

# WELCOME TO UNION THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY in the CITY OF NEW YORK

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## GETTING YOUR VISA AND ARRIVING TO UNION

Important information and dates for new international students

**Congratulations** on your admission to Union Theological Seminary! The Office of Student Affairs is your office on campus. We are here to help with any questions or concerns concerning immigration, the Seminary, adjusting to New York and a new community, or anything you want to know.

# UNION

International Student Affairs  
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**Enclosed are important papers and information:**

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***MAKE SURE YOU BRING YOUR IMMUNIZATION DOCUMENTS***

# HOW TO GET YOUR F-1 STUDENT VISA

Now that you have been admitted and issued your Form I-20, Certificate of Eligibility for F-1 Student Status, the next step is to apply for your F-1 Student visa! For complete information on this process, visit U.S. Homeland Security's website: <http://studyinthestates.dhs.gov/students/getting-a-visa/>.

If exempt from the visa requirement (for example, a Canadian citizen), you must still follow the following rules and procedures at the U.S. Port of Entry. Wherever the word "consul" or "visa" is mentioned below, you should substitute the words "Port of Entry Inspector" and "student status."

You must understand the process and rules for obtaining the F-1 Student Visa or status. The most common reason students are denied the F-1 visa or not admitted to the U.S. is that they are unprepared. Don't let this happen to you! Read the following information very carefully and contact us if you need more information or help.

## KNOW THE RULES

1. **Pay the U.S. SEVIS fee of \$350 USD** and have a printed receipt that proves payment before your visa interview. Find out how to pay your SEVIS Fee at [www.FM.Fee.com](http://www.FM.Fee.com).
2. **Apply for your visa as soon as possible.** There may be considerable wait time for the visa interview and visa processing. Wait time information for specific embassies and consulates is available at: <https://travel.state.gov/content/travel/en/us-visas/visa-information-resources/wait-times.html>
3. **The embassy/consulate will not issue your visa more than 4 months before the start date on your Form I-20.**
4. **By U.S. law, the consul MUST believe that you do not intend to return home after completing your studies in the U.S.** Do not take this personally. Student visas are only given to those who can convince the consul that they intend to return to their country of residence. **THIS IS THE NUMBER ONE REASON FOR VISA DENIAL.** You must convince the consul that you plan to return to your home and stay.
5. **You must have a good educational or professional objective for coming to study** at Union Theological Seminary that will prepare you for or enhance your career in your country of residence. You must also prove that you are academically qualified and have the financial means to pursue it, as indicated in your Form I-20.
6. **Be brief.** Answer questions directly and to the point.
7. Consuls are impersonal when administering laws. In the U.S., laws are applied equally to everyone regardless of status or gender identity. **DO NOT TRY TO NEGOTIATE OR DISCUSS PERSONAL MATTERS** with them.
8. **U.S. Government officials require evidence proving you qualify for the F-1 visa.** Carefully follow our instructions and take all necessary documentation with you.
9. **Keep a positive attitude.**

## CANADIAN STUDENTS OBTAINING F-1 STUDENT STATUS

Canadian students have a different process for entering the U.S. with F-1 status. To enter the U.S. in F-1 student status, Canadians must present the items listed below to the immigration inspector:

- Form I-20 from Columbia University
- Valid passport
- Supporting financial documents submitted to obtain the Form I-20
- Proof of SEVIS Fee payment
- To pay the SEVIS fee, click [here](#) and follow the instructions. Be sure to make a copy of the receipt for your records.

After the immigration inspector reviews your documents, you will be given an I-94 Admission/Departure card to complete. Be sure to look at your I-94 card before you leave the inspection area to ensure that it has the notation "F-1 D/S" written on it. ALL international students, including Canadian students, must have a correctly annotated I-94 card to confirm their current F-1 status. If your I-94 card does not have "F-1" "D/S", you are considered to be in Visitor (B-2) status, a status which does not permit study in the U.S.

### BE WELL PREPARED

**Be ready to clearly explain why you want to come to the U.S. to study at Union.**

- Why do you want to study in the U.S.?
- Why do you want to pursue this graduate program of study?
- Why did you choose Union?
- What career will your studies enhance or prepare you for?

**Take evidence of your educational qualification for admission to Union, meaning original copies of your transcripts and test scores.**

**Take original copies of the financial documents you submitted with your Application for a Form I-20.** Your financial documents must match what appears on your Form I-20. You are required to prove that you can pay for your U.S. stay.

