Purpose

The International Students and Scholars Office (ISSO) at Boston University has prepared this handout for students who have a Certificate of Eligibility for Nonimmigrant (F-1) Student Status (SEVIS Form I-20) for a program of study at Boston University. It describes the steps you need to take in order to pay the SEVIS fee, apply for an F-1 student visa, if necessary, and to enter the U.S. as a student in F-1 immigration status.

Step 1: Read your enclosed SEVIS Form I-20

Your SEVIS Form I-20 indicates that we have created a record for you in the Student and Exchange Visitor Information System (SEVIS). Your assigned SEVIS ID number is in the upper right corner of page 1 of your SEVIS Form I-20. If you have informed us of any dependent family members (husband or wife and/or children under the age of 21) who will travel with you to the United States, each of them will receive their own dependent SEVIS Form I-20 to assist them in applying for their F-2 visa. If any information on your SEVIS Form I-20(s) is incorrect, please contact Boston University Admissions immediately. If all of the information is correct, complete item 11 on page 1 of each Form I-20.

Note: The spelling of your name and your date of birth must be exactly the same as reflected in your passport. The same is also true for dependent family members. If your name and/or date of birth on your SEVIS Form I-20 are not exactly the same as it appears in your passport, please contact Boston University Admissions and request a corrected Form I-20. Please send a photocopy of the passport so that we can make sure that all information is consistent, as using an incorrect I-20 can result in delays or denial of your visa interview application.

Step 2: Make sure your passport is valid

In order to avoid possible problems applying for a visa or entering the U.S., it is recommended that your passport be valid for at least six (6) months beyond your expected entry date to the U.S.

Step 3: Pay the SEVIS Fee

The U.S. Department of State (DOS) and the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS) require proof of payment of the SEVIS fee before issuing a visa or approving any benefits of status. This fee must be paid by new F-1 students with “initial attendance” I-20s who are beginning an academic program in the U.S. in F-1 status. We recommend that students pay the fee as soon as they receive the Form I-20 to allow sufficient time for DHS to update the fee payment in the student’s electronic SEVIS record. Please refer to the Student and Exchange Visitor website for more information: http://www.ice.gov/sevis/i901/index.htm

You must also pay the SEVIS Fee if:
- You have studied in F-1 status in the past, but are entering the U.S. on a new SEVIS record number.
- You have studied in F-1 status in the past, but have since changed to another immigration status, and are now changing back to F-1 status.
- You are a Canadian citizen. While Canadian citizens do not have to apply for a visa, they must still pay the SEVIS fee.

You do not have to pay the SEVIS Fee if:
- You are an F-2 dependent.
- You are an F-1 student who is currently in the U.S. under valid F-1 immigration status.
- You are an F-1 student who is transferring to a new school or changing degree program or level using the same SEVIS record number.

You will be required to show proof of your SEVIS fee payment at both your visa interview and when entering a U.S. port of entry.

The SEVIS fee must be paid to DHS prior to your visa appointment or U.S. entry through the following methods only:
- Over the internet with an electronic application form (Form I-901) and a credit card.
  Unfortunately, due to recent processing difficulties, the Student and Exchange Visitor Program (SEVP) is unable to accept credit card payments made on behalf of students and scholars from Ghana, Nigeria, Cameroon or Kenya. Students and scholars from these countries must pay by cashier’s check, money order or Western Union transfer.
- By mailing a paper application with a check or bank draft drawn in U.S. dollars to a processing center in the U.S.
- By making a payment at a participating Western Union in your area.
To pay the SEVIS fee online, log onto the FMJ website (www.fmjfee.com) and follow the instructions for completing the Form I-901. If you are unable to pay the fee online by credit card, be sure to indicate your method of payment and follow any additional instructions for paying the fee by check or Western Union. Students should print their payment confirmations from the FMJ website (http://fmjfee.com). The ISSO strongly recommends that students retain the printed fee receipt along with other immigration documents to use as needed.

If you have been accepted to more than one school in the U.S., we strongly recommend that you decide which school you will attend before paying the fee, since you must include the unique SEVIS ID number and school code found on the SEVIS Form I-20 issued by the appropriate institution. Although DHS has confirmed that a fee payment made on one SEVIS ID number can be applied to another SEVIS ID number issued to the same individual in such case, it could complicate a visa application and should be avoided whenever possible. The SEVIS fee is non-refundable. However, in the unlikely instance that your F-1 visa application is denied by the U.S. Embassy or Consulate, you may reapply for a new F-1 visa within 12 months without having to pay a new SEVIS fee.

