



## **International Student Information Guide Biblical Theological Seminary**

This information guide is meant to help you with the various procedures necessary to maintain your F-1 immigration status while you are in the United States. It is important that you be aware of federal regulations so that your stay in this country will be lawful. Your Designated School Official (DSO) is Rick Houseknecht, Director of Academic Services.

### ***SEVIS***

The government Student and Exchange Visitor Program (SEVP) utilizes an internet-based system for tracking international students, called SEVIS (Student and Exchange Visitor Information Systems). I-20 forms are generated for students and accompanying dependent family members from SEVIS. See here for more information: <https://studyinthestates.dhs.gov/students>

### ***SEVIS Fee***

SEVP has instituted a \$200 fee, called the I-901 fee, for all *initial* status students. This fee must be paid via credit card or check/money order drawn on a US bank. The fee may be sent to SEVP (with form I-901: I-901 Student/Exchange Visitor Processing Fee, P.O. Box 970020, St. Louis, Missouri 63197-0020) or paid over the internet ([www.FMJfee.com](http://www.FMJfee.com)). Students must have a receipt of payment in order to apply for a visa. For more information, see [www.FMJfee.com](http://www.FMJfee.com) and <https://studyinthestates.dhs.gov/i-901-sevis-fee-payment-tutorial>. Note: If you are already in student status, you do not have to pay this fee.

### ***Maintaining Status***

According to USCIS, F-1 students must be both matriculated and enrolled full time. BTS is on a semester system, so students must enroll in at least 9 credits in the fall term and 9 credits in the spring term. For DMin and ThM students, full time status means 6 credits in the fall semester and 6 credits in the spring semester. In order to remain “in status,” you must maintain these requirements. You must also be making satisfactory progress toward your degree program.

### ***Registration***

Students who are granted an I-20 but who either fail to register or fail to show up for classes must be reported to SEVP. Such students will be out of status (see below).

### ***Course Load***

You must maintain a full-time course load (see above under **Maintaining Status**). Reductions for emergency and/or ongoing medical reasons cannot exceed more than twelve months total (aggregate), and must be approved beforehand by the DSO.

### ***Reinstatement***

If you fail to take classes for a semester, drop below full-time status for one term without any authorization, or fail to file for an extension before the date of completion on your I-20, you will be “out of status.” In order to regain your status you must request reinstatement, and reinstatement is not guaranteed. Students out of status for more than 5 months cannot be reinstated and must leave the country. You may also gain reinstatement by traveling to your home country and re-entering the U.S. with a new I-20.

Reinstatement is not granted for student or DSO oversights. It will only be considered for circumstances beyond your control, such as serious illness or injury, closure of the institution, or natural disaster.

Students will be required to submit a new I-20, noting the student request for reinstatement, and form I-539 by mail to the district director. Once adjudicated, the student will receive his or her I-20 form with the decision of the director.

If you are in the country illegally for more than 180 days without filing for reinstatement, you may be barred from entering the U.S. for 3 years. Please be careful to maintain your status!

Here are some resources that can help you understand reinstatement:

<https://studyinthestates.dhs.gov/2016/07/how-should-an-f-or-m-student-file-for-reinstatement>

[https://studyinthestates.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/Reinstatement%20User%20Guide\\_0.pdf](https://studyinthestates.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/Reinstatement%20User%20Guide_0.pdf)

### ***Program extensions***

If you find that you will not be able to complete your program by the date on your I-20, you must notify the DSO immediately for a program extension. You should notify him before the program completion date on the I-20. He will issue you another I-20 with the new date of completion.

### ***Change in Program***

If you decide to change to another academic program at Biblical, you may need a new I-20. This will most likely involve providing updated financial data. Please see the DSO if you are considering a change in your program.

### ***Address updates***

Biblical Seminary is required to keep F-1 student addresses up to date in SEVIS. If you move, please submit your new address to the DSO immediately.

