

F-1

Student

Handbook

**The U.S. immigration system is complicated!
This is a guide to help you understand it better and avoid future problems
during your journey in this country.**



Please contact our office if you have any questions about the information in this packet.

The International Center
Buchtel Hall, Room 202
The University of Akron
Phone: 330-972-6349
Email: immigration@uakron.edu

Last revised August 14, 2018

Important Definitions

SEVIS – The Student & Exchange Visitor Information System

This is the information database used by the Department of Homeland Security and Department of State to monitor international students and exchange visitors here in the United States.

Designated School Officials (DSOs) and certain U.S. government employees are the only individuals that have access to SEVIS. Only DSOs are allowed to update your I-20 with any new information.

USCIS – United States Citizenship and Immigration Services

USCIS is the government agency that adjudicates applications for immigration benefits such as Optional Practical Training (OPT) employment authorization and changes of visa status.

Immigration Resources

Study in the States: www.studyinthestates.dhs.gov/students - This is a great resource. It will help you find out about how to maintain your student status, bring dependents, obtain a driver's license, avoid immigration scams, transfer to another university, change your immigration status, and much more.

USCIS: www.uscis.gov – Here you can access updates on immigration law, application forms for certain types of employment authorization, information on changing nonimmigrant status, and much more.

Maintaining Lawful F-1 Status

In order to remain lawfully in the U.S. as an international student, you must follow these rules to maintain your F-1 status:

HAVE VALID DOCUMENTS

Please ensure that the follow documents are always accurate:

- Passport (valid for at least 6 months beyond your intended stay)
- I-20
- I-94 Arrival/Departure Record – available online at <https://i94.cbp.dhs.gov>

REGISTER FOR A FULL COURSE OF STUDY

Undergraduate students: At least 12 credit hours per fall and spring semester.

Graduate students: At least 9 credit hours each fall and spring semester.

Law students: At least 12 credit hours each fall and spring semester.

Online/Distance Learning Limits: Students may only take 3 credits **or** one course per semester that is

online or distance learning (more can be taken if you have fulfilled the 9 or 12 credit hour requirement for that semester). If it is your last semester and you only need one course, it cannot be distance/online.

***Exceptions** – Apply and obtain approval for a Reduced Course Load (RCL) through our office before you drop below full-time for the following reasons:

1. Academic difficulties (first semester only)
 - a. Difficulty with English language/reading
 - b. Difficulty with the American teaching style
 - c. Improper course level placement
2. Medical reasons – must be recommended by a licensed doctor or clinical psychologist
3. Last semester of program

****SUMMER SEMESTER** – If summer is your first or last semester, you must enroll full-time.

INFORM THE INTERNATIONAL CENTER OF CHANGES

Changes to your Academic Program

If you **change one of the following**, please visit our office to update your I-20 within 10 days of the change:

- Program of study – for example, if you switch from Mechanical Engineering to Psychology
- Education level – for example, if you complete a Bachelor’s degree and want to start a Master’s or Doctorate program
- Early completion of program (before the program end date listed on your I-20)

Extending your I-20

Your I-20 was issued for a “normal” length of time usually needed to complete your program of study. However, there can be certain instances where you may need to apply to have your I-20 extended because you will not finish your program in the time allotted. Some of these reasons include:

- Changing research topics
- Unexpected research problems

*You must apply for the extension BEFORE the end date on your current I-20. Failure to do so will result in the loss of your F-1 status.

Address Change or Name Change

- Report your new address in MyAkron within 10 days of the change.
- If you change your legal name, provide the International Center with official proof of the change within 10 days.

COMPLY WITH THE GRACE PERIOD

From the time you finish your program, you have **60 days** to remain in the United States to prepare for your departure, obtain a new I-20 for a new academic program, or apply for Optional Practical Training. If you are admitted to a new program, you must take action on your SEVIS record *before your grace period expires*.

- No employment is allowed during these 60 days.
- If you depart the U.S. during your grace period, you may not re-enter the U.S. using your I-20.

If you fail to maintain F-1 status, **you are not granted a grace period**.

