



FAQS FOR INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS IN THE UNITED STATES

Q1. What is SEVIS?

The Student and Exchange Visitor Information System (SEVIS) is a database used by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) to manage and track international students and scholars in the United States with F, M, or J visas, as well as their certified schools or sponsors.

Q2. What is the difference between a SEVIS termination and a visa revocation?

SEVIS termination. Termination of a SEVIS record *may* indicate that a student is no longer in their valid nonimmigrant status (e.g., F-1 or M-1) and ICE may initiate removal proceedings against the student. A student's Designated School Official (DSO) can terminate a student's record only if they are not compliant with the terms of their visa (e.g. no longer enrolled in school). In spring 2025, ICE unilaterally terminated students' SEVIS records for a variety of reasons, including students' exercise of their right to protected speech or any contact with the criminal legal system (including dropped criminal charges). These actions were beyond the scope of federal regulations that allow limited circumstances in which the government can terminate a student's status. Some legal challenges to ICE's unilateral termination of SEVIS records remain pending, while others have resulted in judges ordering ICE to reactivate students' SEVIS records that were terminated during the spring 2025 period.

Visa revocation. The Department of State has the sole discretion to revoke a student's visa for any number of reasons. A revocation indicates that the visa stamp upon which a student entered is no longer valid. If a student is in the United States at the time of visa revocation, they are still in valid nonimmigrant status and are not required to immediately leave the United States. If a student is outside the U.S. at the time of or travels outside the U.S. after a visa revocation, they will have to apply for a new visa to return. Despite the lawsuits filed in spring 2025, the Department of State did not reinstate any revoked F-1 visas, making it risky for international students in the United States to travel abroad and obtain a new visa.

Q3. What are the potential grounds for terminating someone's SEVIS record?

ICE indicates that a student's SEVIS record may be terminated for a variety of reasons, including but not limited to: failure to enroll or maintain status in school, employment not authorized by the visa, or failure to report employment under Optional Practical Training (OPT). Beginning in spring 2025, ICE unilaterally terminated some students' SEVIS records for reasons unrelated to their academic status or visa violations, including protest and social media activity or prior contact with the criminal legal system. ICE did not coordinate or communicate these terminations with a

Designated School Official (DSO) at the students' schools. As indicated in Q2, many students challenged these terminations and litigation is still pending.

Q4. What impact does a SEVIS termination have?

If a SEVIS record is terminated due to an alleged violation of status, a student loses their campus employment authorization and, if they are abroad, cannot re-enter the United States. ICE requires a student to immediately depart the U.S. after this type of termination and may investigate to confirm the student's departure. Additionally, the student's school may bar them from continuing their academic studies. As noted in Q5, immediate consultation with an immigration attorney is important.

Q5. What should I do if my SEVIS record is terminated?

In spring 2025, ICE did not always notify students that they had terminated the student's SEVIS record; DSOs were sometimes the ones to discover a SEVIS revocation. If a student learns that their SEVIS record was terminated, they should contact an immigration attorney as soon as possible. An immigration attorney can assist the student in requesting a correction through SEVIS, applying for reinstatement of status through a formal process, or litigating the termination in federal court. Please note that a visa revocation and SEVIS record termination puts a student at risk of detention and deportation.

Q6. What should I do if my SEVIS record was terminated, but then reinstated?

If ICE terminated a student's SEVIS record and then reinstated it, they can ask their DSO what exactly their SEVIS record shows and whether ICE provided any reasons for the termination and reinstatement. An immigration lawyer can advise a student on the reinstatement's implications, which could impact OPT work authorization, future ability to reenter the United States following international travel, or future visa, change of status, or adjustment of status applications.

Q7. As an international student, what information must my school give to immigration authorities?

Federal law requires that colleges and universities report certain information about international students (F, M, and J status) for immigration compliance. This information is housed in SEVIS and is accessible by the Department of Homeland Security and the Department of State.

