

ICE Guidelines for Fall 2020 (Applied for Spring 2021)

As of July 14th, SEVP has rescinded the guidance provided on July 6th for fall 2020 enrollment. The following FAQ has been created to provide you with more information regarding this update as of July 24th, 2020.

ADMISSIONS: ATTENDING UTRGV AS AN F-1 STUDENT

1. If I am unable to make an entry in the U.S. for Fall 2020, can I transfer the I-901 SEVIS Fee payment to the next session?

As long as you maintain the same SEVIS record, there is no need to transfer your I-901 SEVIS Fee payment. If you are unable to make an entry in the U.S. in fall 2020, you may defer your enrollment to the next available session (Spring 2021). Keep in mind that you also have the option to enroll fully online from your home country until you are able to attend UTRGV physically. If you will be deferring your attendance for a future term, please contact our International Admissions Specialist, Jessica Cantu at jessica.cantu@utrgv.edu

Fee transfers are available for F-1 students who have already paid the I-901 SEVIS Fee and who:

- Reapply for a visa within 12 months of the date of their initial I-901 SEVIS Fee payment or
- Are from a Visa Waiver Program country and reapply for status as a student at the port of entry within 12 months of the date of their initial I-901 SEVIS Fee payment.

Refer to the I-901 SEVIS Fee Frequently Asked Questions on <https://ICE.gov/SEVP> for additional information about reapplying fees.

2. I am a new international student scheduled to start my studies at UTRGV in Fall 2020. Will I be able to start my studies as planned?

- New international students outside of the United States may take classes 100% online while you remain outside of the United States (No active F-1 visa status).
- International students with an INITIAL SEVIS I-20 may enter the United States if your schedule is not 100% online, therefore, you must enroll in at least one face-to-face or hybrid and the rest could be online.
- If you did a change of educational level or pursuing a second degree, you must remain in the U.S. to be eligible to pursue a full course of study that is 100% online. If you are not in the U.S. (that means that your I-20 has a remark of "Outside the United States due to COVID-19."), you must make an entry and must enroll in at least one face-to-face or hybrid and the rest could be online.
- For F-1 transfer students, SEVP's temporary guidance does not permit students in Initial/Transfer status in SEVIS to begin a new program without making an entry.

3. What does "Initial" status mean on your I-20 and what are the requirements for students under this status if they have already arrived in the United States?

Initial students are those that have never attended a U.S. institution (first time with an I-20), have or will apply for an F-1 visa, and are pending to report their arrival to IASS when physically in the U.S. Initial status

students can also be considered those that have failed to maintain F-1 status and were issued a new I-20 for a re-entry.

Students in Initial status that are currently in the United States must report during our Fall 2020 Virtual New International Student Orientation so that we may activate your SEVIS record.

Even though IASS has already issued I-20s for the fall semester, we are aware that due to the COVID-19 pandemic, there are some Embassy closures and travel restrictions. If for some reason the F-1 visa is not granted for the Fall due to these issues, UTRGV is encouraging all international students to enroll in online classes and complete their Fall 2020 semester.

If travel is permitted, and F-1 visas are granted at a later time, students may arrive on-campus to continue their studies in the Spring 2021 semester. Otherwise, students may continue to enroll in online classes and complete their Spring 2021 semester. However, they will not have a valid F-1 status until the student make an entry into the U.S. and reports to our office to activate their record in SEVIS.

4. If I am a continuing student pursuing a new program (i.e. change of educational level or a second degree), would I be able to enroll in online classes?

Yes, if you remained in the U.S. you may pursue a full course of study that is 100% online.

5. Based on SEVP's guidance from January 2020 and March 2020, is SEVP encouraging UTRGV to cancel admission for new students?

No, UTRGV is still accepting new students and maintaining standard operations for Fall 2020.

Students can enroll in the following instructional methods during Fall 2020 Term:

- Attend UTRGV for in-person, hybrid, online asynchronous or online synchronous course instruction (If F-1 visa has been granted and student has been admitted to the U.S.)
- Remain in home country and enroll fully online (No active F-1 status)
- Defer enrollment for following term: Spring 2021

6. Will you be sending me an original I20 with an ink signature?

Due to COVID-19, on March 26 2020 the Student and Exchange Visitor Program (SEVP) allowed DSOs to send I-20s to student via email addresses with electronic signatures. Forms I-20 that are issued electronically—will be valid for 12 months as with a regular ink signature.

SEVP coordinated with both the Department of State and CBP regarding the policy to allow electronic issuance and signing of Forms I-20 for the duration of the COVID- 19 emergency. Both agencies are in support of this action.

