

Travel Tips for International Students

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1. TRAVEL WITHIN THE UNITED STATES

Many students think that their passport and visa documents are only needed when traveling abroad. **WRONG!** If you are planning a trip within the United States by car, bus, train or airplane, to U.S. cities near or far, **it is essential** that you have your passport and visa documents with you. Since September 11, there has been heightened security not only at all border crossings, but also at bus terminals, train terminals and airports throughout the United States. Police from multiple agencies; federal, state and municipal, are patrolling these areas. People may be stopped and questioned randomly. Therefore, students are urged to be sure to have their passport, visa documents (I-94 card and I-20) and student ID card with them for **ALL** distance travel. In addition, be sure that **the back page of the I-20 has a current authorizing signature**. If you are applying for a change of non-immigrant status, visa petition or EAD card, be sure to carry your INS (BCIS) receipt notice as well, which proves that you have an application pending with the Immigration Service. A person without valid travel documents can be arrested, threatened with deportation and taken into INS (BCIS) custody.

2. TRAVEL TO CANADA OR MEXICO

For travel to Canada or Mexico, first check to see if a tourist visa will be required to enter either country. You will need to have your passport and visa documents (I-94 card and I-20) with you when you travel, and be certain that **the back page of the I-20 has a current authorizing signature**.

The U.S. Department of State has announced new rules for non-immigrants who use the "automatic revalidation of visa" benefit [22 CFR 41.112(d)] to re-enter the United States after a 30-day or less visit to a "contiguous territory" (Canada, Mexico, and, in the case of F non-immigrants, the "adjacent islands other than Cuba") without having to obtain a new visa prior to re-entry. There are two major changes that took effect April 1, 2002.

First, citizens of "state sponsors of terrorism" (as designated in the State Department's annual "Patterns of Global Terrorism" report) will no longer be eligible for the automatic revalidation of visa benefit. The most recent State Department report (year 2000) was released on April 30, 2001, and lists the following countries as state sponsors of terrorism: Iraq, Iran, Syria, Libya, Sudan, North Korea, and Cuba. Before this rule change, only citizens of Iraq were excluded from the automatic revalidation of visa benefit. This means that a person who is a citizen of Iraq, Iran, Syria, Libya, Sudan, North Korea, or Cuba in the United States in any non-immigrant classification can only enter Canada and return to the United States **IF** they have an unexpired multiple-entry U.S. visa in their passport for their current status.

The second change will affect individuals who choose to apply for a new U.S. visa while in Canada or Mexico. Under the new rule, **ANY** non-immigrant (not just someone from the 7 countries listed above) who chooses to apply for a new visa while in Canada or Mexico will no longer be eligible for the "automatic revalidation" benefit during the course of that trip, but will have to wait until the visa is approved in order to re-enter the United States. Therefore, if the U.S. visa application is denied, that individual will not be permitted to re-enter the United States. See Section 8 of this article, "Applying for a New U.S. Visa at a Consulate Abroad" for additional information on the visa application process.

However, non-immigrants traveling to Canada or Mexico for less than thirty days and returning to the United States (other than citizens of Iraq, Iran, Syria, Libya, Sudan, North Korea, and Cuba) who do not intend to apply for a new U.S. visa can still make use of the automatic revalidation benefit, and re-enter on their expired U.S. visas, as long as they have a valid, unexpired passport, their I-94 card, and a valid and signed I-20.

SPECIAL NOTE ABOUT I-94 DEPARTURE CARDS:

F-1 students with expired U.S. visas who are traveling to Canada, Mexico or adjacent islands for up to 30 days, who will not be applying for a new U.S. visa while there, AND who will be resuming their studies upon their return should NEVER surrender their I-94 card. Canadian or Mexican nationals returning to their home country should surrender their I-94 card as they enter their country, and obtain a new I-94 card the next time they enter the United States. Canadian nationals should be sure to carry with them their financial documentation that verifies the information on their I-20 when getting ready to return to the United States.

3. TRAVEL ABROAD

SHOULD I TRAVEL ABROAD?