Employment

ON CAMPUS

Students are allowed to work on The University of Akron campus while also taking courses full-time to keep their F-1 status. The following rules apply:

- **New** students can start jobs any time **within 30 days before** the program start date
- The job must be located “on campus” (for example – dining services, athletics, library, administrative offices in departments)
- The job does not have to be related to your studies
- Limited to **20** working hours per week **while school is in session**, and **29** hours per week **during breaks** (winter, spring, summer)
- No approval is required by a DSO or USCIS
- NOTE: Students cannot work during their 60 day grace period

*Find on-campus jobs here: <https://www.uakron.edu/student-employment/students/on-campus.dot>

OFF CAMPUS

F-1 students are eligible to apply for several forms of practical training or employment authorization:

Curricular Practical Training (CPT)

Apply if you have an offer for work/study, internship, cooperative education (co-op), clinical, or practicum that is sponsored by an employer through an agreement with The University of Akron.

Requirements:

- Must be an integral part of your program,
- Must be related to your major, and
- You must be a **full-time student for one academic year** before applying (*Exception: graduate students who are required by their program to start the training immediately*)

Optional Practical Training (OPT)

Apply if you would like to obtain temporary employment with real-world training directly related to your major. This type of employment authorization is adjudicated by USCIS. There are two types of OPT:

Pre- and Post-Completion.

Requirements:

- Must be related to your major area of study,
- You must be a **full-time student for one full academic year** before applying,
- For post-completion OPT, you must apply to USCIS before the end of the **60 day grace period after completing your academic program**, and
- To start the position, you must have the Employment Authorization Document in hand and the OPT authorization start date must have been reached.

**Students in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) programs have the option of a 24-month extension of post-completion OPT.

Severe Economic Hardship

Students who have been enrolled in a full course of study for one academic year and are in good academic standing *may* qualify for this special type of employment authorization if they can demonstrate both:

- On-campus employment is insufficient to meet the needs that have arisen as a result of unforeseen circumstances (for example, significant currency devaluation in your home country), and
- Acceptance of employment will not interfere with carrying a full course of study.

This type of employment authorization is adjudicated by USCIS. To accept employment based on severe economic hardship, you must have the Employment Authorization Document in hand and the start date must have been reached.

Travel and Re-entry

If you plan to travel outside of the U.S. for a short time, you will need the following to re-enter the U.S.:

- Your valid passport,
- Your valid I-20 with a **travel signature** endorsed by a DSO from UA (see next page for details),
- And your valid F-1 visa (except for Canadian citizens).
 - If your F-1 visa expires while in the U.S., you must get a new visa abroad to seek re-admission to the U.S.
 - Exception: If you and your dependents travel less than 30 days to Canada, nearby Caribbean islands (excluding Cuba), or Mexico, you do not need a new visa. This exception does not apply to students from some specific countries.

- Contact the International Center if you:
 - are from a country potentially affected by the “Travel Ban,”
 - plan to travel during OPT or while your OPT application is pending,
 - will be traveling for an extended time period during the academic year, or
 - have other questions about your specific situation.

I-20 Travel Signature

For current students, travel signatures are valid for one year or the end of your academic program, whichever time period is shorter. For students on OPT, the travel signature is valid for 6 months. For a travel signature, please submit a completed Travel Signature Request form to our office with your I-20 and allow three business days for processing.

The following DSOs on campus are authorized to sign the I-20:

- Jung Shin
- Emily Aronson
- Robyn Brown
- Nicola Kille
- Tracy McCune

Abide by Laws

You are required to follow all criminal and civil laws governing the jurisdiction(s) in which you are living, attending school, and traveling. This includes federal, state, and city laws, regulations, and ordinances about:

- Filing annual tax returns;
- Alcohol, tobacco, and drugs;
- Driving;
- Immigration;
- Violence (including domestic violence); and
- Firearm possession

Visa Revocation

If you are arrested, your visa may be revoked. Discuss your situation with the International Center right away if you have been charged with a crime, especially if you are planning to travel outside the U.S.

Stay Aware of Important Updates

Please be sure to check your UA email account regularly to receive updates from the International Center. This is the primary way we communicate changes to U.S. immigration regulations and policies that may affect you. This is also how we inform you of changes to International Center policies and processes.

Disclaimer: The International Center is able to provide you with general guidance. However, any advice provided to you by our office, as well as the information in this packet, should not be construed as legal advice. Additionally, due to the fluid nature of governmental interpretation, the USCIS may change its interpretation of these immigration laws/regulations and eligibility requirements for benefits, at any time. We will do our best to provide you with the most current guidance. Each case is fact-specific and it is advised that you contact an experienced immigration attorney if you have questions regarding your situation.