Information schools must report through SEVIS includes:

- A student's identity and current address;
- Country of citizenship and country of birth;
- Immigration status in the U.S. and date it was issued;
- Enrollment status (such as full-time or reduced course load);
- Port of entry and date of entry;
- Program start date and field of study;
- If applicable, completion, suspension, expulsion, termination or dismissal from the program and the reason;
- If applicable, school disciplinary action taken against the student as a direct result of a criminal conviction;
- If applicable, changes to the information on the Form I-17, Petition for Approval of School for Attendance by Nonimmigrant Student; and

- Other requirements found via the [SEVIS Reporting Requirements for Designated School Officials](#).

Q8. Are there other circumstances where my school may share my information with immigration enforcement?

A school may share a student’s “directory information” with outside agencies; however, a student can opt out of this through a process created by their institution. Under the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA), a school must provide the student with notice of the type of information it designates as directory information. Directory information is typically basic demographic information, such as a student’s name, address, contact information, birth date and place of birth, and enrollment status. A student may restrict this disclosure by following their school’s protocols. Once restricted, the information is protected, except for the SEVIS reporting described in Q7.

Aside from directory information, FERPA protects personally identifiable information in a student’s educational records, unless the school is presented with a judicial order or judicial subpoena. These must be signed by a state or federal court judge, not an immigration judge, ICE, CBP, or USCIS officer. A school must make a reasonable effort to notify a student before complying with a subpoena.

Q9. Will campus security and university personnel assist ICE with locating individuals on campus?

ICE can take enforcement actions in public areas but cannot enter non-public areas without a judicial warrant. If ICE does not have a criminal or search warrant signed by a judge, which they normally do not, campus security and university employees are not required to let ICE enter non-public areas of a campus, provide documents, or to help locate students. Campus staff are also not required to ask students, faculty, or staff about their immigration status. If ICE does have a criminal or search warrant, a school should have a policy on determining the validity of the warrant and what steps it will take to ensure that staff are not interfering with an arrest or concealing individuals who are the target of law enforcement.

For the most reliable guidance, students should ask their university administrators to clarify whether campus police at public schools are considered a local law enforcement agency and what the university’s policies are on cooperating with federal law enforcement.

Questions Related to Travel

Q10. Should I travel internationally right now?

We advise all international students to consult with an immigration attorney to understand their unique risks of traveling internationally. Such travel presents a risk of not being allowed to re-enter the U.S. because immigration policies are changing frequently and immigration agents have broad discretion at the border. Even international students with valid visas may be questioned, prevented from entering the U.S., or asked to “voluntarily” withdraw their application for admission into the U.S.

Q11. Who should I expect to see when entering and leaving the United States?

At ports of entry, which include international airports and the border stations with Canada and Mexico, students likely to encounter various federal officials. While Customs and Border Protection (CBP) officers have jurisdiction at the border, students may also encounter Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) officials, Homeland Security Investigations (HSI) agents, or FBI agents. At the border ports of entry, students may also encounter deployed army officials. As noted in Q15 and Q17, border officials may search a student's body, bags, and phone and devices when they seek re-entry.

Q12. The visa stamp in my passport has expired. What does that mean?

The expired visa stamp affects a student's ability to enter the United States, but nonimmigrant status is distinct from the visa, as mentioned in Q2. The visa stamp is only required to enter the U.S. This stamp can expire at any time after a student's entry without affecting their nonimmigrant status. However, if a student leaves the U.S. and their visa has expired, they will need to apply for a new visa and interview at a U.S. consulate to reenter the U.S. with a valid visa. There is an exception for students traveling to Canada, Mexico, or nearby islands, where their student visa is automatically revalidated.

Q13. Where can I go for consular processing?

Consular processing is typically done at a U.S. consulate in the country where a student has nationality or where the student resides. Where the U.S. does not have consulates in a student's country of nationality or residency, they can schedule an interview with a designated consulate.

Q14. What documents should I carry with me when I travel internationally?

Carrying original versions of the following documents is advised. If a student does not have originals, physical copies are often still required. Students should keep digital copies for their records, but avoid handing over an unlocked device to a law enforcement officer.