Whether or not to travel abroad is a personal decision. Students whose U.S. visas have expired and who will need to apply for new U.S. visas abroad should anticipate longer waiting periods to obtain a new visa and closer scrutiny of their visa documents. It is advisable to check with the U.S. consulate or embassy where you will apply for the visa, or its web site link: <http://travel.state.gov/links.html> BEFORE leaving the United States to determine that particular post's policies and procedures. You should start the visa process at the earliest possible time upon your arrival back in your home country.

Males between the ages of 16 and 45 from Afghanistan, Algeria, Bahrain, Djibouti, Egypt, Eritrea, Indonesia, Iran, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Malaysia, Morocco, Oman, Pakistan, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, Tunisia, the United Arab Emirates and Yemen who will need to renew their U.S. visas while abroad will be required to undergo FBI security checks that may lengthen the processing time for their visa applications by as long as thirty days. Any student in this category should apply for a new visa as early as possible upon their return home to allow ample time for the longer process.

While there is currently legislation before the U.S. Congress that deals with border security, it had not been approved at the time this article was published (mid-April 2002). However, the Executive Branch of the Federal Government (which includes the Department of State and the Immigration and Naturalization Service) can put in place new regulations without Congressional approval. If your college or university has been providing updates to students via e-mail or on the internet, try to stay up-to-date on immigration news by checking these resources periodically.

4. DOCUMENT REVIEW

PASSPORTS

When was the last time you checked the expiration date in your passport? In order to travel, your passport MUST be valid at least six months into the future. Passports may be renewed at your country's embassy or consulate in the United States. If you have access to the world wide web, you can obtain up-to-date information on passport renewal. Point your web browser to <http://www.embassy.org>.

I-20

Be sure your I-20 has not expired. The back of your I-20 form must be signed prior to your departure, especially if it has not been signed within the past six months. If you will need to apply for a new visa, check the front of your I-20 carefully to be sure the field of study, level of study, and source of funds are still correct. If you will need a new I-20, you must provide new proof of financial support. Allow sufficient time for the International Student Office at your school to prepare new visa documents for you.

I-94 ARRIVAL/DEPARTURE CARD

You will need to surrender your I-94 card upon your departure from the United States. You will be issued a new I-94 card upon your re-entry to the United States. SPECIAL NOTE: F-1 students with expired U.S. visas who are traveling to Canada, Mexico or adjacent islands for up to 30 days AND who will be resuming their studies upon their return should NEVER surrender their I-94 card. Canadian or Mexican nationals returning to their home country should surrender their I-94 card as they enter their country, and obtain a new I-94 card the next time they enter the United States. Canadian nationals should be sure to carry with them their financial documentation that verifies the information on their I-20 when getting ready to return to the United States.

U.S. VISA

Check your U.S. visa stamp inside your passport. Has your visa stamp expired? If it is still valid, is it for multiple entries, or has the entry been used up? Finally, is the category for which the visa was issued the status you currently hold (for example, if your visa is F-2, are you currently in F-2 status or did that status change after you entered the United States)? If you are in F-1 status and traveling to Canada, Mexico, or islands adjacent to North America, you do not need a valid U.S. visa as long as you have been maintaining your status, have a valid passport and I-20 and are entering those countries for tourist purposes and your stay will be thirty days or less (you DO need a valid U.S. visa if you are a citizen of Iraq, Iran, Syria, Libya, Sudan, North Korea, or Cuba). However, travel to all other countries will require that you have a valid U.S. visa before you may re-enter the United States. This is especially true if you changed your non-immigrant status while in the United States (for example, changed from F-2 to F-1). This will mean applying for a new visa at the U.S. consulate in the country you will visit. Be sure to see section 8, "Applying for a New Visa at a U.S. Consulate Abroad."

COLLEGE OR UNIVERSITY ID CARD

Carry your current college student ID card with you as supporting documentation.

LETTER OF CERTIFICATION

This is a letter issued by your school that verifies that you are a student and that you are maintaining valid status. Any international student traveling outside the United States for the purposes of applying for a new U.S. visa should request such a letter from their school well in advance of their travel. This letter is **not** needed for travel within the United States or for travel abroad if you have a currently valid U.S. visa in your passport.

MAINTAINING STATUS

Have you been maintaining the conditions of your non-immigrant status? If you are an F-1 student, this means maintaining full time registration each semester at the school you are authorized to attend, refraining from unauthorized employment, not letting your I-20 expire, and following the appropriate procedures for school transfer and extensions. If you think you may have violated the conditions of your status, be sure to speak to staff at your school's international student office BEFORE departing the United States, as you may risk being denied permission to return.

