FAQs for International Students on F-1 and J-1 Visas Re: COVID-19

Updated 4/01/20

Please be reassured that Rutgers University is closely monitoring and responding to the COVID-19 situation, and that we at Rutgers Global will continue to share additional information as soon as it becomes available. You should be monitoring the University’s coronavirus.rutgers.edu site, checking the Rutgers Global alerts, and regularly watching your Rutgers email inbox for updates from the university and our offices. For further information, especially concerning travel advisories, you should continue to follow the relevant U.S. Department of State (U.S.DOS) and CDC sites.

Feel free to contact our office if you have any questions that are not answered by the FAQs below.

INTERNATIONAL TRAVEL AND VISAS

1. Where are the current travel bans?

The U.S. government has suspended entry for any non-U.S. citizens and non-permanent residents who were physically present within the following countries during the 14-day period preceding their entry to the U.S.

- People’s Republic of China (excluding Hong Kong and Macau)
- Islamic Republic of Iran
- European Schengen area countries - Austria, Belgium, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Italy, Latvia, Liechtenstein, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden and Switzerland.
- United Kingdom and Ireland (as of Monday, March 16, midnight)

Please note that the situation is changing daily. Also, many countries are imposing immigration restrictions in order to contain the virus. For further information, please review travel advisories available from the U.S. State Department, the CDC, and the country/countries outside of the U.S. from which you want to fly from or to. Feel free to contact our office if you have any other questions.

2. I am currently in the U.S. but was planning to travel outside of the U.S. soon. Should I travel?

Given the fluidity of the current situation, we are unable to advise one way or the other about international travel. This is a decision you will need to make keeping in mind all available information.

Even if your destination does not have any travel restrictions at this time, we cannot guarantee that the situation will remain the same at the time of your travel, as many countries are imposing travel restrictions in order to contain the virus. International students should also be aware of U.S. government-imposed travel restrictions if you consider travel outside the United States, and you may face difficulties when trying to re-enter the U.S., including being denied entry.

However, we understand that international students may want to return home to be with their families. As long as you have weighed the risks and then made your decision, please know that Rutgers Global will continue to support you and your legal status will remain active while you are utilizing the university’s remote instruction plan and otherwise remain compliant with
applicable regulations. Should you choose to travel, make sure you have a valid travel signature or have requested a new one. Please note, you only need to have the I-20 with a valid travel signature at the time of entry into the U.S. and not when you are leaving.

3. My visa is expiring soon. Can I travel home or to a third country to apply for a new visa?

International students should consider the following as they plan to travel out of the country to apply for a new visa:

- Students can remain in the U.S. with an expired visa as long as they have legal status in the U.S. The F-1/J-1 visa only needs to be valid at the time of entry into the U.S. If your visa expires while you are in the U.S., you can still continue to stay here as long as you are maintaining your status. If your visa expires and you have traveled out of the U.S., you will need to apply for a new visa.

- If students must travel out of the country, they should keep in mind the status of visa application operations at the embassy or consulate where they intend to apply, as well as travel and other restrictions in the destination countries visited while out of the U.S. The following links should be closely monitored for the latest information on the status of embassies and consulates around the world:
  - The Department of State website for the status of operations at the embassy where students intend to apply for a visa
  - Visa wait times at various embassies

- Students should also be mindful of U.S. government-imposed travel restrictions that may affect re-entry into the U.S.

- Students should also consider the implications of their travel on immigration benefits such as OPT.

We also have a lot of useful information related to travel and visa application on our website.

4. How do the current travel restrictions impact visa applications?

Generally speaking, students from countries not impacted by the travel bans should be able to apply for U.S. visas in their home countries as usual. However, students should check with the embassies or consulates near them as they prepare for their visa applications. We would also recommend checking the Department of State website for the status of operations at the embassy where they intend to apply for a visa.

We would recommend that students continue to monitor the news, airline travel information, and the Rutgers Global website for additional changes or updates. We also have a lot of good information related to travel and visa application on our website.

5. I am a student currently enrolled at another institution in the U.S. Do I need a new visa to begin study at Rutgers in the fall?

You do not need a new visa to begin the new program at Rutgers if you remain in the U.S. while between schools. If you choose to travel internationally, you will need to check with your embassy or consulate to determine if you need to apply for a new visa. If you have a valid visa (valid at the time of expected entry to the U.S.), chances are you won’t need to apply for a new one.

F-1 students can have their record transferred to Rutgers within 60 days of their program completion date at the current school. Your program at Rutgers must begin within five months of the date of last enrollment at your current school (program completion date) or the last date of authorized Optional Practical Training (OPT).

J-1 students can transfer their SEVIS records to Rutgers, but their new program must begin immediately after completion of the current program (no gap allowed).
IMMIGRATION STATUS – CURRENT STUDENTS

6. As an international student can I take online classes until the end of the spring and/or summer semesters and still remain in legal status?

