— Vice Consul,  
U.S. Consulate Monterrey, Mexico

### **What is a Visa?**

Many people misunderstand the meaning of a visa and what it authorizes. A visa, which is issued by the U.S. Department of State in a U.S. embassy or consulate

abroad, does not guarantee entry into the United States. A visa allows a foreign citizen to travel to a U.S. port-of-entry and request permission from a U.S. immigration officer to enter the United States. For more information about the definition of a visa, as well as policies and procedures regarding visas, please visit the Department of State’s visa web page at [http://www.travel.state.gov/visa/visa\\_1750.html](http://www.travel.state.gov/visa/visa_1750.html).

### **Visa Types**

Most non-U.S. citizens who wish to study in the United States will

seek an F-1 (non-immigrant) student visa, but there are other visa types that are sometimes authorized for those who study in the United States. If you have questions about which visa is right for you consult the international student office at the school you plan to attend.

### F-1, or Student Visa

This visa is the most common for those who wish to engage in academic studies in the United States. It is for people who want to study at an accredited U.S. college or university or to study English at a university or intensive English language institute. Learn more at [http://travel.state.gov/visa/temp/types/types\\_I268.html](http://travel.state.gov/visa/temp/types/types_I268.html). If your spouse or children under the age of 21 are traveling with you to the U.S. (or joining you at a later date), they would be eligible for an F-2 visa.

### J-1, or Exchange Visitor

The “J” visa is for people who will be participating in an exchange visitor program, including those programs providing high school and university study. Learn more at [http://travel.state.gov/visa/temp/types/types\\_I267.html](http://travel.state.gov/visa/temp/types/types_I267.html). If your spouse or children under the age of 21 are traveling with you, they would be eligible for a J-2 visa.

\* Note: Some J-1 Exchange visitors (and their spouses and dependents) are ineligible to apply for H, L, or immigrant visa status until they have returned to and been physically present in their country of permanent residence for two years following their J-visa exchange program. If you apply for a J-1 visa and will receive funds from your home country government or the U.S. government you will be subject to the “Two-Year Home-Country Physical Presence (Foreign Residence) Requirement.” The consular officer issuing your visa will determine whether you are subject to this requirement and note it with the words, “subject to 212(e),” at the bottom of your visa. (This refers to the section of the Immigration and Nationality Act [INA] that includes the requirement.) The Foreign Residence requirement does not preclude you from applying for other types of visas, such as the B (tourist) or F (student) visa, or another J exchange visa.

For more information, see the Department of State website at [http://travel.state.gov/visa/temp/types/types\\_I267.html#I2](http://travel.state.gov/visa/temp/types/types_I267.html#I2).

### M-1, or Student Visa

This visa is for those who will be engaged in non-academic or vo-

cational study or training at an institution in the United States. Learn more at [http://travel.state.gov/visa/temp/types/types\\_1268.html](http://travel.state.gov/visa/temp/types/types_1268.html). If your spouse or children under the age of 21 are traveling with you, they would be eligible for an M-2 visa.

### **Student and Exchange Visitor Program (SEVP)**

The Student and Exchange Visitor Program (SEVP), located within Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), is the Department of Homeland Security program that manages the Student and Exchange Visitor Information System (SEVIS). SEVIS is an Internet-based system that maintains data on foreign students and exchange visitors before and during their stay in the United States. For more information about the SEVIS program, visit the ICE website at: <http://www.ice.gov/sevis/index.htm>.

U.S. colleges and universities must be approved by SEVP before they can issue I-20s to international students. Most U.S. institutions of higher education have received this approval. If you wish to confirm that the institution which you are interested in attending has been approved to admit international students,

you can view the list of approved schools at: [http://www.ice.gov/sevis/schools/existing\\_schools/index.htm#map](http://www.ice.gov/sevis/schools/existing_schools/index.htm#map).

Programs that focus on exchange visitors must be approved by the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs at the Department of State before they can issue DS-2019s to exchange visitors. The Designated Sponsors List is available at <http://eca.state.gov/jexchanges/index.cfm>.

### **Applying for a Student or Exchange Visitor Visa**

To apply for a visa at a U.S. embassy or consulate, you must first have been accepted by a SEVP certified school or a Department of State approved J-1 Exchange Visitor program and have received a SEVIS-generated document (either an I-20 or DS-2019) issued by a program authorized to enroll international students or participants. You will be required to submit this form when you apply for a visa.

The U.S. academic institution or program sponsor will provide you with the appropriate SEVIS-generated form only when you have been academically admitted to the institution or accepted as a participant in an exchange program and have provided evidence

that you can meet all the costs of the program. The institution or program sponsor will send you additional information about applying for your visa, including information about the SEVIS fee.

Once you have all the required documentation, you may apply for a visa, even if you do not intend to begin your program of study for several months. It is best to apply early to allow sufficient time for processing.

### The Visa Application Process

Most of the procedures and requirements for applying for student visas and for the exchange visitor visa are standardized. For a detailed discussion of the visa application procedures visit [http://travel.state.gov/visa/temp/types/types\\_I268.html](http://travel.state.gov/visa/temp/types/types_I268.html).

For information specific to your country, please visit the website of the U.S. embassy or consulate. (To find the nearest embassy or consulate visit <http://www.usembassy.gov>.) If you have specific questions about visas that are not answered by the embassy website, please contact the EducationUSA advising center nearest you for individual guidance.

### Planning Ahead for the Visa Process, Not Just Your Academic Admission

One of the most important things you can do to ensure that you will be able to arrive in time for the start of your educational program in the United States is to plan well in advance, not only for the academic portion of your U.S. program, but also for the visa process. This means you will need to request and receive the appropriate visa-qualifying document (either an I-20 or DS-2019) from the U.S. institution or program sponsor well in advance of your planned departure to the United States, and pay the appropriate I-901 SEVIS fee. You will also need to make an appointment for your visa interview.

### Applying for a Visa – Key Points to Keep in Mind

- You must pay the SEVIS fee (information about the fee is available at <http://www.ice.gov/sevis/i901/index.htm>) at least three days prior to submitting your visa application.
- Pay the non-refundable visa application processing fee (the procedure will differ from one U.S. embassy/consulate to another, so visit the website of the

U.S. embassy in the country where you are located).

- Make an appointment for the visa interview.
- Complete the Nonimmigrant Visa Application (form DS-156) correctly, following the instructions carefully. Some applicants for an F, J or M visa may also have to complete the DS-157 and the DS-158. Use the information from your passport to complete these forms. Make sure that your passport is valid for at least six months and that your name is spelled the same on all documents. Any inconsistencies can delay the issuance of the visa.
- Gather and review your documents. Make sure you have all the documentation you will need when you go for the interview, including the visa-qualifying document (I-20 or DS-2019), financial support documents, proof of payment of the SEVIS and visa fees, and a completed visa application form.

### Where to Apply for Your Visa

Most students will apply for a visa at the U.S. embassy or consulate with jurisdiction over their place of permanent residence. Although in many places U.S. em-

bassies and consulates may accept visa applicants from other countries, it is usually easier to complete the process in your country of permanent residence. If you are not living in your country of permanent residence, check the website of the U.S. embassy in your current place of residence for details of the visa application process.

### When to Apply for Your Visa

Apply for your student visa well in advance of the date you would like to depart for the United States. Holiday seasons (such as Christmas/New Year's Day) and the summer months (June through August) can be very busy times at U.S. consulates and embassies.

U.S. embassies and consulates work hard to process student and exchange visitor applications promptly, but it is wise to apply for your U.S. visa as early as possible. Enhanced security screening can sometimes make the process lengthier for some students, so apply for a visa as soon as you have your documents. This also leaves time to reapply if necessary. For visa application procedures and requirements and approximate processing times, consult the website of the embassy or consulate at which you plan

to apply. Approximate wait times are also available on the State Department website at [http://travel.state.gov/visa/temp/wait/wait\\_4638.html](http://travel.state.gov/visa/temp/wait/wait_4638.html).

### Important Points to Remember When Applying for a Student Visa

To increase your chances of a favorable visa decision: start the process at least two months in advance of your departure date; have the required documentation organized and ready to present during your interview, and make sure you are well prepared. When you receive your Certificate of Eligibility (I-20 or DS-2019), make sure your name is spelled correctly and exactly as it appears on your passport, that the personal, financial, and program information are correct, and that a college official has signed the document.

In order to issue your visa, the consular officer must be satisfied that you have been accepted by a SEVIS-approved institution or program in which you plan to enroll and remain, that you have sufficient funds to cover your studies or exchange program, that you speak English well enough to complete the program (unless you intend to participate exclusively in an English-language train-

ing program), and that you plan to return to your home country when you finish.

The consular officer may look at your educational background and plans and ask why you chose a particular program. To demonstrate your academic commitment, you may wish to bring school transcripts, national examination results, and/or SAT/ACT and English-language test scores. The officer may also ask how you plan to finance your studies or exchange experience. Your form I-20 or DS-2019 will list how you have shown the university or program you will cover your expenses, but you should also be able to provide solid evidence of your family and/or sponsor's finances, especially sources and amounts of income. If you have a spouse or dependents, you will need to demonstrate how you will support them during your stay (even if they will not accompany you to the United States). Finally, since consular officers are required to consider all applicants for student or exchange program visas as intending immigrants until they can convince the consular officer that they are not, be prepared to show that your reasons for returning home are stronger than those for remaining in the United States.

## Visa Refusals

If your application is refused, the consular officer is required to give you a written explanation. You have the right to apply a second time, but if you do reapply, make sure to prepare carefully; the consular officer will need to see fresh evidence sufficient to overcome the reasons for the first denial. You may wish to contact the nearest EducationUSA advising center or the Admissions Office or International Student Office of the U.S. college or university you plan to attend for advice on your second visa interview.

## Some Visa Don'ts

- Do not plan to enter the United States on a tourist or visitor's visa (B visa) and then change your visa status to student (F-1). If you do, you may not begin study until the Department of Homeland Security approves the change, which can take 90 days or more and preclude you from beginning classes on time.
- Students and exchange visitors need a visa even if their home countries participate in the Visa Waiver Program (VWP). To travel without a visa on VWP your travel must be to visit, not to study, and you must meet certain other

requirements. If you attempt to enter the United States under the Visa Waiver Program even though you intend to study or participate in an exchange, you will be required to depart the United States and apply for a visa. Persons coming to the United States on the Visa Waiver Program are not allowed to change to another status, including student status.

- If you have been admitted to more than one U.S. college or university, you must present the Certificate of Eligibility (Form I-20 or DS-2019) from the institution you plan to attend when you apply for a student visa. You must then present that same Certificate of Eligibility when you reach a U.S. port of entry. Entering the United States on one school's certificate but enrolling someplace else is a violation of immigration regulations and may be considered visa fraud.

## Additional Information about Visas and Entering the United States

There are two additional bits of information that are useful to know. First, your U.S. embassy or consulate cannot issue a visa more than 120 days before the actual start of the program in the

United States. Thus, if the college or university to which you have been admitted states on the I-20 or DS-2019 that the program will start on September 1, a visa cannot be issued before May 1. (Keep in mind, however, that you may submit your application more than 120 days in advance of the I-20 start date in order to accommodate processing time.)

Second, even if you have been issued a visa to enter the United States, you will not be allowed to enter the country more than 30 days before the start of your program if you are an initial entry student. Using the earlier example, if the program of study starts on September 1, you will not be permitted to enter the United States until August 1 or later. Note that this applies only to students on their initial entry. Students who obtain a visa to continue studies in the United States are not subject to this provision and may reenter at any time.

### Review

- Schedule your visa interview appointment early, as soon as you are prepared and well in advance of your planned travel date.
- Complete the visa application correctly, following the instructions carefully.
- Be sure to submit all required documents when applying:
  - SEVIS-generated document (either an I-20 or DS-2019) issued by a U.S. college or university or Department of State-designated sponsor organization
  - Completed Nonimmigrant Visa Application, Form DS-156
  - Completed Supplemental Nonimmigrant Visa Application, Form DS-157 (if applicable)
  - Completed DS-158: Contact Information and Work History for Nonimmigrant Visa Applicant (if applicable)
  - Any additional items listed in the embassy or consulate's instructions, such as proof of payment of both the SEVIS and visa application fees.
- Be prepared to answer questions regarding your ties to your home country, your English language skills, your academic background, the program in the United States to which you have been admitted, your financial ability, and your dependents.

