

Building a Bridge to Success: Mastering the International Student Visa and H1B Journey Podcast Transcript

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Patrick Lageraen:

Hello, and welcome to another installment of the UB School of Management's Manage-A-Bull Podcast. My name is Patrick Lageraen. I'm a second year MBA student, and one of the hosts of this podcast.

This installment is by popular request of perspective and admin students, particularly international students, concerning the process of coming to the US and studying at UB legally. UB is a desired school, not only because of the programs, but because of the opportunities it provides to international students.

However, there are still government requirements that must be met in order to study here legally, and be admitted to UB. And these legal requirements can be quite complicated and overwhelming, the first time you hear about them.

So in this first segment, we are going to hear from two international second year MBA students that are studying here in the US, and hear about their UB experience. Additionally, we're also lucky enough to have a representative from the ISS here in the studio, or UB's Department of International Student Services.

At the ISS, they answer questions, and assist international students on a daily basis. Unfortunately, I'm not going to have a ton of input, as I'm not an international student, but I believe, especially after researching for this episode, that I can empathize with the requirements that international students must conform to.

We all come from different places, but what unites us is the value that we see in a SUNY education, and our desire to study here at UB, and in our case, the School of Management.

I'd like to introduce Shashwat Raj Singh, a second year MBA student from India, who's currently our GMA President, and Akshay Koltewarr, a second year MBA student from India, who's currently the vice president of our consulting group, and is currently the graduate assistant at the School of Management.

So first off, Shash, why don't you give us a brief intro about yourself? And tell us where you came from, and how you got here.

Shashwat Raj Singh:

Absolutely. Well, thank you, Patrick, for organizing this session. My name is Shashwat Raj Singh, and I'm in the UB MBA program, in the class of 2024.

I just finished the first year of the MBA program, and the second year begins on this coming Monday. I am really excited and looking forward to the semester.

The reason why I chose UB is because of its ranking, its prestige all over the US, and there are so many employers who prefer UB MBA students, and they come here for recruitment purposes.

In addition to that, the cost of living and the tuition cost is relatively low. So, for an international student like me, it's very, very beneficial.

I am currently the president of the GMA, which is the student governing body of the MBA program. I also work as the student assistant for the Office of Strategic Marketing and Enrollment Management.

I'm also a Dean Student Ambassador for the MBA program, and a Dean Scholar, and I'm very happy to give my inputs here, and help all the prospective international students coming from all over the world.

I got my F-1 visa through the USCIS change of status through I-539. I'm going to talk about that during the course of this podcast. I want to become a product manager in the tech industry, and I'm concentrating in data analytics, marketing and information systems and e-commerce.

Patrick Lageraen:

Okay, and are you part of that STEM program?

Shashwat Raj Singh:

Yes, I'm part of that STEM program. The reason why I chose STEM is, for all international students, after you finish your graduate degree program, you are allowed to work in the US if you have a job for one year on OPT, but with STEM, you have an option to extend that OPT by another 24 months. All in all, you can work for 36 months in the US after your degree program, without any sponsorship.

Patrick Lageraen:

Okay, makes sense. We'll come back to the STEM program later.

Shashwat Raj Singh:

Absolutely.

Patrick Lageraen:

And just go a little bit more in-depth on why some people choose that.

Next up, I'd like to introduce Akshay. Akshay, why don't you tell us a little bit about yourself, and where you came from, how you got here?

Akshay Prabhakar Koltewar:

Thank you so much, Patrick, for having me here. My name's Akshay, and I'm the current vice president of the Consulting Club at the UB School of Management, and I'm also serving as a graduate assistant at the Admissions Office of the School of Management.

I came from India, specifically Mumbai, and I got here through the non-immigration pathway of F-1 visa. I had to interview for the same at the Consulate in India itself, and I had to go through the visa process.

I chose UB specifically because of the plethora of experiential learning opportunities it provides to students in the form of corporate champions, in the form of leader course certification, which not only focuses on the theoretical part of the MBA, but also announces the personality completely, and is a transformation program altogether.

I am also pursuing the STEM program. The STEM MBA is a pathway for you to stay here in the US for three years, and seek H-1B sponsorship.

My plan is to go back in the financial services industry, in the comptrollership role, and pursue this further to leadership, from the leadership perspective.

Patrick Lageraen:

Yeah, makes sense. Thanks, Akshay. Last up, I'd like to introduce Jenna. She's a representative from the ISS.

Hi, Jenna. Thank you for being here.

Jenna Lenz:

Hi, thank you so much for having me. It's a pleasure to be here.

Like you said, my name is Jenna Lenz. I am one of the advisors in International Student Services, or ISS, for short.

So our office, we work directly with all of our international students on F-1 or J-1 student visas. We start working with students once you are admitted and deposited.

You might start getting our newsletters, information about our check-in, and our Welcome Series for students. Once you're here, we help you with maintaining your status, and applying for benefits.

We do some way finding. If you're not sure where to go, you can always stop by our office, we can help you find the right office. And then, like it's been mentioned, after students graduate, international students, generally, if they choose, are able to work in the US after graduation.

So we continue to help students maintain their status, and report what they need to report, while they are working on their F-1 visas. I've been in the office for about seven years.

Patrick Lageraen:

Okay. You mentioned F-1 and J-1 visas. I'm sure there's going to be a lot of alphanumeric codes throughout this podcast. Can people contact you to get more information about these different things?

Jenna Lenz:

Yeah, absolutely, that's a good question. So I do have some vocabulary we can kind of go over.

We've heard some of these alphabet soup words already, but yes, certainly our website is buffalo.edu/iss. Lots of information there about the different visa categories, or you can always e-mail us in our office, as well. The information is on our website.

