

BERKELEY COLLEGE

F-1 International Student Status

Rules, Responsibilities & Immigration Compliance Handbook Guide

Effective for the 2026–2027 Academic Year

Updated August 2026 | Includes DHS Final Rule Effective September 15, 2026

IMPORTANT: U.S. immigration regulations can change. This guide is educational and does not constitute legal advice. Students must follow the most current instructions from Berkeley College International Student Services (ISS), DHS/SEVP, USCIS, and other U.S. government agencies. When in doubt, contact ISS before taking action that could affect F-1 status.

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1. Purpose of This Guide

This guide explains the principal federal rules governing F-1 students at Berkeley College and the actions students must take to maintain lawful F-1 status. It is intended to help students understand their responsibilities regarding enrollment, academic progress, employment, travel, reporting requirements, immigration documents, program changes, and the new DHS fixed-period admission rule.

2. The Most Important Change: DHS Ends Duration of Status

Effective September 15, 2026, DHS will eliminate the long-standing F-1/F-2 “Duration of Status” (D/S) admission framework. The final rule, published July 17, 2026, replaces D/S with a fixed period of admission and establishes a formal extension-of-stay process.

Before September 15, 2026	Beginning September 15, 2026	What Students Must Do
F-1 students generally admitted for D/S.	F-1 students are admitted for a fixed period tied to the program/I-20 end date, subject to the applicable maximum period.	Monitor the I-94, I-20, and program end date. Do not assume the I-20 alone controls your authorized stay.
Students who needed more time could generally obtain an I-20 extension through the school while maintaining status.	Students needing to remain beyond the fixed admission period generally must use a USCIS Extension of Stay (EOS) process or, where permitted, depart and re-enter with a new admission period.	Contact ISS well before the fixed end date. Do not wait until the last minute.
60-day F-1 post-completion grace period.	30-day F-1 grace period following completion of studies or authorized post-completion practical training.	Plan graduation, transfer, change of status, or departure before the new 30-day period expires.
OPT/STEM OPT applications generally handled through the existing OPT process.	For applications filed after the transition period, EOS procedures may be required in connection with OPT/STEM OPT.	Consult ISS before filing OPT/STEM OPT and follow the current filing instructions.

Transition rule for students already in the United States: Students who are maintaining F-1 status in the United States on September 15, 2026 are subject to the final rule's transition provisions. Their authorized period is generally based on the applicable I-20/program end date or the transition maximum, whichever comes first, with the F-1 transition period including the applicable 60-day period. Students who depart the United States and return on or after September 15, 2026 will be subject to the new fixed-date admission framework.

3. What It Means to Maintain F-1 Status

Maintaining F-1 status means complying with federal immigration requirements and the conditions attached to the student's Form I-20. A student—not the College—is ultimately responsible for maintaining lawful status.

- Remain enrolled in the required full course of study each fall and spring term unless ISS has authorized an immigration-permitted exception before the reduction occurs.
- Make normal academic progress toward completion of the program and remain within the program end date reflected on the Form I-20, subject to the new fixed-admission rules.
- Attend classes and satisfy academic requirements. Immigration status is separate from academic standing; a student may face immigration consequences even when an academic issue is otherwise handled by the College.
- Do not work unless the employment is specifically authorized under F-1 rules and, when required, by ISS and/or USCIS.
- Keep required immigration documents valid and accurate, including the passport, Form I-20, visa when applicable for travel, and I-94.
- Report required changes to ISS promptly, including changes to address, name, major/program, academic level, and circumstances that may affect enrollment or immigration status.
- Never assume that an action is permitted because another student has done it. Immigration authorization is individual and fact-specific.

4. Full-Time Enrollment Requirements

F-1 students must maintain a full course of study during required academic terms. Berkeley College will communicate the minimum course load applicable to the student's academic level and program. Students should not drop, withdraw from, stop attending, or otherwise reduce their course load without first consulting ISS.

Important rules include:

- Do not drop below the required full-time enrollment level without prior ISS authorization for a permitted Reduced Course Load (RCL).
- Only one online/distance-education course, or the regulatory equivalent, may generally count toward the minimum full course of study for an F-1 student during a term in which online coursework is permitted under federal regulations.
- An RCL may be permitted only for specific regulatory reasons, such as certain academic difficulties, a final term, or a qualifying medical condition, and must be authorized before the reduced enrollment occurs.
- A student who withdraws from a course without required authorization may violate F-1 status even if the withdrawal is allowed academically.

- Summer enrollment depends on the student's program and SEVIS record. Students should consult ISS before assuming that summer enrollment is optional or required.