Yes, international students in F-1 and J-1 status can complete their spring semesters, either abroad or in the U.S., via remote instruction offered by the university and maintain their legal status, as long as they continue to remain enrolled in a full course of study and make normal progress towards their degree (unless they qualify for a reduced credit/course load based on permissible exceptions).

This guidance is based on the following information:

• According to President Barchi’s announcement on March 17, 2020, and the Senior Vice President for Academic Affairs, Dr. Barbara Lee’s announcement on March 26, 2020, Rutgers University will continue to offer remote instruction through the end of the spring semester and summer sessions.

• We have also received official guidance from the government that allows U.S. universities to temporarily adapt their policies and procedures in certain respects related to remote instruction to address issues associated with COVID-19.

Students who chose to leave the U.S. should consider future implications, such as potential difficulties with visa renewals when returning to the U.S. and travel restrictions. The Rutgers Global ISSS Office can help to advise students on a case by case basis.

7. If I leave the U.S. now and stay out of the country for more than 5 months, will this be a problem for my immigration status? What happens to my SEVIS record and my I-20/DS-2019?

Based on current guidance from the government, students who leave the country but remain enrolled full-time and make normal progress towards their program by participating in modified modes of instruction (as offered by the university) will be considered to be in active SEVIS status. They will also be eligible for the summer vacation after the end of the spring term. In this case students could potentially leave any time during the spring semester and return any time before the start of classes in the fall term and their SEVIS records would remain active.

This applies to continuing students only – that is students enrolled in the spring and expected to enroll in the fall term.

If students withdraw from their programs in the spring term, the usual five-month rule would apply to their SEVIS status.

8. I am currently enrolled in a program at Rutgers as an international student (and will be enrolled in the fall semester as well). Are there any restrictions on returning home for the summer?

Continuing students are not required to enroll in courses in the summer. They are eligible to stay in the U.S. without being registered for courses. They may (if they choose) enroll in summer classes or a summer program at Rutgers or at a different institution. Online study is also not restricted during the summer as long as the student was actively enrolled in the spring and intends to be enrolled in a “traditional” in-class program in the fall.

Continuing students are eligible for on-campus employment (full-time or part-time) and may apply for Curricular Practical Training (if eligible).

See answer to question 1 for more travel related details.
9. I am an international student currently abroad, and I cannot return to the U.S. due to travel restrictions. What should I do?

Students are advised to contact their academic department/school immediately (if they haven’t already) to discuss whether any academic contingency plans are feasible while they are abroad. These may involve:

- Taking classes online while abroad
- Obtaining a leave of absence and withdrawing from Rutgers for the semester (SEVIS record would need to be closed)
- Qualifying for reduced credit authorization and maintaining an active SEVIS record
- Graduate students who have completed all coursework and may be able to enroll full-time in research or other non-coursework degree requirements while abroad may be able to maintain an active SEVIS record.

Once an academic plan is agreed upon, students should be directed to contact ISSS immediately to discuss the immigration implications of this plan. While there are usually very limited options to keep a student’s SEVIS status active while outside the U.S. during an academic term, current COVID-19 based accommodations for F-1 and J-1 students may allow for some flexibility.

If the academic plan (and/or a relaxation of federal regulations) allows ISSS to maintain a student’s SEVIS status, we will do so.

If this is not possible, students will be directed to close their SEVIS record and obtain a new immigration document (I-20 or DS-2019) when they are ready to return. This may involve reactivating the currently closed record or issuing a document under a new SEVIS ID based on how long the student remains outside the country from the date of termination of his/her record. ISSS will handle these on a case by case basis.

There are other implications of the actions above, including but not limited to delayed benefits such as Optional Practical Training (OPT), Curricular Practical Training (CPT) or students being required to apply for a new visa. Contact ISSS to discuss these implications.

10. I am an international student in my final semester, currently abroad, and I cannot return to the U.S. due to travel restrictions. Can I return after the situation stabilizes?

International students who were expecting spring 2020 to be their final semester of study and are not able to complete their programs should apply for an extension of their SEVIS program. Please note that extensions cannot be granted to accommodate graduation ceremonies (the Rutgers May graduation ceremony is suspended).

International students unable to return to the U.S. and in their final semester of study (completing their programs while overseas) are faced with the possibility of losing their ability to apply for Optional Practical Training (OPT for F-1 students) or Academic Training (for J-1 students). There is currently no regulatory relief for students caught in this situation.

If you are graduating in May and would like to come back to the U.S. based on your current legal status, please make sure you do so before the end of the spring semester – May 17. Even if your I-20/DS-2019 is valid until a later date, your status is only valid until the date that you are pursuing your program of study. Students intending to continue their study in the U.S. can return with a new I-20 for that program. If you would like to return for any other purposes, you may do so on another visa classification (such as the B-2 visitor visa).