So the most common type is F-1 visa, which we'll get into, but you've heard the term USCIS already. That stands for United States Citizenship and Immigration Services.

They are the ones who process immigration benefits, like a change of status, or work authorization like OPT, which stands for Optional Practical Training. It's one of the types of work you can do as an international student after you graduate, or sometimes before, as well.

Part of ISS, we are DSOs, is a Designated School Official. So that is someone who has access to the government database SEVIS, and that is where we create the Form I-20 that all F-1 students have, which is an immigration document that you need for your studies at UB.

The other word you might be hearing is SEVP, that stands for Student Exchange Visitor Programs. That is an agency under the Department of Homeland Security.

SEVP is the agency that runs the SEVIS government database, and they are responsible for a lot of the regulations that will be kind of touched upon, I think, here today.

Patrick Lageraen:

Okay, great. That's awesome information, thank you.

Another quick question about your department. How many full-time employees do you have?

Jenna Lenz:

Yeah, so there are 13 full-time employees with us. There are six advisors.

So international students, when they come in to talk to us, or if they come to our advising, I am one of the six people that they will likely see.

Patrick Lageraen:

Okay, great. Sounds like you have a big department there.

I guess we'll get right into the questions. This is open to anybody.

So how can international students pursue a program at UB? Who needs a visa, and what type of visa do they need?

Jenna Lenz:

All right, I'll start this one off, then. So international students, if they are looking to do online program, obviously, you don't necessarily need a visa. You might just be doing that online.

Fun fact, I am doing one of the School of Management online programs, starting in the fall.

Patrick Lageraen:

That's great.

Jenna Lenz:

So I do know we have a classmate who's studying actually from India, but that's neither here nor there.

For coming to Buffalo, you would need, likely, a student visa, if your primary purpose is to be a student here. The most common is F-1 student visa, for degree seeking students. There is also J-1 students, but that is a much smaller population, usually fairly specific, and that can depend on the length of the program.

For example, if you're coming to study abroad through an exchange program, you might be on a J visa, but the vast majority of the students at UB who are international students are here as F-1 students.

Patrick Lageraaen:

The F-1 student visa, is that a different approval pool, than people just looking to move to the US in general?

Jenna Lenz:

Yeah, so if you're looking to the move to the US in general, for example, if you have immigrant intent, so you're planning to stay here long term, maybe you're applying for a permanent residency, or even someone coming on something like an asylum, those are entirely different processes.

Part of being an F-1 student at the visa interview, and we may touch on this, is you have to be able to prove that you do not have immigrant intent at the time of the visa. When you talk to the counselor officer, they will ask for documents, and I know we talk about this later, but basically, F-1, your idea is to come here, study, get an American university experience, get some industry experience if you want, after you graduate.

And then, depending on your path, you may go home. The path may take you for an H-1B worker visa, which, again, would be a separate visa process.

Patrick Lageraaen:

Okay, understood. So you could choose later to pursue staying in the US, but at the time of accepting, you have no intent to do so.

Jenna Lenz:

Correct. When you apply for the visa, you should be able to prove that you do not intend to stay in the US forever. But obviously, life happens.

You might find an employment visa. Or you might meet someone, and get married to a US citizen, and that's understood.

Patrick Lageraaen:

Okay, understood.

Shashwat Raj Singh:

But I quickly want to add to what she said. F-1 is a non-immigrant intent. I mean, I have attended so many sessions organized by the US Embassy Consulate in India. They do, I think, video sessions every Friday, or I think Thursday, I'm not sure about the exact day.

F-1 is non-immigrant intent, no matter what your plans are in the future. But when you're appearing for an F-1 interview, you have to sufficiently, through evidence, demonstrate that you have a non-immigrant intent, and that you're going to come to the US just as a student, just for your education, finish the education, and you have the intent to return to your home country.

Patrick Lageraen:

Okay. That's a really important detail to note.

Akshay Prabhakar Koltewar:

I would just like to insist on the fact, for all the international students out here listening to the podcast, that the F-1 category is a non-immigrant category, wherein, when you go for the interview, you have to establish the fact that you will be coming back to your home country.

So, irrespective of and irrelevant to your plans after graduation, you should insist on the fact that you'll be coming back home, to make sure that you get that F-1 visa, and you get that approval.

Patrick Lageraen:

Okay, thank you. So my next question, a lot of people's first step into studying at UB is, of course, applying to the school, and seeing if you can even get in, but that's the easy part. So what are the next steps to take, after accepting that offer from UB?

Akshay Prabhakar Koltewar:

I could take that. As part of the admissions team, I get a lot of the questions in and around the same theme of it.

First and foremost, after accepting the admission, you should make sure that you pay the tuition deposit, and make sure that you upload the supporting financial documents and the admissions form.

It is super, super important, and I cannot insist on this fact, that you must expedite in uploading these two forms. One is the financial form, and the second one is the supporting financial documents.

Because only after this stage, this upload, your documents are passed over to the International Admissions Office, when they process your I-20, within four to six weeks. When we say four to six weeks, that is a tentative time that we've taken into consideration, but it is an earnest request to all the international students to please keep patience.

And if you're planning to come down to UB, make sure that you upload the documents timely, so that you get the I-20 timely. And subsequently, you could go ahead and appear for the visa interview.

As you may know or may not know, the I-20 is the most essential document for your Visa interview. Without the I-20, you cannot go for the visa interview.

And as we all know, that there is the shortage of the visa interview slots, that you get back in Indian consulates. So we must make sure that all the students are uploading all the documents timely manner. And if that happens, you could get the I-20 timing.

Patrick Lageraen:

Okay. So just to clarifying that, after applying to UB, the ISS would help you submit your I-20. And then you would get access to a visa interview, which takes place in India?

