

**Frequently Asked Questions for  
Alabama A&M University (“AAMU”)  
INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS  
Regarding COVID-19**

**Full-time Enrollment**

All F-1 students must be enrolled full-time (12 credit hours for undergraduate / 9 credit hours for graduate) during each semester to remain in status. This requirement is in effect during the COVID-19 pandemic as well.

**Electronic Form I-20 Issuance**

**Many returning F students may choose to remain home and complete the 2020 fall semester remotely. Since they are still enrolled, will their Forms I-20, have to be canceled if they are taking classes outside of the United States?**

F students are permitted to temporarily count online classes toward a full course of study in excess of the normal limits, even if they have left the United States and are taking the online classes elsewhere. This temporary provision is only in effect due to COVID-19. Students should inform their DSO if they are leaving the United States due to COVID-19 (or any other reason). As a reminder, per current regulations, students must notify schools within 10 days of an address change. Students will need to submit to their DSO, in writing, their new address.

**Are all students attending schools in the United States this fall 2020, still needing new Forms I-20 issued to them, stating that the school is not operating entirely online, that the student is not taking an entirely online course load for the fall 2020 semester, and that the student is taking the minimum number of online classes required to make normal progress in their degree program?**

No. The guidance that all students be issued an updated Form I-20 has been revoked by SEVP.

**Can DSOs electronically send signed Forms I-20 to students instead of physically mailing the forms?**

Yes, due to COVID-19, DSOs may electronically send Forms I-20 to student email addresses listed in SEVIS. In the case of a minor students, the email address may belong to their parent or legal guardian.

All original documents must be mailed via **USPS** (United States Postal Service) **Delivery** to the following address:

*AAMU—Office of Student Affairs  
P.O. Box 4900  
Normal, AL 35762*

Additionally, anytime that an original document(s) is requested by an international student, the student will need to provide a self-addressed, postage paid envelope via **USPS Delivery** to the aforementioned address so that the requested document may be mailed you.

**Will schools need to provide students with their original Form I-20 (ink-signed copies) when schools reopen?**

Forms I-20 issued electronically or with electronic signatures—as permitted during the COVID-19 emergency—will remain valid until students have a need for an updated Form I-20.

**How long is an electronic or digital travel signature valid on the Form I-20? Is it valid for the same amount of time as an ink signature?**

An electronic or digital travel signature will be valid for the same duration as an ink signature (12 months for F students).

**Has SEVP worked with both the U.S. Department of State and U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) in developing the policy to accept the use of electronic signatures during the COVID-19 emergency?**

SEVP coordinated with both the Department of State and CBP regarding the policy to allow electronic issuance and signing of Forms I-20 for the duration of the COVID19 emergency. Both agencies are in support of this action. SEVP continues to respond to any issues raised or questions from both agencies about this policy and will provide clarity as needed.

**Temporary Study Provisions for AAMU Students During The Pandemic**

During the pandemic, in accordance with SEVP regulations, AAMU will allow F-1 students to temporarily count online classes towards a full course of study in excess of the normal limits, even if they have left the United States and are taking the online classes from elsewhere. The temporary provision is only in effect for the duration of the pandemic.

Other temporary provisions for AAMU students during the pandemic:

- F-1 students should participate in either all face-to-face instruction, all online instruction, or a mixture of both, and remain in active status in SEVIS; Students choosing to participate in:
  - All face to face courses – must physically be in the United States;
  - All online courses – Returning students may participate in all online courses from their home country or they may participate while in the United States. **AAMU will not permit new international students to travel to the United States and participate in 100% online instruction. New students desiring 100% online instruction should remain in their home country and must either participate remotely via online instruction, or they must defer their enrollment.**
  - Hybrid courses (student has both face to face and online courses) – must physically be in the United States.

Note: Although face-to-face courses are being offered in many departments, **there are some departments which are operating fully online.** Students should check with their academic advisors regarding course availability and options, **prior** to traveling to the United States.

### **Will students be permitted to drop courses due to dissatisfaction with online courses not providing the same level of instruction and still remain Active in SEVIS?**

No, students should maintain a full course of study to the extent possible. If a student is unwilling to take online courses or participate in other alternate forms of study as per AAMU's COVID-19 procedural adaptation plan, they should request a temporary absence and be terminated for Authorized Early Withdrawal.

If AAMU is not offering a full course of study because of COVID-related limitations, it is permissible to have students take whatever courses are being offered or request temporary leave. However, if a student is simply unwilling to take a full course of study because it is only offered online, they should request a temporary absence.

### **What if students are asked to move out of university housing mid-semester?**

If students are required to leave campus, they can continue to study online, if possible, **either inside or outside of the United States.** If students remain in the United States, they should report, in writing, their updated address to their DSO. If there are no online classes and the closure is temporary, students can find a place to live and return to class when the school opens.

