



Student Visa Guidelines

*In order to have the correct and legal immigration status in your host country, you may be required to obtain a **visa which allows you to participate in full-time study**. Often this type of visa is called a “**student visa**.” These guidelines are intended to help guide you through the process of researching and applying for your student visa; however, it is ultimately your responsibility to acquire the appropriate visa.*

INTRODUCTION

A **visa** is an official document issued by the government of your host country, which allows you to enter the country legally. Visas may fall into a number of different categories (defined by the purpose of the visit), such as visitor, work, and student visas. While some countries allow students to enter on a visitor visa, most will require you to obtain a **student visa**, either ahead of time or when arriving in your host country.

Whether you need to apply for a visa ahead of time, and what steps you must take to do so, depend entirely on the country where you’ll be studying. In addition, the requirements may vary depending on where you live – so be sure to research your requirements thoroughly!

Plan ahead! Research your visa requirements immediately. Apply as early as you’re eligible – but work ahead of time on gathering all of your required documents!

We recommend that you **begin researching requirements as early as possible**. For many countries, the visa application process is very involved – you may be required to provide a long list of documents; apply a certain number of days in advance; or even obtain an FBI

background check. All of these steps can take time, and skipping any of them may make you ineligible for your visa – as such, you should not leave this process until the last minute. Also be aware, however, that there are often limits on how early you can apply. There is such a thing as applying too early – many countries require that you apply no more than 90 days in advance of the start date of your program. Be sure to check this on the consulate’s website.

HOW IT WORKS

Not all countries require you to obtain a visa in advance. In some cases, you may be able to enter the country legally as a visitor; in other countries, you enter as a visitor but then must change to student status once you’ve arrived. In many cases, though, you must apply for your student visa ahead of time, and will not be allowed to enter the country without it.

IF YOUR HOST COUNTRY REQUIRES THAT YOU OBTAIN A VISA IN ADVANCE, WE STRONGLY RECOMMEND THAT YOU DO SO. You may hear from other students that they avoided the student visa process by entering on a 90-day visitor visa, leaving the country for a short time partway through the semester, and then re-entering on a new 90-day visa. While there’s a chance that this approach

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could work, it also means that you will not be in the country on the correct legal status – which means that if you get caught, there is a chance you will be deported.

If you do need to obtain a visa prior to studying abroad, you will typically need to apply through your host country's US-based **embassy**, or to a regional **consulate** (branches of the embassy located throughout the US).

Before applying for your visa, you must have a valid passport. If you do not have a passport, you should apply for one immediately. Your passport should also be valid for at least six months *after* the end of your program – if it will expire before then, you should apply immediately for a renewal. If you do not have a passport, you should consult with the Office of Study Abroad to see whether you need to use expedited processing in order to have time to then apply for your visa. Processing time is normally 6-8 weeks for a passport; please see www.travel.state.gov for up-to-date and detailed information.

You may not have access to your passport while your visa is being processed – take that into consideration when planning any other international travel!

Your visa often takes the form of a small document that gets adhered into your passport by the government of your host country. When applying for your visa, you may be required to **forfeit your passport temporarily** to the host government authority.

The fact that you may have to hand over your passport is important, because it means that **you may not be able to travel internationally while your visa is being processed.** If you planned to travel outside the US prior to your semester abroad (for example, during the summer; during intersession; or on a family trip), this may affect your travel plans. In addition, if you plan to study abroad in two different countries in consecutive semesters, you may have difficulty applying for your second semester's visa while in the first country. We advise careful and early consultation with the Office of Study Abroad anytime you are considering multiple types travel of within a short period of time, or especially when you hope to link two experiences (i.e. international intersession course and spring semester study abroad, summer travel and fall semester study abroad, or fall and spring study abroad to two different countries). Be aware that the order of your plans may need to occur in a certain order or you may need to prioritize. Planning ahead is crucial.

Be sure to understand the terms of the visa you're applying for. What period does it cover? When do you need to enter and exit your host country? Can you leave the country and come back in ("multiple entry")? If there are several different types of available for your host country, be sure to apply for the one that will give you the most flexibility.

RESEARCHING YOUR HOST COUNTRY'S REQUIREMENTS

The **requirements for student visas vary widely** from one country to another, and even among consulates for the same country. As a result, it is very important that you **research the requirements for your specific case**, and not rely on what another student may have

Every country has its own visa requirements, and different consulates for the same country may even have their own requirements. Be sure you know what your consulate requires!

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had to do. Consulates are jurisdictional, meaning that they typically serve residents of certain states only. Some (but not all) will allow you to use the consulate that serves Pennsylvania, as you are a student in this state. Using the wrong consulate will likely result in the refusal of your application. If you are unsure which consulate to use, please ask the Office of Study Abroad.

There are several resources to consult when researching your visa requirements:

- 1) Start with the website of the US Department of State (www.travel.state.gov) On the main page, select the country where you'll be studying – they will then typically list “entry/exit requirements,” which will give you a general overview of what might be required. In addition, they typically provide a link to the country's embassy.
- 2) Visit the website of your host country's US embassy (typically based in Washington DC or New York City). If there's not a link to the embassy on the State Department's website, you should be able to find it easily with a quick search. This is the best resource for specific visa requirements, and will also normally contain information about which consulate has jurisdiction over your home state.
- 3) In some cases, your program abroad may provide you information about visa requirements, or about information they need from you to provide supporting documentation. As with everything you receive from your host institution, please be sure to read this information carefully.
- 4) You may find it useful to do a web search for your country (e.g., “student visa [host country]”). As with everything on the internet, though, not everything you read will be accurate – use this option with care.

