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Questions and Answers: Planning for U.S. Arrival

How far ahead should I plan to arrive in the United States before classes start at my university?

Anywhere from one month to a week ahead is recommended. In planning your travel timing here are a few points that you need to be aware of—

- Under current student visa regulations, you cannot enter the United States earlier than 30 days before the arrival date provided on your form I-20 or DS-2019 (the form that your university or sponsoring organization sent you to use in visa application.)
- Jet lag. You are going to be crossing many time zones to get to the United States and your body will need time to adjust to the “new clock.” Allow at least a few days after arrival to recover from the fatigue and disorientation of “jet lag” before your schedule gets busy.
- It’s usually best to arrive during the work week (Monday through Thursday, or Friday earlier than 5 p.m.) because it will be easier to reach your university, country consulate, or other sources of assistance if you need to.
- Check on when your university is holding its student orientations, and be sure to arrive in time to attend. Many institutions offer both programs for all new students and a program specifically for international students.

I don’t think I can make it in time for my university’s orientation programs. How important are they? What can I do instead?

They are quite important in allowing you to gather information on campus resources and requirements quickly, so do your best to attend. If you can’t, ask your institution’s international student office whether you can get notes and handouts from the programs—meet with your foreign student adviser and your academic adviser to cover the highlights of what you should know.

I didn’t tell my U.S. university after they accepted me that I definitely plan to attend. Will this create problems?

Yes, it can. The school needs to enter you as enrolled with the SEVIS national student tracking system. If you are not listed as enrolled it can cause difficulties with your visa application and your U.S. entry, not to mention when and if you reach campus. Let the school know.

I didn’t tell the schools that accepted me but that I’m not attending that I won’t. What problems will this create?

It’s mainly a courtesy to the schools—it makes it easier for them to plan. You will not be popular with these schools if you do not keep them informed, and who knows when you may want to work with them in the future?

How do I decide whether I want to sign up for on-campus housing? The campus meal plan?

In most cases you will want to stay in on-campus housing during your first year unless you already have contacts in the local community. It is too difficult to evaluate outside housing options from a distance—to know, for instance, which neighborhoods are safest, what a fair price is in the particular area, what will be convenient, and so on. There may be some cases where off-campus housing will work better—for instance,

if you have a family coming with you. However, many universities do have specific housing options to address specific needs. Ask what they have for your situation.

Campus housing in some cases will appear more expensive than off-campus housing but remember that there are often added costs associated with off-campus housing (security deposits, utility payments, telephone installation, furnishings and computer facilities) that may be included as part of your on-campus housing fee.

Campus meal plans are usually more expensive than cooking for yourself but less expensive than eating out. Consider how likely you are to cook for yourself regularly. Eating with other students on-campus can also provide a good chance to socialize and meet people.

What are typical U.S. health care costs?

U.S. health costs are the highest in the world. They vary according to exact procedure and location but some average health costs cited in the 2002 *To Your Health* brochure series published by NAFSA: Association of International Educators include—

- At least \$500 for an emergency room visit (note that making an appointment at an urgent care clinic costs much less, typically \$200 or under)
- About \$6,000 for routine delivery of an infant; or \$12,000 for cesarean delivery
- About \$2,500 per day for hospital room, board, and doctor's fees (costs of medicines, tests, and so forth are additional!)

How much coverage will I need?

You will want to choose a policy that will pay at least 70 percent of costs in case of a serious medical emergency, preferably with a deductible (amount paid by you before coverage begins) of \$250 or less. The NAFSA: Association of International Educators brochure *Medical Insurance: Coverage for International Students, Scholars, and Their Families* (http://www.nafsa.org/content/professionaleducationalresources/publications/medical_insurance.pdf) provides additional background on types of insurance coverage and questions to ask in choosing a policy.

What about using the insurance plan that I already have in my home country?

Such a plan may not meet U.S. health care costs. In addition, U.S. health care providers only accept coverage from particular insurance plans, usually not including plans based in other countries.

I have a disability. When should I let the university know about this? Will it cause problems?

According to U.S. law, all colleges and universities receiving public funding (any accredited institution) must make “reasonable accommodations” to ensure that disabled students have the same access to facilities and educational resources as other students. They also may not legally discriminate based on disability (or illness). There will be a special person or office on-campus that is responsible for making such arrangements. However, you must let them know what your needs and wants are in a “timely” manner so that they are able to arrange for any needed accommodations. If you have special health care needs related to your disability, appropriate insurance coverage also needs to be sought out.

What information do I need to get from my bank to transfer funds to a U.S. bank?

Check this with your bank. Basics would include your account numbers and bank contact information (e-mail, fax, or telex). You'll also want to find out what fee your bank charges to transfer funds and how this should be paid.

How much money should carry with me to the United States?

One general recommendation (as of 2002-2003) was to bring about \$300 cash for immediate expenses (such as temporary housing and transportation needs), and about \$1,000 to \$1,500 in traveler's checks.

Figure out what early expenses you are likely to have including buying books, housing deposits, student activity fees, costs for furnishing your apartment, food, clothes, and so on. Also find out from your bank at home about how long it will take to transfer your funds once you have provided U.S. bank information.

What are usual size/weight limits for airline checked bags? Carry-on bags/personal items?