Below are some scenarios:

Scenario 1: AAMU completely closes and does not have online courses or other alternate learning procedures.

*If AAMU were to close temporarily without online instruction or other alternative learning procedures, the students should remain in active status in SEVIS so long as the students intend to resume their course of study when classes resume. This is similar to short-term breaks in the school calendar when classes are not in session.*

Scenario 2: AAMU temporarily stops in-person classes but implements online or other alternate learning procedures and the nonimmigrant student remains in the United States.

*If AAMU closes temporarily but offers online instruction or another alternative learning procedure, nonimmigrant students should participate in online or other alternate learning procedures and remain in active status in SEVIS. Given the extraordinary nature of the COVID-19 emergency, SEVP will allow F-1 students to temporarily count online classes towards a full course of study in excess of the usual limits. This temporary provision is only in effect for the duration of the emergency.*

Scenario 3: A school temporarily stops in-person classes but implements online or other alternate learning procedures and the nonimmigrant student departs the United States.

*If AAMU closes temporarily but offers online instruction or another alternative learning procedure, nonimmigrant students should participate in online or other alternate learning procedures and remain in active status in SEVIS. Given the extraordinary nature of the COVID-19 emergency, SEVP will allow F-1 students to temporarily count online classes towards a full course of study in excess of the usual limits, even if they have left the United States and are taking the online classes from elsewhere. This temporary provision is only in effect for the duration of the emergency.*

**If students cannot or will not return to school when 100% in-person instruction resumes, will their records be terminated for authorized early withdrawal?**

Once AAMU returns to normal operations, if students cannot or choose not to return to the United States to study, their records will be terminated in SEVIS.

## **What if an F student does not have the technology resources to meet online or other alternative instruction requirements?**

F students unable to participate in online or other alternative instruction requirements due to the lack of available technology resources should notify their DSO. DSOs may keep these student records Active in SEVIS as long as the student intends to resume their course of study when in-person classes resume.

Students should contact their DSO for options for maintaining student status while outside of the United States.

## **5-Month Rule**

### **If their Student and Exchange Visitor Information System (SEVIS) records remain in Active status, will students be subject to the five-month rule?**

While the temporary measures related to COVID-19 are in place, students are deemed to be maintaining status if they are making normal progress in their course of study. For that reason, the five-month temporary absence provision will not apply for students who remain in Active status.

### **How will the five-month rule apply to student transfers?**

The five-month rule related to student transfers will not apply to students affected by COVID-19. For transfer students that exceed the five-month period, please contact a DSO for assistance.

## **Student Transfer**

### **Can DSOs complete a transfer in SEVIS for students who are outside the United States in Initial transfer status and could enroll and begin study at the transfer-in school remotely?**

For students outside the United States who are currently in Initial status in SEVIS with an “I-20 Issue Reason” of transfer, schools should keep their SEVIS records in Initial status and request a data fix when these students are ready to re-enter the United States to begin study.

SEVP’s temporary guidance does not permit students in Initial status in SEVIS to begin a new program remotely. SEVP continues to monitor the situation.

Transfer students inside the United States must report to a DSO at their transfer-in school in person or using electronic means within 15 days of their program start date (*8 CFR 214.2(f)(8)(ii)(C)*). The DSO must complete the transfer process and register the student as Active in SEVIS. Students should follow the guidelines the school provides to all its F and M students related to COVID-19.

## **I-901 SEVIS Fee**

**Due to COVID-19, if students are unable to enroll in the next session, can they transfer their I-901 SEVIS Fee payment to the next session?**

As long as students maintain the same SEVIS record, there is no need to transfer their I-901 SEVIS Fee payment. Students who are unable to enroll in the next session may defer their enrollment to the next available session.

Fee transfers are available for F students who have already paid the I-901 SEVIS Fee and who:

- Reapply for a visa within 12 months of the date of their initial I-901 SEVIS Fee payment or
- Are from a Visa Waiver Program country and reapply for status as a student at the port of entry within 12 months of the date of their initial I-901 SEVIS Fee payment.

## **Employment**

**Many students' on-campus employment opportunities are now being conducted remotely while campuses are closed or students are able to perform their work duties from home. Can F students engage in remote work for on-campus employment?**

If the current on-campus employment opportunity has transitioned to remote work or the employment can be done through remote means, with their supervisor's approval students may continue to engage in on-campus employment remotely. Students should be able to explain how they are providing services associated with the employment while not at the location of the employer.

**Can students engaged in OPT and the science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) OPT extension work remotely when appropriate and permitted by the employer? If so, do they need to submit an updated Form I-983?**

Students currently participating in OPT, including STEM OPT, may work remotely if their employer has an office outside of the United States or the employer can assess student engagement using electronic means. Students participating in STEM OPT do not need to submit an updated Form I-983 to report remote work. However, requirements to submit an updated Form I-983 for other changes remain in effect.