## Useful Websites

List of U.S. Embassies and Consulates  
Worldwide

<http://www.usembassy.gov>

Student and Exchange Visitors Website  
[http://travel.state.gov/visa/temp/types/  
types\\_1270.html](http://travel.state.gov/visa/temp/types/types_1270.html)

Visa Wait Times for Interview  
Appointments

[http://travel.state.gov/visa/temp/wait/  
wait\\_4638.html](http://travel.state.gov/visa/temp/wait/wait_4638.html)

Nonimmigrant Visa Application Forms  
[http://www.travel.state.gov/visa/frvi/  
forms/forms\\_1342.html](http://www.travel.state.gov/visa/frvi/forms/forms_1342.html)

Department of Homeland Security  
(DHS)

SEVIS Fee Processing – [www.fmjfee.com](http://www.fmjfee.com)



## **Traveling to and Arriving in the United States**

*“Find out about airline and immigration policies and procedures so you do not panic if something strange happens. Luggage, passports, what you can and what you cannot bring. It’s always better to know everything beforehand.”*

— Computer Science student from Brazil

### **Planning Your Journey**

More than likely you will arrive in the United States by plane. If

you do not receive travel information from your U.S. college or university, contact your international student adviser to find out the best way to reach your final destination. He or she can tell you which airlines serve the nearest airports and if you will have to transfer planes or take alternate forms of transportation to reach the school. Many U.S. colleges and universities are located away from urban centers or in small cities, so local directions will be

very helpful in planning your itinerary. It is also important to find out the best days and times to arrive. Notify your international student adviser of your arrival date and time, since some may make arrangements to meet you at the airport.

### When to Travel

Before you make travel arrangements to the United States, find out when you are expected to arrive on campus. If you do not receive this information from your school, ask your international student adviser. Following are a few suggestions for planning your travel:

- Arrive on campus in time to participate in the orientation program for international students.
- If you plan to arrive before your campus accommodations are available, you will need a place to stay.
- Arrive on campus during business hours, Monday-Friday, and not in the evening or on

Saturday or Sunday, unless your school advises you differently.<sup>1</sup>

- If you are booking a return ticket make sure you have consulted the academic calendar for your school so you know when the terms end.
- U.S. immigration regulations allow you to enter the United States no more than 30 days prior to the start date on your F-1 or J-1 immigration document, the I-20 or DS-2019.
- It is not advisable to make your plane reservations until you have been issued your U.S. visa.

### Making Travel Arrangements

If you want to make your own reservations, you can deal directly with an international airline by phone, mail, or Internet. Most airline agents can also advise you on other travel matters, such as baggage allowances, airport and customs procedures, and vaccination and health requirements. There are many travel websites that allow you to compare prices,

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In making your travel arrangements, you should be aware of peak tourist seasons or holidays, when airfares are more expensive and tickets are harder to get. These include Easter (either in March or April); the summer months of June through August; and the Thanksgiving, Christmas, and New Year's Day holidays in November, December, and January. For more information about U.S. holidays visit <http://usinfo.org/enus/life/symbceleb/holidays.html>.

create your own itinerary, and buy your tickets online. Making reservations this way can be riskier since you do not have the expertise of a travel agent at your service, but it can also save you time and money if you know exactly what you are looking for. Remember there will be an additional charge if you have to change your reservation.

### **Travel Agencies**

Using a travel agency is probably the most efficient and convenient way to make your travel arrangements. Travel agents can advise you on airlines, fares, and routes, compare prices, and confirm or change reservations. If you have dietary restrictions, the travel agent can also order you a special in-flight meal. Because they have access to current specials or sales, travel agents may save you money. They also are aware of which airlines offer reduced student rates or special student packages, including round-trip international fares and domestic U.S. fares.

### **Travel Clubs and Charter Organizations**

Certain organizations in your country may specialize in charter flights and other low-cost travel to the United States. Sometimes these organizations advertise in

local publications and student newspapers, but students usually learn about them from other people who have dealt with them. Some travel clubs require that you join their club and pay a membership fee before you are eligible to take advantage of charter flights. Check the organization's reputation before you pay a fee or make reservations. When you call for information, ask whether fares, departure dates, and connections are reliable. Sometimes, if the carrier does not sell enough seats, charter flights are cancelled or re-scheduled.

### **Travel Arrangements Made by Sponsoring Organizations**

If you are being sponsored by your home country government, a government official may make travel arrangements for you. If so, you will be informed by your sponsor. If you have a sponsor other than your home country government, write to that sponsor to share the travel information from your college or university and ask for advice. Ask the organization to make arrangements for you to arrive at the city nearest your university, not just your first point of entry. If your sponsor cannot arrange travel plans beyond your first point of entry, be sure to make onward arrangements before you leave home.

\*Note: Students sponsored by the U.S. government may be required to travel on U.S. airlines whenever possible.

## **Packing Your Bags**

Before you start packing, there are many things to consider. How much can you bring? What is safe to bring? Will you bring it with you to the United States or send it separately? Remember you will probably have to carry everything yourself once you arrive, and once you're on campus you will have a better sense of what you need.

## **Airline Baggage Allowance**

There is a limit to the amount of baggage you can take with you on a plane. The number of pieces of baggage and the size and weight of those pieces determine this limit. Confirm your airline's baggage allowance when you purchase your ticket, but be aware that regulations are subject to change. Most economy class passengers traveling on international flights to the United States are allowed two pieces of baggage, plus one small piece of hand or "carry-on" baggage that can be carried onto the plane and must be able to fit under the seat. Flights within the United States usually allow one piece of baggage plus a carry-on bag. Each piece must

meet the weight and size restrictions established by the airline. If your luggage exceeds these limitations, you will be asked to pay excess baggage charges.

## **What to Bring**

What you bring with you is largely a matter of personal choice. You will have to carry whatever you bring, so try to keep your baggage light and compact. If you need advice, write to the international student adviser or talk to another student who has recently been to the United States.

Start to pack early to make sure you have everything you need and can remove unnecessary items if you begin to exceed weight and size restrictions. Do not worry if you cannot bring everything, since most goods are available in a wide range of prices in the United States.

## **Do bring:**

- a good bilingual dictionary, since it might not be possible to obtain one for your language in the United States;
- all of your essential identification papers and documents. Carry these with you in your hand luggage. Do not put them in your checked baggage. (See chapter 2,

“Documents to Bring,” for a list of important documents);

- pictures of your family, home, and country;
- items from your culture, such as musical instruments, recordings of traditional and contemporary music, picture books, arts and crafts, and small gifts, to share your talents and customs with people in the United States. You might also consider bringing traditional dress and accessories from your country;
- books, manuals, or journals you think may be useful for reference in your field of study and that definitely will not be available in the United States (you may want to consider having these sent to you after you arrive);
- a camera to record your experience in the United States (If you do not own a camera, you can easily purchase one in the United States.); and
- at least \$100 to \$200 in small cash denominations, in case you need U.S. money before you reach a currency exchange center.

### Do NOT Bring

U.S. customs regulations prohibit travelers from bringing narcot-

ics, weapons, some foodstuffs, and items for resale into the United States. More information on these restrictions is available wherever you acquire your visa and on the U.S. Customs and Border Protection website at <http://www.cbp.gov/xp/cgov/travel/clearing/restricted/>. Following is a sample list of items to leave at home, but be sure to check airline and customs regulations as well.

- goods you can easily buy in the United States, such as notebooks, pens, paper, toiletries, towels, or bed sheets. These items will take up valuable space in your luggage;
- food, seeds, or plants. The United States has very strict restrictions on importing foods, perishables, and agricultural goods into the country;
- books that can easily be obtained in U.S. libraries. Some universities have their library catalog on the Internet so you can check ahead of time. You can also contact university library staff to verify the availability of books or order them from another library via inter-library loan;

- animals;

- medications, unless you have written prescriptions from a doctor (See chapter 2, “Prescriptions for Medication and Eyeglasses”);
- expensive jewelry, treasured possessions, family heirlooms, or delicate things, since they could be stolen or damaged;
- firearms, knives, weapons, or articles that could be perceived as weapons;
- narcotics or drugs;
- duty-free alcohol if you are under 21;
- any article of clothing, artifact, or medicine made from endangered animals; or
- electrical appliances (Appliances in the United States work on a different system than in many other countries. It is usually best to purchase electrical items in the United States, especially if you plan to live in university housing, as some items will not be allowed. Remember that video systems, including televisions, VCRs, and DVD players, use different systems in different parts of the world, and those you bring from home are unlikely to be compatible with U.S. media).

## **Protecting Your Baggage**

Clearly label every piece of luggage with your name, U.S. address, and a telephone number (perhaps the International Student Office of the university or college you will attend). Disposable identification tags are available from the airline, but we recommend you use sturdier luggage tags or labels. You may also want to put a label or luggage tag inside your luggage for additional security. Consider purchasing baggage insurance to protect against loss, damage, or theft of your baggage (See chapter 2, “Baggage Insurance”). Pack a few days’ worth of clothing and personal items in your carry-on baggage in case your checked luggage is lost or sent to the wrong destination.

\* Note: Never leave your baggage unattended. You must always be alert to the possibility of theft.

## **Shipping Additional Items**

While you may sometimes pay to take excess baggage on the plane with you, it is very expensive, so many students choose to ship additional items by mail or private carrier (land, air, or sea) or to wait until they have arrived and have family members ship what

they need. Regardless of how you ship your belongings, clearly mark all baggage or packages with your name and your U.S. address. Write directly on the box or on an address label, then place wide, transparent tape over the writing. If you ship packages before you leave or know that someone will be shipping them soon, be sure to declare them at customs when you enter the United States. When you pick up the parcels in the United States, you might have to pay a “duty” (import tax). Ask about this when you make arrangements with your post office or shipping company.

## Arriving in the United States

### Correct Time in the United States

The United States follows a 12-hour system of time. The 12 hours from midnight to noon are called “a.m.” (ante meridian). The 12 hours from noon to midnight are called “p.m.” (post meridian). For example: 1400 is two o’clock, 2:00 p.m., or 2 o’clock in the afternoon; 2200 is 10 o’clock, 10:00 p.m., or 10 o’clock at night; and 1000 is 10 o’clock, 10:00 a.m., or 10 o’clock in the morning. Set your watch to the correct U.S. time before you leave the plane. Keep in mind that the United States uses nine standard time

zones, so if you have a connecting flight you may need to change your watch again.

### U.S. Immigration

On your flight to the United States, you will be asked to complete immigration and customs forms, including the Form I-94 (Arrival-Departure Record). Use the information from your I-20 or DS-2019 to fill out the I-94. (Please note that the Form I-94 is the only government document that uses the European method of recording dates: dd/mm/yyyy.)

When you leave the plane and go through immigration, you will present the completed form with your passport and I-20 or DS-2019. The inspector will stamp your I-94 and usually staple it to your passport, which will be returned to you along with your I-20 or DS-2019 form. You should keep this card securely in your passport during your stay. It will indicate the visa classification you are given upon entry and the length of time you are allowed to stay. The expiration date for persons in F or J status will be noted as “D/S” meaning duration of status. The I-94 of M-1 students will bear the date you are expected to complete your program plus 30 days (a maximum of one year.) Before you clear immigra-

tion, check to make sure your I-94 notes your correct status: F-1, M-1 or J-1 and the correct expiration date (“D/S” for F-1 and J-1 students).

Some students may be directed to a private work station to provide additional information, have their photograph and electronic fingerprints taken to verify their identity, and complete a short interview. They may also need to schedule a follow-up appointment to confirm their plans. If you are required to undergo this secondary screening, the customs officer will use SEVIS to verify your status; he or she may also call your college or university to confirm your information.

The Form I-94 is a critical document, since it shows that you have been legally admitted to the United States and how long you are authorized to stay. It is very important that the information on the form is correct, since it is input into a U.S. government computer system that shows arrival and departure information. Make sure the information on your Form I-94 is the same you provided for SEVIS, since any differences can confuse the computer system and make it difficult to verify your status. Complete instructions for filling out the Form I-94 are available on the

Customs and Border Protection website at [http://www.cbp.gov/xp/cgov/travel/id\\_visa/i-94\\_instructions/filling\\_out\\_i94.xml](http://www.cbp.gov/xp/cgov/travel/id_visa/i-94_instructions/filling_out_i94.xml).

