

International Graduate Students

The following is a reference of primary immigration regulations pertaining to international graduate students on F-1 student visas at UH Hilo.* An F-1 student visa allows a non-US citizen to temporarily live in the U.S. for a defined period of time while enrolled at a U.S. college or university. Schools issue students on F-1 visas a form called an I-20, which certifies that the student has been admitted to the college or university and has demonstrated sufficient financial resources to stay in the U.S.

- **Enrollment:** Students must be enrolled full-time each semester (excluding summer sessions), except for their final semester in which they can be enrolled less than full-time. Graduate students are allowed to be enrolled less than full-time even if it is not their final semester if they only need to be enrolled in thesis or dissertation credits. If a student is enrolled but residing outside of the U.S. for a semester, they are not required to be full-time.
- **Online classes:** Current regulations require a student to be enrolled for at least one face-to-face or hybrid class each semester. Government regulations may change in the future, however; before the Covid-19 pandemic, a student could only enroll in one online class per semester (or more than one if at least 75% of their classes were face-to-face or hybrid). If a student is residing outside of the U.S for a semester, they are allowed to take all online classes.
- **Employment in the U.S. while a student:**
 - **On campus:** Students are eligible to work in any job on campus (maximum of 20 hours per week while school is in session, up to 40 hours per week during summer or breaks between sessions). “On campus” includes jobs that are located at an off campus location that is educationally affiliated with the school (e.g., PACRC). “Educational affiliation” means the location is associated with the school’s established curriculum or, at the graduate level, be related to contractually funded research projects conducted by the school. Therefore, the employer could be RCUH if the job is either associated with UH Hilo’s established curriculum or related to research projects conducted by UH Hilo.
 - **Off campus:** Students are eligible to work off campus in jobs that do not meet the criteria for being considered “on campus” with authorization from the Director of International Student Services. To obtain authorization, the job must be an integral part of the student’s degree program. An “integral part” of a student’s degree program includes activities such as a required internship, a job for which a student is getting academic credit via a Directed Reading/Research (X99) class, or a job in which a student is conducting research as part of their thesis or degree program. (There are a few other ways to obtain authorization to work off campus in special circumstances--such as unforeseen economic hardship--but they are generally undesirable because they involve a large fee), typically take three months to get approved by the federal government, and the amount of time a student works in these situations counts against the amount of time they are allowed to work in the U.S. after graduation.)

- **Internships in the U.S.:** Unpaid internships on or off campus are allowable. Paid internships on or off campus are also allowable, provided that an off-campus internship can be considered an integral part of the student's degree program (see "employment off campus" section above). For paid off-campus internships, the student must obtain authorization from the Director of International Student Services (see "Employment while a student" section above).
- **Employment in the U.S. after graduation:** Students are eligible for Optional Practical Training (OPT) after graduation. As a way to enable international students to gain work experience before returning to their home country, OPT allows students to work for one year after graduation in a job directly related to their field of study. Students in STEM fields such as TCBES are allowed an additional two years of OPT, for a total of three years. The job can be anywhere in the U.S., can be part-time or full-time, and students can have more than one job and can change jobs. After OPT, it is typically difficult for a student to continue living and working in the U.S. legally. One pathway is to obtain an H-1B visa, which an employer applies for on behalf of an employee. (There is a cap on the number of H-1B visas the government grants each year, but employees who work for a university or research entity affiliated with a university such as RCUH are exempt from this cap.). Another pathway is to obtain permanent residency (a "green card") by marrying a U.S. citizen.
- **U.S. social security numbers:** Students can apply for a social security number if they get a paid job (on or off campus). The Director of International Student Services assists students with this process.
- **Taxes:** Students are subject to tax laws in the U.S. for income they earn from employment in the U.S., from stipends, and from scholarships if the amount of a scholarship exceeds the cost of tuition and fees. The Director of International Student Services provides free access to a software program specifically designed for international students in the U.S. to help them prepare necessary tax forms. The Director informs students about access to this free software each year in January.
- **Extension of stay:** When a student is admitted to UH Hilo, there is a projected graduation date provided on their I-20 form. If a student is unable to complete a program by the projected graduation date on their I-20 form, they need to request an extension of stay from the Director of International Student Services. This is generally always granted.
- **Leave of absence:** It is allowable for a student to take a leave of absence from a degree program (at UH Hilo, graduate students are allowed up to a one-year leave of absence). During the period they are not enrolled, they cannot be present in the U.S. and may need to pay a \$350 fee to the U.S. Department of Homeland Security before they return to the U.S. to resume their studies.
- **Health insurance:** The UH System requires students on F-1 visas to have health insurance. The Director of International Student Services has negotiated a health insurance plan that meets the University's requirements, is widely accepted in Hilo and throughout the U.S., and is also nearly 66% lower in cost than UH's HMSA student health insurance plan. Students are required to enroll in this particular plan.

- **Scholarships/financial aid:** Students may apply annually for the International Student Scholarship, a merit-based scholarship which also takes into consideration a student's financial need. Currently the scholarship is \$2,250 per semester. The scholarship is competitive and not guaranteed, as the number of students who apply exceeds the amount of scholarship funds available. Students on F-1 visas are not eligible for any U.S. federal financial aid, including loans. Students from the Compact of Free Association (COFA) and American Samoa, Guam, and the Northern Mariana Islands are eligible for some limited forms of U.S. federal financial aid. COFA citizens are only eligible for U.S. federal work-study at the graduate level. Students from American Samoa, Guam, and the Commonwealth of the Northern Marianas are eligible for loans (another form of U.S. financial aid) in addition to federal work-study. No graduate students are eligible for Pell grants.

**Students who are citizens of the Compact of Free Association nations (Palau, Marshall Islands, and the Federated States of Micronesia), while international students, do not need visas to enter, study, work, or live in the U.S. Students from American Samoa, Guam, and the Commonwealth of the Northern Marianas are U.S. nationals or citizens and therefore also do not need visas.*

Prepared by Jim Mellon, Director of International Student Services, 12/22/2022