SCHOOL TRANSCRIPT

Have an official copy of your college or university transcript with you ONLY if you will be applying for a new student visa abroad, to show the consular official that you have been making satisfactory progress towards your degree. An increasing number of consulates are beginning to ask for transcripts when students come to renew their student visas. In addition to the transcript, you may also want to have with you a printed copy of your current course schedule, stamped by your school's Registrar's Office.

FOREIGN VISA

If you are visiting a country other than your own, you may need a visitor's visa to enter. Consult that country's embassy or consulate in the United States, or search their web site by visiting a web directory such as <http://www.embassy.org>

FINANCIAL DOCUMENTATION

Documented proof of financial support that appears on your I-20 is only required if you will be applying for a new student visa abroad, OR if you are a national of Canada or Mexico who is traveling home to Canada or Mexico for the summer.

PRACTICAL TRAINING

If you have completed your studies and have applied for Practical Training, you must have your Employment Authorization Document (EAD) with you, as well as your I-20 endorsed for practical training, in order to re-enter the United States. If you are on Practical Training and will need to obtain a new F-1 visa before returning to the United States, it is strongly advised that you have with you a letter from your employer, verifying your employment status. INS (BCIS) regulations state that an F-1 on authorized practical training may depart the country temporarily and re-enter the United States to "resume" employment, which means not only must you have a job offer, but also employment must have already commenced. Students are warned that visa issuance for individuals on practical training can be highly problematic, since you may have a hard time proving that you do not intend to immigrate to the United States. Such students are urged to discuss their situation with staff at their school's international student office before they travel.

5. U.S. VISA POSTS AND SECURITY CONCERNS

Any student who is traveling outside the United States whose U.S. visa has expired will need to renew it at a U.S. visa issuing post abroad before the student can return to the United States. In most cases, the visa application will be filed in your home country. Its important to note that the summer period is an extremely busy time at visa issuing posts due to large numbers of travelers and reduced staff who may be taking vacation. In addition, in the event of any protests, threats or terrorist attacks that are judged to be threatening to U.S. embassy or consulate personnel, government officials at those posts may temporarily close or alter their operational hours. It is advisable to check with the U.S. consulate or embassy, or its web site link: <http://travel.state.gov/links.html> for the most current information, although keep in mind that information on the web site might not necessarily be up-to-date. Some visa issuing posts have stopped accepting non-immigrant visa applications filed in person, and will only accept them by mail or through an approved "drop-off" facility. Drop off or mailed visa applications will always add to the processing time.

6. WATCH YOUR WORDS!

Last Fall, two international students from Syracuse University were escorted off an airplane at Hancock Airport in Syracuse and were closely questioned by legal authorities. Passengers became concerned and notified security officials when the students began to ask questions about the flight time, the engine and other matters about the flight. It turned out that one of the students suffers from motion sickness and was worried about the possible turbulence in this type of aircraft, and how long it would be in the air relative to his medication for air sickness! They were both quite "innocent," and allowed to continue their trip. However, it caused a serious delay in the travel plans of all the passengers, and great anxiety, as you can imagine, for the students and all the passengers. These students were NOT part of any particular ethnic, cultural or religious group which would have 'targeted' them; so one cannot look at this situation as discrimination or "racial profiling." People around them who overheard their questions of the flight attendants were just frightened, and the airplane personnel had to respond. This incident is a good example of why it is best to be cautious and discrete in your conversations while traveling.

7. U.S. IMMIGRATION REQUIREMENTS IF YOU ARE LEAVING YOUR SCHOOL PERMANENTLY

International student advisors are often asked what the immigration requirements are if a student will no longer be continuing at his or her current school, either because the student is returning to his/her home country, or is beginning Practical Training, or because the student is going to begin study at a new school.

Regardless of your plans, retain your old I-20s! These forms represent your immigration history in the United States and should be kept in a safe place as you would any important document. In addition, be sure to let your current school's international student office know that you are leaving.

The U.S. Immigration Service process for transferring your F-1 status from your current school to a new school is the responsibility of the new school's International Student Office. Therefore, it is important that you follow your new school's instructions for reporting to the International Student Office at the beginning of your semester there.