Following is a sample Form I-94 with instructions. You may wish to fill in the sample prior to traveling and use it to complete the actual form before you arrive in the United States.

\* Note: Citizens of Canada do not need a visa to enter the U.S. to study, but like other international students and exchange visitors must present a SEVIS-generated document (either an I-20 or DS-2019) issued by a U.S. college or university or Department of State-designated sponsor organization, as well as proof of payment of the SEVIS fee and evidence of the ability to meet the costs of their academic program. If you are a Canadian citizen, please visit the DHS, Customs and Border Protection (CBP) website to make sure you have everything you need to enter the United States.

Once you have entered the United States, you should direct all questions about your immigration status and visa to your designated school official or international student adviser. The international student services office at your educational institu-

tion is an important resource for you if you have questions about your stay in the United. Prior to arriving in the U.S. consult the website of the international student office or e-mail the of-

fice staff if you have a question that is not answered on the web or in the arrival information you received with your I-20 or DS-2019. Then visit the office in person soon after you arrive.

**DEPARTMENT OF HOMELAND SECURITY**  
U.S. Customs and Border Protection OMB No. 1651-0111

Admission Number *Welcome to the United States*

0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0

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**I-94 Arrival/Departure Record - Instructions**

This form must be completed by all persons except U.S. Citizens, returning resident aliens, aliens with immigrant visas, and Canadian Citizens visiting or in transit.

Type or print legibly with pen in ALL CAPITAL LETTERS. Use English. Do not write on the back of this form.

This form is in two parts. Please complete both the Arrival Record (Items 1 through 13) and the Departure Record (Items 14 through 17).

When all items are completed, present this form to the CBP Officer.

Item 7 - If you are entering the United States by land, enter **LAND** in this space. If you are entering the United States by ship, enter **SEA** in this space.

CBP Form I-94 (10/04)

Admission Number OMB No. 1651-0111

0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0

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**Arrival Record**

1. Family Name		_____	
2. First (Given) Name	_____	3. Birth Date (Day/Mo/Yr)	_____
4. Country of Citizenship	_____	5. Sex (Male or Female)	_____
6. Passport Number	_____	7. Airfare and Flight Number	_____
8. Country Where You Live	_____	9. City Where You Resided	_____
10. City Where Visa was Issued	_____	11. Date Issued (Day/Mo/Yr)	_____
12. Address While in the United States (Number and Street)			
_____			
13. City and State			
_____			

CBP Form I-94 (10/04)

Departure Number OMB No. 1651-0111

0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0

\_\_\_\_\_

**I-94  
Departure Record**

14. Family Name		_____	
15. First (Given) Name	_____	16. Birth Date (Day/Mo/Yr)	_____
17. Country of Citizenship			
_____			

CBP Form I-94 (10/04)

See Other Side

**STAPLE HERE**

Use all CAPITAL letters. Use English. Use standard United States characters and print clearly. Letters like ñ, é, ü, ç are not recognized by U.S. data systems. (Instead, use n, e, u or c.)

**Name (Blocks 1, 2, 14, and 15)** — The Family name (Blocks 1 and 14) is also referred to as surname or last name.

If you have only one name, enter it in the Family Name block.

**Spacing** is as important as spelling and must be consistent. For instance, systems will not read Mc Millan and McMillan as the same name.

**Hyphens** must also be used consistently.

**Print your name exactly** as it appears on your Form I-20 or DS-2019 and your passport and visa.

**Date of Birth (Blocks 3 and 16) and Date Issued (Block 11)** — Your date of birth must be given in Day/Month/Year order. This is not the same order that appears on your Form I-20 or DS-2019. For example, if you were born on the 9th day of January in the year 1986, you should write 09011986 in the birth date block (Block 3 and 16). The same date format is used in block 11 for Date Issued.

**Country of Citizenship (Blocks 4 and 17)**

Country of citizenship is the country that issued your passport. You can find the U.S. spelling in block 1 of the Form I-20 or on the second line of the Form DS-2019.

Be sure you complete all required blocks.

## U.S. Customs

After passing through the immigration area, you will collect your baggage and pass through customs. A customs inspector will ask you to declare what you have brought into the country, inspect your bags, and review the customs form you filled out on the plane. Penalties for concealing declarable items can be severe, so be honest and make a full declaration. (Remember to tell the officer about any additional items that you have sent or will have sent soon.)

You may bring items for personal use into the United States without paying duty. As a nonresident, you are also allowed to bring in gifts with a total value up to \$100 duty-free. If the total value of such items exceeds \$100, you will need to pay a duty.

You must declare the amount of money you have with you, but you do not have to pay a duty on it. You may bring as much money as you want into the United States, but you must file a report with the U.S. customs official if you bring more than \$10,000.

Certain articles are forbidden or restricted. (See page 37, “What to Bring,” or visit the U.S. Customs and Border Protection website at

<http://www.cbp.gov/xp/cgov/travel/clearing/restricted> for a list of prohibited items).

For more information about clearing U.S. customs, please visit <http://www.cbp.gov/xp/cgov/travel/clearing>.

## Travel to the University

Once you reach your U.S. port of entry, you may have to travel by other means to your final destination. Your international student adviser should provide this information, and a travel agent can help you make the arrangements. If you arrive at the airport and don't know how to get to your final destination (if you're not flying), go to the “Ground Transportation” desk and ask for assistance.

## Connecting Flights

It is best to book your tickets for U.S. domestic flights while you are still in your home country. Be aware that if your final destination is a medium- to small-sized city, your final leg of travel may be in a small, propeller-driven “commuter” plane, rather than a jet airliner.

## Shuttle Services

If you are arriving at a large major airport, there will often be a shut-

tle service from the airport to local universities. You will find these services at the Ground Transportation desk in the airport. Taking a shuttle is almost always cheaper than taking a taxi.

### **Trains**

Train travel in the United States is relatively expensive compared to train travel in other countries, and it is not readily available. Amtrak is the national rail line. Although there are other small rail lines, they generally travel only in local areas. Amtrak travels across the country, but its service is most extensive on the East Coast. In most cities, train stations are not located near airports, and public transportation between the train station and the airport may be limited.

### **Buses**

Travel by bus is often the least expensive way to travel in the United States, and service is extensive. As with train stations, bus stations are rarely located near airports, and public transportation may be limited between the airport and the bus station.

### **Renting a Car**

Renting a car is probably the most expensive, but most flexible,

way of traveling in the United States. Many car rental agencies are international and may have branches in your country. You can reserve a car from home through one of these branches, with a travel agent, or on the Internet. Keep in mind that there are often age restrictions and credit card requirements when renting a car. You may be asked to show an international driver's license instead of, or in addition to, your home country license. Also consider that one-way rentals (picking up the car in one city and returning it in another) often cost much more than standard rentals. If you plan to rent a car to travel from your U.S. entry point to your college or university, a one-way rental may be required.

### **Overnight Accommodations**

If you arrive at your final destination before you can move into your permanent housing, you may have to spend the night somewhere else. The most expensive options are hotels and motels, but some "budget" motel chains can be quite reasonable. Other options include youth hostels, international houses, and (at some schools) university residences. Check with your international student adviser for information on overnight housing options.

## Arriving at the University

Once you arrive on campus, you should immediately report to the office responsible for assisting international students and scholars. It may be called the Office of International Services, the Office of International Education, the International Programs Office, or some other similar name. Whatever the name, this office can help you with questions or concerns about immigration rules and regulations. Most importantly, this office is required to report your arrival to the federal government using the SEVIS system. If this report is not submitted at the beginning of the term, you may be considered in violation of your status in the United States, which could jeopardize your stay. Be sure to make the international student office one of your first stops on campus. It is helpful if you bring your passport and immigration documents with you on your first visit.

## Review

- Find out when you need to arrive on campus, and make travel arrangements well in advance of your departure date, especially if you are traveling during peak times. Know in advance how you will travel from the U.S. port of entry to your final destination.
- Begin packing early.
- Label your luggage inside and out with your name and the address of your university.
- Pack a travel bag with personal articles to use in case your luggage is temporarily lost in transit.
- Give your family a contact number, such as that of the International Student Office.
- Be sure the following items are in your carry-on bag (not in your checked luggage):
  - valid passport with U.S. visa;
  - I-20 or DS-2019 form;
  - debit card and/or traveler's checks;
  - credit card, if you have one;
  - small amount of U.S. cash;
  - insurance card;
  - letters of acceptance and financial support and other important documents from your U.S. university;
  - proof of your ability to cover the costs of your U.S. education (scholarship letters, bank statements, etc.);

- official transcripts from your secondary schools, colleges, or universities;
  - important addresses and telephone numbers;
  - medical records including immunization certificate and any other health documents;
  - marriage certificate;
  - birth certificates for you, your spouse, and your children;
  - international driver's license and valid foreign driver's license (if you plan to drive);
  - information about traveling from the airport to your college or university.
- Be prepared for both immigration and customs inspections, with all documents ready for the officials.
  - Know where you will stay if you arrive in the United States before you can move into your permanent housing or if you plan to stay overnight in an intermediate city.

### **Useful Websites**

Customs and Border Protection (CBP)  
<http://www.cbp.gov> (Click on "Travel,"

then "Arrival Procedures for Students and Exchange Visitors.")

Sample International Student Website (Yale University) - See "Before You Leave Home" and "Preparing for Travel"

<http://www.yale.edu/oiss/newstudents/index.html>

### **Major U.S. Airlines**

American — <http://www.aa.com>

Continental—<http://www.continental.com>

Delta — <http://www.delta.com>

Southwest — <http://www.southwest.com>

United — <http://www.united.com/>

US Airways—<http://www.usairways.com>

### **U.S. Train Travel**

<http://www.amtrak.com>

### **U.S. Bus Travel**

Greyhound—<http://www.greyhound.com>

Peter Pan Bus — <http://www.peterpanbus.com/>

Trailways — <http://www.trailways.com>

Gotobus.com — <http://gotobus.com>

### **Overnight Accommodations**

Hostelling International — <http://www.hihostels.com>

Hotels.com — <http://www.hotels.com>

### **Travel Websites**

Expedia — <http://www.expedia.com>

Orbitz — <http://www.orbitz.com>

Kayak — <http://www.kayak.com>

Travelocity—<http://www.travelocity.com>



## Beginning Your U.S. Education

### First Days at the University

The first few days at your U.S. college or university can be truly exciting, but also overwhelming as you get organized and settle in. You will want to let your family know you arrived safely, get to know the campus, meet some new people, select classes, and complete all the requirements for registration and enrollment. But don't worry – you don't have to do all of this on your own. New stu-

dent orientation programs are a perfect opportunity to accomplish all of these tasks, attend campus social events planned especially for new students, and help ease the transition to a new place.

### The Academic Year

For most colleges and universities, the academic year begins in late August or early September and ends in May or June. The “semester” system divides the ac-

ademic year into two equal terms of approximately 14-16 weeks each. For schools on a “quarter” system, the academic year is divided into three equal terms of approximately 11 weeks each. Usually, there is also a fourth summer quarter. The “trimester” system has equal terms of approximately 16 weeks each, including a summer term. Many students take the summer off, and international students are generally not required to study during the summer. Some students, however, choose to go to summer school and earn credits to complete their degree work more quickly. Make sure you know your college or university’s academic calendar.

### The Academic Program

U.S. undergraduate programs are designed to give students a broad educational background, with an emphasis called a “major.” A major is the subject in which you concentrate your studies for a degree. You will take many classes in your major, especially in your junior (third) and senior (fourth) years. In some cases, you may also be allowed to declare a “minor,” which is a secondary field in which you want to concentrate.

It is normal for undergraduate students in the United States to begin studying for a bachelor’s

degree without knowing what subject they will choose for a major. During the first two years, undergraduates usually take a variety of courses from different academic departments to fulfill “general education requirements.” As a result, even those students who “declare” or choose a major when they first enroll often change to another major that seems more interesting or is more suitable to their career goals. Most, if not all, coursework taken during this general education period will count toward graduation requirements. Usually, a student must select a major by the end of the sophomore (second) year. See Booklet One, *Undergraduate Study*, for detailed information.