**Be ready to convince the consul that you will return permanently to your country of residence after you complete your studies.** Present documents that can prove that you have "ties" to your country that are so strong that they will force you to return. These ties are usually social, economic, and/or family.

- Prove that you have a permanent residence in your country that you do not intend to abandon by taking a photocopy of a deed or lease to your home.
- If your family owns a business, take a letter from the bank describing it. If they own the property, take the deeds.
- If you have traveled to the U.S. before, emphasize that you have returned home!
- If you have a brother or sister who studied in the U.S. and then returned, take a copy of his/her diploma and a statement from his/her employer.
- If your program of study is in great demand in your country of residence, get a letter from a possible employer stating that they are interested in hiring people with degrees like the one you will get at Union.
- **Do not emphasize ties to the U.S. or family members in the U.S.**

**Answer questions clearly and briefly.**

**Only talk about working in the U.S. if** you have been awarded a teaching assistantship or fellowship on campus and have the documentation to prove so. You must prove that you can support the costs of studying

and living in the U.S. Employment is strictly controlled by the Department of Homeland Security and is not guaranteed.

**If you have already begun your studies in another nonimmigrant status and received a change of status to F-1**, be prepared to discuss how your original purpose for being in the U.S. changed to that of a full-time student. Take transcripts to show what you have been studying.

### **REVIEW YOUR VISA AFTER IT IS ISSUED**

When your F-1 Student visa is issued, make sure that it has been issued correctly before leaving the consulate. Check that your name matches your passport name and shows that it is an F-1 visa. If either is incorrect, ask for it to be fixed immediately. If you do not get your visa fixed, you will have severe problems later.

### **WHAT IF YOUR VISA IS DENIED?**

Contact us with complete details of what was said and what documents you presented with your application. Send a copy of any written reason for the denial you may have been given. If you were denied on 214(b) grounds, you needed to present more evidence that you would return home after your studies. We can advise you on how to prepare for your next visa application.

# “Five Secrets of Applying for a U.S. Student Visa”

Used With The Permission Of Beijing Youth Daily  
Consul General David Hopper at Peking University

## Part I

(March 14, 2000) *Last Tuesday afternoon, Consul General David Hopper, the head of visa operations at the American Embassy, came to Peking University with three other visa officers to explain the "secrets" of applying for a US student visa and were welcomed by the students. They will go to Qinghua and People's University in the near future.*

In the past, visa officers have seemed rather mysterious and cold. They hold the power to grant or deny you a visa -- they say yes and you get a visa, they say no and you are rejected. You can do nothing about it; separated from them by a glass window, you cannot make busy officials stop and listen to your explanation. This time the Americans came out from behind their glass wall to talk to students face to face, and the officials' friendliness was immediately apparent.

**What questions do visa officers have in mind when they face a student applying for a visa? Here is the gist of what Mr. Hopper explained:**

**1. Are you a genuine student**, headed to the US for the purpose of studying? Some applicants use fake documents, or have no real intention of attending college in America -- the whole project is just a ruse to get to the US. The officers look closely at I-20 forms, diplomas and school records for evidence of fraud.

**2. Can you pay for your studies?** Some applicants have full scholarships, but many are self-supporting, in whole or in part, so the visa officer must make sure the money is available.

**3. Are you really going to America to study and only to study, not to work?** (The problem here is work after graduation, not part-time campus jobs while the student is in an academic program.) Do you intend to leave the US when you have your degree? Of course this is quite difficult to prove to the visa officer, and correspondingly difficult for the visa officer to judge. But the visa officer cannot simply ignore U.S. visa law, which states that if you give a person a student visa, you must be convinced that he intends to leave the US when his studies are finished.

How do we assure ourselves that the applicant has such an "intention"? First of all, we listen to what you say. The visa officer will try to move you away from prepared speeches. We need to know what your answers are, not what someone else advised you to say. What is your career plan? Why are you going to America? What do you plan to study there? What plans do you have for after graduation?

We know how difficult it is for a student to have a clear idea of what he means to do after receiving his US diploma. If you are not sure, just tell us you are not sure. The admission will give greater credibility to your other answers. We are not looking for certainty, but for evidence that you've given serious thought to the matter: Do you have a plan or ambition of some sort? Is it believable in the Chinese context? If you tell us that you mean to study a subject that appears of no use in China, then what are we to think? But if you can explain how what you learn will be useful in China in the years to come, that will help you to qualify for a visa.

