

Overview – Obtaining an I-20 Certificate of Eligibility and the F-1 Non-immigrant Student Visa

The Application for Form I-20 Certificate of Eligibility

If you plan to enroll at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary as a full-time student with an F-1 student visa, you must apply for and receive a Form I-20 Certificate of Eligibility. This process includes completing the *Form I-20 Certificate of Eligibility Application*, submitting qualifying financial documentation that establishes proof of funding for at least one academic year, and submitting any other required documents. Once you have successfully completed this application process and all eligibility requirements have been met, a document called a Form I-20 Certificate of Eligibility will be issued to you. The student then uses the Form I-20 to apply for an F-1 student visa at an US Embassy and to pay related fees.

If you are already in the United States, you must still apply for an I-20 for use in support of an application for change of nonimmigrant status or to follow the procedure for an F-1 student transfer. Transfer students must also complete the *Transfer-In Request Form*.

When completing the *I-20 Application*, carefully complete all sections related to personal information and financial certification. To ensure that you have sufficient time to receive your F-1 student visa, plan to submit a completed *I-20 Application* along with all required identification and financial documents 2- 3 months prior to your degree program start date. Be sure to check the current visa processing times at the embassy or consulate you plan to visit to ensure adequate lead-time. Submit your completed *I-20 Application* along with all required documents to the International Office at Gordon-Conwell.

Important Dates and Deadlines

To begin in-person studies under the F-1 visa in the Fall 2023 term, you must successfully obtain the F-1 visa by **Monday, August 7, 2023**. Once you have received the F-1 visa, you must plan your arrival with the International Student Office.

International Student Welcome Day: Wednesday, September 6, 2023
New Student Welcome Day: Thursday, September 7, 2023.

The Form I-20

The Form I-20 is an official government document that certifies that a person is eligible to be an F-1 non-immigrant student at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary. The I-20 document confirms to the United States Government that the person carrying it (the student) has been accepted to an educational institution in the United States and has proved to this institution (and the U.S. Government) that he or she has sufficient funds to support themselves (and their families, if applicable) for at least one academic year per visa regulations. The school the student plans to attend is the institution that issues the I-20. The I-20 is sent to the student in order to apply for an F-1 visa at a United States Embassy or Consulate. The completed I-20 will include all the information the U.S. Government needs to know about a student's term of study, level of study, field of study, date the student is expected to begin and complete studies, and the student's ability to pay for his or her education. Students will need to have this document with them any time they modify their program or travel to and from the U.S. Please be advised federal regulation requires the I-20 go directly to the recipient. The I-20 will be emailed to the recipient using their GCTS-assigned email address.

Applying for an F-1 Visa

To obtain a visa, you must apply at an U.S. Embassy or Consulate. When you apply, you will complete **DS-160 (Nonimmigrant Visa Application Form)** along with any supplementary forms required by the particular embassy or consulate. You will also need to present a paper receipt indicating a SEVIS fee payment. The SEVIS fee can be paid [online](#). Only the primary applicant is required to pay the SEVIS fee. Some embassies or consulates will accept the online-generated SEVIS fee receipt, others may require the official receipt generated by SEVIS and sent via mail to the student.

For the application interview at the U.S. Embassy/Consulate:

- Bring your passport, SEVIS Fee payment receipt, Form I-20(s), and all financial documents, plus passports and financial documents for each dependent that will accompany you to the U.S.
- You will also need two photographs of each visa applicant. For specific photo requirements, click [here](#).
- If your family name is different from your dependents, be prepared to show documents that prove your relationship (e.g. marriage certificate or family registry).
- On occasion, a Visa Officer may even require evidence (in addition to the certification on your Form I-20) of English proficiency sufficient to pursue your proposed program of study as well as proof of economic/social ties to your home country.
- The length of visa validity, number of entries permitted, and application fee are based on reciprocity and generally reflect your country's policies for granting visa privileges for full-time study in the U.S. Remember, the Visa Officer has the final word on your application; his or her judgment is not subject to review. **Standards for visa eligibility may be considerably more rigorous than the standards you must meet to qualify for the Form I-20.** Use good judgment as to whether to submit additional information with your entry visa application.

Financial Documentation and Support

To complete the *I-20 Application*, you must complete the section called *Financial Certification* and include financial documentation (bank statements, etc.) that proves coverage of all expenses for one academic year; you must also demonstrate reasonable means of support for future years. Various documents are required depending on the source of financial support. If you have more than one source of funding, you must provide the required documentation corresponding to each source. Certified bank statements or other documentation may be required.

