

Visa and Immigration Information for F-1 Students

Qualifying for an F-1 visa:

U.S. federal regulations state that:

an applicant for a non-immigrant visa shall be presumed to be an immigrant until the consular officer is satisfied that the applicant is entitled to a non-immigrant status. [22 CFR 41.11]

Therefore, to qualify for a student visa, you must show the visa officer that you have a permanent residence and other ties outside of the U.S. which will compel you to leave the U.S. at the end of your temporary stay. Ways to demonstrate permanent residence and strong ties differ from country to country, city to city, person to person. Some examples of ties to your home country are a job when you finish your studies in the U.S.; a house; immediate family members; a bank account; membership in professional, religious or social organizations; and long-range future plans in your country.



What steps do I have to take to apply for an F-1 visa?

- 1) Pay the SEVIS fee (see below for further instructions)
- 2) Sign your I-20 on line #11.
- 3) Go to a U.S. Consulate for an F-1 visa: For an overview of the visa application process you could read <http://unitedstatesvisas.gov/>. For additional information, also visit the Department of State web site at www.travel.state.gov. Then select "Visas" in the blue navigation bar. To obtain your F-1 foreign student visa, you should contact the nearest U.S. Embassy or Consulate for complete information about specific application requirements, procedures, open hours, and length of required processing time. This information is also usually on the Consulate's website, which can be found through the Department of State's web site under "Locate an Embassy". Generally, you will need to prepare the following:
 - Form I-20
 - letter of admission to Towson University
 - financial documents to show your ability to afford your entire program of study at T.U. (You should take the documents you submitted as evidence of financial support when you applied to T.U.: for example, bank statement, letter of support from family or sponsor, scholarship letter, loan approval letter.)
 - evidence of your intention to return to your home country after you complete your studies
 - passport
 - two identical passport format photographs
 - application Form DS-156, DS-157 (for all males 16-45 years of age), and DS-158, available at all consular offices and can be downloaded from the Department of State's web site under "Forms"
 - required visa fee; visa application fee information can be found on the Department of State's web site under "Fees and Reciprocity Tables"
 - SEVIS fee receipt, if available

How much is the SEVIS fee and how do I pay it?

The U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS) is now collecting an additional fee to support the Student and Exchange Visitor Information System (SEVIS). Students applying for F-1 status for the first time and those with a Form I-20 issued for initial attendance with a new SEVIS ID Number must pay the \$100 fee. **(Students entering the U.S. for the first time in F-1 status and those applying for a change of status to F-1 from within the U.S. must pay the fee; those transferring institutions and those changing educational levels at the same university do not have to pay the fee.)** The fee is non-refundable.

The fee can be paid by three methods:

- Through Western Union Quick Pay™ service
- Through the Internet at www.FMJfee.com by using a credit or debit card and completing the online Form I-901 (Fee for Remittance for Certain F, M, and J Nonimmigrants), or
- Through the mail by submitting a completed Form I-901 and a check or money order drawn on a U.S. bank and payable in U.S. currency.

Payment of the SEVIS fee may be made by you or by any other individual, either in the U.S. or abroad, including family or friends. However, anyone paying the fee on your behalf will need to have a copy of your Form I-20 or a completed Form I-901.

The fee must be paid early enough to ensure that the payment can be deposited and recorded in SEVIS prior to the scheduled visa interview. The U.S. Consular Officer giving the interview will confirm fee payment by accessing SEVIS. You can check the status of your fee payment by calling the DHS at 1-785-330-1048 or by accessing their web site at <http://www.ice.gov/graphics/sevis/i901/index.htm>.

Completing the Form

To complete Form I-901, be sure to enter all of your personal information exactly as it appears on your Form I-20. Towson University's School Code of BAL(214F)00040000 can be found in section 2 and your SEVIS ID number is printed above the bar code starting with the letter "N."

Paying through Western Union Quick Pay™ service:

Once you have received your Form I-20 or DS-2019, you can go to your local Western Union to complete Form I-901 and make the payment in local currency. The properly completed Western Union receipt serves as immediate proof of payment for a visa interview at a U.S. consulate and for admission at the U.S. port of entry. Western Union transmits the payment and data to the U.S. government.

Print out and bring a copy of the instructions along with a copy of the sample form to a local participating Western Union Agent location. The instructions can be found at www.ice.gov/graphics/sevis/i901/wu_instr.htm. When you arrive at the Western Union, request and complete the blue form.

Paying on the Internet:

You can make the fee payment by accessing the following web site: <http://www.fmjfee.com> and submitting Form I-901 on-line using a credit card.

MasterCard, Visa, or American Express debit or credit cards are accepted. It does not matter if the card was issued in the United States or overseas. Follow the on-line instructions, include the required credit card information, and print out the payment screen to verify your payment. The printed receipt should be presented at the visa interview or at the U.S. port of entry as proof of payment.

Thus, when paying the fee on the Internet, it is essential that your printer be ready before starting the payment process. Do not exit the receipt page until you have successfully printed the receipt. You will not be able to return to the receipt page.

Paying by Mail:

To pay by mail, you must download and printed Form I-901 from <http://www.fmjfee.com> or use a paper copy of the Form, available from the ISSO upon request.

Your payment must be in U.S. dollars by check, money order or bank draft, drawn on a U.S. bank. Your check, bank draft or money order should be made payable to: "I-901 Student/Exchange Visitor Processing Fee." Also, be sure to print your name and SEVIS ID number in the lower left-hand corner of the check, money order or bank draft. The need for a check, bank draft or money order in U.S. dollars drawn on a U.S. bank does not mean that only a U.S. bank can issue the document. Many foreign banks are able to issue checks or money orders drawn on a U.S. bank, because they are chartered in the United States, or because they are foreign subsidiaries of a U.S. bank, or because they have arrangements with a U.S. bank to issue a check, money order, or foreign draft that is drawn on a U.S. bank.

