

Temporary Adaptations for Fall 2020 for International Students in F-1 Status Taking Online Courses

We received guidance from the Student and Exchange Visitor Program (SEVP) on July 6th, 2020 with the following [Broadcast Message](#) regarding fall enrollment guidelines for international students. UTRGV International Student & Admissions Services is providing this update for the fall semester.

Here are key points to consider if you hold an F immigration visa:

- UTRGV's in-person and hybrid course offerings for fall 2020 allow International Students to take a combination of remote and in-person courses (hybrid) as long as they maintain a full-time course load (undergraduate students: 12 credits; graduate students: 9 credits). Students are expected to return to their campus location by the start of the fall term, which is August 24, 2020.
- International students who have health or other concerns about being physically in a classroom with others may enroll in only online courses but would need to study from their home country. However, our office will not be able to keep their F-1 status active.
- Our current international students who left the U.S. and would like to continue to study from home with hopes to return in the future may do so, but we cannot keep their SEVIS record active. They are encouraged to contact our office for guidance on issuance of a new I-20 to return in spring term.
- Students who decide to return to their home country for the fall semester (enrolled or not) with plans to come back for spring term are encouraged to contact our office for guidance on issuance of a new I-20.
- Students with an interest in applying for Optional Practical Training (OPT) after the fall semester must have an active SEVIS record and must have fulfilled the 12-month academic requirement.
- If you plan to continue your studies from outside the U.S. please make sure to inform our office before census date September 9th, 2020 to avoid further complications.
- If you choose to terminate your status please be aware that you could lose out on CPT, OPT, and on-campus employment opportunities.

Frequently Asked Questions

1. What is the new policy regarding international students in the U.S.?

On July 6, 2020, the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) Student and Exchange Visitor Program (SEVP) announced that it would no longer provide exemptions for international students in F and M visas taking exclusively online classes due to the pandemic during the fall 2020 semester. ICE also issued a [Broadcast Message](#) with slightly more detail and indicated that the rule will be published in the Federal Register as a Temporary Final Rule.

2. What does the new Fall 2020 adaptation for F1 students mean?

With new SEVP/ICE guidelines for F1 students, student will NOT be allowed to enroll fully online. Therefore, in order to maintain your F-1 status and continue studying in the U.S. you must meet the following requirements:

- Enroll in at least **ONE (1)** face-to-face or hybrid class so that you can take more than 3-credit hours of classes online.
- You must still meet the full-time enrollment requirement of **12-credit** hours for undergraduate students or **9-credit** hours for graduate students unless you qualify for a reduced course load (RCL).

3. What happens if I cannot find any face to face/hybrid courses? What options do I have?

We highly advise you to meet with your Academic Advisor/Program Coordinator as soon as possible to explore which face to face/hybrid course you can register for. If you still do not find any face to face/hybrid course, please let us know as soon as possible so we can help you more options.

4. Can I take classes that are not on my degree plan to meet face to the face requirement?

If you have concerns locating an appropriate face-to-face or hybrid course, please make arrangements to speak with your Academic Advisor (UG)

<https://www.utrgv.edu/advising/advising-basics/schedule-your-advising-session/index.htm> or Program Coordinator if you are a graduate student.

5. Can I take online classes from my home country?

Yes, you are allowed to take classes from your home country; however, you will not be able to have an active F-1 status. You may lose your eligibility for benefits such as CPT or OPT.

6. Can I apply for an authorized Reduced Course Load (RCL) if I am outside the U.S. and I will not be returning for the Fall 2020 semester?

No, since you are out of the country and not maintaining an F-1 status, you do not need a reduced course load. IASS cannot authorize reduced course loads to maintain F-1 status when students are outside of the U.S. However, you may still enroll in online/remote/distance credits.

7. Can I apply for a Reduced Course Load due to medical condition for the Fall semester?

Yes, however, the reduced course load 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.

8. Fall 2020 will be my last semester and I am planning to request an RCL, but my last two courses are only offered online. Do I still need to meet the face-to-face requirement if I get the RCL approved?

Yes. You can apply for the RCL; however, you will have to take at least one class either face-to-face or in a hybrid mode in order to comply this requirement.

9. Can I use my current on campus position (RA, TA, Assistantship) be counted as physically present on campus?

No, SEVP is only considering academic enrollment.

10. I am an F-1 student who will be in the United States, registered for dissertation, thesis, or independent study hours. Are these considered face-to-face/hybrid credits?

Thesis or dissertation classes are usually coded as traditional instruction method. Please review your ASSIST schedule or contact your program coordinator for more information.

11. If my class is classified as online but my lab is a “no-credit-bearing” is face to face course, can I still use this as my face to face course?

Yes, since this class will have a face-to-face component then it will meet the SEVP requirements.

12. I am a F1 border commuter, do I need to follow these guidelines?

Yes, you will be required to register into at least one face to face or hybrid course in order to take more than 3 credit hours online. Keep in mind that you also need to comply with the 12 credit hours as undergraduate and 9 credit hours as a graduate enrollment requirement.