11. I am an F-1/J-1 student studying on-campus at Rutgers and in my final semester of study at Rutgers. What are my options at this time?

Graduating students have the following options:
• **Optional Practical Training (OPT)/ Academic Training**

F-1 students can apply for post-completion OPT, which grants them employment authorization and an extension of status for 12 months (per advancing degree level) after the completion of their program. This authorization can be extended by another two years for students in approved STEM fields, based on certain eligibility criteria. The application is filed with the United States Citizenship and Immigration Service (USCIS) and involves a filing fee. It provides employment authorization as well as extension of a student’s legal status. Application deadlines must be adhered to.

Students have to be present in the U.S. to apply for OPT. They can travel only after they get a receipt for the successful submission of their application to the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Service (USCIS). If you choose to apply for OPT, ensure that you apply prior to departing the U.S. (and get the receipt notice) or stay in the U.S. and complete the semester via remote instruction.

J-1 students may apply for Academic Training (AT), and work in the U.S. after completion of their program. Academic Training is authorized for a specific job and is processed at ISSS. Legal application deadlines must be adhered to. Students looking to apply for AT should contact ISSS to discuss case specific timelines and possible travel restrictions.

• **Transfer to a New Institution/Program**

Students in F-1 and J-1 status can transfer their SEVIS records from one school to another. F-1 student SEVIS records can be transferred to a new school within 60 days of the completion of their program at Rutgers. This date is often the degree completion or graduation date. The new program can begin within 5 months of the date of last enrollment at Rutgers (program completion date) or the last date of authorized OPT.

J-1 Students - Students must begin a new program immediately after completion of the current program (no gap allowed).

International students can also begin a new program at Rutgers. Please contact ISSS for advice on how best to maintain/update your SEVIS record.

• **Change of Status**

Students may consider applying for a change to a different immigration status such as B-1/B-2 tourist visa (or another viable) status to remain in the US. This is an independent petition and students can apply on their own, or work with external lawyers for assistance. The application is filed with the United States Citizenship and Immigration Service (USCIS) and involves a filing fee.

• **Leave the Country within the Grace Period**

F-1 and J-1 students have a grace period, following the end of their programs, which enables them to remain in the U.S. legally during this time.

- F-1 students - 60 days after degree completion
- J-1 students - 30 days after degree completion

**12. I am an international student on a study abroad exchange program in one of the impacted countries. What should I do?**

If the program is cancelled, students may return to their home country. Students have the following options:

- Take a leave of absence (LoA), withdraw for the semester and close their SEVIS records
- Maintain status by enrolling in remote instruction/online courses, unless they qualify for reduced credit authorization under any of the permissible reduced course load exceptions
• In the case that this is a student’s final semester before graduation, and the student is unable to return to the U.S., they would lose their OPT eligibility (according to current policy). Students in this situation should consult with a Rutgers ISSS advisor immediately.

13. I am currently in the U.S. but quarantined (or self-isolated) and unable to attend classes due to medical reasons. What should I do?

International students may submit a request to ISSS for consideration of a Medical Reduced Course Load exception to normal full-time enrollment requirements if they are unable to maintain their full-time studies for a medical reason. The quarantine or required self-isolation would qualify as a medical reason. International students should carefully assess the individual need for such an exception in light of the university’s temporary utilization of remote education.

IMMIGRATION STATUS - INCOMING STUDENTS

14. I have been re-admitted to Rutgers for the summer; how does the current crisis impact my situation?

Students who are in the U.S. in active SEVIS status (possibly at another institution, e.g. a community college) can transfer their records to Rutgers and participate in remote instruction offered by their program.

Students who are outside the U.S. and were looking to return over the summer may face the travel restrictions based on when they are looking to return. If you are unable to return, you can participate in remote instruction offered during the summer session. Please contact your school/department/program to discuss your academic options.

Please review the information on our “Returning to Rutgers” section of our website for more details.

Students will need to contact an advisor at ISSS for guidance on the appropriate way to obtain a new I-20 when they are able to return. Based on the period of their absence from the country (less than 5 months or more than 5 months), the action recommended will be different.

15. I am a new student starting my studies in the fall/summer session at Rutgers University. Can I begin my studies in the fall/summer if I cannot come to the U.S. in time?

As a new student, you would need to come into the U.S. and report to Rutgers to activate your SEVIS record and legal status. If you are enrolled for the summer/fall, and unable to come to the U.S., your F-1/J-1 record would need to be deferred to the start of the next semester. You may be able to begin your program from overseas if your department/school provides remote instruction options, but your immigration status would only be activated when you are able to enter the U.S.

More information about delayed enrollment, as well as possibly beginning Rutgers enrollment and courses while abroad (using online or other methods), will be outlined in future communications.