5. Financial Responsibility and Immigration Benefits

Students must meet Berkeley College's financial obligations and any applicable institutional requirements. Before ISS can process certain immigration-related requests or student benefits, students may be required to demonstrate that their Berkeley College account is current or that they are complying with an approved payment arrangement, as permitted by College policy.

- Students should resolve outstanding balances, registration holds, or payment-plan issues before requesting time-sensitive immigration benefits whenever possible.
- Financial clearance is an institutional requirement and does not replace the federal requirement that an F-1 student demonstrate sufficient financial resources when required for an I-20 or other immigration process.
- Students should not delay payment or assume that an immigration deadline will be extended because of an outstanding account balance.
- Examples of requests that may require coordination with ISS and other College offices include I-20 issuance or extension, CPT, OPT processing, change of major/program, transfer, and other benefits.

6. Employment: What F-1 Students May and May Not Do

Employment is one of the most strictly regulated areas of F-1 status. Working without authorization can result in a serious status violation and may jeopardize future immigration benefits.

On-Campus Employment

- Generally limited to 20 hours per week while school is in session.
- May generally be full-time during official school vacation periods when the student is eligible and intends to enroll for the next academic term.
- Students should confirm eligibility and any College-specific employment procedures with ISS before beginning work.

Curricular Practical Training (CPT)

- CPT must be an integral part of an established curriculum and must be directly related to the student's major/program as required by federal rules.
- CPT must be authorized by the DSO in SEVIS and reflected on the student's Form I-20 before employment begins.

- Students may not begin CPT based solely on an employer offer, faculty approval, or an application that is still pending.
- CPT can be part-time or full-time, but one year or more of full-time CPT generally makes the student ineligible for post-completion OPT at the same educational level.

Optional Practical Training (OPT) and STEM OPT

- OPT employment must be directly related to the student's major area of study.
- A student must receive the required DSO recommendation and USCIS employment authorization before beginning off-campus OPT employment.
- Post-completion OPT generally provides up to 12 months of employment authorization at each higher educational level, subject to federal eligibility requirements.
- Eligible STEM degree recipients may qualify for a 24-month STEM OPT extension, subject to additional requirements.
- Students on OPT/STEM OPT must follow all reporting, employment, unemployment, address, and employer requirements.

Never work first and ask for authorization later. If you are unsure whether a job, internship, volunteer activity, freelance arrangement, or self-employment is permitted, contact ISS before beginning the activity.

7. Program Changes, Change of Major, and Educational Level

- Students must consult ISS before changing their major, academic program, degree level, or educational objective.
- Beginning September 15, 2026, the DHS final rule adds significant restrictions on transfers and educational-objective changes for F-1 students.
- Students must complete the first academic year of a program at the school that initially issued the Form I-20 or successor form before transferring or changing educational objectives, subject to regulatory/SEVP exceptions.
- At the graduate level and above, the final rule generally prohibits transferring or changing educational objectives during the program, unless an exception is authorized by SEVP for extenuating circumstances.
- After completing a program at one educational level, an F-1 student generally may begin another program only at a higher educational level; changing to the same or a lower level while remaining in F-1 status is restricted under the new rule.

8. Program Extensions and the New Extension-of-Stay Process

Under the new fixed-period admission system, a student who needs additional time beyond the authorized admission period must plan ahead. An I-20 program extension and an immigration Extension of Stay are not necessarily the same thing.

- Contact ISS well before the program end date if additional time will be needed.
- If the student's fixed period of admission will expire before the student can complete the program, a formal USCIS Extension of Stay may be required.
- An extension request may involve Form I-539, filing fees, supporting documentation, and potentially biometrics or other USCIS requirements.
- While a properly filed extension request is pending, the final rule provides a period during which qualifying F-1 students may continue authorized activities, including certain employment, subject to the rule's conditions and limits.
- Do not travel internationally while an EOS or other immigration application is pending without first obtaining individualized guidance from ISS and, when appropriate, qualified immigration counsel.

9. The New 30-Day Grace Period

Beginning September 15, 2026, the F-1 post-completion grace period is reduced from 60 days to 30 days. Students completing their program or authorized post-completion practical training must use the applicable grace period to depart the United States, transfer, change educational level, or pursue another lawful immigration option as permitted.

- Do not remain in the United States beyond the applicable authorized period or grace period.
- Students whose F-1 status ends for a different reason—such as an unauthorized withdrawal or status violation—may not receive the normal post-completion grace period.
- Ask ISS before taking action if you are unsure when your grace period begins or ends.