Another thing we look at is your current situation in China. What family do you have here -- and abroad? What do your parents do for a living? Do they occupy positions in government, industry, commerce or education from which they can assist you when you return from America?

We are also interested in your family's financial situation. If your family can afford to send you to the U.S. to study and are doing well in China, we are likely to believe that you too will prosper after you come back.

On the other hand, if your family has no money and you are borrowing thousands of dollars to finance your U.S. education, it will be more difficult to persuade us that you intend to come right back to China after finishing your studies. Where are you going to get the money to repay those loans?

There is no one thing that determines whether we grant a visa or not. We consider all the factors in coming to what we hope is a sound decision. We don't claim that our decisions are perfect. We work fast because we have to: interview time is necessarily short. But we always try to make the best decision we can.

If you are denied a visa, please listen carefully to what the visa officer tells you. For example, if he says, "I'm not sure of your finances," then the next time you come, bring new information that shows where your money is from. If the officer says, "I'm sorry, but I'm not convinced that you intend to come back," think about your plan again and figure out how to explain it more clearly and persuasively; then reapply. If you come back a second time and say similar things, you will probably get the same response.

## Part II

(March 21, 2000) *On March 7, U.S. Consul General David Hopper and three other officials from the visa section of the American Embassy met with students at Peking University. One of the officials presented "Five Secrets" for getting a student visa:*

**Secret One:** Get free, accurate information on applying for a student visa. Visit the U.S. Embassy web site ([www.usembassy.org](http://www.usembassy.org)). There is no charge for using these resources. Why pay to get the same information from other sources?

**Secret Two:** Be thoroughly prepared. Make sure you bring:

- \* Your I-20 form (or IAP-66 form)
- \* Your diploma(s)
- \* Your standardized test score reports (TOEFL, GRE, GMAT, LSAT, etc.)
- \* All letters and e-mail from the school, especially those that discuss scholarships, assistantships, fellowships and other forms of financial aid
- \* Evidence of funding for your studies (bank documents, etc.)
- \* Your business cards (if you have a job)
- \* Any other documents that you think might be important

**Secret Three:** Answer that questions that are asked. Don't give the visa officer a prepared speech! Here's an example of what to avoid:

*Visa officer:* Hi, how are you today?

*Applicant:* I'm going to study chemical engineering at X University.

*VO:* X University? I've been to the campus many times.

*Applicant:* I will surely return to China and find a good job with a major multinational company.

*VO:* (Recognizing the disconnection and robotic tone) So tell me, what color is the sky?

*Applicant:* I was given a teaching assistantship because the school believes my test scores and credentials are excellent.

These people are not communicating, and the applicant is not advancing his cause!

**Secret Four:** Tell the truth, If the visa officer thinks you're lying, you won't get a visa.

**Secret Five:** Come back to China. We mean that in two ways:

1) Come back to see your family and maintain your ties to China. Keep up your friendships and professional contacts here. Students returning on vacation don't even need to come in for an interview; they can simply use the drop-box service offered at many CITIC Bank locations.

2) Come back to China after you graduate. Use those advanced skills and theories that you learn in the US to make China a better place. Study in France had a great impact on the lives of leaders like Zhou Enlai and Deng Xiaoping. Will study in the US have a similar impact on the lives of China's future leaders?



After the speech by the visa officer, the four officials asked the students for any questions they had. Unprepared for the switch to question-and-answer format, the students were slow to come up with questions. Consul General Hopper interjected, with a touch of humor, "All questions are welcome. If you ask a question we don't like, we won't remember you and refuse you a visa because of it, so really -- don't worry." The students laughed and began to open up.

One question was "Do we need to wear formal clothes to the interview?" Answer: No. Another student said he'd been in the U.S. for a month, so he wondered if he could use the drop-box. The answer was in the negative, because he'd gone to America on a different type of visa.

After getting through all the questions, Mr. Hopper pointed out that people seeking student visas should apply no earlier than 90 days before the date when they must report to their new university in the U.S. Visa rules do not allow officers to issue visas more than 90 days before the start of the academic program the applicant is enrolling in.

## from “Students Visa for the U.S.: A Checklist”

printed in *The Economic Times*, 1 Oct, 2008

It is a myth that if the admission in a recognized University of US is procured, visas are automatically granted. An applicant of non-immigrant categories student visa is obliged to satisfy the consular officer that he has nonimmigrant intention which is easy to say but difficult to show.

