

## **The NAGPS International Student Guide**

*Preparing and adjusting to graduate student life at US institutions*

**Developed by the International Student Concerns Committee**

**Revised and Edited last by Samaneh Mesbahi, August 2016**

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## Introduction

American educational institutions have encouraged intellectual exchange between nations for decades. They recognize how vital this exchange is to the growth of science, technology, literature and the humanities, to the innovation of ideas, and the depth of research. The US department of state reported that international students at the US exceed 600,000 enrollments as of 2009, a 16% increase since 1980. Nearly 4% of all students enrolled in higher-level education are international students.<sup>1</sup>

As an international student already in the United States or preparing for the educational journey ahead of you, there are many issues and questions for which you may be lacking answers or procedures that you might not be aware of. An international student in the United States, holding any type of student visa (F-1 and M-1, J-1 exchange) is responsible for being aware of the different requirements that are put forth by their respective universities and the regulations stated by the federal government regarding their legal stay in the United States.

As higher education institutions are constantly trying to work hard on communicating the many different requirements that your acceptance to their institution entails, there are many general issues that will be common between you and other international students at different institutions. This guide was created to help you as you plan your move to the US or to remind you of important events, procedures, responsibilities, paperwork, and other logistics so that you are hopefully prepared for your educational journey as you move forward with your endeavors, to accomplish the goals that you have set ahead of you

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<sup>1</sup> For more statistics on International students in the US please see the Resources section

*Disclaimer: This guide is aimed to assist your transition to life as a student in the US. It is not to meant to replace the information communicated to you by your specific institution through mail, email, fax or any other method of communication. The information in this guide is subject to change, and to our knowledge, accurately reflect the rules, regulations, policies, requirements, and other information as put forth at the time of the creation of this guide. NAGPS is not liable for any misunderstanding or information contained in this guide. Resources provided in the resource section may have been deleted or removed by their owners or adjusted and moved to a different URL.*

## **Pre-departure Necessities**

This section will discuss many of the options that you can look into while you prepare for your departure to the US. There are many things you can do via email, phone and the Internet to help you ensure a less complicated and more organized first few days at your new school and help you deal with many of the essential needs and adjust to new environment ahead.

### **Application Process**

Choosing the educational degree and program that best suits you is difficult and can be quite confusing, as there are many options among American academic institutions for undergraduate and graduate studies, and the application process for every institution can differ greatly. The internationalstudent.com website suggests that you will need 18 months to complete this process starting with researching and selecting which institution(s) to apply for and taking all the required examinations (e.g., TOEFL, GRE, GMAT, MCAT, LSAT) as requested by your department and graduate studies office.

Part of your application process involves selecting the degree and major that you would like to pursue and developing initial contact with whom you choose as your graduate adviser. You can provide them with a brief introduction of your academic interests and goals and set up for your first meeting. Selecting an adviser with similar research interests can provide you with support for your academic career, but some consideration can be put towards whether an adviser has experience with international students.

While some university websites provide you with quick and easy access to

the admission application forms. In some cases you will be required to send the required documents via snail mail. Generally an application to a higher degree will require the following:

- Curriculum Vita (resume)
- Undergraduate and/or other graduate transcripts
- Recommendation letters (letters of support)
- A statement of goals or purpose
- Results for required entrance exams (such as TOEFL, GRE, SAT, GMAT)
- Proof of financial resources (if not granted by the university or your department)
- Valid contact information (Address, phone number, and email).

Different universities have different methods of communicating your acceptance or denial to their program. Make sure that your information is valid and up-to-date. If your information changes, make sure that it is reflected in your application. Notify your institution immediately..

Meeting the application deadlines is a must. In most cases the application process finishes 9 to 10 months before the beginning of the school term that you are applying for. In some cases the university graduate studies office and your department may have different deadlines. Deadlines also may be different for financial aid and support.

### **Planning your trip**

Planning for your trip starts from the moment you are notified that you are accepted to a program. There are many things that you need to be aware of and many decisions that you need to make.

