

VISA APPLICATION PROCESS

BASIC TERMINOLOGY

Here are some basic immigration terms and forms you should know:

- **SEVIS** Stands for *Student and Exchange Visitor Information System* – the web-based data exchange program for storing and tracking information on all continuing and new F-1 international students and J-1 exchange visitors in the United States.
- **SEVIS Form I-20** Certificate of Eligibility for Nonimmigrant (F-1) Student Status – For Academic and Language Students. This is the document that Oberlin College issues via the SEVIS database to prove to the United States Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) and the US Department of State (DOS) that a student has been lawfully admitted and is expected to enroll at the school. This form is one of your most important official documents while you are studying in the United States, and you should have the original form with you any time you travel outside the US. It must be signed by you and the Designated School Official.
- **Designated School Official (DSO)** The school representative on campus who advises you on immigration matters, maintains your F-1 status record, and acts on behalf of the USCIS in certain cases when you need permission to travel, work, etc. Ellen Sayles and Katya Grim are the Oberlin College Designated School Officials.
- **Visa** A special stamp affixed to a page in your passport by a US consular officer abroad. It allows you to travel to the United States and to apply to enter the country. You must have a valid visa every time you attempt to enter the US after travel abroad.
- **Port of Entry (POE)** The airport, land border crossing, or port in the US where you first arrive and apply to enter the country.
- **I-94 Arrival-Departure Record** A short form that you'll be asked to complete upon arrival in the US. This form usually gets stapled to your passport and proves when and where you last entered the United States. The I-94 is the official record of your permitted length of stay in the US. It indicates your name and birth date, visa type, the date of entry into the US, as well as your admission number (also known as the "A" Number).
- **"A" Number** The number the USCIS uses to identify you and your F-1 student status while you are in the US. This number is on your I-94 and is also noted on your I-20 when the immigration officer endorses it at the port of entry.

F-1 VISA APPLICATION REGULATIONS AND PROCEDURES

This is an outline of current procedures. For more detailed information and other useful advice, go to www.unitedstatesvisas.gov.

- If you are a US citizen or permanent resident who is residing and/or studying abroad, you do not need a visa to enter the United States.
- If you are already in the US on an F-1 visa or another type of non-immigrant visa, you will not need to change your visa status if your visa type allows you to study full-time in the United States. **If you do not know whether your current visa type**

allows you to engage in full-time college-level study, please contact the Office of International Students as soon as possible. If your US visa is valid and you do not plan to travel abroad before you come to Oberlin, you do not need to apply for a new visa. However, if your current visa has expired, the next time you travel abroad, you must apply for a new visa at an American embassy or consulate abroad if you wish to re-enter the US. Please contact the Office of International Students if you have specific questions about your visa situation that are not answered in this handbook.

- If you are a citizen of a country exempt from the requirement to have a visa to enter the United States (for example, Canada and Bermuda), you do not need to apply for a visa at a US embassy or consulate. To enter the United States, you must be able to establish both identity and citizenship. Documents that may establish citizenship are: birth certificate, citizenship certificate, and passport. Although the immigration officer may accept an oral declaration of citizenship, it is recommended that a Canadian citizen carry a document that establishes citizenship. Under current procedures, all travelers may be required to present photo-identification. **NOTE: A Canadian citizen arriving from outside the Western Hemisphere is required to present a passport.** Your Form I-20 and entry visa will be processed at the port of entry to the US. Because the immigration officer at the border is doing the job of the consular officer, s/he may choose to interview you. Be prepared to show proof of financial support. Once the visa is granted, the immigration officer will stamp your passport, your I-20, and I-94 card.
- If you are a citizen of a foreign country, you will need a visa to enter the United States. You must apply for a visa at the US embassy or consulate in your home country. **The visa for which you will be applying as an international student is a nonimmigrant-type visa called the F-1 visa (for academic studies in the US).**

Students are encouraged to apply for their visas early to provide ample time for visa processing. Changes introduced shortly after September 11, 2001 involve extensive and ongoing review of visa issuing practices as they relate to US national security.