At the graduate level, study is specialized. You will spend most of your time in the department in which you are doing your degree work, although there may be some flexibility for taking courses in other areas of interest. See Booklet Two, *Graduate and Professional Study and Research*, for detailed information.

### The Academic Adviser

When you enter a university or college, you will usually be assigned an academic adviser who will help you select your classes and plan your program. He or

she may also monitor your progress. You are free to seek advice from other faculty members as well.

Before you meet with your academic adviser, it may be helpful to design a tentative program plan. Know what the degree requirements are, or if you are not certain, prepare a list of questions. Study the university catalog, departmental course schedules, and the printed schedule, which lists all the courses being offered during the term and the days and times the courses will meet. Note that not all courses must be taken in a particular order; there is usually some flexibility in designing your program.

At the first meeting with your academic adviser, you may wish to discuss what you hope to do both during your program and after you finish your academic studies. You should discuss the tentative program plan that you have drawn up for the semester. You may also wish to discuss opportunities for field experience, study abroad, and other activities that might enrich your educational experience.

Many international students are hesitant to express their opinions to their academic adviser, since this may be perceived as inap-

propriate behavior or a sign of disrespect in their own cultures. In U.S. culture, it is very appropriate to voice your opinion. The role of the adviser is to help you make your own decisions, not to make decisions for you. On most campuses, your academic adviser is responsible for approving your plan of study and the number of courses you will take each term. Remember that SEVIS requires international students to take a full course load (usually 12 to 15 credit hours for undergraduates and nine to 12 credit hours for graduates) for their visas to remain valid.

Your academic adviser will help you decide on a study plan based upon your goals and the requirements for a degree. During the academic year, you should make appointments with your academic adviser at regular intervals (a good time is just prior to the next semester registration period) in order to review your progress.

### Course Registration

Registration procedures are different at each educational institution. Course registration may be managed on-line, by phone, or by visiting an office or general registration area. Exact procedures will be outlined in your orientation materials.

Plan your schedule early. It may take a great deal of thinking, consulting, arranging, and rearranging. It is a good idea to have two or three possible schedules written out by registration day. Having more than one schedule is helpful if some courses you want are already closed or full.

During the registration period, you will probably need to complete payment arrangements for the semester, obtain your university identification (ID) card, and submit any health or medical forms. Some schools require that all tuition and fees be paid at the beginning of each semester; others may let you pay in installments. Contact the college or university Bursar's Office for information on these procedures.

### **Campus and Department Orientation**

Virtually every college and university in the United States offers orientation programs for new students. The programs take on many forms and cover different topics, but the purpose is the same: to ease your transition to a new place. Sometimes there are also campus or department orientation programs and/or a separate program especially for international students.

Some campus-based orientation programs charge a fee that covers the costs of program materials, refreshments, staff support, and other expenses. You may be asked to pay the fee ahead of time or find it included as part of your total student bill.

While not all schools require students to attend, orientations often provide the best possible introduction to your U.S. institution and can help relieve much of the anxiety of being in a new place. Some of the things you might do at a typical campus or department orientation program include:

- meeting other students;
- learning your school's expectations for intellectual and personal growth;
- getting to know your new school and the local community;
- moving into your on-campus or off-campus residence;
- speaking with professors and academic advisers about course placement and selection;
- training in the use of the campus library and computer services, including electronic mail; and
- registering for courses.

At an orientation program for international students, you might:

- meet other students from your own country and from around the world;
- receive information about immigration regulations;
- obtain a U.S. Social Security Number (needed for employment, including on-campus employment);
- have your passport and visa documents copied and signed for future travel;
- learn about the U.S. system of higher education;
- obtain advice on personal safety, health and accident insurance, and wellness;
- take a guided tour of the local area;
- open a bank account and purchase a cell phone;
- take an English-proficiency examination;
- learn about U.S. culture and social and personal relationships in the United States; and
- receive information on services

and programs for international students.

### **EducationUSA Orientation Programs**

Most EducationUSA advising centers offer orientation programs in June and July that provide information about U.S. colleges and universities and guidance for students from your particular country. Go to the EducationUSA website and click on “For International Students,” then “Attend a Pre-Departure Orientation” to see if one of these programs is available in your home country.

### **Professors**

The social code of behavior between students and professors varies from institution to institution. While some professors adhere to more traditional methods, others come to class wearing jeans and sports shirts and insist that you call them by their first names. Here are a few pointers to help you deal with professors:

- Always address teachers as “Professor” or “Doctor” unless instructed otherwise. If the teacher wants to be called something else, he or she will usually tell you. Do not be shocked to hear students calling professors

by their first names. This is especially common among graduate students, since they develop a closer professional relationship with their teachers than undergraduate students do.

- Professors in the United States hold office hours, usually several times a week, when they are available for consultation. Many students schedule meetings during office hours to discuss projects, review material covered in class, or simply exchange ideas on a given topic with their professors. If you would like to meet with a professor but are not available during office hours, he or she will generally give you the chance to schedule meetings at other times.
- Be prepared for each class and arrive on time. Much of the professor's impression of you will be based on your level of class participation. Sometimes part of your class grade is based on your participation. Demonstrate interest in class, speak up, ask questions, and respond to others' comments.
- At the undergraduate level, many Teaching Assistants (TAs) work with professors, and some teach partial or full courses. These TAs are usually graduate students from the de-

partment. You should not call them "Professor" but rather "Mr." or "Ms." or, if they ask you to, by their first name.

### Study Skills

It is common for students to think they already know how to be a successful student, and that if they do the readings and study they'll get good grades. But different teaching methods, a different language, different academic background, and a different campus culture can affect your ability to be successful.

Most colleges and universities offer free short-term classes to help you be a successful student. Topics may include utilizing your school's library resources to write a research paper, navigating the Internet, developing good study skills, and practicing effective time management. If English is not your first language, you might help your grades by visiting the university writing center, by taking an ESL course, or by joining an informal English conversation group. There are also excellent study-skills websites on the Internet.

### The Honor Code

Most colleges and universities in the United States have honor

codes or statements of rules that students are expected to follow in their academic work. These rules relate primarily to academic honesty and originality. U.S. educational institutions take these rules very seriously, and ignorance of the rules is not an excuse for breaking them. Violating a school's policy of academic honesty can result in suspension from school. Even if a particular academic practice is accepted in your country or is part of your culture, it is not acceptable to violate the rules at a U.S. college or university.

The university honor code, or the university code of conduct, is usually distributed to new students at the beginning of the academic year and is frequently a topic of discussion during new student orientations. If you have questions about any of these issues, talk to your instructor, your academic adviser, or the international student adviser.

### Cheating

Cheating is getting unauthorized help on an assignment, quiz, or examination. You must not receive from anyone, nor give to anyone, any information, answers, or help during an examination or any kind of test. You must not take notes or books to the examination if this is for-

bidden, and you must not refer to any books or notes while you are taking the test unless you are instructed otherwise. Sometimes students who speak a foreign language during an examination are perceived by others to be cheating, even though they may simply be asking a fellow student in their native language for a piece of paper or an eraser. You should be aware of this and try to avoid suspicion.

### Plagiarism

Plagiarism is another kind of cheating. It is the failure to do your own original work in written assignments. Instead, you use someone else's words or ideas as though they were your own, without crediting the source. Plagiarism is considered literary and intellectual theft and is vigorously condemned in academic work. When quoting words or ideas from books, magazines, websites, recordings, films, or other sources of information, always give appropriate credit to the author in your text. Many U.S. universities have specific guidelines to follow when quoting an author, and some of them publish guides for papers. To avoid being accused of plagiarism, make sure you know the university policies on quoting words and ideas.

### Review

- Visit the international student office as soon as you arrive on campus.
- Attend your school's new student and/or international student orientation.
- Use the first few days after your arrival to get to know the campus, to meet new people, and to become acclimated to your new school.
- Ask your academic adviser to help you arrange your first-semester schedule and to help you plan for future semesters and special academic opportunities.
- Faculty and staff are willing to assist you, but they will not as-

sume that you need help unless you ask for it.

- Sign up for special classes or meetings that will help you be a successful student.
- Become familiar with your school's honor code or student code of conduct.

### Useful Websites

EducationUSA Online Orientation Schedule

<http://www.educationusa.state.gov>

(Click on "For International Students," then "Attend a Pre-Departure Orientation.")

America.gov — Education and Youth

<http://www.america.gov/amlife/education.html>



## Housing

One of the most important things to do before you start your studies in the United States is find a place to live. It will be one of your biggest expenses and will affect your personal and academic adjustment.

### Temporary Accommodations

As mentioned earlier, if you arrive at your final destination before you can move into your permanent housing, you will have to spend the night somewhere else. The most expensive options are hotels and motels, but some “budget” motel chains can be quite reasonable. Other options include youth hostels, international

houses, and (at some schools) university residences. Check with your international student adviser for information on overnight housing options.

### Campus Housing

*“Before I left for the USA, I knew that as a first-year student I would have to live in the university dormitory in a shared room. At first it was strange to share my room with another person, but I soon got used to it. My roommate and I eventually became good friends.”*

— Undergraduate student from Sweden

Almost all U.S. colleges and universities give students the option to live in residence halls or dormitories (also called “dorms”). These are usually for single students, not married couples or families, and are situated on or close to the campus. Dorms are great places to meet U.S. students and make new friends rapidly. Dorm rooms are equipped with basic furniture, and many dorms also have a cafeteria. In some dorms there may be a kitchen for those who would rather cook for themselves. Dormitories usually have common rooms where students can get together to watch television, play games, or simply be with friends. Supervisors, often called “resident advisers,” “resident assistants,” or “resident directors,” often live in dormitories to keep an eye on safety and cleanliness and to make sure the rules are observed. Most of the time, these resident advisers are students themselves, employed by the university. The resident adviser can be a great source of information and support throughout the academic year.

There is usually a high demand for residence hall space, so return your housing application and pay any required deposit as soon as possible. At some colleges and universities, dormitory rooms are so much in demand that a lottery is held to determine who will be granted space.

Some campus housing closes for holidays, vacations, and break periods, but some may be open year-round. If you require campus housing during vacations and holiday periods, be sure to inquire well in advance regarding availability. Also check with your international student adviser regarding the possibility of a homestay or off-campus housing options.

Many rooms in dormitories are shared with one or more roommates. Many universities require first year students to share a room. Your roommate will be someone of the same sex, whom you will not know. Be prepared to live with someone who could be very different from you. Roommate arrangements often lead to life-long friendships, but on rare occasions roommates can prove mismatched. If you have problems in your living arrangements with your roommate, contact your resident adviser or someone else in charge of housing at your university to discuss the situation. In extreme cases, it is possible to change rooms or roommates.

Some dormitory rooms do not have a private bath or toilet. Instead, residents share large “community” bathrooms, which are separate for men and women. In the United States, a bathroom in-

cludes a toilet, a sink, and a bathtub or a shower.

Generally, students living in a dormitory have to follow a set of rules to ensure smooth community living. There are rules to control the noise level, the cleanliness, the number of visitors, and other aspects of living. These rules can vary from building to building to cater to different student tastes. For example, some dormitories might be designated as “24-hour quiet” buildings for students who prefer a more studious lifestyle, while others might not have strict noise regulations for students who have a more spirited lifestyle. Make sure you are familiar with the rules before you move into a residence hall to avoid unnecessary discomfort or misunderstandings. Examples of typical campus housing include:

- **Coed Residence Halls:** Coed dormitories have both men and women living in the same building. Male and female students do not share rooms; sometimes they live on different floors or in separate suites, which are small apartments that contain several sleeping rooms, a common living area, and one or two bathrooms.
- **Single-sex Residence Halls:** These dormitories are for those who prefer to live in an all-male or all-female environment. Universities may set aside a residence or at least part of a residence building to house women and men separately.
- **University Apartments:** Some universities operate apartment houses on campus. Apartments are always in high demand. Usually priority is given to upper-level students and to students who are married.
- **Fraternity and Sorority Houses:** Fraternities (for men) and sororities (for women) are national social organizations with smaller groups or “chapters” on campuses throughout the United States. Perhaps most well known for the parties and social activities they organize, fraternities and sororities also sponsor philanthropic activities and take part in community service projects. Fraternity and sorority houses may be either on- or off-campus, and living in a fraternity or sorority house may be restricted to upper-level students. For detailed information on fraternities and sororities, see Booklet One, *Undergraduate Study*.
- **Married Student Housing:** At some universities certain apartments or houses are owned and operated by the university ex-

clusively for married students and families. These houses and apartments are usually furnished, and demand for them is very high. If you are married, inquire as early as possible about the availability of married student housing.