10. Travel and Re-Entry

- Before international travel, confirm that your passport is valid, your F-1 visa is valid for re-entry when required, and your Form I-20 has the appropriate travel endorsement.
- Check your I-94 after every U.S. entry. Beginning September 15, 2026, the I-94 will be especially important because F-1 admissions will use a fixed end date rather than D/S.
- A visa permits you to seek entry to the United States; it does not itself determine the length of your authorized stay.
- Do not assume that an unexpired visa guarantees re-entry. Admission is determined by U.S. Customs and Border Protection.

- Students with pending USCIS applications or status issues should obtain guidance from ISS before traveling.

11. Immigration Documents You Must Monitor

Document	What It Does / Student Responsibility
Passport	Establishes identity/nationality and is generally required for international travel. Keep valid and renew before expiration; provide updated information to ISS when required.
F-1 Visa	Used to request admission to the United States in F-1 classification. Monitor expiration before travel. A visa expiration date is not the same as the authorized stay end date.
Form I-20	School-issued record of the student's F-1 program and SEVIS information. Keep accurate, sign where required, and obtain ISS authorization before changes or travel.
I-94	CBP record showing admission and authorized period of stay. Check after each entry. Beginning Sept. 15, 2026, pay close attention to the fixed admit-until date.
EAD	Evidence of employment authorization for OPT and certain other categories. Do not work outside the dates and conditions of the authorization.

12. Reporting Changes to Berkeley College

Students must promptly notify ISS of changes that may affect the SEVIS record or F-1 status. Examples include:

- Legal name change.
- Residential or mailing address change.
- Change in major or academic program.
- Change in degree level or educational objective.
- Expected program completion date or need for an extension.
- Intent to transfer to another school.
- Withdrawal, leave, reduced enrollment, or other interruption of study.
- Changes in OPT/STEM OPT employment or other required employment information.
- Changes to passport information or other immigration documents when required.

13. Social Security Number and Employment

An F-1 student's eligibility for a Social Security number generally depends on authorized employment and the applicable federal requirements. Students should not work simply because they have a Social Security number, and having a Social Security number does not itself provide employment authorization.

14. Tax Responsibilities

F-1 students may have U.S. federal, state, or local tax filing obligations even when they have little or no income. Immigration status and tax status are separate legal matters. Students should review applicable IRS requirements and seek qualified tax advice when necessary.

15. What Happens If You Violate F-1 Status?

A status violation can affect a student's ability to remain in the United States, obtain employment authorization, transfer schools, travel and re-enter, change immigration status, or obtain future immigration benefits. Depending on the circumstances, the student may need to pursue reinstatement or another immigration remedy.

- Contact ISS immediately if you believe you have violated F-1 status.
- Do not attempt to conceal a status issue or continue an activity that may be unauthorized.
- ISS can explain school procedures and federal requirements but cannot guarantee approval of a USCIS application or provide legal representation.

16. Student Quick-Check Before You Act

- Am I changing my course load?
- Am I dropping or withdrawing from a class?
- Am I starting a job, internship, volunteer position, freelance activity, or CPT?
- Am I applying for OPT or STEM OPT?
- Am I changing my major, degree level, or educational objective?
- Am I transferring to another school?
- Am I extending my program?
- Am I traveling outside the United States?
- Has my passport, visa, I-20, EAD, or I-94 changed or expired?
- Do I have an outstanding College balance or hold that could delay an immigration-related request?
- Could this action change my SEVIS record?

If the answer to any of these questions is yes, contact Berkeley College International Student Services before taking action whenever possible.

17. Key Federal Authorities and Official Resources

Students should use official government sources for current requirements. Berkeley College may also issue additional procedures and deadlines.

- DHS/ICE – Final Rule (Federal Register, July 17, 2026): <https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2026/07/17/2026-14439/establishing-a-fixed-time-period-of-admission-and-an-extension-of-stay-procedure-for-nonimmigrant>
- USCIS – F-1 Students and Practical Training: <https://www.uscis.gov/working-in-the-united-states/students-and-exchange-visitors/students-and-employment>
- USCIS – Policy Manual, Students and Employment: <https://www.uscis.gov/policy-manual/volume-2-part-f>
- Study in the States – F-1 Student Resources: <https://studyinthestates.dhs.gov/>
- U.S. Customs and Border Protection – I-94: <https://i94.cbp.dhs.gov/>
- U.S. Department of State – Student Visas: <https://travel.state.gov/content/travel/en/us-visas/study/student-visa.html>

18. Important Disclaimer

This handbook guide is intended for general educational and institutional compliance purposes. It summarizes federal immigration requirements as understood at the time of publication and is not a substitute for the Immigration and Nationality Act, the Code of Federal Regulations, Federal Register notices, USCIS/ICE/SEVP guidance, or individualized legal advice. Federal rules and agency guidance may change. Berkeley College reserves the right to update this guide as required by federal law or agency guidance.