

XIII. ADVISING INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS ON AN F-1 VISA

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Advising International Students on an F-1 Visa

The primary category of international students that Messiah University accepts is students who are citizens of a country other than the U.S. and have been admitted entry into the United States on an F-1 Visa. These students have particular requirements that they need to take in order to remain in compliance with their visas.

Commonly Used Terms

Form I-20: Certificate of Eligibility for Non-Immigrant (F-1) Student Status, issued by Messiah University and other approved institutions. The form contains information such as student's major, program start and end dates and student's financial information.

F-1 Visa: An entry permit issued by a U.S. embassy/consulate abroad for students who wish to enter the U.S. for the purpose of pursuing full-time studies.

DSO: This stands for Designated School Official. A DSO is a regular employee of the university approved by the Department of Homeland Security to access SEVIS (see below). A DSO is responsible for issuing Form I-20s; approving reduced course loads, internship opportunities through Curricular Practical Training (CPT) and other work authorizations; and reporting and updating student's information in SEVIS (Student and Exchange Visitor Information System). A DSO is also the one who can endorse a student's Form I-20 for travel.

Maintaining Status: This means the student is complying with regulations pertaining to their F-1 student visa. Students are considered to be "in status" or maintaining status if they are complying with the regulations. If they are in violation of their status they are considered to be "out of status" and therefore, ineligible for certain benefits of their status and at risk of not being able to continue their studies in the United States

SEVIS: The Student and Exchange Visitor Information System is an internet-based automated system that maintains current information on non-immigrant students and scholars. Schools and DSOs must report and regularly update information about students on an F-1 visa in SEVIS, which is accessible to the government and the way that schools are kept accountable.

CPT (Curricular Practical Training): CPT is a program that allows students to gain practical experience in their chosen area of study. This can take the form of paid or unpaid internships that occur on or off campus. The student must go through an approval process that involves their academic advisor and the Career and Professional Development Center before engaging in this opportunity.

OPT (Optional Practical Training): OPT is a benefit available to all students on an F-1 visa in which they are able to work in a position that relates to their area of study. This type of practical training typically occurs after a student has completed their program and graduated from Messiah. Students typically apply for the benefit of OPT before graduation. They are then approved by USCIS (United States Customs and Immigration Services) and obtain an EAD (Employment Authorization Document) Card that permits

them to work for at least a year following graduation. Certain majors are eligible for an additional benefit called STEM Extension which permits up to two additional years of employment in a STEM field.

Advising Issues that Impact F-1 Students

Change of Major

If an F-1 visa student changes their major or adds a major, they must inform the Office of International Student Programs, as the student needs to obtain a new Form I-20 to reflect their current degree programs.

Extension of Program

Students who are unable to complete their studies by the program end date indicated on their Form I-20 must apply for an extension prior to the expiration of their Form I-20. *A delay caused by academic probation or suspension is not an acceptable reason for extension.* Students should contact a DSO if they are in need of an extension.

Full-Time Enrollment

F-1 visa students are required to study full-time each term by enrolling in and completing a **minimum of 12 credit hours** each semester. *

Internship for F-1 Students and Curricular Practical Training (CPT):

F-1 international students who wish to do an internship or practicum **MUST** apply for Curricular Practical Training (CPT). CPT is granted for an internship or practicum that is **directly** related to the student's degree program. This includes student teaching, paid and unpaid internships. To be eligible for CPT an F-1 student must:

- Have been enrolled full-time for at least one full academic year
- Be maintaining legal F-1 immigration status
- Work with the Office of International Student Programs to properly apply for CPT
- Register for academic credit in order to be authorized to do the internship
 - If the internship/practicum is not required for their major, they must enroll in the internship class offered by the Career and Professional Development Center.
- Have an internship job offer and corresponding letter
- *Students engaging in CPT fulltime (over 20 hours a week) for 12 cumulative months, are no longer eligible for OPT (Optional Practical Training) which could impact their plans post-graduation.*

Online Courses

F-1 international students are required to take most of their classes in a traditional classroom setting. Only 3 online credits hours per semester or term will be counted towards full-time enrollment. Students who are taking overload courses may take more than 3 credits hours of online classes. *If a student only needs one course to complete their degree program, that course cannot be taken online from within the United States.*

For more information, please contact the Office of International Student Programs:

Visit our website: www.messiah.edu/isp

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**Under certain academic or medical circumstances, international students on F-1 status may receive authorization from the Office of International Student Programs for a Reduced Course Load (RCL), which gives them permission to enroll in less than 12 credits.*