13. What is the difference between hybrid, face-to-face, and online classes?

For more information on the difference hybrid, face-to-face, and online classes, please visit: <http://link.utrgv.edu/options/>

14. How do I know what type of modality a course is classified as?

To access the full list of courses and their modalities: Visit my.utrgv.edu. Click Class Schedule under the Resources section. Select the term you wish to view in the Search by Term drop-down menu and click Submit. Then, search for the class you want to take.

15. Can I continue to use my current I-20?

No, our office will be issuing each student an updated I-20s with the remarks that specify the following:

UT Rio Grande Valley is not operating entirely online; this student is not taking an entirely online course load for the Fall 2020 semester, and this student is taking the minimum number of online classes required to make normal progress in their degree program.

Your new I-20 will be sent electronically to your UTRGV email prior to August 4th, 2020. Please print it out, sign it in blue ink, and discontinue to use your previous one.

16. Can I maintain my F-1 status and take all online classes remotely from outside of the United States during the Fall 2020 semester?

No. The SEVP guidance for the Fall 2020 semester does not allow for international students in F-1 status attending schools adopting a hybrid model—a mixture of online and in person classes—like UTRGV. This will only apply to schools that will offer only online instruction in the fall. Students in this case will be able to maintain their F-1 student status outside the country.

17. Can I take a leave of absence (not enroll in any courses) for the Fall 2020 semester if I am currently outside of the United States and I am unable or unwilling to return?

Yes. International students in F-1 status may take a leave of absence from UTRGV if they are not returning to the U.S. and choose *not* to enroll in any UTRGV courses. Students wishing to take a total leave of absence should take the following steps:

- Submit the [Student Departure Form](#) as IASS will have to end the student's F-1 record in SEVIS. Once the Student Departure Form has been signed, the student will be responsible for dropping all courses before the first day of class. Otherwise, you will be subject to tuition fees if you did not drop the classes on or after the first day of class (Aug. 24, 2020).
- When the international student intends to return to the United States after the authorized leave of absence, he or she will need to contact IASS to initiate this process.

18. Is there a deadline to request a leave of absence for Fall 2020?

Yes. International students in F-1 status must submit the leave of absence request by census date, September 09, 2020.

19. If I am unable to return to the United States and for Fall 2020 and plan to enroll in UTRGV online courses from outside of the United States, what should I do?

Returning international students in F-1 status that are unable to return to the U.S. and will enroll in UTRGV online courses from outside of the U.S. will need to complete the [Student Departure Form](#) as IASS will have to end your F-1 record in SEVIS.

20. What should I do if I plan to return to the United States for Fall 2020 and my F-1 visa has expired?

If you have been in Mexico, Canada, or the adjacent Islands except for Cuba, for less than 30 days you will be able to return to the U.S with an expired visa based on the provision of the [Automatic Visa Revalidation](#).

If you are an international student who does not qualify for the Automatic Visa Revalidation, then you will be required to apply for a new F-1 visa at your nearest U.S. Consulate. Once you get your F-1 visa stamp, you will be able to enter the U.S.

21. What should I do if I am outside of the United States, and planning to return to campus but I'm unsure if I will be able to due to travel restrictions?

We always recommend that you check with your home country's Embassy regarding any travel restrictions. The most recent information about the U.S. travel restrictions, closure of U.S. consulates and embassies for routine visa services, and self-quarantine recommendation are on the websites below:

- [U.S. Entry Restrictions](#)
- [Suspension of Routine Visa Services](#)
- [Voluntary Stay at Home / Self-Quarantine](#)

22. I am entering the United States on F-1 visa and want to return to the U.S. for the Fall 2020 semester, what is the earliest date that I can arrive?

If you are a transfer student, you are able to return at any time prior to the start of classes (August 24th, 2020). New international students will be able to enter 30 days before the start date of classes. Before entering the United States, please make sure you review and follow the [UTRGV Travel Protocols](#).

23. I am entering the United States on F-1 visa and want to return to the U.S. for the Fall 2020 semester, what is the latest date that I can arrive?

New and Returning international students unable to arrive in the U.S. before classes begin on August 24, 2020 *must* contact our office, as well as their professors and academic advisors in advance. Before entering the United States, please make sure you review and follow the [UTRGV Travel Protocols](#).

24. Will F-1 students still be able to travel to Mexico and vice versa or will there be a restriction on travel for students studying during the fall?

There is no restriction to travel for educational purposes. Personal or "non-essential" travel is not permitted. Students will be able to travel back and forth as long as they present valid documentation and their new Fall I-20 that includes the remarks required for fall 2020.

25. What would cause an international student to face deportation in regards to student status?

The Immigration and Nationality Act (statute) provides a list of reasons a person may be deported after they have been admitted into the United States. International students who are identified by ICE as violating this new policy could be charged under 237(a)(1)(C), a provision in the immigration statute (Immigration and Nationality Act) that makes a person deportable if they failed to maintain nonimmigrant status in the United States. ICE could initiate removal proceedings by filing a charging document known as the Notice to Appear with the immigration court.

26. Will I be able to continue with my F-1 student on-campus employment?

Yes, your employment will not be affected as long as you maintain an active F-1 status.

Please contact your supervisor for more guidance on how your duties will be performed.

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.