Step 4: Contact the nearest U.S. Embassy or Consulate to obtain a valid F-1 visa

Citizens of Canada are not required to obtain an F-1 visa to enter the U.S. to study. However, citizens of all other countries must be in possession of an F-1 visa to enter the U.S. You must initiate the visa application process with the nearest U.S. Embassy or Consulate. It is strongly recommended that you review the web site of the specific consular post to learn about their visa application procedures, documentary requirements and deadlines. Most consular posts will process a visa application 120 days prior to the start date of the academic program listed on your SEVIS Form I-20. All first-time applicants for an F-1 visa are required to schedule an appointment for an interview. Please keep in mind that it may take a few weeks to schedule an appointment, so you should initiate your visa application as early as possible after receiving your SEVIS Form I-20. Visit http://www.usembassy.gov/ for a list of embassies and consulates.

The U.S. Department of State (DOS) website offers information and list of required documents for the visa application: http://travel.state.gov/content/visas/english/study-exchange/student.html

In addition to the documents listed on the U.S. DOS website, you will also need to be ready to submit the following documents:
- Admission letter from Boston University
- Original financial documents proving the availability of sufficient funds as reflected on your SEVIS Form I-20
Please bear in mind that there are special procedures for citizens of Cuba, Syria, Sudan, and Iran to apply for a U.S. visa. Please refer to the following DOS website for more information: http://travel.state.gov/content/visas/english/general/section-306.html

**Visa Application Tips!**

During your visa interview, the consular officer will assess whether you qualify for an F-1 student visa for university study by taking into account your academic preparation, your financial security, and your English-language ability. The officer will also evaluate whether you pose a national security risk to the United States, whether your intention to study in the U.S. is “temporary”, and confirm that you intend to return home after you complete your studies. The visa interview is often a very brief encounter. It is important to be well prepared and make a strong first impression so that you have a good chance of obtaining your visa.

While the ISSO and the Office of International Admissions cannot guarantee a successful visa application, we have prepared a few suggestions to help your visa interview:

- The documentation required for the visa application may differ from consulate to consulate. Make certain to review checklists on the website for the consulate where you will be applying to make sure you have all documentation that might be requested.
- The visa “interview” is usually a very brief exchange (often just a minute or two) at a consular window, sometimes in a crowded hall. Generally, the consular officer will be familiar with the details of your application before you are called and will ask a few questions in order to evaluate your intentions in the U.S. and your eligibility before making a decision.
- Before the interview, practice answering questions in English about your application, your academic objectives in the U.S., and your plans after you return home.
- The consular officer may ask questions about your “Nonimmigrant Intent” – that is, your intention to return home after you complete your studies. It may be sufficient to describe your plans after you return home, whether it is to work, continue your studies, or another reason. However, the officer may ask you to provide further proof of your plans. Please see the section on “Proving Nonimmigrant Intent” for more information.
- The consular officer may also ask for proof of financial ties to your home country as part of your proof of nonimmigrant intent. Familiarize yourself with types of financial documents to help you prove this, as well as explaining them in English. If your spouse and children will remain in your country, be prepared to explain how they will support themselves without you sending them money from the U.S.
- Be positive and respond to questions with clear, concise answers during your interview.

**Proving Nonimmigrant Intent**

The consular officer will determine whether you intend to enter the U.S. temporarily for study, or whether they believe you plan to immigrate permanently to the U.S. In order to prove your “nonimmigrant intent” you must show “strong ties to a home abroad which you do not intend to abandon.” Consider the questions below to help assess if you may have difficulty with this point of eligibility:

- Is it difficult to obtain an U.S. visa in your country?
- Are a significant percentage of F-1 visa applications in your country denied by the U.S. Embassy or Consulate?
- Are any members of your immediate family U.S. citizens or permanent residents? Are any members of your immediate family living in the U.S.?
- Are you married, and applying for F-2 visas for your spouse or children?
- Is a friend or relative acting as your financial sponsor for your activities at Boston University?
- Will this be your first trip to the U.S.?
- Have you recently finished one activity in the U.S. and will now begin a new activity?
- Have you ever been denied a U.S. visa?

If you answered “yes” to one or more of the questions above, it may be more likely that you will need to provide additional documentation to support your intent to return home after your activities in the U.S.

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<th><strong>Proving Financial Ties</strong></th>
<th><strong>Recommended Documents to Submit:</strong></th>
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| If you or your sponsor own property or have financial investments in your country, documenting these may help prove you have strong financial ties. You may not use any assets that will be needed to pay for your F-1 or J-1 activities. You will need to prove the availability of that financial support separately in order to meet the minimum requirements for the visa. | - Official papers proving property ownership  
- Copies of investment statements or certificates  
- A letter or financial statement from you or your sponsor’s bank or accountant |
### Proving Employment Ties

If you expect to be employed full-time upon your return, this indicates strong employment ties to your country. Your employment ties are viewed as stronger based on the prestige, importance and salary of your job.