**Can students with proper authorization participate in curricular practical training (CPT) while they are abroad?**

Students may engage in CPT during their time abroad, provided they are:

- Enrolled in a program of study in which CPT is integral to the program of study;
- Their DSO authorized CPT in advance of the CPT 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.

This enrollment may be online. All other requirements still apply.

**Does time spent studying outside of the United States during the COVID-19 emergency count toward the one-year requirement for CPT and OPT?**

An F student accrues eligibility for practical training whether they are inside or outside of the United States during the COVID-19 emergency if the student is in Active status in SEVIS and meets the requirements of the University.

**AAMU has allowed students with courses fully online to participate in their studies from their home countries. Will this international status alter the student's current OPT/CPT and social security number (SSN) status?**

DHS is evaluating these issues and may issue additional guidance. In the meantime, since USCIS adjudicates OPT employment authorization requests, SEVP recommends reaching out to USCIS for further guidance.

Students may engage in CPT during their time abroad, provided they are enrolled in a program of study of which the CPT is an integral component, the DSO has authorized the CPT in advance, and either the employer has an office outside the United States or the employer has a means to assess student engagement and attainment of learning objectives. This enrollment may be online. All other requirements still apply.

**Due to COVID-19, what is SEVP's advice to students who want to apply for OPT? Is there any chance that students would be able to apply for post-completion OPT from outside the United States?**

DHS is evaluating these issues and may issue additional guidance. In the meantime, since USCIS adjudicates OPT employment authorization requests, SEVP recommends that students reach out to USCIS for further guidance.

**Can students apply for OPT while outside of the United States by filing a Form I765, “Application for Employment Authorization,” from abroad?**

Students should reach out to USCIS for further guidance regarding applying for OPT while outside of the United States.

**Must students cease engaging in OPT if they are now working fewer than 20 hours a week due to the economic impacts of COVID-19?**

For the duration of the COVID-19 emergency, SEVP considers students who are working in their OPT opportunities fewer than 20 hours a week as engaged in OPT.

**Will there be an extension or suspension of the 90-day/150-day allowed period of unemployment for OPT and STEM OPT during the COVID-19 emergency?**

DHS is evaluating this issue but has not yet determined whether to implement a specific exemption for exceeding the regulatory limits for unemployment of 90 days for OPT and 150 days for STEM OPT.

**Can F and M students who were previously employed and are now unemployed due to COVID-19 apply for unemployment benefits?**

Students who are unemployed due to COVID-19 should contact their local or state employment agency for more information.

**Volunteering**

**Do F students need employment authorization to volunteer as part of COVID-19 relief efforts?**

No, F and M students who work without wages, taxable compensation or other remuneration are considered volunteers and are not required to obtain an employment authorization document.

**Travel**

Students currently outside of the United States and looking to enter the country should check on any travel restrictions their country might have regarding international travel, including restrictions applicable to countries they may travel through.



**Will F students be able to return to the United States if they are continuing their studies outside of the country as a result of COVID-19?**

Students who continue to make normal progress in their course of study remain eligible for admission into the United States. However, because of the changing array of travel restrictions, students should refer to their local embassy's website through the [U.S. Department of State](#) for any updates about visa issuance. Also, DHS and the [Center for Disease Control and Prevention's](#) (CDC) websites provide information about current travel restrictions to the United States.

**Is there a time frame for when students are expected to return to the United States once the COVID-19 emergency is over and AAMU has resumed normal operations?**

Dependent on AAMU's return to normal operations and any continuing travel restrictions, students should seek to return to the United States within 30 days of the next available session start date. SEVP anticipates providing additional guidance to schools after the COVID-19 emergency ends regarding a school's return to normal operations.

**If students remain in the United States due to COVID-19 and their passport expires, what do they need to do to renew it?**

Students in this situation should contact their country's embassy or consulate to identify options for passport extension or renewal. If students decide to depart the United States, they will not be eligible to apply for admission until they renew their passport.

**Is there any flexibility in extending grace periods for students who have been unable to depart the United States after completing their programs due to travel restrictions? Will there be any changes to SEVIS to allow for such extensions?**

This is a complex issue that SEVP is addressing within the larger context of the DHS response to the COVID-19 emergency. Amending SEVIS database functionality is a complex undertaking and would have to be prioritized among the many other scheduled improvements that SEVP is making to the system to enhance efficiency and functionality.

**What should students do if they need to return home within 60 days after completing their program of study, but their travel plans are complicated by a lack of commercially available flights or their country currently prohibits all inbound travel?**

SEVP recognizes that some students may find it difficult to return home during the COVID-19 emergency because of diminished travel options. Students in this situation should

communicate with their DSO for guidance and to assess options for alternative study arrangements such as online classes during this time.

*NOTE: Due to the fluid nature of this difficult situation, this guidance may be subject to change. AAMU continues to monitor the situation and will provide updates as needed.*