Akshay Prabhakar Koltewar:

That's right. Once the I-20 is issued by the UB, the ISS office and the International Admissions office, the candidate appears for the interview by seeking a slot, a visa interview slot.

Before that, they have to fill out the DS-160 form post, which they go for seeking the slot. There is always a shortage of this interview slot. So the students have to make sure that they are always in chase of these slots/.

Once they get this slot, in respective consulate back in India, there are, namely four consulates, four to five consulates back in India, wherein they seek the interview appointment. And once they get the appointment, they go and appear for the visa interview.

Patrick Lageraen:

Okay.

Jenna Lenz:

Yeah, and just to clarify on that point, he's right. The financial documents are a requirement.

We actually cannot, by regulation, give an I-20, until we have sufficient proof of funding. Part of being an F-1 student is being able to prove that you can support yourself financially in the US, while you're here for your education.

That is something that you need for your I-20, so that's why International Admissions needs it. We are separate offices, International Admissions and ISS, but we do work together, and so they will use those documents to create your I-20. You'll also need that funding, when you go probably for your Visa interview, as well.

Patrick Lageraen:

Okay.

Shashwat Raj Singh:

I have a quick question for you guys. So what kind of financial documents are you looking, does a prospective international student need?

Is that just a bank statement, or a passbook? Is there any specific period that the UB looks at?

Akshay Prabhakar Koltewar:

That's a very good point. So we look at last 12 months of financial statements. The financial statements can be in the form of bank statement, can be in the form of cash deposits, fixed deposits. They cannot be any liquid funds, which are invested somewhere, like mutual funds statements are not accepted.

Any liquid money which is stale, and which is not invested, and which does not have any risk associated with it, and those kinds of financial documents are accepted. All the accepted financial documents are mentioned as part of the financial form, which is available on all our websites.

So once the candidate fills the financial form, they can go through the list of documents which are acceptable, and accordingly planned, for the funding in the same line.

Jenna Lenz:

And that could be a financial loan, specifically, an educational loan. There's also a possibility of having a financial sponsor. So if you yourself don't particularly have much money, you might combine funds, personal funds, family sponsorship, sometimes government funding, sponsorships, depending on what the case may be.

And then, once you have the I-20, right now, we are able to electronically sign as the DSO, the Designated School Official. And it'll get e-mailed to you, or perhaps uploaded into your portal, for access.

As a student, once you get that, you're going to want to make sure you printed out, sign your name. Students should still sign in ink, and you'll need the information on there, like your SEVIS ID, for your visa interview.

Patrick Lageraen:

Okay. Thank you guys for clarifying that, about the funding. That's a pretty important detail that people need to remember.

And Jenna, so earlier, you mentioned that a DSO from the ISS can access and help make the I-20. Can we just take a step back, and further clarify, what is the I-20, who needs it, and who it's issued by?

Jenna Lenz:

Yeah, absolutely. The I-20, the full name is Form I-20, Certificate of Eligibility for Non-Immigrant F-1 Student Status. So this is a document specific to F-1 students. If someone is a J student, they have something called a DS-2019. But in this case, we'll focus on the I-20.

That is a legal document issued by a US school, like UB, through that SEVIS database I mentioned earlier. So the only people who can access this database at the school are the DSOs. Right now, the DSOs are only ISS advisors, and some people in international admissions.

Basically, before we can issue the I-20, the school has to confirm that the student is admitted for a full course of study, and that they have sufficient proof of funding for their program. Any student who's planning to come as an F-1 student needs to make sure, like we mentioned, you have that I-20 first. That is needed, before you can do the visa application with a consulate or embassy.

It's also something that you need to have in hand for your entry to the US. When you first enter as an F-1 student, and you get to the border, and you talk to that border official, with Customs and Board of Protection, or CBP, they are expecting to see that I-20 in hand, in addition to your passport, and your visa stamp.

Patrick Lageraen:

Okay, understood.

Shashwat Raj Singh:

I have a quick question. So is there a minimum number of credit requirements that international students need to meet per semester, to become eligible to get an F-1?

Jenna Lenz:

Yeah, that's a really good question. So you don't necessarily need to be enrolled, and in fact, can't be enrolled at the time that you have your Visa interview, right? That's before you get to the enrollment stage of being a UB student.

But once you're here, you need to make sure that you have a full course of study, that's part of maintaining your status. The default for that at UB is 12 credits per semester.

If you have an assistantship, like a graduate or a teaching research assistantship, full-time enrollment is considered nine credits, because you're doing nine credits plus your assistantship work.

There are different cases where you may be able to do less, but in order to do that, you would need prior authorization through our office. In general, for F-1 students, plan on either 12 credits each semester, or nine credits, if you have an assistantship.

Patrick Lageraen:

Is that credit requirement on the UB side of things, or on the legal side of things?

Jenna Lenz:

Yeah, so the full course of study requirement is a regulation, so that comes from the federal regulations.

Patrick Lageraen:

Okay.

Jenna Lenz:

Schools themselves have some jurisdiction on different aspects of full-time, like graduate assistantship, or when students who are graduates get to later parts of their degree, and they might be eligible for full-time certification.

That's internal to UB policies. But the full course of study requirement is baked into the F-1 regulations.

Patrick Lageraen:

Okay. Other than the I-20, what documents are required for this visa application process?

Akshay Prabhakar Koltewar:

I could reflect upon that, since I've been to the visa interview. It is recommended that the student carries the I-20, the financial documents, the financial form, the letter of acceptance, or the admit letter, to be precise, and the proof of the financial documents.