Students in F-1 status who will be ending their studies in May but have no plans to apply for practical training, continue at a new school or in a new field or level of study, or seek a change of non-immigrant status must depart the United States within sixty days of completion of their academic program.

8. APPLYING FOR A NEW VISA AT A U.S. CONSULATE ABROAD

Remember when you applied for your U.S. visa the first time? Applying for a new visa to replace the one that has expired in your passport requires you to present similar documentation.

GENERAL INFORMATION

Many of the U.S. consular posts overseas have their own web sites. The initiative is part of an effort to disseminate information on visa application procedures specific to the individual posts. Information on consular post policies, procedures and documentary requirements can be obtained via these web sites which may be accessed from the State Department's main web page at: <http://travel.state.gov/links.html>. One feature that a number of the consulates have is an e-mail option. This may be used to ask specific questions of the consulate. The consulate web sites may prove to be a valuable resource for international students and scholars.

VISA APPLICATION FORMS

The U.S. State Department has revised its visa application forms. The new forms are DS-156, the non-immigrant visa application (to download a copy, go to: <http://travel.state.gov/DS-0156.pdf>) and DS-157, the supplemental non-immigrant visa application (to download a copy, go to: <http://travel.state.gov/DS-0157.pdf>). The DS-157 is used in conjunction with the DS-156 to determine visa classification and eligibility. The DS-157 must be completed by all males between the ages of 16 and 45, but consular officers reserve the right to require a DS-157 from any applicant for any visa classification. These application forms are also available as paper copies at all United States visa-issuing posts abroad.

The State Department has also prepared two information sheets about student visas on its web site which may be useful to you as an international student. They may be obtained at http://travel.state.gov/foreign_student_visas_handout.html and http://travel.state.gov/what_consuls_look_for.html

SECURITY CONCERNS

All visa applicants should anticipate longer processing times for their visa applications and closer scrutiny of their documentation.

FBI security checks are now required for males between the ages of 16 and 45 from Afghanistan, Algeria, Bahrain, Djibouti, Egypt, Eritrea, Indonesia, Iran, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Malaysia, Morocco, Oman, Pakistan, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, Tunisia, the United Arab Emirates and Yemen. The FBI security checks are likely to lengthen the processing time for visa applications by as long as thirty days.

Students who are from countries that have been determined by the U.S. Secretary of State to be sponsors of international terrorism; Iraq, Iran, North Korea, Syria, Libya, Sudan and Cuba should anticipate extremely close review of their visa documents and a high likelihood of visa denial.

VISA APPLICATION REQUIREMENTS

To apply for a new visa, you will need to complete application form DS-156, and if you are male, also the DS-157, the supplemental application. You will also need one photograph 1 and 1/2 inches square, showing full face, without head covering, against a light background. You will need to have sufficient currency to pay the required visa fees, or a receipt showing that you have paid the visa fees. You will need your currently valid I-20 form, with a recent signature on the back, or a new form if there has been a change in your program of study, level of program, or source of funding. You will want to have a letter of certification from your current school, verifying your enrollment as well as the fact that you have been maintaining valid F-1 status.

You will also need to show proof of financial support, binding ties to your home country which you do not intend to abandon, and that you plan to return to your home country upon the conclusion of your studies. Some U.S. consulates will ask you how you plan to use your U.S. education in your home country. Many consulates will ask you to present copies of your academic transcripts to prove that you have been maintaining student status in the United States and that you have been making satisfactory progress in your program. Plan to have copies with you, but do not present it to a consular officer unless specifically asked to do so.

WHERE AND WHEN TO APPLY

If you are visiting your home country, you should apply at the U.S. consulate that has jurisdiction over your place of residence. If you will be traveling to a third country, you will need to apply for your visa at the U.S. consulate there. A consulate not in your home country will only issue you a visa if you can prove that you have been maintaining valid status while in the United States.

There have been significant staff reductions and increased work loads at many U.S. consulates abroad. The summer is also a peak travel period. Some consulates may be temporarily closed or have undertaken heightened security measures due to concern over terrorist threats. It is possible that some U.S. consulates may choose not to accept visa applications except from residents of that country. Therefore, you may wish to contact the specific consulate you plan to visit BEFORE your departure from the United States, to be sure that they will accept an application from you.