### Off-campus Housing

If you cannot find accommodation in university dormitories, you may have to look for off-campus housing. While university-subsidized housing is often less expensive than other housing in large cities, in smaller cities and towns you might be able to save money by staying somewhere in town rather than on campus. Types of accommodation include furnished and unfurnished apartments and houses, privately operated dormitories, cooperative residence halls, and rented rooms in private homes.

To find off-campus housing, ask the university's Housing Office or consult the classified advertising section (also called "want ads" or "classifieds") of the local newspaper. Many U.S. newspapers are now available on the Internet, so you may be able to explore off-campus housing opportunities while you are still at home. Check campus bulletin boards for notices of students who are looking for roommates to share an apart-

ment. Seek the help of someone who knows the community or ask the international student adviser for suggestions.

In general, the amount you spend for housing should be limited to one-third or one-fourth of the total amount you have planned to spend on living expenses. If the cost is one-half of your budget, you may be spending too much. If the costs are unusually inexpensive, it is possible that your living quarters are substandard. U.S. cities have local housing rules, called "ordinances" or "housing codes," which specify certain standards that must be met to ensure that houses and apartment buildings are safe and sanitary.

### Apartments

Be sure to consider the distance from campus and access to public transportation when you choose an apartment. Also take into account that you will most likely need to pay the costs of gas, electricity, and telephone services (also known as "utilities") in addition to your monthly fee if you rent an apartment. Get an estimate of monthly utility bills from the utility company or previous tenants before you sign a lease, since utility bills vary depending on the climate in which you live and the type of phone service you use.

Sharing an apartment with a roommate can keep costs down. If you do not know anyone to room with, you may ask another student who is looking for a roommate to share an apartment with you. If you respond to an ad for a roommate, you will probably be asked to visit for a personal interview. These interviews are an excellent way to determine if it would be a mutually agreeable arrangement to room together. Never room with someone until you have discussed issues such as smoking, study habits, cleaning arrangements, parties, overnight guests, food, and cost sharing.

Take someone who is familiar with the local community and rental procedures with you when you go apartment hunting. Be sure you understand both your obligations and those of the landlord if you decide to rent an apartment and sign a rental agreement (also known as a “lease”). Many landlords require payment of the first and last months’ rent before the tenants move in. Many also require a security deposit (also called a “cleaning deposit”) equal to one month’s rent. If the tenants leave the apartment in good condition, the landlord returns the security deposit. Always get a copy of the rental agreement and a receipt for your security deposit.

### Off-campus Dormitories

Sometimes there are privately owned dormitory complexes near the campus. These are designated for students and are run like university dormitories, but privately owned. Usually the costs are comparable to living in an on-campus dormitory.

### Cooperative Residence Halls (“Co-ops”)

A co-op is usually a large house in which a group of students lives together, sharing the costs and chores. Residents take turns cooking meals and work together to clean the house and take care of outside maintenance. Because they are generally less expensive, rooms in co-ops may be difficult to find.

### Living with a U.S. family

Sometimes international student advisers have listings of families in the community who would like to have an international student live in their home. Sometimes the family expects the student to perform certain services, like babysitting or household chores, in exchange for free or reduced rent. Living with a family can be a warm and enriching experience, but consider the family and the arrangements carefully and be sure that you understand what is expected of

you. Check with the international student adviser to determine if services are expected in exchange for room and board. This might be considered employment by the U.S. government and therefore subject to certain regulations.

### Cafeteria and Meal Plans

Most U.S. dormitories are equipped with cooking facilities, but many students choose to eat in cafeterias instead. Many dormitories have a cafeteria within the building or nearby that offers low-cost food to students. Students may sign up for a variety of meal plans that allow them to pay in advance for the food they will consume. Depending on your tastes and financial situation, you might find these meal plans convenient, cheap, and easily accessible. Some colleges and universities require all students who live on campus to sign up for a meal plan. Cafeterias are open during scheduled hours and usually offer a variety of foods, including vegetarian selections. Meal plans are sometimes available to students living off-campus as well, which is a great convenience for students who may eat as many as two meals a day on-campus. If you plan to live in an apartment and do not wish to cook or if you enjoy the social aspect of eating in the cafeteria, consider trying out your school's meal plan. Cafeterias are generally

closed during holidays and vacation periods.

### Review

- Know the various kinds of housing options available at your college or university.
- Campus housing, as well as housing for families and married students, may be in great demand. Apply early.
- If you decide to live in off-campus housing, consult with the off-campus housing office at your college or university for advice.
- Review all rental and lease agreements carefully, and do not sign them if there is something you do not understand or with which you disagree.
- Consider the various meal plan options on campus, regardless of your housing arrangements.

### Useful Websites

Apartments.com  
<http://www.apartments.com>

Hostelling International  
<http://www.hihostels.com>

Hotels.com  
<http://www.hotels.com>



## Practical Information for Everyday Living

### Money Matters

#### U.S. Currency

The basic unit of exchange in the United States is the dollar (\$), which is divided into 100 cents (¢). One dollar is commonly written as \$1 or \$1.00. There are four denominations of commonly used coins: 1 cent, 5 cents, 10 cents, and 25 cents. Americans usually refer to coins not by their value in cents, but by their names. A one-cent coin is a penny, a five-cent coin is a nickel, a ten-cent coin is a dime, and a 25-cent coin is a quarter. There are also one-dollar coins and half-dollar (50-cent) coins, but they are seldom found in circulation.

U.S. paper money (often called bills: for example, a “one-dollar

bill”) comes in single-bill denominations of one dollar (\$1.00), two dollars (\$2.00, but these are rare), five dollars (\$5.00), ten dollars (\$10.00), twenty dollars (\$20.00), fifty dollars (\$50.00), and one hundred dollars (\$100.00). U.S. bills are similar in appearance, but differentiated from each other by the number value and with the portrait of a different U.S. historical figure on each denomination. U.S. coins are also marked with the coin’s value, and each denomination is a different size.

#### Opening a Bank Account

One of the first things you should do after arriving in the United States is open a bank account. Do not carry large sums of cash or keep it in your room. Most

banks have main offices in the center of the city or town. Smaller offices, called “branches,” are usually found in other parts of a city or town and in the suburbs. Even if your bank does not have a branch nearby, you can often find automated bank machines to serve your needs. Bank hours vary; some close earlier than other businesses and are open only during limited hours on the weekend. Your international student adviser can suggest which banks are convenient to campus.

Check with several banks to determine which offers the best services for your needs. Interest rates on savings and checking accounts vary from bank to bank. Investigate and compare various banks and their rates of interest on checking and savings accounts before you decide which type of account(s) you need and at which bank. You might also consider using one of the many reliable Internet banks now available. If you choose to use an Internet bank, you might even be able to set your account(s) up ahead of time, before you get to the United States.

### Automatic Tellers and 24-Hour Banking

Almost all American banks now offer banking privileges 24 hours a day through “Automatic Teller

Machines” or ATMs. When you open an account at a bank, you will be issued a bankcard and a Personal Identification Number (PIN). You will be able to use this card in your bank’s ATM to access your account and make transactions such as withdrawing and depositing money, transferring funds, and viewing your balance. Generally, you can also use your bankcard in other banks’ ATMs for a small service fee, but only for cash withdrawals. Banks often impose limits on how much money you may withdraw from the ATM in one day, usually between \$200 and \$400.

Having an ATM card is very convenient, since you can use it all over the United States and even in other countries. You may also use cards from other countries in the United States as long as they function on one of the banking networks used in the United States. Before leaving home, ask your bank if you can use your home country’s bankcard in the United States. This is especially useful if, in case of emergency, you need to get money from home quickly.

### Online Banking

Most U.S. banks now allow customers to conduct most or all of their banking online. This

includes everything from viewing your balance, to transferring funds between accounts, to paying bills electronically, to making arrangements for your bank to send personal checks to individual people or businesses. These services are available at both Internet-based and traditional banks. Be sure to ask about online banking when you decide to set up an account.

### Checking Accounts and Checks

Checking accounts allow you to avoid carrying large amounts of cash or sending it through the mail, since you can use checks instead of money in most stores or businesses in the United States. They are a convenient place to keep the money you need on a day-to-day basis and are usually connected with an ATM or debit card/check card. Many people use debit cards, which withdraw money directly from their checking account, so they do not have to write and keep track of paper checks (see below for more information on debit cards). Checking accounts often pay less interest than savings accounts on the money you deposit, so many people choose to keep a savings account as well so that money they will not need until later has a chance to gain more value.

### Savings Accounts

If you plan on bringing enough money with you for the entire school year, or even most of the money you will need, you should consider opening a savings account. A savings account usually offers a higher rate of interest than a checking account and allows you to make withdrawals to cover your living expenses.

### Debit Cards

Most U.S. bankcards may also be used as debit cards, which withdraw money directly from your checking account each time you use them to make a payment. While many stores now accept debit cards instead of cash, it is a good idea to carry a small amount of cash with you at all times in case a store does not accept debit cards or the card system is not working.

### Prepaid Debit Cards

Like other debit cards, prepaid debit cards are now accepted in most U.S. stores. Instead of agreeing to have money withdrawn directly from your checking account, with a prepaid debit card you pay a specific amount of money, which is loaded on to the card. You may then spend up to that amount on your purchases; once you reach the limit, you must

add more money to the card. Prepaid debit cards are a useful way to avoid overspending and incurring penalty fees from your bank. You can purchase prepaid debit card in banks, online, and in many stores; choose a prepaid card from a major credit provider such as American Express, MasterCard, or Visa to ensure it will be accepted widely.

### Credit Cards and “Buying on Credit”

The use of credit cards is widespread in the United States, and having a credit card is very convenient. Banks, credit card companies, gas companies, department stores, and other organizations issue credit cards. Card holders must pay a minimum amount of what they owe each month, or they are issued a “finance charge.” Applications for credit cards are available in many banks and stores, and most ask for the applicant’s source and amount of income, length of residence at his or her present address, and some bank information. Many companies that issue credit cards require applicants to have a specific minimum income. If you use a credit card or purchase something on credit, be sure you understand the terms of the loan agreement. While most cards allow users to pay only a portion of their bill

each month, you will likely have to pay high interest rates, sometimes as much as 21 percent, for any amount you do not pay in full each month.

### Tipping

In the United States, tips (gratuities) are not usually added to bills. While it is always your decision whether to tip or not, you are usually expected to leave a tip for certain services. People who commonly receive tips are paid a lower wage than those who do not receive tips and often depend upon tips for a significant part of their income. The average tip is 15 percent, depending on the extent and the quality of the service provided.

**Waiters/Servers:** The expected tip in a restaurant is 15 or 20 percent in a good restaurant with excellent service. You should leave your tip on the table for the waiter or waitress as you leave. If you pay with a credit card, you can add the tip to the credit card charges before you total the bill. If you sit at a counter in a restaurant, the tip is usually smaller; 10 to 15 percent is sufficient. In a fast-food restaurant, the bill is paid when the food is ordered, and no tip is expected. No tip is expected in a cafeteria or self-service restaurant.

**Taxi Drivers:** It is customary to give 10 to 15 percent of the total fare.

**Airport and Hotel Porters:** It is customary to give \$1.00 to \$2.00 for each bag.

**Barbers, Hairdressers, and Beauticians:** They are usually tipped 10 to 20 percent of the bill, depending on the type of establishment. You might give a stylist at a high-end salon who spends a lot of time on your treatment more than someone who gives you a quick haircut at a barber shop.

**Valet Parking:** The attendant should usually receive \$1.00 to \$2.00.

Never offer a tip to public officials, police officers, or government employees. This is against the law in the United States. There is no need to tip hotel desk clerks, bus drivers, theater ushers, salespeople, flight attendants, or gas station attendants.