The following checklist of particulars and documents, which a student should carry in original at the visa interview, will assist in obtaining a student visa.

**1** Visa Application Form DS-156, DS-157 and DS-158

**2** Passport - Validity of the passport should be 6 months beyond the time during which the student would be completing his studies.

**3** Photograph, taken as per US Consulate regulations

**4** Form I-20. It should be computer generated SEVIS mode.

**5** TOEFL and other examinations marks/score sheets

**6** Degree/Diploma Certificates with mark sheets.

**7** Copy of Statement of purpose or Essay which the student may have submitted to the University for obtaining admission.

**8** Name of the person who would be providing the financial support. His/Her relationship with the student. The financial supporter could be student's father/mother/ brother/sister/relative/firm/company or all.

**9** A statement showing the total assets of the financial supporter, by separately showing the average annual income, investments, gold and other ornaments, shares, securities, debentures, PPF Account, ownership of motor cars and other vehicles, investments in properties such as flats/land/agricultural land, etc.

**10** Financial documents of the person who is to provide financial support to the student, which may include:

**A.** Last three years income tax returns or **B.** Bank passbook/bank statements for at least last 6 months.

## WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT ENTERING THE U.S.

- 1. IMPORTANT! DO NOT** come to the U.S. earlier than 30 days before your Form I-20's program start date. You are not permitted to enter the U.S. earlier than that date. Arriving too early, you risk being denied entry or charged a fee and admitted as a Visitor instead of a Student. Visitors cannot study full-time, so this would be a problem for you.
- 2. READ THE IMPORTANT INFORMATION DATES FOR NEW INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS** below. This information tells you all the dates that apply to your arrival.
- 3. DO NOT COME LATER THAN THE PROGRAM START DATE ON YOUR FORM I-20 WITHOUT OUR PERMISSION.** If you think that you won't be able to arrive by that date, contact us immediately. You must have permission from International Student Affairs to arrive later than indicated on your Form I-20.
- 4. DO NOT PACK YOUR IMMIGRATION DOCUMENTS. HAVE YOUR DOCUMENTS READY TO SHOW THE U.S. CUSTOMS AND BORDER PROTECTION (CBP) OFFICER.** You will be asked to show your passport containing your F-1 Student visa, Form I-20, and proof of funding when going through U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) Inspection.
- 5. TAKE OUR PHONE NUMBER IN CASE OF EMERGENCY 212-280-1396**
- 6. BE PREPARED TO EXPLAIN WHY YOU'RE COMING TO THE U.S.** The CBP officer may ask you a few simple questions about the purpose of your stay in the U.S. Be prepared to tell them why you are coming to study at Union.
- 7. CHECK THAT THE CBP OFFICER PROPERLY STAMPED YOUR DOCUMENTS.** The CBP officer will review your documents, stamp them, and return them to you. It is important that this process is done correctly, so check your documents before leaving the inspection area. If a mistake is made, you may have to return to the airport later to fix it.  
The officer will stamp and notate your documents as follows:
  - Stamp the date of your arrival opposite your F-1 Student visa.
  - Stamp your Form I-20 with the date and not it "F-1 D/S"
- 8. IF YOU DO NOT HAVE YOUR FORM I-20, OR IT IS NOT PROPERLY SIGNED, YOU WILL BE ISSUED A FORM I-515A AND GIVEN 30 DAYS TO BE IN THE U.S.** If for some reason you do not have your Form I-20 when you bring the Form I-515A to International Student Affairs at Union as soon as you get to campus so we can help you extend your permission to be in the country.
- 9. YOU MAY BE ASKED TO GO TO SECONDARY INSPECTIONS.** If there are any questions about your documents, the CBP officer may ask you to go to secondary inspections. This is normal and no cause for concern.
- 10. MAKE TWO SETS OF COPIES OF YOUR IMMIGRATION DOCUMENTS.** Copies of your immigration are important and must be kept safely. International Student Affairs also requires that you bring us a set so that we can keep them safe and advise you in the future.
- 11. REPORT TO THE SEMINARY ON THE DATES INDICATED BELOW.**

**REMEMBER THAT INTERNATIONAL STUDENT AFFAIRS IS YOUR OFFICE ON CAMPUS. WE ARE HERE TO HELP YOU EVERY STEP OF YOUR ACADEMIC JOURNEY WITH ANY QUESTIONS, CONCERNS, OR CHALLENGES YOU FACE. WE ARE LOOKING FORWARD TO MEETING YOU!**