## *Required Documentation*

To legally enter one of the international ports of entry, you need to apply for a student Visa stamp (commonly known as “Visa”. The Harvard international office states that “A U.S. non-immigrant visa is issued in an individual's passport by a U.S. consul in a U.S. embassy or consulate outside the United States. A visa is used solely for the purpose of entry and reentry to the United States”.<sup>2</sup> Visas are entry documents only and do not determine how long an individual is allowed to remain in the country. One is allowed to remain as long as additional documents (notably the SEVIS I-20 form, I-94 form, and passport) are valid. Examples of these additional documents for students come in three forms:

- Form I-20
- Form DS-2019
- Form I-797

You are required to apply for a visa from an American embassy or consulate outside of the United States. You will need the visa stamp on your passport to enter the US. Different countries have different requirements and timelines for receiving a Visa. The following are usually required for receiving a Student Visa

- Valid passport
- Proof of financial support
- Letter of admission in a program
- Visa application that can be downloaded from the embassy website or retrieved in hard copy from their office (many embassies accept only online applications filled on their site.
- A face-to-face interview with a Department of Homeland Security consular officer at the American embassy or consulate..

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.hio.harvard.edu/travel/internationaltravel/>

Remember that you need to be very accurate with the information you provide on your application. Inaccuracies in the information provided could result in a denial of your visa.

### *Airports Entry Ports*

While on board you will be asked to fill an I-94 form. This form will collect your personal information, details on the purpose of your trip, and the duration of your stay. In addition, you will fill out a customs form listing the items that you bring with you into US soil. Upon arrival to the airport you will be asked to produce your passport, visa stamp, other immigration status documents (e.g., SEVIS I-20) form and the form you filled on the airplane (I-94). The bottom part of the I-20 form will be attached to your passport once the customs and borders agent finishes his examination. If you are an NSEERS student then delays at the airport for a first time entry is expected. <sup>3</sup>

### *Weather and Climate*

One thing that many international students forget to check is the climate of the state that you will be residing at. Climate differs greatly from one state to another, a range from high temperatures to below zero drops exists, knowing what to expect can help you decide how to shape your wardrobe. Clothes are important to think about since clothes can take the majority of the allowed weight of your suitcase.<sup>4</sup>

### *National Security Entry-Exit Registration-NSEERS*

National Security Entry-Exit Registration pertains to certain citizens or nationals of Iran, Iraq, Libya, Sudan and Syria, as designated by the DHA

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<sup>3</sup> More information about NSEERS regulations and policies are in a separate section

<sup>4</sup> More information on adjusting to the climate of your state is available in the resources section

Secretary in the Federal Register. In addition, certain nationals of other countries whom the State Department and the INS determine to be an elevated national security risk and aliens identified by INS inspectors at any point of entry upon specific criteria to be established by the Department of Justice.

If you are asked to undergo special registration procedures upon your arrival, you should expect delays at the airport. The special registration process may take several hours and you will not be allowed to leave without the completion of this process. You need to keep this in mind when reserving your flights to your final destination, as connections between your international and domestic flights need to be long enough to ensure you do not miss miss your connecting flight.

Upon your departure from the country, you will be required to visit an immigration office at your point of exit airport to notify the office of your departure. It is your responsibility to locate the office at the airport and notify them of your departure. You will be required to undergo fingerprinting, photographing, and an interview. A follow up interview and instructions might be given to you by the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) port officer or by the DHS interviewing officer. It is very important to report any change of educational institution, address or employment within 10 days of that change. The DHS website provide you with an AR-11SR that is specific to the communicating these changes.<sup>5</sup>

### *Transportation from the airport*

Depending the state and city that you arrive at, you will have different options of transportation from your airport. While many cities offer a variety of public transportation options (shuttle, bus, train, metro and others), some are limited. Many international student offices offer free shuttle rides for newly admitted and arriving students. You should contact their office in advance to ask about this

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<sup>5</sup> Check the resources section for a link to the AR-11SR form

service. You may also find information on public transportation options from the airport to your destination online.

### *International Student Orientation*

An important event that can help you get situated, adjust to your new environment and introduce you to your campus and the services provided by your institution is the international student orientation day. Attending this orientation is mandatory at most institutions. Federal regulations require that you register your presence at the university and provide all necessary documentation and legal paperwork. Orientation can also introduce you to immigration regulations and procedures required of F-1 and J-1 students. This event is also your opportunity to meet other international students that have recently arrived as well as other students that might be in your department.