## Telecommunications

### Telephones

For convenience and privacy, most students choose to have a telephone. Almost all dormitories have at least a dorm or a

“floor” telephone, which students share. Other dormitories have telephones already installed in the rooms and offer competitive rates for long distance calls. If you live off campus and have a phone installed, you will have to buy your own phone and pay for installation charges and perhaps a deposit to ensure that you will pay your telephone bills. You will be billed monthly for use of the telephone, usually a flat fee for local service plus extra charges for long distance calls. These costs vary from area to area in the United States.

### Telephone Numbers

Telephone numbers in the United States have 10 digits, including a three-digit “area code” that serves a wide region or section of a city, plus a seven-digit set of numbers that is the prime telephone number. If you need a telephone number and cannot find it in the telephone book or on the Internet, you can call “directory assistance.” In most areas, the number for directory assistance is “411.”

### Emergency Numbers

Find the phone numbers for the local fire, police, and rescue departments, your doctors, and the campus emergency line and ei-

ther save them in your phone or keep them nearby. In many communities in the United States, when you need police, the fire department, or paramedics in an emergency situation, you simply dial “911.” Once you have dialed 911, the operator will ask you what the emergency is, ask for your address, and then summon the appropriate help. Most of the time, the operator will stay on the line and give you support or advice until help arrives. It is very important to call 911 only in an emergency situation, and it is illegal to use it otherwise.

### Long Distance Calls

The cost of long distance calls depends on the time of day, length of call, type of call, and the long distance company. When you connect with the local telephone company, you will be automatically connected to their long distance service unless you choose an outside company. Compare the prices and packages available from several different companies before choosing a long distance carrier, since many offer special rates for customers who frequently call the same people or country. Be sure to note when rates are lowest (usually weekends, holidays, and at night) if you plan to make long distance calls. Ask your international stu-

dent adviser for advice on private long distance companies if you are not sure which would be best for you.

### Calls to Foreign Countries

It is possible to dial direct to almost all foreign countries from the United States, and direct dialing is less expensive than placing calls through the operator. To get an international line, you must first dial “011,” then the country code, city code, and telephone number you wish to reach.

### Prepaid Calling Cards

Prepaid calling cards are widely available in campus bookstores, grocery stores, and convenience shops, and also on the Internet. They offer very competitive rates and are often the least expensive way for international students to call home. Prepaid cards require users to call a toll-free or local number, then enter a special code that gives them a specified amount of calling time. The length of time and price per minute depend on the phone number you call and the type of card you choose. Shop around for the card with the best deal for the places you call most; you can often call across the world for just a few cents per minute with a prepaid calling card.

## Cellular or Mobile Phones

Many students choose to use a cellular phone (also called a “cell phone” or “mobile phone”) exclusively. Cell phones are widely available at very reasonable prices in the United States, and cell phone companies provide a variety of inexpensive calling plans that include free long distance calls throughout the country. Some offer special deals for customers who make frequent calls to the same person, state, or country. Many colleges and universities have strict policies regarding cell phone use on campus and in class.

## Internet Phone Calls

If you have access to the Internet, you may wish to consider making your long distance and overseas calls via the Internet. Using a technology called Voice-over-Internet Protocol (VoIP), many service providers can help you convert your voice to a computer signal for free or for a minimal charge and call from your computer to another computer or to a telephone. There are many VoIP providers available; one popular service with international students is “Skype,” which allows users to sign up and begin making basic computer-to-computer calls for free. (See “Internet and

E-mail Services” below for information on Internet and computer use on campuses.)

## Public (“Pay”) Phones

Pay phones are available in some commercial areas and require the user to insert coins or use a credit card to make a call. Directions for making calls are printed on the telephone. Most telephone companies also sell debit cards that allow users to pay a certain amount, then have the cost of calls deducted each time they use their card to make a call from a pay phone.

## Internet and E-mail Services

Most U.S. colleges and universities give students a free e-mail address, and many require them to use that address to receive official news from the school or for information on their courses. Internet services are free on many campuses, but some institutions charge a technology fee. Most U.S. colleges and universities have several computer rooms where you can check your e-mail, browse the Internet, or use software programs to complete assignments. Some students choose to keep a desktop computer in their dorm room or bring a laptop to use around campus. Some universities have

network connections available in all dorm rooms. Off-campus students can sometimes apply for access to the university's server at a discount or, possibly, for free. Some schools require all students to purchase a computer (often a laptop) for their personal use, usually at a discounted price from a local provider. The price and availability of computer and Internet services vary from campus to campus, so be sure to ask your international student adviser how things work at the school you plan to attend.

### Text Messaging

The widespread use of cell phones has made text messaging perhaps the most popular form of communication among young adults in the United States. Many colleges and universities have rules regarding text messaging on campus and in the classroom, so be sure to check before you text. Never text while driving.

### U.S. Postal Service

#### Mailing Address

Before you leave home, give your correct mailing address in the United States to family and friends who will be writing you. If you do not know the address yet, have letters sent in care of

your international student adviser. Then inform people of your permanent address as soon as you can.

Whenever you change addresses while you are in the United States, be sure to tell your international student adviser and/or the DSO/RO listed on your I-20 or DS-2019 so he or she can update your SEVIS profile. You may also wish to fill out a change-of-address form at your local post office or online so the postal system can forward any mail addressed to your old address to your new address. This service continues for six months and can be extended to a full year if you request.

#### Post Offices

Every city has a main post office, and larger cities have several smaller branches as well. Many colleges and universities have their own post offices, or at least a place you can buy stamps and send mail. Post office hours vary and may be limited on weekends. Most post offices deliver mail once or twice a day, except on Sundays and federal holidays.

#### Postage Rates

There are many options for sending mail, depending on what

you send, where you send it, and how quickly you need your mail to be received. Rate information is available at your local post office or on the U.S. Postal Service website at <http://www.usps.com>. The U.S. Postal Service website also allows users to purchase postage and order mailing supplies such as envelopes and boxes online.

### Post Office Boxes

Most post offices have small lock boxes you can rent and use to receive your mail. The rental fee varies from city to city. To apply for a post office box (usually called a “P.O. Box”), go to the nearest regular post office; bring a piece of identification that has your address on it, such as a state driver’s license. When you are assigned a post office box, you will receive the combination or key of the lock and can begin to receive mail there. The person helping you will give you the exact address people should use on their correspondence so it will reach your box. Most colleges and universities also provide students with a free mailbox to receive mail on campus.

In addition to the federal postal system, many private or commercial firms (such as UPS, DHL, and Federal Express) offer nor-

mal or express mailing services through a variety of delivery options. Usually these firms will prepare packages for mailing for an additional fee.

## Health and Wellness

### Campus Health Clinics

Most colleges and universities in the United States have a clinic that offers free or reduced cost health services for students. These services are usually limited to minor and emergency care. In case of a serious health problem, the university will most likely refer you to another facility in the community.

### Family Medical Care

Since campus health clinics usually serve only students, you will need to find another source of medical care if you are traveling with your spouse and/or family. If possible, establish a relationship with a doctor shortly after you arrive in the United States so you will have ready access to medical care if someone becomes ill. When choosing a doctor, you might consider a general practitioner/primary care physician, who can provide medical care for the whole family, a pediatrician if you would like someone who specializes in infants and children,

or an obstetrician/gynecologist, of you would like someone who focuses on women's health. Ask friends, the student health service, or your international student adviser for recommendations of doctors in your community. When you telephone for an appointment, ask how much the doctor charges for services and make sure you know what medical services your health insurance covers. For more information on types of health care plans and health insurance, see chapter 2, "Health Insurance."

## Shopping

Even the smallest cities in the United States have shopping centers or "shopping malls" with a wide variety of stores and services. Store hours vary depending on the area you live and the type of store. Stores and businesses do not close at lunchtime as is customary in many other countries.

### Common Types of U.S. Stores

**The Campus Bookstore:** Almost every campus operates a bookstore where you can purchase required textbooks and supplies, clothing with the university's emblem, and a variety of other items. Most textbooks are available either new or used. Used books are considerably cheaper,

but they may be damaged or marked in by the previous owner. Keep your sales receipt when you make a purchase in case you drop a class or decide you do not need a particular book and wish to return it. At the end of the school term, if your textbooks are in good condition and you do not need them anymore, you can often sell them back to the bookstore for a reduced price.

**Supermarkets:** The supermarket, sometimes called the "grocery store," is a large store that sells food, health and beauty aids, and a variety of other items such as kitchen utensils, houseplants and flowers, and sometimes clothing. Prices in supermarkets are usually lower than in small, independent stores. Some supermarkets carry foreign foods, especially if they are located in an area with a large immigrant population.

**Pharmacies:** In the United States, pharmacies are also called "drugstores" and usually offer a large selection of cosmetics, toiletries, stationery, and other items in addition to medicines. You may purchase both "nonprescription" (that is, not prescribed by a doctor) medications, such as aspirin and common cold remedies, and "prescription" (prescribed by a doctor) medications here. Many medications in the United States

can be obtained only with a doctor's written prescription.

**Department Stores:** Department stores have many different sections, or departments, where you can buy clothing, shoes, appliances, kitchen items, china, gifts, jewelry, and more. Department stores differ in price and quality.

**Discount Stores:** Discount stores are similar to department stores but generally offer lower prices because they buy in large quantities and because the stores are large, economically built, and plain. At some discount stores, you must pay a membership fee and present your membership card to enter.

## Eating Out

U.S. towns offer a variety of restaurants in many price ranges. Some feature specialties of the region, while others specialize in "ethnic" foods from various regions of the world. While some of these ethnic restaurants are very authentic, others have adapted their food to suit American tastes. It is safe to eat in restaurants in the United States since they are regularly inspected for cleanliness and for compliance with health codes. It is also safe to drink water from a tap in the United States. Bottled water

is usually available in American restaurants for an extra charge. If you plan to eat at a formal restaurant, call in advance to make a reservation. Not all restaurants require reservations, but it is a good idea to check. This is especially true on weekends and holidays.

## Transportation

### Public Transportation

Public transportation in the United States varies significantly. Some U.S. cities have a dependable, comprehensive system, while others offer very little public transport. Depending on where you live in relation to your college or university campus, public transportation can be the simplest, least expensive, and most reliable way to get to school. If you plan to live off campus and will not have access to a car, make sure you know how frequently your street or area is served by public transportation, the times of scheduled stops, and the price of travel. If you need to take public transportation daily, consider purchasing a monthly pass to save on transport expenses. These passes are available at the public transportation office in your city and often in other locations such as drugstores or post offices.

## Cars

It may seem to you that everyone in the United States has a car and that everyone needs one. Cars can be convenient, but they can also be very expensive to buy and maintain. Some universities may not allow first-year undergraduate students to keep a car on campus due to limited parking space.

**Buying a Car:** Research the cars you are considering to be certain they are safe and reliable. When shopping, take someone who knows about cars and how they are sold in the United States. Most car dealers will negotiate prices with the customer. The total cost of the car will depend on the age of the car, the options you choose, and the type of car. Look at different brands and models, and compare prices. Used cars are less expensive than new cars, but may require more repairs. *The Kelley Blue Book* (online at <http://www.kbb.com>) is a useful resource that lists the fair market value of many different makes and models of used cars; take a look so you know how much you should expect to pay. You should also have a mechanic check any car you consider purchasing from an individual to make sure it does not have major problems. If you purchase the car from a dealer, there should be

a warranty, so you do not need take it to a mechanic.

Before you buy any car, contact the department of motor vehicles in your state to find out the state requirements for owning a car. Then be sure to get any required documents from the seller.

**Getting a Driver's License and Obeying Traffic Laws:** If you plan to drive in the United States, you must have a valid driver's license. It is a good idea to get a driver's license issued in the state where you will live, since some states do not recognize an international driver's license. Even those that do recognize an international license will accept it for only one year after you arrive in the United States. Check with the local office of the state motor vehicles department for information on obtaining a state driver's license.

It is important to learn and obey traffic laws and to understand that they are enforced. People who break these laws can receive fines or jail sentences, and even lose their driving privileges. Traffic and driving laws vary by state, and you will be required to pass a written test on the laws of your state in order to get a license. You may also have to pass a driving, or "road," test.

