



Gilbert Christian High School
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Gilbert Christian High School International Student Program

GENERAL INFORMATION ABOUT F-1 VISAS

In order for international students (defined as a student holding a foreign passport) to enroll at a school in the United States, they must obtain an F-1 (student) visa. To obtain an F-1 visa, a student must show the government:

- An I-20 form properly issued in SEVIS (government computer program) by a school approved by the Department of Homeland Security (DHS).
- A passport valid for at least six (6) months.
- Intention to stay in the U.S. temporarily and only for the purpose of pursuing a full course of study.
- Proof of a residence outside the U.S. to which the student intends to return after completing the temporary period of study.
- Financial ability to cover the cost of education and living expenses in the U.S.
- Proof of having paid the SEVIS fee, if required.

Students should plan ahead for their study in the U.S. and allow plenty of time for visa processing. U.S. embassies and consulates follow the same set of rules, which are then adapted to their host countries. Therefore, students should inquire in advance about individual policies in the U.S. embassy/consulate in their home country.

A student cannot apply for a student visa more than 90 days before the registration date indicated on the I-20 form. The timetable for visa processing can vary widely depending on the volume of applications processed by an individual consulate or embassy. Notifications of acceptance or denial can range from one to ten weeks. June, July, and August are the busiest months for visa processing. Students cannot enter the U.S. more than 30 days before the program start date on the I-20.

PROCESS FOR OBTAINING AN F-1 VISA

STEP 1: Student applies for admission to the U.S. school.

Complete Gilbert Christian Schools' international student application (available on this website) and submit it along with the \$450 application fee. Application will be considered once TOEFL/IELTS/iTEP SLATE-PLUS report is received.

STEP 2: School makes a decision regarding admission.

The application will be evaluated for academic ability, English ability, financial ability, and Christian testimony. A Skype interview with the student will then be scheduled.

STEP 3: Student submits payment for first semester's tuition and required fees.

The school will notify the student that admission has been granted by sending a letter of acceptance. To fulfill the government's requirement for financial ability, the student will send funds by wire transfer for at least the first semester's tuition and required fees.

STEP 4: School prepares the I-20 form and sends it to the student.

The official name for the I-20 is *Certificate of Eligibility for Nonimmigrant Student Status for Academic and Language Students*. Approved schools may issue I-20's for one year or multiple years to cover the duration of a student's program. Schools may only issue an I-20 form after a student has completed the application process and is admitted to the school.

STEP 5: Student applies for a visa.

After receiving the I-20, the student must apply in person for a visa at the nearest U.S. consulate or embassy in his/her home country. For specific information regarding consulates and embassies worldwide, refer to the State Department website at www.usembassy.state.gov/. **Call ahead to schedule an appointment and to confirm what documents are needed.** The student should bring the following documents when applying for a visa:

- Completed *Nonimmigrant Visa Application*, Form DS-156, which can be obtained from a U.S. consulate or embassy, with a photo and receipt for any required visa processing fee
- Form DS-157, required for all male nonimmigrant visa applicants between the ages of 16 and 45
- Form DS-158
- Completed I-20 from the school the student plans to attend
- Passport, which must be valid for at least six (6) months after the proposed date of entry into the U.S.
- Letter of acceptance from the school
- Financial documentation that shows sufficient funds to cover the cost of tuition, room and board, books, and other related expenses
- Evidence of English ability sufficient for course of study
- Photograph
- Evidence of intent to depart the U.S. after completion of studies
- Proof of having paid the \$350 SEVIS fee
- Machine Readable Visa (MRV) surcharge fee
- Visa reciprocity fee (if applicable)
- Transcripts of previous schoolwork

The Consular Interview – In most countries, a consular interview is required. These interviews are conducted by U.S. State Department Consular Officers and take place at the embassy or consulate. Some consulates/embassies request that students submit the required documentation before scheduling the interview, and others conduct the entire process on the same day.

The purpose of this interview is for a consular officer to determine the student's academic interests and English language proficiency. It is also the consular official's job to ensure that the applicant is a legitimate candidate for a student visa and is not entering the U.S. for some other reason--such as immigration. To prove that students are seeking a visa only for educational purposes, they will be asked to show proof of ties to their home country. Examples of such ties might include evidence of a family business or family-owned real estate. If close family members have previously studied in the U.S. and then returned home, this information might also serve as evidence of ties to the home country.

Applicants should be prepared to answer a variety of questions. The consular official's job is to learn about the student and why he/she wishes to study in the U.S. The official will also want to know why the student wishes to attend a particular school. The student may also be asked about the documentation he/she has provided, and the official may want to see copies of materials sent to the school (such as transcripts and test scores). Sample questions may include:

- Tell me about this school and why you wish to enroll there. What does it offer that your current school does not?
- Where is the school located? (Be prepared to point out the location on a map of the U.S.)
- Who is the head of the school or the director of admission?
- Why do you wish to study in the U.S?
- How will studying at this school benefit you when you return home?

If the student visa application is approved, the student will be given an F-1 visa stamp in his/her passport. This stamp will indicate:

- Where the visa was issued
- Date the visa will expire
- Number of entries permitted--a multiple-entry visa enables a student to enter and leave the U.S. as many times as indicated on the document. As single-entry visa will require the student to obtain a new visa every time he/she travels outside of the U.S. in order to return.
- Type of visa
- Visa number

STEP 6: The student arrives in the U.S.

At the Port of Entry, the student will go through Customs and must present the following to the Bureau of Customs and Border Protection (CBP) official:

1. Valid passport and visa
2. I-20
3. Land Border Travelers Only: Completed I-94 card (*Arrival/Departure Record*)
4. Any other requested information (financial documents, admission letter, etc.)
5. Proof of having paid the SEVIS fee may be required

The Customs official will:

1. Return the passport/visa with an entry stamp;
2. Land Border Travelers Only: Return the I-94 card with an entry stamp--usually the card will be stapled to the student's passport. The card will be marked with the date and place of entry, the student's status as an F-1 student, a unique admission number, and the period of admissions shown as "duration of status" (abbreviated "DS"); and
3. Return the I-20 to the student with the entry stamp in the right-hand corner.

STEP 7: School is notified of the student's arrival in the U.S.

Although the student's arrival is noted in SEVIS, please contact Kimberly Young, the International Student Registrar, at Gilbert Christian Schools regarding the outcome of the student's consular interview and the date of the student's arrival in the U.S. Notification can be emailed to kimberly.young@gcsaz.org.

STEP 8: Student reports to the school.

The student should report to the school immediately after his/her arrival in Phoenix. At that time, copies will be made of the student's I-20, passport, and visa. These copies will be placed in the student's file at the school.



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ADDITIONAL INFORMATION ABOUT THE F-1 VISA

Be sure to keep the passport/visa with the I-20 form, the I-94 card (if applicable), and all other important documents in a safe place and near at hand. Replacing these items is a complicated and time-consuming process and may create problems.

In order to avoid jeopardizing your visa eligibility, pay close attention to the requirements of your status as an F-1 student. When you enter the U.S. on a student visa, you will usually be admitted for the duration of your student status. That means you may remain in the U.S. to complete your educational program as long as you are a full-time student, even if your visa expires while you are in the U.S. If your visa expires and you leave the United States, you will be required to apply for a new visa before returning. Your student visa cannot be renewed in the U.S. It must be renewed at a consulate or embassy in your home country. Much of the same documentation is required for a visa renewal that is required when you first received your visa. After completing your program of study, you have a 60-day grace period before being required to exit the United States.

Please note that your passport must never expire while you are in the United States, and you should plan to renew it 6 months prior to its expiration.