Your total funding may come from one or more of the below sources of funding:

- **PERSONAL FUNDS:** Please submit a copy of a bank statement in your own name, or letter from a bank official on official bank letterhead, prepared within the past three months showing available balances sufficient to meet your expenses.
 - This documentation should be on the financial institution's official letterhead, stamped and signed by the financial institution. Financial documents must include English translation if applicable.
 - If the bank statement is in your spouse's name (and does not have your own name on the account), this should be treated as family support (not personal funds) and requires an affidavit, *see below*.
- **PARENT AND FAMILY SUPPORT:** The Parent or Family Sponsor will need to submit a signed affidavit of support along with a copy of their own bank statement or letter from a bank official on the bank's official letterhead indicating the amount of money (USD) available to them for financial support. The amount of funds available to the sponsor on the bank document must meet or exceed the amount indicated on the affidavit of support. The wording "current balance in excess of _____" (the amount that they are committing to provide) may be used.
- **PRIVATE SPONSOR SUPPORT:** Please follow the same requirements as "Parent and Family Support," including the bank statement, and sponsor affidavit of support. Please be advised that a business cannot support the student. Sponsors must use private personal bank statements.

- **GORDON-CONWELL SCHOLARSHIP:** If you were granted a merit-based scholarship by Gordon-Conwell, please submit a copy of the scholarship letter and signed agreement. Students without a merit-based scholarship may be eligible for a standard tuition discount based on their campus, such as the Trustee’s Scholarship at the South Hamilton, MA campus or the Urban Ministry Scholarship at the Boston, MA campus. See more here: <https://www.gordonconwell.edu/admissions/tuition-financial-aid/>
- **GOVERNMENT AGENCY, CHURCH OR OTHER MINISTRY SUPPORT:** Please submit a “Sponsor Affidavit of Support (Church, Nonprofit or Other Ministry)” as well as an official sponsorship letter on the organization’s letterhead for each supporting organization. Financial documentation (such as a certified bank letter or annual financial report) may be requested. The sponsorship letter must specify:
 - The name and address of the sponsoring organization
 - Total amount (USD) available to you for one academic year
 - Name of the seminary attending (i.e. Gordon-Conwell) and your degree program
 - Period of time funding is guaranteed, and specifics about the funding (i.e., whether funding is renewable annually, for how many years, and any conditions of the award that you must fulfill)

Unacceptable sources of funding include (but are not limited to):

- Potential income, i.e. income you have not yet received or financial support not yet available to you
- Any funds that are not liquid
- Insurance policies
- Retirement or pension accounts.

Please bring all **ORIGINAL** documents to the embassy or consulate as they require **ORIGINAL** documents. Remember that all documents must be presented in English using U.S. dollar conversion. Include any conversion rates used in determining U.S. dollar equivalency. The *I-20 Application* and all applicable documents may be mailed to Gordon-Conwell or scanned/mailed.

F-1 Student Classification and “Duration of Status”

Students holding F-1 visas are normally admitted to the United States for a “Duration of Status” (also designated D/S) by U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS), the U.S. government agency responsible for administering regulations related to the stay of non-U.S. citizens. Under the terms of an F-1 student visa, you are required to pursue a full-time course of study during the academic year, which at Gordon-Conwell is September-May. For immigration purposes, Gordon-Conwell considers full-time study as formal registration for 7 or more credit hours each semester (typically 3 or more courses). **When you enter the U.S. using an “Initial Attendance” I-20 to begin your program, you must begin your course of study within 30 days.** While the visa may be issued up to 365 days before the start date of the program of study, the student will not be allowed to enter the U.S. more than 30 days before the program start date.

Employment

Federal regulations permit F-1 students to be employed on-campus; however, the regulations limit the number of hours an F-1 student is permitted to work during a regular semester (Fall and Spring) to 20 hours per week. F-1 students are permitted to work up to 40 hours per week during the following sessions if not enrolled in a class: summer sessions and January term. Although it is possible for students to work up to 20 hours per week while school is in session, because each F-1 student is required to maintain a full course load of 7 hours per semester in the Fall and Spring, many find they can only maintain a workload of 8-10 hours. Once you arrive on campus, you are able to contact individual departments to find out if on-campus student work is available. Because of the limitations on employment, employment during either the academic year or the summer months should not be considered a primary means of support while at Gordon-Conwell. Also, you are not permitted to consider potential on-campus employment as part of your “Available Funds” on your *Application for I-20*

Certificate of Eligibility. Dependents in F-2 status may not work under any circumstances, including on-campus employment.

Other Immigration-Related Terms

There are two other immigration-related terms you will encounter frequently throughout this process.

- The first term, *entry visa*, refers to the visa foil in your passport that permits you to enter the United States. This foil is obtained at a U.S. Embassy or Consulate. An entry visa is used for entry into the U.S. and may expire during your stay.
- The second term, *immigration status*, reflects the most recent notation on your *I-94 Arrival/Departure Record* (issued electronically). Immigration status is generally the same as entry visa classification, e.g. *F-1, B-2, R-1*, etc. This classification indicates the length of time you are permitted to stay in the country.

Refer to the Following Websites for More Information

- Websites of U. S. Embassies and Consulates: <http://www.usembassy.gov/>
- Visa appointment wait times: <https://travel.state.gov/content/travel/en/us-visas/visa-information-resources/wait-times.html>
- Study in the States: <https://studyinthestates.dhs.gov/>

Contact Information

International Office: internationaloffice@gordonconwell.edu