Please note that **your host country's government is the ultimate authority on what you need to do.** While the State Department and other resources can provide useful information to help interpret the requirements, the government of your host country is the one reviewing your application and issuing your visa – as such, the guidelines they provide are the most important.

HOW TO APPLY

Each consulate will have its own guidelines for the timeframe in which you must apply for your visa. In many cases, you must apply at least six weeks before departure. **If you apply late, you risk not getting your visa in time.** We encourage you to research this requirement immediately, so that you can begin planning your application timeline.

It can take a consulate several weeks or more to process a student visa application. Even if the application seems fairly straightforward, remember that tens of thousands of other US college students will also be studying abroad in your host country – based on the sheer volume of applications, the turnaround time may not be as quick as you might think. **Apply as early as possible** to make sure that you get your visa in time!

Don't wait until the last minute! Applying for your visa can be a time-consuming process, and processing times can vary.

Please note that you will likely need **the original acceptance letter from your host institution** before you can apply for your student visa. While you wait for your acceptance letter, though, you can be researching

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all of the other requirements, and collecting the other necessary documentation for your application. Note that the consulate may require an original acceptance letter or allow you to use a copy.

For those countries that require you to apply for a student visa in advance, each has its own process for how to apply. Some countries have online application processes; others allow you to apply by mail. However,

You may need to apply for your visa in person – make sure to take this into consideration when planning!

some countries will require you to appear in person at your designated consulate. For Pennsylvania residents, this can often mean New York, Philadelphia, or Washington DC (depending on the country). Please research this requirement in advance, so that you can be prepared to schedule a trip to the appropriate city if necessary. If you do need to appear in person at the consulate, **determine whether you can (or must) schedule an appointment**, or if visa applications are taken on a first-come, first-served basis. If the consulate requires that you have an appointment to submit your visa application, we recommend **scheduling your appointment as soon as possible (for a date in the future)** – appointment times can fill up quickly at peak times of the year. The Office of Study Abroad and W&J will not be able to obtain additional appointment slots for you if all appointments are taken, so please be diligent in this regard.

We recognize that having to travel to the consulate can be a hardship; unfortunately, if your host country requires it, you must complete their requirements in order to receive your visa. If other W&J students will be studying in the same country, we encourage you to consider coordinating your travel to the consulate.

Some consulates may allow you to designate a “proxy” to appear at the consulate in your stead. If your consulate permits you to choose a proxy, it would mean that your parent (or other designated person) could make the trip to the consulate in your place. There will normally be some additional paperwork required if your consulate offers this option.

Your consulate may require any number of forms as part of your application – read through the list carefully, and start working on the forms as early as possible. Do not wait until the last minute to gather necessary documentation! When necessary, W&J can provide certain documents that may be required by your consulate:

- *Financial support letter:* If your consulate requires you to provide evidence that you have a certain amount of funds available to you (typically to prove that you can afford to spend the semester in that country), the Office of Study Abroad can provide a letter confirming that W&J will pay for your tuition and room (and if applicable, board). **Letters available upon request.**
 - ***For students going to France:*** Please note that while a financial support letter from W&J can be used as an additional support in your application and you are encouraged to request it, you should still be prepared to provide and include in your application additional proof of funding meeting the requirements listed on the consulate’s website.
- *Confirmation of insurance coverage:* All students studying abroad are required to purchase international health insurance from CISI; CISI is happy to provide a letter for the consulate confirming your coverage, and listing the coverage amounts. The Office of Study Abroad can request a letter from CISI on your behalf.

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- *Verification of enrollment:* If your consulate requires you to prove that you are currently enrolled in a US institution, you can request verification of enrollment from the W&J Registrar’s Office. Please visit the Registrar’s website for the “enrollment and degree verification” form.

If you need any of these documents, please **submit your request at least a week in advance** to allow sufficient time for processing.

In a handful of cases, your consulate may also require you to get an FBI background check. **FBI background checks can take months to complete** – if your consulate requires one, we recommend beginning the process *immediately*. You can find more information at http://www.fbi.gov/about-us/cjis/background-checks/background_checks.

DEALING WITH THE CONSULATE

It may be natural to think of the consulate as a customer service center, and to expect friendly attention and immediate responses. In reality, though, the consulate is an agency of a foreign government, and they have no obligation to give you a visa – **getting a visa from them is not a right, but a privilege**. We encourage you to keep this reality in mind throughout the application process.

When dealing with the consulate, keep in mind the “three Ps”: **patience, persistence, and politeness**. Things may not happen as quickly as you expect, but remember that consulates tend to be extremely busy, and there may be a small number of staff dealing with a large number of visa requests. Feel free to ask questions ahead of time, or to follow up with the consulate as necessary after you’ve submitted your application – but be sure to be polite when doing so.

When submitting your application, **be sure to have all of the appropriate documents in order, with the required number of copies. Attention to detail is very important**. Failure to provide the necessary documentation may result in your application being turned away. Remember: it’s better to have something and not need it, than to need something and not have it.

QUESTIONS?

We hope that these guidelines are helpful. Please let us know if you have questions, and we will do our best to help you through the visa process, and get you on your way to your study-abroad destination. Good luck!