### *Financial Aid and Job Opportunities*

Having financial support to cover the tuition and fees of your studies is a requirement to obtain a student visa. The university that you have applied to may have different types of financial aid that can assist in paying for your tuition and fees. Three different types of financial support are:

1. Graduate Assistantships
2. Scholarships
3. On-Campus jobs

Graduate Assistantships are defined by the graduate studies office of the University of New Mexico as “a financial award to a graduate student for part-time work in teaching or research while pursuing study toward an advanced

degree. The primary goal of an assistantship is to assist students in strengthening and successfully completing their academic program.” Graduate assistantships fall under three general categories teaching assistantships (TAs), research assistantships (RA) and administrative general assistantships (GAs).

The responsibilities, amount of tuition covered and stipend provided vary within an institution. Assistantships can be part or full time. Full time assistantships will cover 20 hours of work per week. As an international student, federal law limits you to no more than 20 hours per week of work, and your employment must be on-campus. During winter and summer vacations, and fall and spring breaks, this limit increases to 40 hours per week.

Some exceptions are available to J-1 visa holders. With written permission from the institution or agency that issues the Form IAP-66 or DS-2019 they can work off campus.

Scholarships are another form of financial aid. If you receive a scholarship then you are not required to repay. Scholarships are given in the form of a grant and have different requirements, while many scholarships require a US citizenship or permanent residency, some are open to any graduate students, some websites can you help you build a profile to help you filter scholarships offered online. Many graduate studies offices will list different available scholarships. <sup>6</sup>

If you are not a recipient of financial aid that will cover your tuition and fees you may want to search for job opportunities on your campus. Many institutions post student jobs available.. In some cases you would be able to apply online and arrange for an interview before your arrival. Campus jobs are an

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<sup>6</sup> Check the resources section for more information on scholarships

opportunity for you strengthen your skill set and add to your existing experiences and can be in a variety of areas. Most jobs require you to have a bank account for salary transfers.

Remember you are only allowed to work up to 20 hours per week!

## **Upon Arrival**

### **Identifications**

#### *Social Security Card*

If you intend to be employed by the university, you will be required to apply for a social security card. Each *Social Security Card* has a unique identification number (SSN). While this card is one form of identification, it should be kept in a safe location and not carried with you at all times. You will need to use that number (or some digits of it) for identification purposes. You will need to provide copies of that card to the financial personnel that handles your employment.

#### *State ID and Driver's license*

While your passport should be used as your form of identification for international traveling, for domestic traveling and identification a driver's license or state ID is sufficient and in many cases more convenient.

The Department of Motor Vehicles (DMV) can issue your driver's license or a learning permit (which allows you to drive in the company of driver's license holder until you can pass the driving tests), and your state ID. Testing varies in each state but normally involves written and behind-the-wheel examinations.

### *University Identification Card*

Nearly every academic institution will require you to obtain a personal university ID. University ID cards can be used for many different purposes such as entering specific buildings, paying for merchandise and other services on campus, and for receiving certain discounts.

### **On campus**

#### *Graduate Studies Office*

Make sure to find the graduate studies office location on your campus upon your arrival. It is encouraged that you walk in and make sure they have all documents, transcripts and required test scores. Some universities accept copies of your documents with the condition of submitting the originals upon arriving. Your department will normally have a graduate administrator to help with questions and needs of graduate students. It is also encouraged that you converse with that person about your documents to ensure they have copies of all the required documents.

#### *International Student Office*

International student offices will typically have international student advisers. These advisers are experts on immigration laws that pertain to international students. These offices understand and recognize that students and scholars from different cultures and educational systems will need advice and assistance.

## *Tuition and Fees Information*

We suggest that you locate the department that handles your tuition and fees payments. Keep in mind that some requirements might apply, for example, your institution might accept only a few of the major credit cards and cash. While graduate assistantships may cover your tuition, in many cases you will be required to pay your fees. The fees and tuition depend on your major, institution and the classes you are registered for. Fees can cover access to the recreation centers, technology fees, international student fees, and health care options. NAGPS has negotiated a very competitive plan with United Healthcare and our website can provide information for individual members.<sup>7</sup>

## *Bank Account*

You will need to have a bank account if you receive an assistantship or have an on-campus job. In most cases, your university employer will wire your payments directly to your . Some universities will have bank branches within them with bank tellers that are more aware of the needs of a newcomer. On-campus branches deal with the needs of international students on daily basis and can provide you with tips on how to handle your finances while you are here.