16. I am planning to attend Rutgers in the summer or fall and am already in the U.S. What should I do?

New students who are already in the U.S. (in high school, or at a different institution), can have their SEVIS records transferred to Rutgers and stay in the U.S. even if their program at Rutgers begins in the fall. Please consult with the international services office in your current school about your transfer eligibility and timelines.

New students starting at Rutgers during the summer and interested in on or off-campus employment options should consult with ISSS for eligibility.
17. I am currently on OPT/STEM OPT or CPT. How does the current situation impact me and my ability to work?

OPT/STEM OPT and CPT work authorizations that have been authorized remain valid for the dates of authorization. The Student and Exchange Visitor Program (SEVP) has provided guidance and accommodation recognizing that changes to workplace requirements may impact students pursuing practical training. Students in such situations should consult with their employers and seek alternative ways to maintain employment such as teleworking and other arrangements. If there are any substantial changes to OPT employment, make sure you follow OPT reporting guidelines to report the change to ISSS so we can update your SEVIS record. Students on authorized CPTs should check with their employer about the viability of the employment/experience. If there is any change to employment dates, contact ISSS to have the authorization updated on your I-20.

18. I am currently on post-completion OPT. Does the 90-day unemployment rule still apply in light of the current crisis?

At this time there is no revised guidance on the unemployment rule while on OPT. Please remember that you can also participate in volunteer/unpaid employment of more than 20 hours/week, directly related to major field of study, and appropriate for your level of education.

19. I cannot return to the U.S. in time to apply for OPT. Can I apply for OPT from outside the U.S.?

Currently, regulations require you to be physically in the U.S. at the time you submit your OPT application, but we have been informed that the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) is evaluating this question and may issue additional guidance. We will update this answer as soon as more information is available.

20. I am graduating in May and applying for OPT. Can I travel internationally after mailing my OPT application to USCIS from the U.S.?

Students are allowed to leave the U.S. while their OPT application is pending at USCIS, but they have to make sure they get the receipt notice for the OPT application prior to traveling out. There is always an element of risk involved with international travel and return to the U.S. (particularly when you have completed the primary purpose of your visa status – that is your degree program), and given these unprecedented times, the risks are further heightened.

If you do choose to travel, please make sure you have your receipt notice with you. If your application is approved while you are overseas, make sure it is delivered and received at a valid U.S. address, and someone checking your mail sends you an electronic copy/image of the EAD card, which you can print and keep with you at the time of re-entry into the U.S. Students are advised to follow the travel tips and OPT guidance on the ISSS website.

We will update this answer as more information becomes available.

21. I have an approved CPT for the summer, but I am currently back home. Can I work on CPT from outside the U.S.?

SEVP has provided guidance that allows students to engage in CPT while abroad, as long as they meet all the standard eligibility criteria for the CPT (the CPT is a curricular requirement and counts towards the degree, the CPT is authorized prior to the employment start date) and either the employer has an office outside the United States or the employer can assess student engagement and attainment of learning objectives electronically. Students should discuss the possibility of remote work arrangements with their employer.
22. If I vacate my current on or off campus residence and relocate to a new U.S. address, do I need to report it within 10 days? Where do I report?

Yes, international students should continue to update their physical mailing address through the MyRutgers portal, within 10 days of the change. For students who are outside the U.S. but maintaining legal status, we understand that you cannot provide a physical U.S. address at this time. However, please remember to update your address when you return for in-person instruction.

HOUSING, DINING, TRANSPORTATION AND OTHER TOPICS

23. When and how can I move out of my on-campus housing?

Rutgers residence halls are currently closed due to COVID-19. All residents are required to move out unless approved to stay by residence life. For detailed information about the move-out procedure, please visit the Rutgers Residence Life website.

24. My on-campus housing contract expires at the end of the semester, but I cannot return home under the current circumstances. Is there any way to extend my contract?

Rutgers is considering the needs of students after the spring semester. No final decisions have yet been made. Information will be shared once it is available.

For information and resources regarding off-campus housing, please contact the Office of Off-Campus Living and Community Partnerships.

25. I am worried about the reduced services on-campus – what dining services are open during this time?

Please check the Dining Services website for the latest operating status of dining halls. In accordance with social distancing measures, starting Monday, March 16, all locations operated by Dining Services will only offer items in takeout containers or prepackaged items. All dining rooms will be closed until further notice. If you need assistance regarding having access to food, we encourage you to contact the Dean of Students Office, who can assist by connecting you with the appropriate campus and community-based resources. The Rutgers Student Food Pantry is another resource for those concerned regarding access to food.

26. What transportation options do I have to get around at this time?

Visit the Rutgers Transportation Services website for information on the modified bus schedules and more.

Some public transportation like NJ Transit (running on a limited schedule), taxis and some other car services (such as Uber and Lyft) are also available. Please exercise caution and care as you use any form of public transportation.