#### Recommended Documents to Submit:
- A letter that guarantees a job upon your return and states how important your U.S. activities will be for the type of work the employer wants.
- A letter from your current employer stating that you will resume your work with them after your time in the U.S.
- A letter from a prospective employer stating that a position will be offered to you upon your return.

### Proving Family Ties

If all members of your immediate family live in your country, the U.S. Consular officer may understand that you have strong family ties to that country. If you are the oldest child or only child in your family, the Consular officer may believe that you are more likely to return home because of that fact. If one or both of your parents are not in good health, this is another reason you might be expected to return home.

#### Recommended Documents to Submit:
- Copies of official documents proving family relationships and their residences
- Letters from physicians explaining important medical conditions of your parents

### Your Visa and Immigration History

If you have visited other countries and returned to your country after those visits, you have demonstrated a pattern of behavior which may lead the U.S. Consular officer to believe that you will return home after your time in the U.S. The more trips you have made, the stronger your case.

#### Recommended Documents to Submit:
- Current and/or previous passport(s) containing entry and exit stamps from your country and other countries
- Other official documents indicating departure and return to your home country

### Possible Complications in the Visa Application Process:

For citizens of some countries, or those students entering certain prospective fields of study, the consular officer may decide to process your application through a “security clearance” before granting the visa. Security clearances may take more than a month to process, so it is important to apply for your F-1 visa in case you are put through this process. Once the visa application has been sent for security clearance, the student must simply wait until the consular post approves the visa.

In the unlikely event that your visa application is denied, it is difficult to get the Consulate to change its decision. Therefore, it is important that you arrive at your appointment prepared with complete supporting documentation. If your visa application is denied, the ISSO recommends that you ask the Consulate for a written explanation of the denial reason. Please contact the ISSO immediately so that we may help you strategize how to strengthen your chances and your documentation in a second visa application. For more information on steps to take after a visa denial, please visit the DOS website: [http://travel.state.gov/visa/frvi/denials/denials_1361.html](http://travel.state.gov/visa/frvi/denials/denials_1361.html)

### Step 5: Travel to the U.S. and Arrival

Once you have obtained your F-1 visa, you are ready to travel to the U.S. Immigration regulations allow you to enter the U.S. up to, but no earlier than, 30 days prior to the start of your program (indicated in section 5 of your SEVIS Form I-20). It is important that you keep your passport, your I-20, proof of SEVIS payment, original financial documents, and your BU admission letter in your immediate possession when you travel to the U.S.

When you arrive in the U.S., you will apply for “admission” at the U.S. Port of Entry, and an immigration officer will examine all of your documents. The immigration officer may ask you a few questions. If you are asked about funding, answer the question and offer to show the officer your financial documents. If you are asked about your “intentions,” explain your plan to study and offer to show the officer the documents that demonstrate your intent to study while in the U.S. and any documents you may have that help demonstrate your intent to return home after you finish your studies.

If you have the required documents and have answered all questions, the officer will officially “admit” you to the U.S. and will stamp your passport indicating the date of entry and immigration status you have been granted. When you leave the inspection area, make certain you have the following documents in your possession: (1) passport, (2) the SEVIS Form I-20 and (3) all supporting financial documents. Verify that the U.S. Entry Stamp in your passport is clear and indicates F-1 and D/S.

Please visit the Study in the States website for additional information: [http://studyinthestates.dhs.gov/students/get-ready-to-go](http://studyinthestates.dhs.gov/students/get-ready-to-go)
Caution: It is important that you do not enter the U.S. on a B-1 or B-2 visitor visa, or in WT or WB status through the “visa waiver” program. It is unlawful for individuals in these classifications to study full-time in the U.S., and it is difficult and sometimes impossible to change your immigration status to F-1 once you are in the country.

Step 6: Report to the International Students and Scholars Office

You are required to report to the International Students and Scholars Office (ISSO) with your passport and Form I-20 upon your initial arrival to the Boston University campus from abroad prior to the semester check-in deadline. Reporting to the ISSO provides us with the opportunity to:

- Welcome you to Boston University and assist you in answering questions you may have;
- Review your immigration documents to confirm eligibility for intended activity at BU;
- Update your university record to reflect your current immigration status;
- Report your arrival in valid status to the U.S. Department of Homeland Security to activate your SEVIS record, as a Boston University sponsored F-1 student.

The International Student Advisors at the Office of International Admissions would be pleased to provide you with information, advice, and assistance on any visa or immigration matter that relates to your activities at Boston University. The ISSO website also includes helpful information at: [http://www.bu.edu/isson/](http://www.bu.edu/isson/). We look forward to welcoming you to campus.