So let's say, if someone is producing a bank statement, the student is supposed to carry the bank statement with them as a background, or in case the visa officer asks for it. Moreover, and mostly, it happens that the visa officer will only ask for the I-20 and the passport.

Other than that, they do not really verify any documents in person. In case they want to verify any documents, they could issue you a 221(g), which is a request further documentation, or to proof for the documentation. So that's pretty much all that the candidate has to carry.

Shashwat Raj Singh:

And there's one more document that is actually needed, which is, so just as soon as you get your I-20 document, you have to pay at your service website, and get a service fee receipt. That is a very important steps, and sometimes people may overlook that.

So US consulates and the visa officers, they primarily require and mandate that you have a valid passport, and a valid I-20, and a service fee receipt. And like Akshay said, that it's very essential for you to also carry your financial documents, in case if you are being asked for that during the interview.

Because if you do not carry them, the officer might issue you a 221(g), which is the administrative processing, which further means that it would require to submit those documents later, which may delay your Visa processing.

Jenna Lenz:

And also, the SEVIS fee is required for us to be able to register your record, once you get here. So if you don't pay the SEVIS fee, we can't indicate that you are an active student, and that could actually end up leading to a lot of trouble. So paying the SEVIS fee early is always a good idea.

You always want to make sure you're paying the SEVIS fee through the official website, which is fmjfee.com. If you're not sure, you can come to our website, or you look at the Department of State website.

Unfortunately, there are SEVIS fee scams out there. So I would avoid paying a SEVIS fee through a third party, or anything. I would go directly to the source.

Patrick Lageraen:

Okay. So now 20 minutes into this podcast, we've mentioned a lot of different steps that we have to take.

Does the ISS have any checklists that students can go through, just to make sure they've done every single step?

Jenna Lenz:

Yeah, absolutely. On our website, we do have a page about the US visa. It has all the steps listed.

We link to this in a couple of different places, again, buffalo.edu/iss. This would be under the Immigration and Visa portion of our website.

You can always e-mail us, as well, and we can send you the direct link, but we go through the steps, starting with, I think we've already talked about filing that Form DSS-160 online. That is the online visa application itself.

That's going to be all the detailed questions about you and your school plans. You might be uploading a photo there. And again, I would print that confirmation, and take it with you to the visa interview.

Second step is going to be that visa application itself. There's probably going to be a fee involved for that application. And depending on where you're from, there may be additional visa issuance fees, as well.

After that would be paying that SEVIS fee, so that is the SEVIS I-901 fee. Again, make sure you're paying directly from the official website. And then for most people, step four is going to be that visa interview.

That's going to happen with the consular officer. There was mention earlier about applying for a visa interview waiver. That's something that's decided case by case by the consular officers themselves. So ISS can help walk you through those steps, but we can't tell you if you're going to be eligible for that waiver or not. That happens at the consular embassy.

Patrick Lageraen:

Understood. That's a great segue into our next topic, which is the visa itself. Can anyone tell us a little bit more about the visa application and then what happens during that application from the start to approval?

Akshay Prabhakar Koltewar:

I could reflect upon that since I've gone through the process. Right after you get the acceptance, you fill out the supporting financial documents, you upload the documents which are required, you get the I-20, then the first thing that you do is you complete the DS-160 form, pay the fees, get an appointment. Now there are two appointments which are required by the candidate. The first appointment is the biometric and the second appointment is the visa interview. When you're going for the biometric, they usually take your biometric and the photograph, which is required on the visa, and subsequently you go for the visa interview, which is with the visa officer. Now this process is lengthy because of the fact that there's scarcity of visa interviews and these slots are scarce and there are a lot of scams in and around this. So students must be really, really careful when they are actually giving someone money to access this portal and book the slots for them on their behalf.

While these slots are scarce, it is very important for the students to know the fact that if they're proactively planning everything in advance, they can definitely get a slot well in advance. So it's all about time and it plays a very pivotal role in this journey. It just not ends there. There are further steps after you're done with the visa interviews, just wait and hold for your passport to come back and then you have two options, basically. You could go and collect the passport from the consulate or you could have them deliver it to your home address. For those who are in the nick of time who have scarcity of time towards the end of the commencement of the program and if they're in the hurry to leave India, it is advised that they collect it because in that case there is no dependency on the courier or the parcel guys in between. So that's how the process plays.

Shashwat Raj Singh:

And to add to what Akshay was saying, he raised a very important point about being scammed. And it's not just for international students from India, but from all over the world. If anybody needs any information, they have two most important resources. Reach out to the ISS office, ask them for any clarity. Or visit the website of the US government, the US Embassy and the consulate in your specific country. And in recent times, the US Consulate and Embassy have pages on Twitter and Facebook and they constantly post updates about the visa appointments and things like that. And earlier it wasn't the case that there would be visa shortages. I think due to Covid there have been a lot of processing time backlog of applications. So that has resulted in limited availability of front interviews.

So I think that point that Akshay raised was very important. So Akshay's visa was through the consular embassy processing and that's an option for somebody who's living outside of the US. There's another

way that you can obtain your visa, which is more complicated, time-consuming in my opinion, also very expensive, which is through the USCIS change of status by filing your I-539. And I'm going to talk about that a little bit later in the session. So you need all those documents that Akshay talked about. In addition to that, you also need your I-94 and a few other documents that we'll touch upon a bit later in the session.

Patrick Lageraen:

Understood. Thank you. You guys mentioned scams. I don't want to just quickly brush over that. What sort of scams should they be looking out for and what type are out there?