## IMPORTANT DATES

Monday, July 29	Earliest date to enter the U.S.
Wednesday, August 14, and Thursday, August 15	Move into the Residence Halls
Monday, August 19	International Student Pre-Orientation
Sunday, August 25-Thursday, August 29	Mandatory Orientation
Tuesday, September 3	Classes Begin

**\*\*\*EARLIEST DATE YOU MAY ENTER THE U.S.: Monday, July 29\*\*\***

Although your visa may be issued as early as 120 days before the program start date indicated on your Form I-20, federal regulations prohibit entering the U.S. more than 30 days before the program start date. Do NOT attempt to use your Form I-20 to enter the U.S. earlier than July 29 or 30 days before your program start date. You may be returned to your country of residence or be asked to pay a fee to be admitted as a visitor -- which does NOT permit you to attend school.

**\*\*\* MOVE IN DAY (for students with housing confirmations only) \*\*\***

**Wednesday, August 14, and Thursday, August 15**

**All Day**

**Hastings Lobby**

If you applied for on-campus housing, paid a housing deposit, and received a confirmation of your housing assignment, you may move into your residence on this date. Only come to campus with confirmation of your housing assignment.

Enter at 121st Street and Broadway to check in and meet your Student Life Assistants (SLAs) and Orientation Coordinators (OCs). Students will help you find your room, move your things, and connect to the internet.

**\*\*\* INTERNATIONAL STUDENT ORIENTATION\*\*\***

**ALL INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS MUST ATTEND**

**Monday, August 19**

Dean Abby Asgaralli and the International Student Caucus will lead a welcome session for all international students. You must bring the following documents with you:

- Passport
- Original Union Theological Seminary Form I-20/DS-2019
- Original Forms I-20/DS- 2019 from other U.S. schools you have attended
- Photocopies of all Forms I-20/DS- 2019 from Union and previous schools (both sides)
- Photocopies of your passport, including identification pages, U.S. visas, and Form I-94 Departure Record (the white card immigration stapled in your passport opposite your student visa).

**PLEASE MAKE SURE THAT ALL PHOTOCOPIES ARE CLEARLY LEGIBLE**

**\*\*\*CLASSES BEGIN\*\*\***

**Tuesday, September 2**

**\*\*\*LAST DAY TO ARRIVE IN THE U.S.\*\*\***

This is the date that appears on your Form I-20 or Form DS-2019. If you can't arrive by this date, contact us immediately. Do not make plans to come to the U.S. after this date! Immigration can deny your entry if you arrive at the port of entry after this date.

## **FALL SEMESTER LATE ARRIVAL INFORMATION**

**THE LATEST DATE YOU CAN ENTER THE U.S. TO ATTEND UNION THIS FALL SEMESTER IS ON YOUR FORM I-20.**

**IF YOU CANNOT ARRIVE IN THE U.S. BY THIS DATE, DO NOT COME.** Entry after this date will put you in immediate violation of your F-1 Student status because you cannot register for this semester.

**IF YOUR FORM I-20 SHOWS AN EXPIRED PROGRAM START DATE, CONTACT US IMMEDIATELY TO OBTAIN AN UPDATED FORM I-20** or other permission from us to arrive late. **DO NOT** attempt to apply for an F-1 Student visa or enter the U.S. with an I-20 program start date that has passed.

**AFTER YOU ARRIVE, COME TO OUR OFFICE FOR PERMISSION TO REGISTER.**

**You must bring the following documents with you**

- Passport
- Original Union Theological Seminary Form I-20/DS-2019
- Original Forms I-20/DS- 2019 from other U.S. schools you have attended
- Photocopies of all Forms I-20/DS- 2019 from Union and previous schools (both sides)
- Photocopies of your passport, including identification pages, U.S. visas, Form I-94 Departure Record (the white card immigration stapled in your passport opposite your student visa)

**TO POSTPONE YOUR ADMISSION TO THE SPRING SEMESTER,** contact International Student Affairs and Admissions requesting that your admission be postponed until the spring semester. **You will need a new Form I-20 to enter the U.S. for the spring semester.** To get a new Form I-20, you must complete a new I-20 application and send it to International Student Affairs. We will send you a new Form I-20 after you have been accepted for the spring semester.