In most countries, first-time student-visa applicants are required to appear for an in-person interview. However, each embassy or consulate sets its own interview policies and procedures regarding student visas. You should consult the US embassy in your country for more specific visa application instructions. Keep in mind that June, July, and August are the busiest months in most consular sections, and interview appointments are the most difficult to get during that period. You need to plan ahead to avoid having to make multiple visits to the embassy. To the extent possible, you should provide the documents suggested below, as well as any other documents that might help establish your ties to the local community.

SEVIS FEE REQUIREMENT

All individuals receiving SEVIS Form I-20 with an issuance date of September 1, 2004 or later are required to pay a SEVIS fee before they apply for the F-1 visa. **The fee amount for F-1 students is 100 US dollars. The fee must be paid before the date of the visa interview and the fee payment must be verified before the F-1 visa can be**

issued. You are advised to allow at least 3 business days between the fee payment and your visa interview at a US consulate or embassy. No fee is to be paid for F-2 dependents, i.e. spouses and dependent children of F-1 students.

If you are a citizen of a country exempt from the requirement to have a visa to enter the United States (for example, Canada and Bermuda), you must provide proof of fee payment at the port of entry to the US.

You cannot pay the SEVIS fee at a US consulate or port of entry. The fee must be paid with Form I-901, which must be completed in English with the exact personal information as recorded on your Form I-20. We have included a copy of Form I-901 in this mailing. It is also available online and can be downloaded at www.ice.gov/graphics/sevis/i901/index.htm. Payments can be made in one of the following ways:

1. By mail:

- Download and complete Form I-901.
- Write a check or money order drawn on a bank located in the United States and payable in US dollars.
- Make the check/money order payable to “I-901 Student/Exchange Visitor Processing Fee.”
- Write the name of the student and the SEVIS Identification Number (the 10-digit number found above the bar code on the first page of the SEVIS Form I-20) on the check.
- Mail the completed Form I-901 with payment to:

P.O. Box Address:

I-901 Student/Exchange Visitor
Processing Fee
P.O.Box 970020
St. Louis, MO 63197-0020
USA

OR

Courier/Express Delivery Address:

I-901 Student/Exchange Visitor
Processing Fee
1005 Convention Plaza
St. Louis, MO 63101
USA

- Once the information and payment are processed, the student’s electronic SEVIS record will be updated with the fee payment information.

2. Over the Internet (recommended option):

- You must use a credit card to pay the SEVIS fee online. Any Visa, MasterCard, or American Express credit card issued in the US or abroad can be used.
- Go to www.fmjfee.com/index.jhtml and follow the instructions.
- Once payment is submitted, a receipt can be printed and can be used for immediate verification of fee payment. The verification will also be automatically recorded in the student’s electronic SEVIS record.

3. Western Union Quick Pay Option:

- This option allows you to pay the SEVIS fee in local currency.
- This option is available in any country where Western Union offers its Quick Pay service.
- The properly completed Western Union receipt serves as immediate proof of payment for a visa interview at a US consulate and for admission at a US port of entry.
- Follow these steps:
 - Go online to www.ice.gov/graphics/sevis/i901/wu_instr.htm and print out a copy of the instructions along with a copy of the sample Blue Form.
 - Go to a local participating Western Union Agent location. To find the nearest Western Union Agent location go to www.payment-solutions.com/agent.asp and select a country or call the telephone number of the Western Union Commercial Services Network Agent in your country as listed in your phone book.
 - Request and fill out the Blue Form. This form may show words such as “Payment Services” or “Quick Pay” printed in the applicable local language. However, please note that all Quick Pay forms will be blue. You must fill out all appropriate information.

NOTE: US embassies and consulates can issue your F-1 visa only within 120 days prior to the start date of study (this date is recorded on the first page of your Form I-20).