Mail the payment and Form I-901 to:

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

To send by courier, use the following address:
(Return courier service is available
for an additional \$30.)

I-901 Student/Exchange Visitor Processing Fee
1005 Convention Plaza
St. Louis, MO 63101
United States
Phone Number: 1-314-418-8833 (United States Country Code 011)

The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) will issue an official paper receipt (Form I-797). Although the information should be available to the Visa Officer electronically, it is recommended that the student bring the receipt to the visa interview. Students who file by mail may request that the receipt be mailed by an express delivery service at an additional cost of \$30.

What to do if your request for an F-1 visa is denied:

Sometimes an F-1 visa application at a U.S. Consulate may be denied. Visas can be denied if the Consular Officer is not convinced that the applicant is a **non-immigrant**. A non-immigrant's purpose and intent must be a **temporary** stay in the U.S. Fortunately, a visa denial for this reason is not always permanent. After a denial, the consular officer may agree to reconsider a case, if additional evidence of ties to a country outside the U.S. can be presented.

If your visa application is denied, **before you leave the U.S. Consulate**, obtain an explanation of the specific reason you are denied the visa, and ask about re-application procedures. You will not have to pay the SEVIS fee again if a motion to reopen or motion to reconsider is filed within 30 days of the denial. Also, try to obtain the full name of the officer who interviewed you, as well as her/his fax number and/or e-mail address. The ISSO may be able to help you, if you can tell us this information. However, please be aware that no one but a Consular Officer has the authority to reverse a visa decision. Visa applicants must qualify according to their own circumstances, not on the basis of a sponsor's (or a university's) assurance.

If I am traveling with a stop-over in another country, do I need a visa for that country?

Transit visas (also called Direct Airside Transit) may be required if your flight connects through other countries between your country and the U.S. A transit visa may be required even if a traveler remains on the same aircraft and in the same airport for arrival and departure. Ask your travel agent or airline whether you need a transit visa.

What steps do I have to take to enter the U.S.?

- 1) Make certain that your passport is valid for at least 6 months beyond the date of your expected arrival.
- 2) When you travel, you should keep your passport, Form I-20, and financial documentation available in the carry-on luggage you take with you onto the airplane, as you will need to show those documents to the U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) officer when you arrive in the U.S. (Don't put your documents in your large luggage which goes into the cargo section of the plane, because you will need your documents before you are allowed to open your large luggage.) We also recommend that you bring contact information for the ISSO and Towson University police (in case you need to contact the ISSO when the office is closed). (University Police telephone number is 410.704.2133.)
- 3) You will be handed CF-6059 Customs Declaration Forms and I-94 Arrival-Departure Forms on the airline or at the port of entry to the U.S. Complete them and keep them with your passport.
- 4) Once you arrive in the U.S. or at the land border, you will present all of your documents to a CBP Officer. Make it clear that you are entering the U.S. to be a student.
- 5) *All nonimmigrant visitors* holding visas will participate in US-VISIT, which involves obtaining a scan of two index fingers and a digital photograph. Race, national origin, and religion are NOT factors in the US-VISIT program.
- 6) Once your inspection is complete, the inspecting officer will:
 - Stamp your SEVIS Form I-20 indicating that you are in F-1 classification for duration of status (F-1 D/S)
 - Stamp your I-94 and staple it in your passport (If it is not stapled, be careful not to lose it, and staple it as soon as possible. It is a very important little document.)
- 7) Attend the ISSO's mandatory New International Student Program to complete your immigration processing.



Can I use the Visa Waiver program to come for study at Towson University?

No! Do not use the Visa Waiver program (other names: WTV, Waiver of Tourist Visa, visa waiver pilot program) to enter the U.S. This is a convenient way for people from many countries to travel on vacation to the U.S. However, people planning to study full-time in the U.S. should not use the waiver; they need to obtain Foreign Student (F-1) visa stamps in their passports. **If you use the waiver program, your stay in the U.S. will be limited to 90 days for tourist purposes only. You will not be permitted to extend your stay or change your visa type from within the U.S.** This rule is strictly enforced by the Immigration Service, with no exceptions.

Can I use a Visitor visa?

No! You may not use a B-1/B-2 Visitor visa to come to the U.S. to study full-time. It is now illegal to study full-time and/or toward a degree.

Can I enter in B-2 Prospective Student Status?

If you need to enter the U.S. more than 30 days prior to the report date in line 5 of your I-20, you might be able to enter the U.S. as a "B-2 prospective student." Due to expected upcoming changes in this area of immigration law, you should contact the ISSO for up-to-date information about this option.

For further information...

If you have any questions about obtaining an F-1 visa or about your legal responsibilities to maintain F-1 status, please ask at a U.S. Consulate, or contact our office. Additional information about the legal responsibilities and benefits of F-1 status (such as those regarding travel abroad, and employment within the U.S.) will be provided at the New International Student Program, and is also available from the International Student and Scholar Office lobby, or on the ISSO website (www.towson.edu/isso) at any time.

Can my spouse and/or children join me during my studies?

If your spouse and/or children will join you during your stay in the U.S., you will also need to submit additional evidence of financial support to provide for the expenses of family members. We will then issue a Form I-20 for each dependant to use when applying for an F-2 visa. You will need to submit the name, date of birth, country of birth, country of citizenship and relationship to you, for each family member. Please contact the ISSO if this has not already been completed for your family. Only the F-1 student must pay the SEVIS fee. **Please note that F-2 visa holders may not legally work or study for a degree in the U.S.** If your spouse will be interested in employment or obtaining a degree while s/he is here, please contact us about other visa options **PRIOR TO** your arrival.