Acquiring and establishing good credit while you are in the US can help you with many of your needs. Banks will normally provide you with two types of cards:

1. **Debit Cards:** These cards allow you to withdraw money from your bank account through ATM machines or have the cost of the purchases that you make directly charged to your bank account.
2. **Credit Cards:** This card will allow you to buy goods and services

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<sup>7</sup> NAGPS health care and other discounts available at <http://www.nagps.org/resources/discounts>

with a promise that you will pay back what you owe. Credits cards are one way of establishing a good credit history and a high credit score.

Establishing a good credit history will show that you are likely to pay back money that you borrow. Lenders and many others revise your credit history to decide on whether to lend you money or not. Paying bills on time, your monthly rent, and your credit card fees, or any other payments can help you maintain a high score.

As a newcomer to the United States, you will not have a solid credit history and building a reputable history can take years. Many banks will issue you a prepaid credit card and monitor how you use it for a year before deciding on increasing your credit limit and returning your deposits on the card. A good history can affect the decisions of many, for example a landlord wanting to rent you an apartment or the quote you can get on your car insurance. Working early on building good credit can help you financially as pursue your studies.

### *Getting a Phone Number*

As you first arrive to the university you will be asked repeatedly for your contact information. Having a phone number (home or cell) is one method of communication that universities use to contact you. Some universities will have telecommunication offices with special deals and discounts on cell phones for students. Many phone companies have offers for students.<sup>8</sup>

### *Registering for Classes*

One of the first things to complete upon your arrival on campus is

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<sup>8</sup> Check the resources section for links to different cell phone carries

registering for classes. It is advised that you arrange a meeting with your adviser to discuss the different classes that are required or recommended for your program. Also note that many universities have adopted online systems to allow you to register for classes. Attending the international student orientation day will help you understand this process.

### *Student Associations*

Many universities host student associations, senates, organizations, and clubs that represent the student body on your campus. The Center for Student Activities and Involvement states that research shows that students getting involved with a student organization can benefit you in many ways. Students involved with student organizations:

- receive better grades
- are more successful in their academic program
- are more likely to stay in school and graduate timely
- feel more satisfied with their college experience
- are more marketable when job searching and applying to grad school.
- develop valuable leadership and interpersonal skills

Your university may have a graduate student association that represents the graduate student body at their campus and many departments will have a graduate student association that can help you meet peers with similar interests.

### *Taxes*

All workers in the United States must file taxes. . If you have been working as

a student you are required to file once a year. This process is different from one international student to another. Your university or local community may have tax consultants that can help you with this process. Some hold “how to file your taxes sessions”. The process of filing will require you to submit many different forms, as a newcomer you are categorized as a Nonresident Alien. The common form that international students submit is the Form 1040NR-EZ, but other forms may apply to you depending on the source of your income and how long you have been in the United States.

### **Resources**

[www.weather.com](http://www.weather.com)

This website can allow you to find information on the weather according to city, state or zip code.

[https://help.cbp.gov/app/answers/detail/a\\_id/1038](https://help.cbp.gov/app/answers/detail/a_id/1038)

This website is a government website that can provide you with all the regulations and policies related to NSEERS regulations and policies.

<http://www.immigrationdirect.com/visas/student/Student-Tourist-Visas-dvd.jsp>

This website is information about student visas of all types.

<http://www.uscis.gov/portal/site/uscis>

This website will allow you to download the AR-11SR form

<http://maps.google.com>

Get schedules for the bus and rail system, find out about fares and other information and choose from walking, buses , metro and bike trails

<http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2009/nov/131995.htm>

International Student statistics

<http://www.internationalstudent.com>

This website can help guide through the complete process of applying to study at the US

<http://www.fastweb.com/>

This website will allow you create a profile that filters scholarships for you.

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_United\\_States\\_telephone\\_companies](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_United_States_telephone_companies)

This Website contains a list of the different phone companies by state and links to their websites.

<http://www.union.ufl.edu/involvement/studentorgs/advisors/benefits.asp>

Website for the Center For Student Activities and Involvement.

<http://www.cheapflights.com/>

Allows you to compare various different flights from different online websites.

<http://www.istaxes.com/taxes/which.html>

This site will explain to you the differences between the many different tax forms, and can help you decided on which forms can be used.