

# ICE Updated Guidelines for Fall 2020

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, SEVP has rescinded the guidance provided on July 6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

## ADMISSIONS: ATTENDING UTRGV AS AN F-1 STUDENT

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

As long as students maintain the same SEVIS record, there is no need to transfer the I-901 SEVIS Fee payment. If students are unable to make an entry in the U.S. in fall 2020, then they may defer their enrollment to the next available session (Spring 2021). Keep in mind that the student will also have the option to enroll fully online from their home country until they are able to attend UTRGV physically. If the student will be deferring their attendance for a future term, please contact our International Admissions Specialist, Jessica Cantu at [jessica.cantu@utrgv.edu](mailto: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. What does “Initial” status mean on the 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 their 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 the 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 the Spring 2021 semester. However, they will not have a valid F-1 status until the student makes an entry into the U.S. and reports to our office to activate their record in SEVIS.

**3. 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

**4. Will IASS be sending continuing F-1 students an original I-20 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 all students to print this document and take it with them during their Consulate/Embassy Visa Interview.

**5. 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.

**6. If an initial F-1 students graduated from an U.S. High School in May/June, but have been in their home country since March, will they be allowed to use their student visa if they get admitted into UTRGV?**

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

**7. Can students expect any issues, if they are transferring to UTRGV, and they are currently outside of the U.S. with their transfer I-20?**

Students 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 students make an entry and have an active status, they 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. Students 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 continuing F-1 students need to let IASS know that they will not be in the US and taking online courses elsewhere?**

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

### **3. If SEVP guidance requires to return to normal operations for Spring 2021, will students 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 students know as soon as we get more guidance for next year.

### **4. Are electronic I-20 still 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 all students to print these documents in case they are questioned by an immigration officer.

## **FULL COURSE OF STUDY REQUIREMENTS AND ONLINE LEARNING**

### **1. Classes are being shifted from in-person to on-line because of COVID-19. How will this affect F-1 students?**

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. Can F-1 students take more than one online course?**

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

**3. Can F-1 students take the rest of their on-campus classes online from their home country?**

We recommend that students who are graduating in the fall remain in the U.S., so that they can apply for OPT. However, if a student wish to return to their home country, they can continue to participate in their classes fully online and they will be able to maintain their F-1 Visa status active. However, students must notify IASS that this will be their plan.

**4. If a student has decided to remain outside of the U.S. for the fall semester, How do they officially let IASS know?**

IASS will be emailing all students a survey form (similar to the Spring 2020) where they will need to notify us regarding their plans. Surveys will be sent August 3<sup>rd</sup> with a deadline of Aug. 10<sup>th</sup>. Registration holds will be placed after this date until students fill out the survey. The notation on the 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 (students will have an active F-1 status)
- Enroll fully online from abroad (students 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 a student drops below 12 hrs. (UG)/ 9 hrs. (GR) because they prefer not to take in-person courses online due to the COVID-19 outbreak, will this affect their 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](mailto:international@utrgv.edu). For more information, please contact an International Student Advisor.

**7. If an F-1 student is thinking of withdrawing from all their classes and returning home, what should they do?**

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

**8. If an F-1 student withdraws from the fall 2020 semester and returns home, what do they need to do if they want to come back in the future?**

If a student will be out of the country for fewer than 5 months and their F-1 visa is still valid, they will NOT need to reapply. Students are encouraged to email IASS at [international@utrgv.edu](mailto:international@utrgv.edu) to let us know of their plans and an advisor will guide them as to the next steps in the process.

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

**9. With IASS still working remotely, how can F-1 students contact an 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 the call promptly.
- Email us at: [international@utrgv.edu](mailto:international@utrgv.edu)
- Book a ZOOM appointment at: <https://www.utrgv.edu/iass/current-students/international-student-advisor/index.htm>

**10. If F-1 students can study outside of the U.S. for the Fall 2020 semester, does this mean that they can choose to stay and complete their 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, some students are having trouble finding classes to register for and their programs have had to cancel classes making it hard for them to enroll full-time. Is there any way they 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](mailto: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. If an F-1 student has a medical condition that makes them more at risk for COVID, can they be excused from not attending the Fall 2020 semester?**

Before a student withdraws from their courses, we would recommend the following options:

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

**2. If a student has classes in-person, but they are scared to enroll for the semester due to COVID, can they use a medical RCL for this?**

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

**3. What if a student is sick and cannot continue for Fall 2020 classes?**

F-1 students in this situation 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 the request and if it is approved then they will be able to proceed. RCLs for Medical Conditions may only be approved for up to 12 months on a semester by semester basis. Students will be allowed to remain in the U.S. for the duration of the approved RCL. Students are not encouraged to drop their courses until they have met with an International Student Advisor.

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

**4. If a student has insurance coverage from the UT-Student Health Insurance Plan, who can they contact if they have questions regarding coverage?**

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

## EMPLOYMENT

**1. If a student has 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. If a student is taking the Fall 2020 course fully online, but their on-campus employment requires them to be on campus, will they have any trouble crossing into the U.S. from Mexico?**

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

**3. During Fall 2020, will students be allowed to work more than the allowed 19 hours a week since they are taking classes fully online?**

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

**4. Can students participate in curricular practical training (CPT) while they are 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. If an F-1 student has 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 students apply for OPT if they are graduating in Fall 2020?**

Students may submit the OPT 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 8<sup>th</sup>, 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 their OPT Package to USCIS within the U.S.

**8. Once a student receives their OPT Card, but can only find work under 20 hours a week, what can be done to stay in status and avoid the accrual of unemployment days?**

For the duration of the COVID-19 emergency, students can work less than 20 hours and keep their 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](#) or their states unemployment office for more information.

## TRAVEL

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

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

**2. Will F-1 students who have been outside the U.S. since spring break and/or summer break and have not returned since then be able to return to the U.S. for Fall 2020?**

All students are encouraged to review the [CDC travel restrictions](#) to ensure that they are making timely decisions in preparations to come back. As a reminder, when traveling back into the U.S. students 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
- EAD card (OPT or STEM OPT)
- Letter of Employment (OPT or STEM OPT)

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 a student remains in the United States due to COVID-19 and their passport expires, what can they 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. If an F-1 student has left the U.S. to complete their last semester online, can an International Student Advisor extend their program end date on the current Form I-20 so they 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.*