**Automobile Insurance:** In most of the United States, automobile insurance is mandatory, but the amount of coverage required varies from state to state. If a car is not insured, the owner of the car is financially responsible for any accidents or damage connected with the car. Ask your international student adviser about state requirements and for advice on purchasing automobile insurance.

**Renting a Car:** Renting a car is a convenient way to travel within or outside your city without the hassle of buying and owning a car. Keep in mind, however, that there are certain requirements and restrictions connected with renting a car. For example, many agencies require that individuals be at least 25 years old to rent a car. Some will allow drivers who are younger, but for an additional fee.

**Car Sharing Clubs:** Car sharing clubs allow fee-paying members to borrow or reserve cars at their convenience. As members of a car sharing club, users can check the availability of cars by telephone or online, then pick them up in designated spots around the city or have them delivered to their homes. The cost to use a shared car is usually less than a traditional rental car, and members often do not have to pay for gas, insurance, or their initial mileage. Perhaps

the most popular car-sharing club in the United States is Zip Car.

## Bicycles

Bicycles are useful, inexpensive, and convenient to use on many U.S. campuses and in many communities. Many communities also have bicycle clubs that schedule group outings and competitive races. Some universities and some city police departments require that bicycles be licensed. Ask your international student adviser about regulations and traffic rules for bicycles on campus and in the community.

## Motorcycles

Motorcycles and other two-wheeled vehicles with motors are another relatively inexpensive form of transportation. Most states require motorcycle drivers to have special motorcycle licenses, register their vehicles, and wear protective helmets when riding. Many universities and colleges also require that motorcycles and similar vehicles be registered with the campus security office.

## Leisure Travel

### Airlines

The United States has several national airlines as well as many re-

gional carriers. Because of competition between airlines, you may find that airfares are surprisingly low, particularly when airlines offer sales. You can book tickets directly with the airlines, through a travel agent, or through the Internet. Several popular websites allow users to browse and compare fares between different airlines. (Keep in mind that fees and taxes often increase the total cost of an air ticket considerably.)

### Trains

Amtrak is the U.S. national rail carrier. While train travel in the United States is often more expensive than in other countries, Amtrak does offer a USA Rail Pass that allows travelers to pay a reduced price for concentrated travel during specified lengths of time. Visit the Amtrak website for details. Local commuter trains are usually cheaper than Amtrak trains and can be an easy way to see nearby cities.

### Buses

Bus travel is often the least expensive way to travel in the United States. Reservations are often not required, but if you plan a trip on a busy route you may wish to contact the company ahead of time to hold a seat. The largest intercity bus company serving

the United States is Greyhound, which offers a “Discovery Pass” that provides unlimited travel and stopovers for periods of 7, 15, 30, or 60 days. There are also many private bus lines that make several trips per day between major cities; these are particularly popular along the East Coast, where passengers frequently travel between Boston, New York City, Philadelphia, and Washington, DC. Ask your international student adviser for more information.

### Personal Safety

Every town has unsafe areas, and you should find out where these are as soon as possible. Every college and university employs police officers or security personnel to help keep the campus safe. If you do not receive security guidelines during orientation, ask your international student adviser or campus security office about safety on campus and in the community and what you should do to ensure your personal safety. Remember that good judgment, precaution, and common sense can significantly reduce the chance of having an unpleasant and possibly harmful experience. If you do become the victim of a crime, report it immediately to the campus/community police and your international student adviser.

## Clubs and Sports

### Clubs

Clubs are an excellent way to meet people who share your interests, to make friends, to learn new things, and to have fun. There are student organizations for almost every interest and purpose, from academic societies, to service organizations, to social groups, to international student associations. Check your school's website for a list of campus clubs and organizations, or ask your international student adviser.

### Cultural Activities

College and university campuses in the United States offer a variety of cultural activities such as plays, concerts, films, lectures, and art exhibitions. If the university is located in or near a metropolitan area, you will find many more opportunities advertised in the entertainment and arts section of the city's newspaper.

### Sports

Almost all colleges and universities have sports teams that compete with teams from other schools. These teams often compete at a very high level and attract large crowds of student supporters and other fans. Most

colleges and universities also offer intramural sporting teams or competitions; intramural sports are usually less competitive than the intercollegiate teams and are often open to anyone with an interest in the sport.

### Arrangements for Dependents Who May Join You

#### Schools for Children

In the United States, education is the responsibility of each state, and every school system is different. Your international student adviser can help you find more information about local schools and their admission requirements. Bring copies of your children's birth certificates and school records to enroll them in school at the appropriate level once you arrive.

#### Child Care

There are many options for full-time or part-time child care in the United States. Prices depend on the setting, the amount of individualized attention your child receives, and geographic location.

**Home Day Care:** Usually for infants and pre-school children (five years old and younger). Care givers (also called "babysitters" or "nannies") watch your child or a

small group of children at their own home or, in some cases, at your home. Some home day care providers also care for school-age children before or after school.

**Day Care Centers:** Usually care for pre-school children (not always infants). Day care centers often have several teachers/care givers and provide care to larger groups of children. While there are many private day care providers, some centers are directly connected to particular work places, providing care primarily to the children of their employees.

**Nursery Schools or Preschools:** Usually serve children three to five years old. Most schools hold classes from two to five days a week, usually in the mornings or in the afternoons. Nursery and preschools provide play activities and help prepare children to enter kindergarten, usually the first year of schooling in the United States.

### Activities for Spouses

Although spouses of international students are usually not permitted to work, there are many interesting and fulfilling ways to spend their time in the United States. Some choose to pursue a favorite hobby or improve their

English, and many enjoy participating in activities with other international spouses or through community service organizations. Still others take courses they might not have had the time for at home. Ask your international student adviser about local ESL classes, academic and continuing education courses, and/or opportunities to volunteer in local hospitals, schools, libraries, or other organizations.

### Review

- Research local or Internet banks to determine which one best suits your needs.
- Explore telephone and/or Internet service options so you can keep in touch with family and friends.
- The U.S. postal service offers a variety of ways to send packages and mail, at many different price levels. Visit <http://www.usps.com> for more information.
- Find out where the campus and community health care facilities are so you know where to go if you become ill. If you are traveling with family, find a local doctor and establish a relationship before you need his or her services.

- The availability and convenience of U.S. public transportation varies. If you plan to live off campus, consider how you will get to class and be sure to include transportation costs in your budget.
- If you decide to buy a car, find out the local requirements for ownership, and be sure to apply for a driver's license from the state where you will reside.
- Ask your international student adviser, or check the Internet for information on bus, train, and airline travel if you would like to explore the United States or the area near your college or university. Some transport companies offer discount tour packages or special passes for international visitors.
- Stay safe; use caution and common sense as you get to know the campus and your new city or town.
- Take advantage of activities available in the community and on campus, including clubs and sporting activities.
- Ask your international student adviser for information on how to ease your family's transition to their new home, including information on local schools

and opportunities for your family to be active and engaged in the community.

## Useful Websites

### U.S. Postal Service

<http://www.usps.com>

### Information on Used Car Prices

<http://www.kbb.com>

### Travel Sites

Expedia — <http://www.expedia.com>

Kayak — <http://www.kayak.com/>

Orbitz — <http://www.orbitz.com>

Travelocity — <http://www.travelocity.com>

### Train Travel

Amtrak — <http://www.amtrak.com>

### Bus Travel

Greyhound — <http://www.greyhound.com>

Peter Pan Bus — <http://www.peterpan-bus.com>

Trailways — <http://www.trailways.com>

Gotobus.com (search for deals and tours throughout the United States)  
<http://gotobus.com>

### Campus Safety and Personal Security

Security on Campus, Inc.

<http://www.securityoncampus.org>



## Adjusting to a New Environment

### Language Problems

Even if you speak English very well, you might not understand the local accent right away, or you may be unfamiliar with U.S. slang or the local expressions. Humor, wit, and sarcasm are an integral part of American English, and at first some international students have trouble adapting to this informal style of conversation or understanding whether the person they are speaking with is being serious or not. You might also not know all of the abbreviations and technical terms used in your study program or workplace. Give yourself time to adapt to the language, and ask

people to repeat what they have said, speak slowly, or explain what they mean. You may also wish to carry a small dictionary with you in case of emergency.

### Culture Shock

*“I wish I had realized that culture shock was something real, for I thought it did not apply to me. I felt quite disoriented the first couple of weeks in the college. But the information from my predeparture orientation program helped me to adjust and move on.”*

— Health sciences/chemistry student  
from Sri Lanka

Culture shock refers to the feelings associated with adjusting to a new country and culture. International students experience culture shock in varying degrees; some hardly notice it, while others find it very difficult to adapt to their new situation. It is normal to feel excited and interested when you first arrive, then confused or even hostile as you encounter things you don't understand or agree with. You will likely miss your home country, your family, and your friends. As time passes you will come to better understand the culture and customs of your campus and (hopefully) come to feel comfortable in your new home. Ask your international student adviser if you need help.

## Social Customs

### Greetings

Upon meeting each other for the first time, most Americans shake hands firmly. Good friends, family members, or people in a romantic relationship might hug or kiss upon meeting one another. Customs vary in different parts of the country and between younger and older people.

### Use of Names

First names are more readily used in the United States than in other

countries. It is almost always acceptable to use the first name of someone of approximately the same age or younger as soon as you meet. Use "Mr." (for men) or "Ms." (for women) and the person's last name when talking to people in positions of authority, your professors, or your elders, unless they ask you to call them by their first name. Do not be shy to ask people what they would like you to call them and to tell them what you would like them to call you.

## Friendliness and Friendships

Americans' friendships are often more casual than friendships among people from some other cultures. Americans might refer to acquaintances or people they meet in class as "friends," even though they do not always have close emotional ties to them. Men and women often have long-term platonic relationships, which can surprise some foreign visitors. People of the opposite sex might go to the movies, a restaurant, a concert, or other event together without ever being romantically involved.

## Social Invitations

Americans tend to be quite punctual. If you have accepted an invitation or agreed to a meeting, try

to arrive on time. If you have to cancel an appointment or know that you will not be able to be on time, call to cancel or reschedule. If you are formally invited to someone's home, it is considerate to bring a gift to your host. Common gifts are a bottle of wine, a box of chocolates, or flowers. No gift is expected when friends visit each other casually.

### Dating and Relationships

For many international students, American dating and relationship rituals can be difficult to understand. In general, men and women treat each other as equals and in an informal, casual way. Traditionally, men ask women on dates, but it is also acceptable for a woman to ask a man out. Expenses on a date are sometimes paid by one person or sometimes split between the two. The man will usually offer to pay but will usually not protest if the woman offers to pay in part. Going on a date in the United States does not assume any kind of sexual involvement. Homosexual relationships are common in the United States.

### Personal Hygiene

Most Americans shower or bathe at least once a day to control body odors and brush their

teeth with toothpaste in the morning and evening. In addition, they use underarm deodorant/antiperspirant to control perspiration odors, and they wash their hair regularly. Many American women, though not all, shave the hair from their underarms and their lower legs. Many also wear makeup on their faces. Americans usually wash clothing that has taken on the smell of perspiration before wearing it again.

### If an Emergency Occurs at Home

If a medical, financial, or family problem arises at home, you will need to decide how to respond. If you decide to leave, make sure your academic work will not suffer. Meet with your academic adviser, the international student adviser, and (for master's and doctoral students) your thesis director. If you miss a significant amount of work, a professor may grant you an "incomplete" as a final grade, meaning that you will have a chance to make up the work in the next semester. You might also be allowed to drop some classes, but in that case you would not get a grade or credit for the work done. Talk with your international student adviser about how these changes could affect your status in SEVIS.

A trip home could be very expensive, and being away could affect both your tuition and your financial aid. If you need to depart for an extended period, make sure to contact your university's Financial Aid Office to discuss your situation. Your international student adviser can help you consider your options and deal with the university's administration.

Whenever you leave the country, check with your international student adviser to make sure you have the appropriate visa and documents to reenter the United States. If your visa expires while you are gone, if you had a single-entry visa, or if you are away for an extended period, you might need to reapply at your local U.S. embassy for a valid student visa.

