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The Basics on U.S. Student Visas

There are several things you need to do as soon as you are accepted as a student at a U.S. academic institution so that you can obtain your visa on time. Advance planning is very important, so make sure you get started on these preparations months before you want to begin your journey.

The steps
After your acceptance to a college or university, and before you begin applying for a visa, your new school needs to send you the proper documentation that enrolls you in the Student and Exchange Visitor Information System (SEVIS). SEVIS is a Web-based information system that keeps track of foreign students and other exchange program participants. It allows information sharing among the various institutions and government agencies that students and exchange visitors are involved with during their journey to the United States and their stay in the country. You must pay a fee to be enrolled in

SEVIS, and you will need to retain your proof of payment for presentation during your visa interview at the U.S. Embassy or nearest consulate. The fee varies according to the type of study or exchange program you are participating in and the type of visa you are applying for. To learn more, you can check <http://newdelhi.usembassy.gov/visasevis.html>
Make an appointment for a visa interview by contacting the U.S. Embassy or the nearest consulate. You'll find the information at <http://newdelhi.usembassy.gov/applyingfjm.html>
Visa processing procedures can vary but all student visa and exchange visitor visa applicants are given priority. Information about waiting times for scheduling an interview and processing your application is available at http://www.travel.state.gov/visa/temp/wait/tempvisitors_wait.php

Pay the SEVIS fee beforehand and take the proof of payment with you to the visa interview.

Workshops on how to complete the visa application process are offered by the United States-India Educational Foundation. For a site convenient to you, check www.usief.org.in/

When you do get an interview, you must assemble all the required documentation. This includes:

- the payment receipt of the SEVIS fee,
- the visa-qualifying document supplied by your academic institution,
- financial support documents,
- the visa application processing fee and
- a properly completed visa application form.

Also review the information at http://newdelhi.usembassy.gov/required_documents.html

You need to be aware that the visa alone does not guarantee entry to the United States. With a visa, a foreign citizen is allowed to travel to a U.S. port of entry. Upon arrival there, a U.S. Customs and Border Protection inspector makes the decision about the individual's admission into the country.

The process of obtaining a visa might sound complicated, but remember that 6.6 million people went through the process to receive non-immigrant visas to the United States in 2008.

The realities

Misconceptions abound about the difficulty of obtaining a visa. Let's take a look at some of the realities.

Myth 1: The United States sets a quota on visas to limit the number of foreign students entering the country.

Reality: There is no limit to the number of student visas issued by U.S. embassies and consulates around the world. If you are a qualified student visa applicant who has gained admission to a U.S. institution, the State Department wants you to pursue that opportunity.

Myth 2: I can improve my chances of getting a visa if I hire an education agent.

Reality: Don't believe anyone who tells you they can help you get a visa. Do not pay money or enter into an agreement with such a person. Self-proclaimed visa "fixers" have no special access to the U.S. government.

If you read the information on the visa Web sites carefully, follow the instructions, and complete the tasks well ahead of the deadlines, you should enjoy a smooth process.

Myth 3: A visa applicant needs to document a minimum income level.

Reality: A student visa applicant should be able to provide financial evidence that shows you, your parents, or your sponsor have sufficient funds to cover your tuition and living expenses during the period of your intended study.

Myth 4: Only academic superstars get visas.

Reality: Visas are not reserved for the very best students, but getting a visa depends on first having gained acceptance to a college or university in the United States. When you have been academically admitted to the institution or accepted as a participant in an exchange program, the academic institution will provide you with the appropriate form required by SEVIS. You will be required to submit this form when you apply for a

are proficient in English.

Reality: If you are planning to study English in the United States, you do not need to show proficiency in the language. Command of the English language is one factor that consular officers will use in evaluating the overall competence of a student applying for a visa. Sufficient English proficiency, however, is a pre-requisite for J-1 exchange visitor visa applicants.

Myth 7: You'll get a visa only if you have relatives in the United States.

Reality: This is not true. The interviewing consular officer may ask about relatives in the United States during the visa interview, just as he or she may ask about your family situation in India.

Myth 8: International students are not permitted to work while visiting the United States on a student visa.

Reality: Some job opportunities are possible, especially in on-campus work-study programs with limited hours.

Myth 9: You must have your entire future planned out to get a visa.

Reality: You need to be able to discuss a realistic study plan, but not a detailed plan for your entire career.

Myth 10: You must return to your home country immediately upon completion of your degree.

Reality: You may apply for Optional Practical Training to work for up to one year in your field in the United States to gain practical experience.

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visa. You will need to demonstrate to the consular officer who conducts your interview that you are a serious student who is well-informed about the admitting institution. You also need to show that you have a well-developed plan of study and are knowledgeable about the subject you are studying.

Myth 5: During your visa interview, the consular officer will be waiting to hear the "right" answers.

Reality: The consular officer will want to hear your own answers and an honest description of your personal circumstances.

Myth 6: You'll get a visa only if you

Types of visas for students and exchange visitors

F-1, or student visa: The visa for people who want to study at an accredited U.S. college or university, or to study English at a university or language institute.

J-1, or exchange visitor visa: The visa issued to people who will be participating in an educational or cultural exchange program.

M-1, or student visa: The visa for those enrolled in nonacademic or vocational programs.



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