Please read this link for more information. <https://www.ice.gov/doclib/sevis/pdf/bcm2003-03.pdf>. We encourage you print this document and take it with you during your Consulate/Embassy Visa Interview.

7. What methods will be used to sign the I-20's?

I-20's can be signed in the following ways:

- Email a scanned version of the physically signed Form I-20;
- Email a digitally signed Form I-20 using electronic signature software; or
- Email a digitally signed Form I-20 that contains a digitally reproduced copy of a physical signature.

8. I graduated from an U.S. High School in May/June, but I have been in my home country since March, will I be allowed to use my student visa if I get admitted to UTRGV?

Yes. However, your SEVIS record must be transferred within the 60-day grace period to be eligible to continue maintaining F-1 status. We recommend that you contact your HS school official. If your 60-days grace period has expired, please contact our office to guide you on the process for a new “Initial” I-20.

9. Can I expect any issues, if I am transferring to UTRGV, and I am currently outside of the U.S. with my transfer I-20?

You will be required to have a valid F-1 visa and make an entry into the U.S. in order to have an active F-1 status. Once you make an entry and have an active status, you will be allowed to take online courses from outside the U.S. or inside the U.S. SEVP’s temporary guidance does not permit students in Initial/Transfer status in SEVIS to begin a new program without making an entry.

JULY 15, 2020 UPDATE: NEW GUIDANCE FOR FALL 2020

1. What impact does the July 15, 2020 SEVP decision mean for F-1 continuing students?

This means that during Fall 2020 students will be allowed take fully online courses from the U.S. or from abroad. Same guidance as in March when COVID began. You also have the option to take classes in the different instructional methods that UTRGV is offering for Fall 2020 [in-person, reduced seating(hybrid), online asynchronous, and online synchronous].

Under current conditions, if an Active F-1 student leaves the United States to complete their fall term online, their SEVIS record should remain in Active status and will not be terminated. SEVP will allow F-1 students to temporarily count online classes toward a full course of study, even if they have left the United States and are taking the online classes from abroad.

2. Do I need to let IASS know that I will not be in the US and taking online courses elsewhere?

Yes, like in the Spring semester, IASS will need to know if you have departed the U.S. as we are required by SEVP to add notations to your SEVIS record indicating you are no longer in the U.S. and have departed due to COVID-19. This notation will help you to follow the proper guidelines and maintain your F-1 status.

3. If SEVP guidance requires to return to normal operations for Spring 2021, will I be required to return to the U.S. to study?

Due to COVID-19, it is too early to know what the Spring semester will look like. We will let you know as soon as we get more guidance for next year.

4. Are electronic I-20 still be valid and accepted during Fall 2020?

Yes. Electronic I-20s—as permitted during the COVID-19 emergency—will remain valid until students have a need for an updated Form I-20 or until a travel endorsement is required (electronic or ink

signature is valid for 12 months).

Please read this link for more information. <https://www.ice.gov/doclib/sevis/pdf/bcm2003-03.pdf>. We encourage you to print these documents in case you are questioned by an immigration officer.

FULL COURSE OF STUDY REQUIREMENTS AND ONLINE LEARNING

1. My classes are being shifted from in-person to on-line because of COVID-19. How will this affect my F-1 status?

The Student and Exchange Visitor Program (SEVP) has indicated that because of the Pandemic, F-1 students will maintain their status even if their in-person courses are shifted to an on-line format or other remote delivery.

2. As an F-1 Student can I take more than one online course?

SEVP will allow international students to take a fully online course load for Fall 2020.

3. Can I take the rest of my on-campus classes online from my home country?

If you are planning to graduate in Fall, we recommend that you remain in the U.S., so that you can apply for OPT. However, if you wish to return to your home country, you can continue to participate in your classes fully online and you will be able to maintain your F-1 Visa status active. However, you must notify IASS that this will be your plan.

4. I have decided to remain outside of the U.S. for the fall semester. How do I officially let IASS know?

IASS will be emailing you a survey form (similar to the Spring 2020) where you will need to notify us regarding your plans. Surveys will be sent August 3rd with a deadline of Aug. 10th. Registration holds will be placed after this date until you fill out the survey. A notation on your SEVIS record will indicate the following: "Departed the United States due to COVID-19."

5. What are the enrollment options that continuing F-1 Students have during Fall Term 2020?

Students have the following options available:

- Attend UTRGV for in-person, hybrid, online asynchronous or online synchronous course instruction (you will have an active F-1 status)
- Enroll fully online from abroad (you will have an active F-1 status)
- Request a Reduced Course Load (must be approved to have an active F-1 status)
- Take a leave of absence (Terminate F-1 status)

6. If I drop below 12 hrs. (UG)/ 9 hrs. (GR) because I prefer not to take my in-person courses online due to the COVID-19 outbreak, will this affect my F-1 status?

