



Changes to F-1 and J-1 Visa Status: What You Need to Know

The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) has significantly changed the rules for F-1 international students and J-1 exchange visitors. Beginning September 15, 2026, a new rule changes how F-1 and J-1 visa holders are admitted to the United States, limits how long they can stay, and restricts their academic mobility. It also requires F-1 and J-1 holders who wish to extend their stay to either file an extension of stay with USCIS or travel outside the U.S. and be admitted at a port of entry. Learn more about how this rule could affect you.

What Is Changing?

For decades, F-1 and J-1 visa holders have been admitted to the U.S. with a "Duration of Status" (D/S) notation, meaning they could stay in the U.S. as long as they are maintaining status and pursuing their program. Under the new rule, this will change. Starting September 15, 2026, all F and J visa holders will only be allowed to stay for a specific amount of time, known as an Admit Until Date (AUD), limited to whichever is shorter: the end date of their program, or four years. The grace period F-1 students receive after their program ends will be reduced from 60 to 30 days.

Note: A lawsuit has been filed to stop the rule from going into effect, but the judge has not yet ruled, so keep a close watch for updates.

For Those Already in the U.S. in D/S on September 15, 2026

If you were admitted for D/S and are present in the U.S. on September 15, 2026, the new rule provides special transition rules.

- You may remain in the United States until the Program End Date on your Form I-20, DS-2019, or the end of your post-completion OPT or STEM OPT, not to exceed November 14, 2030.
- However, if you depart the U.S. and re-enter on or after September 15, 2026, the new rule will apply to you. You will be given an AUD upon re-entry (either the program end date listed on your Form I-20 or DS-2019, or four years, whichever is shorter) and your grace period will be limited to 30 days.
- If you applied for OPT before September 15, 2026, you may continue working until the end date on your OPT authorization.
- If you apply for post-completion OPT by March 18, 2027, you only need to file the standard Form I-765 application. You will not be required to file Form I-539 application.
- If you apply for OPT after March 18, 2027, you must file both an I-765 and the I-539 application with USCIS.
- If you travel outside the U.S. and re-enter on or after September 15, 2026, you will need to file both Form I-539 and I-765 to apply for OPT, regardless of the timing of your filing.

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Extending Your Stay in the U.S.

Unless you qualify for the rules above, effective September 15, if you need more time in the U.S. to complete your program, begin a new program, or engage in practical training beyond your AUD, you will need to take action to extend your status. Your Designated School Official (DSO) for F-1 students or Alternate Responsible Officer (ARO) for J-1 scholars must first recommend the extension in SEVIS and issue you an extended Form I-20 or DS-2019. Next, you will need to either apply for an extension of stay with USCIS or depart the United States before your AUD and apply for admission at a U.S. port of entry.

Limits on Transferring Schools, Changing Your Program, and Other Restrictions

- Students below the graduate level may not transfer schools or change academic programs before completing their first year of study, unless SEVP authorizes an exception for extenuating circumstances.
- Students at a graduate level or above may not change programs or transfer schools, unless SEVP grants an exception for extenuating circumstances.
- After completing a degree in the U.S. after September 15, 2026, students may only advance to a higher degree level. Earning another degree at the same or lower level will not be permitted.
- For those enrolled in English language training programs, the rule limits the total study time to 24 months, including vacation periods.

Dependents (F-2 and J-2)

If your spouse or child(ren) have F-2 or J-2 dependent status, their permitted stay will normally be tied to yours. When you file to extend your own status, they generally need to extend theirs too. You can include them on your Form I-539 application by having each dependent complete a separate Form I-539A. There is no extra filing fee for dependents added this way. They may choose to file a separate I-539 application instead.

If your spouse or children are currently outside the United States, they do not have to file anything now. If they enter the U.S. on or after September 15, 2026, CBP will generally admit them for a fixed period tied to your own authorized stay.

What To Do Now



Talk to your DSO or ARO as soon as possible to understand how this rule will affect your specific situation and timeline. Keep in mind that the prior rules impacting F-1 and J-1 visa holders remain in place until September 15, 2026.



File any needed applications timely and as early as possible. USCIS processing times can be lengthy, and gaps in your status can have serious consequences.



Keep copies of all important documents, including your I-20 or DS-2019, all USCIS filing receipts, and any approval or denial notices.

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