Akshay Prabhakar Koltewar:

So a lot of students are approached by folks on various groups. There are WhatsApp groups, there are telegram groups. Because as soon as you find out that there is scarcity of these visa interviews, the student is in pursuit of this visa interview. They want to get this visa interview as soon as possible so that they get their visa and they also want to keep some contingency time just in case there is any up or down, in case there is a rejection, to be very straightforward. So with this visa interview, when they are a part of these groups, there are a lot of folks reaching out to them confirming that they will book the slot so that the student does not have to check the portal time and again. And there is a limitation of how many times you can actually access the portal. So you could actually access the portal wherein you can check the slots only five times a day.

So because of the scarcity of the slots, a lot of students assume the fact that once a student who has booked a slot and if that student reschedules it, they will get that slot. But that's not the case. The appointment has an algorithm behind it and the students are able to see the appointments which are available only five times a day. So it's better not to give anyone money to book the slot. It is the student's responsibility to log into the portal and book the time slot by themselves. And credentials sharing is a big, big no. Once you pay someone money, they will ask for your credentials and that's a big, big risk that you're taking on your visa.

Shashwat Raj Singh:

And I can also add to what Akshay said. I was also approached by somebody who offered his service that they're going to book an appointment for me and I don't have to make any effort, just have to pay them in advance. And I asked them question, "How do you have the access to that?" Because the US Embassy

and the consulates, they do not allow any third party to do anything. F-1 visa application is a simple straightforward process and it's do it to yourself. It's not complicated at all. Anybody who visits their website, they're going to get all the information that they need. In case of confusion, they can always reach out to the DSO, which is the ISS office at UB. And I was reached out by such people who were scamming students and I asked them questions and they ghosted me on their WhatsApp, they blocked me. So I figured that out and it was really, really prevalent and there were so many students who actually fell for that. And I'm not sure if they even ended up getting a visa.

Jenna Lenz:

And I think honestly that is a really good lesson. They said that they'll do it for you. You don't have to do any effort. If it's too good to be true, it's probably not true. And that is going to be with visa interviews, getting a magic slot for you, a cheaper SEVIS fee that doesn't exist. When you're coming here if you get a job offer that you didn't apply for and it's at home for 20 hours a week and you get paid \$50 USD per hour doing mailings for someone, but you just have to give them some money, it's not going to be real. So if it's too good to be true, it's probably not. And if you're ever not sure, contact our office and we can help you figure out if it's legitimate or not.

Patrick Lageraen:

Because in theory students are going to be in contact with the ISS at this point in the process.

Jenna Lenz:

Absolutely. Once you have your I-20 from International Admissions, you will probably start to hear from us about your upcoming semester, about getting access to a lot of your UB accounts, getting connected with UBIT. We start sending out information, you'll start getting emails from our office.

Patrick Lageraen:

And then just to recap, when it comes to the visa process, don't give anyone any money. You can book the appointment yourself.

Jenna Lenz:

Yeah, the only person who should have money is the direct sites like FMJfee.com or the official US site for your visa payment.

Akshay Prabhakar Koltewar:

Absolutely do it yourself. That's the most prominent advice that I can give.

Patrick Lageraen:

Great. So it seems like a common issue with this visa process is the timing of everything and just getting everything done in time to actually go to the school for that calendar year. So it seems like a common issue with this whole visa application process is the timing. And a lot of you have mentioned doing things well in advance. So if someone's, say, looking to get into UB for the fall 2024 calendar year, when should they be looking to start this process? And when would be the absolute latest that they can safely start this process and still be admitted.

Shashwat Raj Singh:

So I can start. So the most important thing is visit the website of UB, start with your application because application processes can take time. You submit your application, you have to take either GMAT or GRE or might be eligible for waiver depending on if you meet the conditions. So if your application part is over and you have an admission outcome, you have been offered a place and you accept that offer, just start working on your documents, the bank documents, and the other things and upload on the UB portal. And once that happens, keep in touch.

I was issued I-20 within a week. But that timeframe might change. I think Jenna can respond on that. And once you do that, I'm not sure Akshay can answer on this, but I think when I was applying for US visas and it was a standard rule back before Covid, you could only get an appointment up to 120 days prior to your program start date. So let's say that your program is starting on August 30th, the earliest appointment that you can get for an interview is on or after April 30th. But I think that might have changed after Covid.

Akshay Prabhakar Koltewar:

That's absolutely right. It still remains the same. So it is advised that students look out for these visa interviews that are post May 30th and they book the earliest slot possible because if you've worked upon the earliest slot possible and if you booked that, you have contingency time in your hand and you can plan things out on your own. And this plays a very pivotal role in the complete journey. And just to mention another step which is very, very important is with reference to the upload of the financial form

and the supporting financial documents. Every applicant who's applying for their designated program, they definitely can and willingly apply and upload these documents even prior to getting the admit. So the application portal allows you to upload the supporting documents and the financial form even prior to getting the admit. So this will expedite the process in a manner that you are well in advance prepared for it. You have the financial funding which is required by the International Admissions Office to authorize you to come down here from the non-admitted pathway of F-1 visa. And as soon as you get the admit, as soon as you pay the tuition deposit, your documents are already uploaded and your application will be processed straight to the international applications. In that case, you might just get the I-20 within a couple of weeks itself.

Jenna Lenz:

So as far as I understand with admissions processing time for the I-20 can depend a little bit on the time of year. Obviously people who are earlier in the cycle might get it a little bit faster. There is generally a crunch time. So for example, our fall admits, I know that during the spring semester leading up to that, they try to process a lot of those. As far as the visa itself in planning, you can always go to the travel.state.gov website. They have information about US visas. You can actually put in the US Consular Embassy where you're looking to apply and we'll tell you what the wait times are for the different visa categories.