F-1 students must remain enrolled full-time or must be approved for Reduced Course Load in order to maintain their F-1 status. Students may request a Reduced Course Load (RCL) by emailing international@utrgv.edu. For more information, please contact your International Student Advisor.

7. I am thinking of withdrawing from all my classes and returning home. What should I do?

Before you decide to drop your courses and return home, please be aware that the new guidelines from SEVP will allow you to enroll in online courses from abroad AND still maintain your F-1 Visa status. However, if you want to take a temporary leave of absence or authorized early withdrawal, please contact our office at international@utrgv.edu for more information.

8. As an F-1 student, if I withdraw from my fall 2020 semester and return home, what do I need to do if I want to come back in the future?

If you will be out of the country for fewer than 5 months and your F-1 visa is still valid, you will NOT need to reapply. Simply email IASS at international@utrgv.edu to let us know your plans and an advisor will guide you as to the next steps in your process.

- If you will be out of the country for 5 months or longer and your F-1 visa is still valid, you will need to enter using an initial I-20 and pay the SEVIS fee again. Please note that this option may eliminate your ability to apply for OPT, CPT, and on-campus employment.
- If you will be out of the country for 5 months or longer and your visa is **no** longer valid, you will need a new I-20 and you will need to apply for a new F-1 visa at a U.S consulate as well as pay the SEVIS fee again. Please note that this option may eliminate your ability to apply for OPT, CPT, and on-campus employment.

9. With IASS still working remotely, how can I contact my International Student Advisor?

International students can receive assistance by one of the three options below:

- Leave a voice message on our Office Phone lines 956.665.2922 / 956.882.7092 and we will return your call promptly.
- Email us at: international@utrgv.edu
- Book a ZOOM appointment at: <https://www.utrgv.edu/iass/current-students/international-student-advisor/index.htm>

10. If I can study outside of the U.S. for the Fall 2020 semester, does this mean that I can choose to stay and complete my whole degree outside of the U.S.?

Once SEVP requires for schools to return to standard operations, all students will be required to come back to campus and live in the U.S in order to maintain their F-1 status. Students who fail to do so will have their F-1 status terminated.

11. Due to COVID, I am having trouble finding classes to register for and my program has had to cancel classes making it hard for me to enroll full-time. Is there any way I could request an RCL?

Students who are not able to register for a full course load due to no class availability from the program, will be allowed to register in less than full time according to the new regulations. Please contact us at

international@utrgv.edu for more information. Please note that if a student is simply unwilling to take a full course of study because it is only offered online, they should request a temporary absence.

MEDICAL CONCERNS

1. I have a medical condition that makes me more at risk for COVID, can I be excused from not attending the Fall 2020 semester?

Before withdrawing from your courses, we would recommend the following options:

- Email international@utrgv.edu and explain your situation
- Look into the possibility of having a fully online course load
- Talk to your [Student Accessibility Services](#) and discussing special accommodations
- Request a Medical Reduced Course Load
- Or Request an Authorized Early Withdraw

2. I have classes in-person, but I am scared to enroll for the semester due to COVID. May I use a medical RCL in this case?

No, Medical Reduce Course Load can only be used if you have a medical condition and you have a current approved medical recommendation letter. Please review the Medical Reduced Course Load form for more guidance.

3. What if I am sick and cannot continue in my Fall 2020 classes?

You may apply for a Medical Reduced Course Load. The request will be reviewed by the Office of Student Accessibility Services. After Student Accessibility Services and IASS, reviews your request and it is approved you will be able to proceed. RCLs for Medical Conditions may only be approved for up to 12 months on a semester by semester basis. You will be allowed to remain in the U.S. for the duration of your approved reduced course load. Please do not drop your courses until you have met with an International Student Advisor.

However, you are still to eligible to request an authorized early withdrawal and come back to UTRGV at a later time (you will need to make a departure from the U.S.)

4. I have insurance coverage from UT-Student Health Insurance Plan, who can I contact if I have questions regarding coverage?

Please contact Blue Cross Blue Shield Customer Service at 1-855-267-0214 and have your insurance card ready or visit : <https://utrgv.myahpcare.com/> for more information.

EMPLOYMENT

1. I have an on-campus job, that will be conducted remotely for Fall 2020. Can F-1 students engage in remote work and perform their work duties from home for on-campus employment?

If the current on-campus employment opportunity has transitioned to remote work or the employment can be done through remote means, students may continue to engage in on-campus employment remotely.