Airline requirements may vary depending on the particular airline, whether the flight is in-country or international, and on special circumstances such as heightened security or an expectation of crowded flights. For international flights, a common limit for checked baggage is two pieces with a maximum weight of 70 pounds (31.75 kg.) per bag. The largest piece of luggage cannot exceed 62" (1.57 meters) in any dimension, and the second piece of luggage cannot exceed 55" (1.39 meters) in any dimension..

Regarding carry-on bags, Some U.S. airlines allow two bags weighing up to 50 pounds (22.68 kg.) per bag, and not to exceed 22" x 9" x 14" (55.88 cm. x 22.86 cm x 35.56 cm.). Airlines based outside of North America may only allow one carry-on bag not to exceed 11 pounds (slightly more than 4.98 kg.) and 22" x 9" x 14".

What types of documents are important to carry with me to the United States?

You need to bring the following types of documents with you to the United States (along with notarized English translations as appropriate). You should not pack them in your luggage but should carry them with you on to the plane. You will also need to make notarized true copies of these documents—put one set of copies in your checked luggage and leave another one with someone you trust at home in case by some misfortune you lose both of the other sets.

- Visa, passport, and I-20 or DS-2019. You will need to show these documents to enter the United States so obviously you will want them immediately at hand.
- Birth and marriage certificates. As you did in applying for your visa, you are likely to again at various points (for instance when applying for insurance) need to prove that your dependents are indeed your dependents—that you are legally married to your husband or wife and that you are legally the parent of your children.
- Health records. Copies of your medical records, x-rays, and the like as well as prescriptions for any medications that you currently take, written in generic terms
- School records. Bring your own diploma and transcripts (or notarized copies) and test results as well as records for your children. More information on the types of courses you took (for example translations of descriptions from university catalogs or other background) may be helpful if there are questions about what university requirements you may have already fulfilled.
- Emergency contacts. Carry contact information for your university FSA (including home contact information if you expect to arrive outside office hours), for your country's embassy or consulate, and for an emergency contact at home. Also carry your directions regarding how to get to campus and/or wherever else you will initially be traveling.

Where can I buy baggage insurance?

You can generally purchase baggage insurance at airports, or from a travel agent.

What types of items am I not allowed to bring into the United States?

Airplane security restrictions for the most part focus on materials that are highly flammable or could be used as weapons. Some of the less obvious things that you should not try to carry on a plane include fingernail clippers; scissors; razors; pocketknives; tools such as hammers or screwdrivers; and sports equipment such as golf clubs or pool cues. Often such items are allowed as part of checked luggage but may not be carried on to the plane by passengers.

Cigarette lighters and safety matches may not be checked in luggage but up to two cigarette lighters and four packs of safety matches may be carried on board.

It's also important to be aware of customs regulations. Some types of items that require a special permit for U.S. entry or that are entirely prohibited include any drugs and narcotics that are illegal or unapproved for medical use in the United States; weapons, ammunition, and explosive materials (including fireworks); offensive-smelling or irritating materials such as pepper spray; fresh fruit, vegetables, plants, seeds, and other unprocessed plant products; wildlife or products made from endangered species; and fresh fish, meat, or seafood. You may also want to avoid packing substances that may be difficult for inspectors to identify, especially if it's possible for them to be mistaken for prohibited substances.

What should I do to avoid difficulties in carrying my medications through U.S. customs?

Keep all prescribed medications in their original containers and have the original and translated prescriptions with you to show. Certain drugs may not be brought into the country or must receive a special permit, so check with your local consulate if you have any questions about the ones you are bringing.

What are the “profiles” for airport searches? What can I do if I feel I am being discriminated against?

Many searches are random or based on concerns raised when passing through screening devices. Other reasons that can trigger searches are not specified publicly for security reasons but generally are focused on circumstances of ticket purchase—for instance someone buying only a one-way ticket or paying for their ticket in cash is more likely to be searched.

Choosing passengers for search based on their religion, ethnic background, or country of origin is illegal in the United States as are other forms of discrimination based on such personal characteristics. If you feel you have been so discriminated against, you should file a complaint with airport authorities. In the U.S., you can also file a complaint with the U.S. Department of Transportation Aviation Consumer Protection Division (U.S. telephone (800) 322-7873; E-mail: airconsumer@ost.dot.gov). However, you are required to pass through any requested searches in order to be allowed to board your plane, and so cooperation with airport personnel is probably the best strategy.

How much time will US-VISIT registration at the airport take?

The time it will take to register depends on how many other people are receiving special registration processing on the same day you arrive. Allow at least three hours total between your flight's arrival and any connecting flight. Waiting time will be the main delay factor. Processing itself usually takes only about one to two minutes.

What if I miss my connecting flight?

Go to the office of the airline that provides your connecting flight; this office should be located within the airport where you are transferring. Staff there can arrange to put you on another flight to your destination (most usually without charge assuming that you have a good reason for missing the flight). Ask at the airport information desk if you have trouble figuring out where your airline's office is located.

What happens if I am not approved to enter the United States?

You will be sent back to your port of origin or home country. This is extremely uncommon, however—if you have all your travel documents and don't break the law during your flight out or indicate that you are coming to the United States for some other reason than your visa specifies, you don't need to worry about being denied entry.

I am a U.S. citizen but have lived overseas almost all of my life. Do I need to register with US-VISIT?

No. You still need to go through customs, however.