They did actually just update the window for how far in advance you can apply for a visa. So currently it is up to 365 days in advance of your start of your program. What hasn't changed is once you have the visa, the earliest you can enter the US is up to 30 days before the start of your I-20. So generally as with many things, the earlier the better. As far as last minute, how late can you go? It's really going to depend on what the wait times are at the embassy or consulate and when can you actually arrive to UB because you want to make sure that you're not late to the start of the semester.

Patrick Lageraen:

Right. That makes sense. I remember someone in our class was late to the start of the semester.

Shashwat Raj Singh:

And so that was my question. So for example, if somebody got their visa appointment when their MB advantage is happening, like Akshay had, how does that work? Does UB allow deferring for a week? Can they come as a late joiner and join after the program has started?

Jenna Lenz:

Yeah, that's a good question. So there are late arrival potential options. There is a deadline every semester for that. Usually it's not more than about a week into the start of the term, partially because the later you get, sometimes the more concerns the visa officers may have about your ability to start on time. Obviously you don't want to start a program late. That can really impact your success moving forward. So if you're in a position where you aren't sure if you're going to get a visa appointment on time or you get that slot and it's a week before classes, I think it's important to have a real conversation with your academic department about do I need a later start? Can I get one? What does that process look like? Because you need late arrival approval and in some cases you might need a letter from our office for that, as well, especially if you have a late visa interview. And then of course, there is the logistics of booking your flight to get here on time as well.

Patrick Lageraen:

So does that deadline for late arrivals at all coincide with the add/drop date for classes?

Jenna Lenz:

No. The late arrival usually is around the same time as the drop/add date. But for people who aren't familiar, the drop/add is the last day to add classes or remove classes from your schedule for a semester. So obviously if you arrive after that date and you haven't enrolled, it's going to be very difficult for you to actually take classes. So that's why it's important to talk to your department because depending on what your date is, you may need to be working with your department to have them help you register. And that also means you have to work on getting your UB holds lifted from your account. So if you are given late arrival, there's still a lot of work that you're going to be doing even before you get to the US because you want to make sure that you can enroll on time.

Patrick Lageraen:

That makes sense. And then let's say someone does arrive after or they wouldn't even arrive if they were past the deadline, they wouldn't even come at all?

Jenna Lenz:

Yeah.

Patrick Lageraen:

So in that case they would have to reapply and then shoot to come to UB the following year.

Shashwat Raj Singh:

That was my case.

Patrick Lageraen:

The following fall?

Shashwat Raj Singh:

Yes.

Jenna Lenz:

It can depend on the situation. Depending on your situation, you may need to reapply. It may be possible to do a deferral of your admission to UB. That may impact your visa application differently, but as far as your UB admission, it might be a new admission or in many cases if you've been working with your department and letting them know what's going on, it might be a deferral.

Patrick Lageraen:

And I'm sure it might be different with different departments within UB, but for the School of Management, you can't start in the spring semester. You have to start in the next fall semester.

Shashwat Raj Singh:

So that was my case exactly. My visa was still processing after the deadline in the 2021 and I spoke to the head of the School of Management, the admissions head, and she advised me that because of my application, I had a pretty decent profile. They gave me an option to defer it to the next intake, which is the fall intake. There are no spring intakes.

Patrick Lageraen:

So you didn't have to reapply, you just deferred it?

Shashwat Raj Singh:

Yes.

Patrick Lageraen:

But then you still, on the backend, had to redo all of your visa stuff?

Shashwat Raj Singh:

In my case, no, because it was still processing, because I had no outcome on my visa application, it was still processing, so I could not restart it since it was still processing. But I think it might be a little bit different for...

Akshay Prabhakar Koltewar:

In case of F-1 visa for those who are arriving from India. So UB, by policy, allows up to only once to defer your program. Once you have deferred your program, you go through the complete visa application process yet again and you go through that process, secure your visa. Once you have been deferred, ideally your application would be moved to the subsequent date or the subsequent intake. For that intake, you have to make sure that if you have not uploaded your supporting financial documents and the financial form till that date, you have to upload it yet again and make sure that you get the new I-20 from the International Admissions Office. And then you go for the visa interview.

Make sure that you are not using the old I-20 and going for the visa interview because that will be a waste of effort because the last date has already passed and you're taking a visa on last I-20, which will not be valid because you've already passed that date and you'll not be even able to come down here for the classes.

Patrick Lageraen:

All right. So let's talk a little bit more about this visa interview. We've already mentioned the documents that are required and what you need to bring a couple of times and we've given some resources on where you can find this information. So let's talk a little bit more about what people can expect from the interview and what the different possible outcomes are from that interview.

Akshay Prabhakar Koltewar:

I could definitely reflect upon that. I've studied the profiles of visa officers a lot, specifically upon my rejection the first time out. So it's very straightforward, it's a very simple process. The visa officer is going to decide within 10 to 15 seconds whether to reject or whether to approve your visa. So yes, and it's true. Your complete fate depends upon those 10 to 15 seconds. Very rare times it stretches to 20 to

25 seconds. They're going to ask you a couple of questions which you should be able to confidently answer. And the questions are around what school are you going to? What program are you going to pursue? Who is funding your program? And what are your further plans? They make sure that they ask you what are your further plans and this is the mistake that most of the international students make. While the intention is very clear with the international students that they want to stay here, they want to look for employment, and that's the prime reason they're investing so much money to study here. Please take note, and we have repeated this ample of times, F-1 is a non-immigration category wherein you must be able to prove to them that you will be returning back to your own country no matter what. Out of time because at that point of time you're not sure about seeking H-1B sponsorship or your future. The F-1 visa is all about that stipulated program of the date, the start date and the end date. And you should be able to establish the fact that you'll be returning back home.

Patrick Lageraen:

So if you apply for an F-1 visa and you go in and you say, "After I graduate I'm looking to find a job," they're going to reject you?