If you apply for a visa more than 120 days before the start date indicated on your Form I-20, the US embassy or consulate will hold your application until it is able to issue the visa. Consular officials will use that extra time to conduct any of the necessary special clearances or other processes that may be required.

NOTE: According to Department of Homeland Security regulations, new F-1 students may be allowed to enter the United States only within 30 days prior to the start date indicated on the Form I-20. Please consider this date carefully when making travel plans to the US.

WHAT IS NEEDED TO APPLY FOR AN F-1 VISA FOR THE FIRST TIME?

Because each student’s personal and academic situation is different, two students applying for the same visa may be asked different questions and may be required to submit different documents. For that reason, the guidelines that follow are general and can be abridged or expanded by consular officers overseas, depending on each student’s situation.

All applicants for an F-1 visa must provide:

- A Form I-20 issued by Oberlin College. **Be sure to sign the first page of your I-20 and provide all pages of the form for the interview.**
- An Application Form DS-156, together with a Form DS-158. Both forms must be completed and signed. Some applicants will also be required to complete and sign

Form DS-157. Form DS-156 must be the February 2003 edition, either the electronic “e-form application” or the non-electronic version. Blank forms are available free of charge at all US consular offices and on the www.unitedstatesvisas.gov website.

- A passport valid for at least six months after your proposed date of entry into the United States.
- One (1) 2x2 photograph. The required photograph must be an unmounted, full-face photo taken within the last six months. It must be submitted stapled or glued to the Application Form DS-156. See the www.unitedstatesvisas.gov website for detailed photo requirements.
- A receipt showing payment of the visa application fee. For up-to-date information on current fees, contact the U.S. embassy/consulate in your home country. **NOTE: The visa application fee is different from the SEVIS fee.**

All applicants for an F-1 visa should be prepared to provide:

- A receipt showing payment of the SEVIS fee (see SEVIS fee requirement section above). This information should be available in your electronic SEVIS record but you are also advised to have a receipt with you at the time of the visa interview.
- Transcripts and diplomas from previous schools attended.
- Scores from standardized tests required by Oberlin College, such as TOEFL and SAT.
- Financial evidence that shows you or the people sponsoring you have sufficient funds to cover your tuition and living expenses during the period of your intended study. For example, if you or your sponsor are salaried employees, you can provide income tax documents and original bank statements. If you or your sponsor own a business, you can show business registration, licenses, tax documents and original bank statements.

WHAT DO CONSULAR OFFICERS LOOK FOR?

Evidence of Residence Abroad – The consular officer may not issue a student visa unless satisfied that the applicant: (1) has a residence abroad, (2) has no intention of abandoning that residence, and (3) intends to depart from the United States upon completion of the course of study.

Evidence of English Proficiency – If your Form I-20 indicates that proficiency in English is required for pursuing the selected course of study and that no arrangements have been made to overcome any English-language deficiency, the consular officer must determine whether you have the necessary proficiency. To this end, the officer must conduct the visa interview in English.

□ **Determining Financial Status of F-1 Students** – the phrase "sufficient funds to cover expenses" means that you must establish the unlikelihood of either becoming a public charge or of resorting to unauthorized US employment for financial support. You must provide documentary evidence that sufficient funds are, or will be, available to defray all expenses during the entire period of anticipated study. This does not mean that you must have cash immediately available to cover the entire period of intended study, which may last several years. The consular officer must, however, require credible documentary evidence that you have enough readily available funds to meet all expenses for the first year of study.

□ **Educational Qualifications for F-1 Students** – consular officers are not expected to assume the role of admissions counselors to determine whether you are qualified to pursue the desired course of study, but are expected to be alert to three specific factors: (1) that you have successfully completed a course of study equivalent to that normally required of an American student seeking enrollment at the same level; (2) that you haven't submitted forged or altered transcripts of previous or related study or training which Oberlin College has accepted as valid, and (3) that Oberlin College hasn't accepted your alleged previous course of study or training as the equivalent of its normal requirements when, in fact, this is not the case.