### Review

- If possible, plan to arrive at your university or college several days before orientation begins to allow time to recover from jet lag.
  - Even if your English is very good, you may experience some language problems when you first arrive. Do not be afraid to ask people to speak more slowly or to explain what they are saying until you are comfortable with the local language.
- It is normal to experience some culture shock when you first move to a new country.
  - Become familiar with American social customs that may be different from those in your country. Understanding these differences should help ease your transition and avoid embarrassing situations and misunderstandings.
  - If a family emergency should arise while you are at school, remember that there are people available at your university or college who can help you decide your best course of action. Returning home may not be the best option in every circumstance.

### Useful Websites

America.gov — Click on “American Life”

<http://www.america.gov>

InfoUSA — U.S. Department of State website with information on life, education, government, media, and the economy in the United States

<http://usinfo.org/enus>

Sample International Student Web Resource on Cultural Issues (New York University)

<http://www.nyu.edu/oiss/beyond/cultural/index.html>

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# Glossary of Terms

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**Academic Adviser (AA):** A member of a college faculty who helps and advises students on academic matters.

**Academic Year:** The period of formal instruction, usually September to May; may be divided into terms of varying lengths — semesters, trimesters, or quarters.

**Accreditation:** System of recognition and quality assurance for institutions and programs of higher education in the United States.

**ACT University-Entrance Exam:** A multiple-choice test of English, math, reading, and science reasoning (plus an optional writing component) used for admission into undergraduate programs.

**Add/Drop:** A process at the beginning of a term whereby students can delete and add classes with an instructor's permission.

**Advance Registration:** A process of choosing classes in advance of other students.

**Affidavit of Support:** An official document proving a promise of funding from an individual or organization.

**Assistantship:** A study grant of financial assistance to a graduate student that is offered in return for certain services in teaching or laboratory supervision as a teaching assistant, or for services in research as a research assistant.

**Associate Degree:** The degree awarded after a two-year period of study; it can be either terminal (vocational) or transfer (the first two years of a bachelor's degree).

**Attestation:** Official affirmation that a degree or transcript is genuine. Usually signed by a recognized expert or witness.

**Audit:** To take a class without receiving credit toward a degree.

**Authentication:** Process of determining whether something is, in fact, what it is declared to be. Incoming students are often required to provide a document of authentication for academic transcripts or previous degrees when applying to a program of study in the United States.

**Bachelor's Degree:** Degree awarded upon completion of approximately four years of full-time study in the liberal arts and sciences or professional subjects.

**Class Rank:** A number or ratio indicating a student's academic standing in his or her graduating class. A student who ranks first in a class of 100 students would report his or her class rank as 1/100, while a student ranking last would report 100/100. Class rank may also be expressed in percentiles (for example, the top 25 percent, the lower 50 percent).

**Coed:** A college or university that admits both men and women; also refers to a dormitory that houses both men and women.

**College:** A postsecondary institution that provides an undergraduate education and, in some cases, master's level degrees. College, in a separate sense, is a division of a university; for example, College of Business.

**College Catalog:** An official publication giving information about a university's academic programs, facilities, entrance requirements, and student life.

**Core Requirements:** Mandatory courses required for completion of the degree.

**Course:** Regularly scheduled class sessions of one to five hours (or more) per week during a term. A degree program is made up of a specified number of required and elective courses and varies from institution to institution.

**Credits:** Units that universities use to record the completion of courses (with passing grades) that are required for an academic degree. The catalog defines the number and kinds of credits that are required for the university's degrees and states the value of each course offered in terms of "credit hours" or "units."

**Day Student:** A student who lives in accommodations not administered by the college and off the campus grounds. He or she travels to campus every day for classes.

**Degree:** Diploma or title conferred by a college, university, or professional school upon completion of a prescribed program of studies.

**Department:** Administrative subdivision of a school, college, or university through which instruction in a certain field of study is given (such as English department or history department).

**Designated School Official (DSO):** A Designated School Official (DSO) is the person on campus who gathers and reports information on international students to the Student and Exchange Visitor Information System (SEVIS) and assists international students in the visa and employment authorization process. Your DSO's name will be listed on your I-20 or DS-2019.

**Dissertation:** Thesis written on an original topic of research, usually presented as one of the final requirements for a doctoral degree (Ph.D.).

**Distance Education:** A type of formal learning in which the student and the instructor are not in the same place at the same time. It may be accomplished via telephone, radio, television, audio-video recordings, computer programs, and/or the Internet.

**Doctorate (Ph.D.):** The highest academic degree conferred by a university to students who have completed at least three years of graduate study beyond the bachelor's and/or master's degree and who have demonstrated their academic ability in oral and written examinations and through original research presented in the form of a dissertation.

**Dormitories:** Housing facilities on the campus of a college or university reserved for students. A typical dormitory would include student rooms, bathrooms, common rooms, and possibly a cafeteria. Also known as "dorms" for short.

**Electives:** Courses that students choose to take for credit toward their intended degree, as distinguished from courses that they are required to take.

**Extracurricular Activities:** Nonacademic activities undertaken outside university courses.

**Faculty:** People who teach courses at U.S. colleges and universities. Faculty members may include professors, associate professors, assistant professors, and instructors.

**Fees:** An amount charged by universities, in addition to tuition, to cover costs of institutional services.

**Fellowship:** A form of financial assistance, usually awarded to a graduate student. Generally, no service is required of the student in return.

**Final Exam:** Often referred to as a “final,” a final exam is a cumulative exam on a particular course subject encompassing all material covered throughout the duration of the course.

**Financial aid:** A general term that includes all types of money, loans, and work/study programs offered to a student to help pay tuition, fees, and living expenses.

**Fraternities:** Male social, academic, and philanthropic organizations found on many U.S. campuses.

**Freshman:** A first-year student at a secondary school, college, or university.

**GMAT:** Graduate Management Admission Test, usually required for applicants to business or management programs.

**Grade Point Average:** A system of recording academic achievement based on the numerical grade received in each course and the number of credit hours studied.

**GRE:** Graduate Record Examination; primarily multiple-choice test of verbal and quantitative reasoning, critical thinking, and analytical writing used for admission into graduate programs.

**High School:** The U.S. term for secondary school.

**Higher Education:** Postsecondary education at colleges, universities, professional schools, technical institutes, etc. Education beyond high school.

**Honors Program:** A challenging program for students with high grades.

**International English Language Testing System (IELTS):** An English language proficiency examination of applicants whose native language is not English.

**International Student Adviser (ISA):** The person at a university who is in charge of providing information and guidance to foreign students in areas of government regulation, visas, academic regulations, social customs, language, financial or housing problems, travel plans, insurance, and legal matters.

**Junior:** A third-year student at a secondary school, college, or university.

**Liberal Arts:** A term referring to academic studies of subjects in the humanities, the social sciences, and the physical sciences, with the goal of developing students' verbal, written, and reasoning skills.

**LSAT:** Law School Admission Test required of applicants to professional law programs and some post-graduate law programs in American law schools.

**Major:** The subject in which a student wishes to concentrate.

**Master's Degree:** Degree awarded upon completion of academic requirements that usually include a minimum of one year's study beyond the bachelor's degree.

**MCAT:** Medical College Admission Test required of applicants to U.S. medical schools.

**Midterm Exam:** An exam administered after half the academic term has passed that covers all class material up until that point.

**Miller Analogies Test:** Test of analytical thinking sometimes required for admission to graduate programs in fields such as education and psychology.

**Minor:** A subject in which the student takes the second greatest concentration of courses.

**Non-resident Student:** A student who does not meet the residence requirements of the state. Tuition fees and admission policies may differ for residents and non-residents. International students are usually classified as non-residents, and there is little possibility of changing to resident status at a later date for tuition purposes. Also referred to as an "out of state" student.

**Notarization:** The certification of a document (or a statement or signature) as authentic and true by a public official (known in the United States as a "notary public") or a lawyer who is also a commissioner of oaths.

**Placement Test:** An examination used to test a student's academic ability in a certain field so that he or she may be placed in the appropriate courses in that field. In some cases, a student may be given academic credit based on the results of a placement test.

**Postdoctorate:** Studies designed for those who have completed their doctorate.

**Postgraduate:** Usually refers to studies for individuals who have completed a graduate degree. May also be used to refer to graduate education.

**Professional degree:** Usually obtained after completing a bachelor's degree; degree designed to lead into a specific profession such as medicine, dentistry, veterinary medicine, or law.

**Prerequisites:** Programs or courses that a student is required to complete before being permitted to enroll in a more advanced program or course.

**Registration:** Process through which students select courses to be taken during a quarter, semester, or trimester.

**Resident Assistant (RA):** A person who assists the residence hall director in campus dormitories and is usually the first point of contact for students with problems or queries regarding dorm life. RAs are usually students at the college who receive free accommodation and other benefits in return for their services.

**Responsible Officer (RO):** A Responsible Officer is the exchange program staff person who gathers and reports information on exchange visitors to the Student and Exchange Visitor Information System (SEVIS) and assists in the visa process. The RO's name is listed on the DS-2019.

**Sabbatical:** Leave with pay granted to give a faculty member an extended period of time for concentrated study.

**Scholarship:** A study grant of financial aid, usually given at the undergraduate level, that may take the form of a waiver of tuition and/or fees.

**SAT:** A primarily multiple-choice test of mathematics and English that is used for admission into an undergraduate program.

**School:** A term that usually refers to elementary, middle, or secondary school. Also used in place of the words “college,” “university,” or “institution,” or as a general term for any place of education; for example, law school, or graduate school.

**Semester:** Period of study lasting approximately 15 to 16 weeks or one-half the academic year.

**Seminar:** A form of small group instruction, combining independent research and class discussions under the guidance of a professor.

**Senior:** A fourth-year student at a secondary school, college, or university.

**Social Security Number (SSN):** A number issued to people by the U.S. government for payroll deductions for old age, survivors, and disability insurance. Anyone who works regularly must obtain a Social Security Number. Many institutions use this number as the student identification number.

**Sophomore:** A second-year student at a secondary school, college, or university.

**Sororities:** Female social, academic, and philanthropic organizations found on many U.S. campuses.

**Special student:** A student who is taking classes but is not enrolled in a degree program.

**Student and Exchange Visitor Information System (SEVIS):** An Internet-based system that maintains data on foreign students and exchange visitors before and during their stay in the United States. It is part of the Student and Exchange Visitor Program (SEVP) managed by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security.

**Syllabus:** An outline of topics covered in an academic course.

**Teaching Assistant (TA):** A graduate student who acts as instructor for an undergraduate course in his or her field, in return for some form of financial aid from the university.

**Tenure:** A guarantee that a faculty member will remain employed by a college or university until retirement except in the case of very unusual circumstances. Tenure is granted to senior faculty members who have demonstrated a worthy research and publication record. Its purpose is to preserve academic freedom.

**Thesis:** A written work containing the results of research on a specific topic prepared by a candidate for a bachelor's or master's degree.

**Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL):** An English language proficiency examination of applicants whose native language is not English.

**Thesis:** A written work containing the results of research on a specific topic prepared by a candidate for a bachelor's or master's degree.

**Transcripts:** A certified copy (see "Notarization") of a student's educational record.

**Transfer:** The process of moving from one university to another to complete a degree.

**Tuition:** The money an institution charges for instruction and training (does not include the cost of books).

**University:** A postsecondary institution that offers both undergraduate and graduate degree programs.

**Voice-over-Internet Protocol (VoIP):** technology that converts a user's voice to a computer signal and sends it over the Internet. VoIP allows users to call from one computer to another computer or to a telephone.

**Zip Code:** A series of numbers in mailing addresses that designates postal delivery districts in the United States.

## Additional Resources

Contact your nearest EducationUSA advising center to find out more about these and other resources.

*The Everything College Survival Book: From Social Life to Study Skills—All You Need to Fit Right In.* 2005. Michael S. Malone, Adams Media, Cincinnati, OH.

*International Student's Guide to the USA.* 1998. Ian Jacobs and Ellen Shatswell, Princeton Review Publishing, LLC, New York, NY.

*NAFSA's International Student Handbook: The Essential Guide to University Study in the USA.* 2001. NAFSA: Association of International Educators, Washington, DC.

*Succeeding as an International Student in the United States and Canada.* 2008. Charles Lipson, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, IL.

*The Ultimate College Survival Guide.* 2009. Janet Farrar Worthington and Ronald Farrar, Peterson's, Princeton, NJ.

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