- Passport that is valid at least 6 months into the future;
- Valid F-1 visa;
- Most Recent I-20 with valid travel signature (travel signatures for active students are valid for 1 year from the date of the last signature);
- Most recent I-94 arrival record;
- I-901 SEVIS fee receipt;
- School or program acceptance letter, proof of enrollment and most recent transcript; and
- Original financial documents—like bank statements, scholarship award, or department stipend letter—that show the student possesses sufficient funding for the amount indicated on their I-20.

Q15. What rights do I have at the airport?

While Fourth Amendment privacy protections apply to everyone in the U.S. regardless of their immigration status, there is a legally recognized border search exception. This means that law enforcement officers at airports and other ports of entries may conduct warrantless searches of a traveler without any reasonable suspicion of a violation of the law. Border officials may question a traveler and search their person, bags, phone, and electronic devices. Travelers may request to have their attorney present, even by telephone, during any questioning.

Q16. What can officers ask me at a port of entry?

Customs officers have the authority to ask travelers about their immigration status to determine whether they have the right to enter the United States. It is a federal crime to knowingly and willfully make false or fraudulent statements to a federal officer.

U.S. citizens need only answer questions establishing their identity and citizenship. Anecdotally, U.S. citizens who have declined to answer additional questions about their travel, beliefs, or activities have been subject to additional inspection and delays.

Lawful permanent residents (LPRs) who have maintained their status need only answer questions establishing their identity and permanent residency. Anecdotally, LPRs who have declined to answer additional questions about their travel, beliefs, or activities have been subject to additional inspection and delays. Border officers cannot deny LPRs entry solely for failure to answer questions, but may detain LPRs who have committed crimes in the U.S. or internationally.

Noncitizen visa holders are applying for legal admission to the U.S. and CBP officials have the authority and discretion to grant or deny physical entry. Officially, officers may not select a traveler for secondary questioning based on their religion, race, national origin, gender, ethnicity, or political beliefs. Anecdotally, travelers have indicated profiling based on these identities and beliefs. A traveler who believes they were profiled can note the details of their encounter and subsequently speak with an immigration attorney.

Refusing to answer an officer's questions or otherwise comply with instructions may lead to a discretionary denial of entry. If a visa holder is denied entry, but fears they will be persecuted or tortured in their country of citizenship, they should ask for protection at the border. While this will trigger a pre-asylum screening interview, it may also lead to the visa holder's detention in an immigration jail.

Q17. Do I have to let officers look inside my phone if they ask? Do I have to give them my password or open my phone with face ID/thumb print? What information can they access on my phone?

Border officials have the authority and discretion to search a traveler's belongings. Officers have asked travelers for their password and/or unlocked phones. Travelers may comply with their request by handing over their phone that is shut down or locked, or handing over their unlocked phone; travelers may refuse their request by keeping their phone. Officers whose request was refused may try to unlock a traveler's phone using their biometric login, such as a face ID or thumbprint. Refusals may result in CBP's confiscation of the traveler's phone and a forensic scan of it. A student visa holder who declines to unlock or hand over their phone may be subject to increased scrutiny or denial of entry.

A border official may either conduct a basic, manual search of a student's phone—scrolling through apps, photos, and texts—or a more intrusive, forensic analysis of the phone by downloading its contents to an external hard drive. A forensic scan allows federal officials to see all information on a phone, even photos and items that have been deleted. Recently, law enforcement had trouble accessing data on an iPhone because it was in “lockdown” mode.

Before traveling, international students can conduct a personal risk assessment of complying with or declining to provide border officials access to their devices. As a safety precaution, many travelers have resorted to traveling with the least amount of technology possible, securing their devices with long alphanumeric passwords and encryptions, where possible. Traveling with a recently wiped or blank device may invite increased scrutiny.

Q18. Do I have to answer questions about my religious beliefs and practice, political opinion, or other personal views?