Akshay Prabhakar Koltewar:

They're definitely going to reject you.

Shashwat Raj Singh:

I think that's a red flag right there. To add to what Akshay... Sorry, do you want to continue?

Akshay Prabhakar Koltewar:

Go ahead, go ahead.

Shashwat Raj Singh:

So I definitely want to add, because I have done a lot of research into student visa and I also have had a B-1, B-2 visa earlier and I have been visiting US from last 20 years. My family lives here. So there a lot of times that people create anxiety that, oh, it's a visa interview, you're going to get rejection. There are so many resources on websites, on Google, on different places where... Because I think, in my experience, people are more likely to post their failures than their success. And that's why you just have people talking about their failures. But in no way you can ever associate yourself because every individual is an

individual and their case is very different. So just because somebody else had a refusal and had a difficult interview experience does not mean that you are also going to have that.

I think that's a point to be understood as baseline, it's very important to dress up well, make an eye contact, greet the officer, because they're human beings. They process so many applications, you are just one application and it's important to connect with them. The only thing that they're trying to establish in that situation is that you are a genuine student. You have only one intent, which is to go and study there. You're not going to engage in any illegal activities, such as working off campus without permission or doing anything else. And that you have sufficient funding to support your... If you do not have enough funding, you're going to come here and not be able to pay for your education and you might have to go back. They're not going to ruin your life. So they would rather reject your visa than issue your visa if you do not have sufficient funding.

And another way that you prove that you're going to come back to your home country is by establishing that you have enough ties in your home country. A way of doing that is definitely having a family members, talking about them, your plans after your education. But like Akshay said, it should not take more than 20, 25 seconds. And those are few questions that are normally asked where the office is going to ask about who's paying for your education, what kind of education you're going for, and particularly for the MBA program and the MIS and all these programs, these are really popular programs.

So the officers do understand that you're going to be here because there are a lot of students who are coming for these programs because that's a very industry-focused programs. So if somebody who is completely, they did not have any background and they didn't do any research and they just came there and they started fidgeting and they're not able to answer the questions on what they have been asked and they're prolonging the responses, then that's a red flag. So those are a few things to remember. Of course these are just from our experiences and it could differ from person to person, but I think those things are definitely to be kept in your mind.

Jenna Lenz:

With your guys' experience, would you say that a good tip is as long as you're familiar with what you put on your visa application, what your program information is on your I-20, maybe why you were interested in that program, and what your funding is, if you can confidently speak to those and avoid one word answers, yes, no, just have a full sentence, like you said, make eye contact. It's easier to say,

"Don't be nervous," but remember that you're being honest, you really are here for a student visa to study. If you think those are the big takeaways for people?

Akshay Prabhakar Koltewar:

Absolutely. You must be able to express your passion towards the program. Why are you taking such a big step about leaving your own country and going miles away from home to pursue something which is so different? And you should be able to express your passion. That's pretty much all. You should be very clear in your head why you're taking the step, why you're migrating, and how are you going to manage everything. That's pretty much all.

Shashwat Raj Singh:

And I also want to add that it's... And there are a lot of US consular officers who have appeared on different interviews and they have done town hall and they have answered this straight up that it's not documents-based. They have the documents and they really ask for any documents other than your passport and your I-20 and service fee receipt because those are the important documents that you have to carry. But it's more conversational, more interview-based. And I think, in my experience, and I have traveled to about 15 countries, I think US Visa interview process is one of the easiest interview processes. If you know what you are going for. If you have genuine intentions, there's no better experience that you can get in terms of your visa interview.

Jenna Lenz:

And I think genuine's probably the right word, right? You want to make sure that you are presentable and friendly but you don't have to worry about being someone that you're not. You are here to be a student.

Shashwat Raj Singh:

Yes, absolutely.

Patrick Lageraen:

Those are really great tips and I think a good takeaway is to simply be prepared. So that when you're sitting there and they ask you a question, you don't have to do any thinking. You already know the answer. So I have a couple of quick questions about that interview process. These visa officers, are they Americans working in other countries?

Jenna Lenz:

Yes.

Patrick Lageraen:

Okay, so they're American citizens who travel there to do these interviews?

Shashwat Raj Singh:

Yeah, they are diplomats basically. They probably have to take some exams and they work as a foreign resource. They are all American citizens.

Jenna Lenz:

Yeah, they're employees with the Department of State.

Shashwat Raj Singh:

Yeah.

Patrick Lageraen:

Okay, I understood. So in your experience, would you say that they treat people pretty fairly?

Shashwat Raj Singh:

100%.

Patrick Lageraen:

Okay.

Shashwat Raj Singh:

100%. And that's one of the reasons that I'm saying it's one of the easiest visa interview process if you are prepared, if you are a genuine student or a genuine applicant. If you're just going to go there and just beat around the bush, I mean, you are applying for a program and you do not even know what courses you are going to take, what your future plans are, then that's a red flag.

That's a question that you have to ask yourself, "Why am I doing what I am doing?" So I think they are a 100% fair and I'm glad that they are so accessible, as Jenna mentioned. You can reach out to them, you

can email them, you can connect with them on their Facebook. For most countries, I know for India, but I also know that for most other countries they do all of these sessions, so just keep in touch with what they are doing.

Patrick Lageraen:

Okay. These are really great tips, so thank you guys. I'm sure the visa interview process is probably the most nerve wrecking part of this whole process but based on what you're saying, it doesn't really have to be. So what happens if the visa is refused or rejected? What happens next?