2. I am taking my Fall 2020 course fully online, but my on-campus employment requires me to be on campus. Will I have any trouble crossing into the U.S. from Mexico?

We highly advise students that you get a letter from your Supervisor on Department letterhead stating you are an essential employee and why you are required to be on campus.

3. During Fall 2020, will I be allowed to work more than my allowed 19 hours a week since I am taking classes fully online?

No, while school is in session, you are only allowed to work up to 19 hours (20 for Graduate Assistantship). You are only allowed to work more hours when school is not in session or during summer break.

4. Can I with participate in curricular practical training (CPT) while I am abroad?

Students may engage in CPT during their time abroad, provided they are:

- Enrolled in a program of study in which CPT is integral to the program of study.
- Their DSO authorized CPT in advance of the CPT start date; and
- Either the employer has an office outside the United States, or the employer can assess student engagement and attainment of learning objectives electronically.

5. Since I have been outside of the US since March, does time spent studying outside of the United States during the COVID-19 emergency count toward the one-year requirement for CPT and OPT?

An F-1 student accrues eligibility for practical training whether they are inside or outside of the United States during the COVID-19 emergency if the student is in Active F-1 status in SEVIS and meets the requirements of their school's procedural change plans submitted to SEVP.

6. When should I apply for OPT if I am graduating in Fall 2020?

You may submit your application as early as 90 days before the last class day of fall which is September 11, 2020 or 60 days after graduation which is February 8th, 2021. We are encouraging students to apply as soon as possible because there might be some changes in USCIS that may delay the approval process.

7. Due to COVID-19, what is IASS's advice to students who want to apply for OPT? Is there any chance that students would be able to apply for post-completion OPT from outside the United States?

IASS is highly encouraging students to return to the U.S. (if abroad) before the end of semester and mail out your OPT Package to USCIS within the U.S.

8. Once I receive my OPT Card, but I can only find work under 20 hours a week. What can I do to stay in status and accrue unemployment days?

For the duration of the COVID-19 emergency, you can work less than 20 hours and keep your F-1 OPT status. Finding a volunteer position will also stop the unemployment clock.

9. Will there be an extension or suspension of the 90-day/150-day allowed period of unemployment for OPT and STEM OPT during the COVID-19 emergency?

DHS is evaluating this issue but has not yet determined whether to implement a specific exemption for exceeding the regulatory limits for unemployment of 90 days for OPT and 150 days for STEM OPT.

10. Can F-1 students who were previously employed and are now unemployed due to COVID-19 apply for unemployment benefits?

Students who are unemployed due to COVID-19 should contact [Texas Workforce Commission](#) for more information.

TRAVEL

1. Will I need a travel endorsement to return to the U.S. for Fall 2020?

Only if the last signature on your I-20 is older than 12 months. Travel endorsements with an ink or electronic signature are valid for 12 months.

2. I have been outside the U.S. since spring break and/or summer break and have not returned since then. Will I be able to return to the U.S. for Fall 2020?

Please review the [CDC travel restrictions](#). Make sure you make timely decisions in preparations to come back. As a reminder, when traveling back into the U.S. you must have all proper nonimmigrant documents:

- Form I-20 (with valid ink or electronic travel signatures issued within the last 12 months)
- Valid Passport
- Valid F-1 Visa (exception: Automatic Visa Revalidation)
- I-94

UTRGV students who are travelling from abroad are also required to review the following guidelines for returning to campus. <https://www.utrgv.edu/coronavirus/travel/index.htm>

3. If I remain in the United States due to COVID-19 and my passport expires, what do I need to do to renew it?

Students in this situation should contact their country's embassy or consulate to identify options for passport extension or renewal. If students decide to depart the United States, they will not be eligible to apply for admission until they renew their passport and must also have a valid F-1 visa for re-entry.

4. I left the U.S. to complete my last semester online. Can my International Student Advisor extend my program end date on my current Forms I-20 so I can return to the United States at the end of the semester (December) for graduation ceremonies?

IASS cannot extend students' I-20 program end dates to accommodate graduation ceremonies. Students wishing to return to the United States to attend graduation for fall 2020 will have the following options:

- Students can return to the United States prior to the program end date on the Form I-20 and attend their graduation during the 60-day grace period.
- Students who intend to continue their study in the United States can return with a pending change of educational level or transfer Form I-20.
- Students can return to the United States on another visa classification (i.e., B-2 visitor visa).

The information contained is provided for educational purposes only and not as part of an attorney-client relationship or personal immigration advice. This FAQ is not a substitute for expert legal advice.