Student visa holders are not required to answer such questions but may feel compelled to do so by the insecurity of their immigration status. Religious and political beliefs and associations are protected by the First Amendment and questioning individuals about them infringes upon their Constitutional rights. These rights are not surrendered at the border; however border officials do ask travelers—oftentimes Muslim—about their religious affiliation, religious practices, association with religious institutions, and political opinions.

U.S. Citizens and Lawful Permanent Residents cannot be denied entry to the United States for declining to answer such questions. If border officials persist in asking such questions, travelers can request that their attorney is present during questioning.

Noncitizen visa holders may decline to answer general questions about their religious beliefs and political opinions. Doing so may lead to delay, additional questioning, or denial of their entry into the U.S. If a visa holder is denied entry, but fears they will be persecuted or tortured in their country of citizenship, they should ask for protection at the border. While this will trigger a pre-asylum screening interview, it may also lead to the visa holder's detention in an immigration jail.

Q19. What are the Trump “travel bans” and how do they affect me as an international student?

The government continues to change its immigration policies frequently adding and removing countries from the list below. At the time of publishing, there are two travel bans that impact international students seeking to enter or reenter the U.S. While the government's travel bans do not revoke previously issued student visas, a student from a country on a travel ban list will not be able to reenter the U.S. if they depart to travel internationally.

Full Visa Suspension

Afghanistan • Burkina Faso • Burma (Myanmar) • Chad • Republic of the Congo • Equatorial Guinea • Eritrea • Haiti • Iran • Laos • Libya • Mali • Niger • Palestinian Authority Travel Documents • Sierra Leone • Somalia • South Sudan • Sudan • Syria • Yemen

Students from a country on this list will not be allowed to enter the U.S. under any circumstances, except in rare cases. There are limited exceptions to this ban for ethnic and religious minorities facing persecution in Iran, dual nationals applying with a passport not subject to these suspensions, certain former US Government employees, participants in major sporting events, and Lawful Permanent Residents.

Students in valid F-1 nonimmigrant status may still encounter issues when applying for OPT because of USCIS's indeterminate "pause" on adjudications.

Partial Visa Suspension

Angola • Antigua and Barbuda • Benin • Burundi • Cote D'Ivoire • Cuba • Dominica • Gabon • The Gambia • Malawi • Mauritania • Nigeria • Senegal • Tanzania • Togo • Tonga • Turkmenistan* • Venezuela • Zambia • Zimbabwe

Student from a country on this list cannot receive a B-1/B-2 visitor visa; F, M, and J student and exchange visas; or any immigrant visa. There are limited exceptions to this ban for ethnic and religious minorities facing persecution in Iran, dual nationals applying with a passport not subject to these suspensions, certain former US Government employees, participants in major sporting events, and Lawful Permanent Residents.

Additionally, U.S. consular officers have also been instructed to be hesitant in granting other types of visas not expressly prohibited to nationals of countries on this list.

*For Turkmenistan, visa issuance is only suspended for immigrant visa applicants.

USCIS "Pause" on Benefit Applications

Students from a country on either of the above lists can file an application with USCIS, but USCIS will not adjudicate that application. This indefinite "pause" benefit applications may impact students' ability to work while studying in the U.S. as OPT applications are not being adjudicated at the time of this publication.

Additional Resources

American University International Student FAQ		Visa Revocation and SEVIS Termination FAQs		2025 SEVP Policy Re. SEVIS Terminations	
USC International Office SEVIS Termination Information		AILA: Enforcement Actions Against International Students		ICE Declaration in <i>Deore v. DHS</i> (E.D. Michigan)	
Higher Education and Immigration Enforcement FAQ		Immigration Enforcement on Campus FAQ		DIY Copy of Red Card	

The American University Washington College of Law's Immigrant Justice Clinic (IJC) runs the *Defending the AU Dream Initiative* (AU Dream), which provides *pro bono* immigration legal services to students enrolled at a college or university in the Washington, D.C. metropolitan area.

AU Dream thanks all the students who contributed to these FAQs, including AU international students and the Fall 2025 and Spring 2026 IJC student attorneys.

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