### ***Program completion***

Upon the fulfilling of all of the requirements for your degree, you have a 60-day grace period before you must leave the country. **This is true even if you finish your degree before the date on your I-20.** If you plan to remain in the country you must gain admittance to another degree program or apply for optional practical training **before** your current program is completed.

## ***Transfers***

If you plan to transfer to another school, please notify the DSO immediately. You should provide the name of the school, proof that you have been accepted at the school, and the date you plan to transfer. The DSO will transfer you out of your program at Biblical and set a release date when the other school can view your SEVIS record.

## ***Optional Practical Training***

Optional practical training (OPT) is available for students who desire up to 12 months of ministry work to complement their seminary training. Many students utilize OPT after their program is complete. Please contact the DSO at least 60 days before the completion of your program if you plan to pursue OPT. You may apply for OPT 90 days before your diploma date, and you may start your employment any time within the 60 day grace period after your diploma date. You should secure a job or position by the time you receive approval to work. Once you receive approval from USCIS (including an employment authorization card), please tell your DSO of any address changes or early termination of employment. You must also provide the name and address of your employer to the DSO. The DSO must report your OPT status after the 6 months and 12 months from your employment start date, so please be ready to supply information on your employment. You may only be without employment for 90 from the start of the beginning date on your employment authorization (EAD) card.

If you travel on OPT, you should contact the DSO about signing the travel page of your I-20 (the signature must be less than 6 months old).

## ***Curricular Practical Training***

Curricular practical training (CPT) is available for students who have a curriculum requirement for work associated with a class. Currently only 4 classes at BTS require some kind of work or ministry outside of class time: Community and Mission, Ministry Internship Seminar, and both the fall and spring internship classes for the MA in Counseling program. Students are authorized for CPT only for the duration of those classes. Full-time CPT for 12 months disqualifies a student from applying for optional practical training (OPT). If you have one of the classes listed above and would like to be authorized for CPT, please contact that DSO, who will issue you a new I-20 which authorizes CPT for you for the duration of the class. Note: DMin students may be registered for part-time CPT for one year at a time.

## ***Economic Need Work Permission***

Students are generally not permitted to work under F-1 regulations, except part time (<20 hrs. /week) on campus, if such work is available. However, students who can demonstrate economic hardship, such as an unforeseen circumstance that reduces the available funding claimed on the I-20 (e.g., a drop in the value of currency in one's country), may apply for permission to work for one year (part time during regular school terms, full time during vacations). The government has become stricter in issuing work permits, so you must make a good case for your need in addition to filling out paperwork and paying a fee. Please realize that working without authorization will jeopardize your status. Your spouse and children may not work under any circumstances as F-2 dependents.

## ***Travel***

Your I-20 page 2 contains a signature of the DSO which is good for one year of travel from the date of the signature. It is always a good idea to check with the DSO before you leave the country, even if the

signature is already valid for the time period you will be away. If you travel while you are on post-completion OPT, the travel signature must be less than 6 months old.

### ***Lost or Stolen I-20***

Contact the DSO immediately if your I-20 is lost or stolen.

### ***Social Security Numbers and Driver's Licenses***

Students may apply for social security numbers if they have a valid work reason (see above under *Economic Need Work Permission* and *Optional Practical Training*) or for the following: (1) a federal law requires that you show your Social Security number to get a particular benefit or service; (2) a state or local law required you to show your Social Security number to get general assistance benefits. To apply for a social security number, use the following internet link: [http://www.ssa.gov/replace\\_sscard.html](http://www.ssa.gov/replace_sscard.html). You will need to show proof of a job offer if your SS# is for work.

*Social security numbers are not granted in order for international students to get driver's licenses. To get a driver's license, you must be registered as an active student in SEVIS. For more information on applying for a driver's license, check the website of your state's Department of Motor Vehicles.*

Students who need a record of their I-94 number to apply for a social security number or a driver's license may download a print version from [www.cbp.gov/I94](http://www.cbp.gov/I94). Students no longer receive paper version of the I-94 upon entrance into the United States.

### ***Current form fees:***

Please see the following website: <https://www.uscis.gov/forms>