In ALL cases, apply for your visa AS EARLY AS POSSIBLE! Consult the appropriate consulate by phone, fax or web site to ascertain visa application procedures and requirements and approximate processing time.

VISA APPLICATIONS IN CANADA OR MEXICO

New U.S. State Department regulations that took effect in April 2002 state that any non-immigrant who chooses to apply for a new visa while in Canada or Mexico (but is not a citizen of either of those two countries) and whose visa application is subsequently denied will not be permitted to re-enter the United States. Therefore, international students should consider this matter carefully when applying for a U.S. visa in Canada or Mexico.

9. STRATEGIES FOR A SUCCESSFUL RE-ENTRY INTO THE UNITED STATES

You should expect to go through both U.S. Immigration and U.S. Customs at the U.S. port of entry. You may also be required to go through a pre-inspection procedure at certain airports abroad.

When you give your documents to the INS (BCIS) inspector at your U.S. port of entry or pre-boarding checkpoint, you should initially present **only** your passport, I-94 card (which was distributed on the airplane), and signed I-20. Your school ID card and other materials are meant to be used only for "supporting documentation" purposes, if you are asked additional questions or asked to produce additional documentation.

A U.S. immigration official who is presented with more documents than is customarily required might become suspicious, so you are well advised to show only your passport, I-94 and I-20. Then you have the comfort of knowing that you have additional supporting documentation with you if needed.

Expect close scrutiny of your documents. Answer all questions politely and **briefly**. Do not offer any information that goes beyond the scope of the question asked you.

In certain cases, if there is some problem with your documents, you may be issued a 30-day entry on your I-94 card and issued a form I-515, usually with instructions to see your international student advisor. Examine your I-94 card carefully as you leave the immigration booth. F-1 students should have their I-94s marked "D/S" which means Duration of Status, along with a stamp indicating the date you entered the United States. If an expiration date is written on the I-94 instead of "D/S," and you are in F status, go to your school's international student office as soon as possible.

Anyone who is denied admission at a U.S. port of entry should be very cautious about arguing with the immigration official. You may risk being issued "expedited removal," which now entails a five-year bar on admission to the U.S. If you are denied admission, first try to contact your school's international student office for assistance, but also make it known to the Immigration Official that you are willing to withdraw your application for admission to the country rather than be subject to expedited removal.

10. STAYING INFORMED WHILE YOU TRAVEL

Much is being reported in the national and international media regarding the aftermath of September 11, and proposed federal laws and regulations that may have an impact on foreign nationals coming to the United States. If your college or university has been providing updates to students via e-mail or the internet, try to stay up-to-date on immigration news by checking these resources periodically.

11. KEEPING YOUR VALUABLES SAFE WHEN YOU TRAVEL

The following information on laptop computer security is also applicable for other items of value such as briefcases and carry-on bags while you are in domestic or international travel status:

Items left unattended for even a very brief period have become a premium target for theft. All travelers should remain on constant alert as they traverse through all airports. Here are some common examples of methods used by thieves to separate you from your belongings.

One method involved the use of security x-ray machines. The first thief precedes the traveler through the security checkpoint and then loiters around the area where the carry-on luggage had already been examined. When the traveler places his laptop computer or bag onto the conveyer belt of the x-ray machine, the second thief steps in front of the traveler and sets off the metal detector.

While the traveler is being delayed, the first thief removes the traveler's laptop computer or bag from the conveyor belt just after it has gone through the x-ray machine and quickly disappears.

Another method of theft can occur while the traveler is walking through a crowd of people in the airport terminal. The traveler, who may have a laptop computer or small bag on top of his or her roll bag, is preceded by the first thief. Just as the traveler gets around the crowd of people, the first thief stops abruptly, causing the traveler to stop abruptly. When they stop momentarily, a second thief, who had been following just behind them, quickly removes the traveler's laptop computer or small bag from the roll bag and disappears into the crowd.

All travelers, both international and domestic, are urged to be alert to the above methods used in stealing valuable items and always be mindful of any abrupt diversions during your travels. Report any losses immediately to the authorities. Keep serial numbers, make, and model information of your laptop computers, or of any items of value, separate from the item so you can give precise information to authorities if the items are stolen.