Akshay Prabhakar Koltewar:

I could definitely reflect upon that. Duh. I have gone through a visa rejection earlier and as much as I agree with Shashwat that it's a very simple, straightforward process, and I completely want to reinstate the fact that they're completely fair to all the students. My only advice to those whose visa is being rejected, even in the future and who's here in the South, do not give up, do not let someone decide your fate within 10 to 15 seconds. Because you've worked hard for that particular admittance, for coming down here for the last two years.

You go ahead with preparation for your GMAT, GRE or whichever standardized test that you're giving for about a year's time and then after that you apply and you go through the admission process. After two years of time, if someone is going to actually reject your visa, do not give up at that point. Pick up yourself, go head and book another interview slot. As much as people would make it a big deal that your visa is rejected, it is not such a big deal. Please keep it very straightforward. Please keep it very clean. Just go ahead with another visa interview. Go ahead with your attempt. Be well-prepared with all the visa officer questions.

Study visa officers very well because there are particular visa officers in particular consulates which ask particular tricky questions. So study the questions very, very well. There are Facebook groups, there are telegram groups which you could join to get an idea about what kind of questions do they ask and how you can prepare for them in the way that your program is stipulated to.

But do not give up and do not try to find out reasons. There is no particular reason for your visa rejection. It's sheer luck and even you could imagine that you cannot decide someone's fate within 10 to 15 seconds. It's just a judgment by the visa officer and there is nothing wrong with it. They are absolutely fair and they will definitely not do anything wrong. At that point of time, in that particular interview, they felt that you could not establish the fact that either you're going to return back to your

own country or you have enough financial documents and that is a prime reason you were rejected. There is no other reason to it.

Jenna Lenz:

Now when you were rejected, did they give you a paper or any explanation as to why you were rejected?

Akshay Prabhakar Koltewar:

Yes. So they gave me a reason of 214. They handed me a receipt of 214, which says that I have not established enough evidence of returning back to my own country and that's the only reason that they objected.

Shashwat Raj Singh:

[inaudible 00:52:46]. Yeah, so like Akshay mentioned and what better and bigger example than Akshay himself that his visa got rejected and he happened to call me and he was really, really sad and I said that, do not give up, hold your chin up and keep trying. And 20 days later he applies for a visa and he gets the approval and he made it to the program and he's so successful here as an international student, this serves as an example that if people come and tell you that if your visa was rejected the first time, it's going to get rejected the second time, it's not. It will never be rejected. They're human beings and there are no better people to process your visa than those officers.

So even if an officer has incorrectly assessed your profile, it's all on their notes when they're [inaudible 00:53:31] taking your interview. That note is actually accessible to the next officer and I think the next officer is going to ask you questions based on that note. And if you know where he went wrong, please do not come with the same mistakes. Review, reflect, know where he could have possibly gone. Talk to people who have had rejections in the past or approval and what worked for them and just take it easy and apply. They're having people whose visas was rejected two times in one season and they got it the third time. So just stay positive.

Jenna Lenz:

Yeah, I think that be prepared piece of advice comes here too, right? Because just because you're rejected, it's important to know why you were rejected because when you do apply you need to be able to say what changed since your last interview? What information are you bringing that's different or you

are more prepared on how to answer that question the second time around. It is generally true that the more times you are rejected the harder it becomes each time. But a single visa rejection should not necessarily be the end of the road for you by any means.

It's really about, like you said, reflection, looking at the reason that you were given on that paper, so that way you can prepare your next application and then speak to what is more complete or what you have changed since the last time you applied.

Patrick Lageraen:

Okay, really great advice. So if they're rejected, everything on the UB side is basically just on hold until that visa gets approved.

Jenna Lenz:

Yeah, so UB will give the I-20, but the visa stamp is what you need to actually enter the US. So until you have that visa, you are not able to come for your studies. If you are rejected or your visa is put in administrative processing, it's really important that you reach out to your department and let them know what's going on. If there is something that we could, potentially someone at UB, help either with guidance or planning, depending on if it's really close to the semester, what maybe your next steps might be. For timing purposes, talk to your department, talk to ISS, but unfortunately the Department of State that visa really is a make or break point for being able to enter the US.

Patrick Lageraen:

Okay, great. And then once the visa is approved, so what are the next steps after that?

Jenna Lenz:

Yeah, so once the visa is approved, hopefully you've already paid your SEVIS Fee, but if not, make sure you do that and you'll want to make sure that you collect your documents. As far as getting ready for coming to UB, you'll be getting emails from your department, you'll be getting emails from ISS. If you have not yet at this point started your international student check-in, you can definitely do that. You can start before you get the visa, absolutely. You start uploading your passport, your I-20. But once you have that visa, you are going to want to go to our system, it's called UB Global.

You can find it on our website. You'll definitely be getting emails about it from us and upload a copy of that visa stamp for us. That lets ISS and your department know that you really do intend to come to UB.

The bonus also in the case of moving forward in the process is once you upload your visa stamp with us, we will lift the IS hold on your account. So if you've resolved any other holds, once that hold is removed, then you can really start working with your department for class enrollment for the semester. So once you have the visa stamp, make sure you are uploading it on our ISS UB global website and if denied, again, obviously contact your office and let us know.

Patrick Lageraen:

Okay, great. So other than the traditional route of applying for a visa, are there any other ways that international students can get one?

Jenna Lenz:

Yeah, so it is possible to do a change of status with the USCIS. If you are already in the United States, this is something through a form called I-539. In that situation you would likely come talk to ISS. If you are a current UB student in a different visa category or if you're incoming but you're in a different visa category in the United States, you come and talk to us about general eligibility. If you are eligible for the I-20, our office would likely issue it to you, but then at that point we would recommend that you work with an attorney. That's not a process that we're necessarily trained on, but it's something that you've experienced.

Shashwat Raj Singh:

So I would like to share my experience and to start with, I-539 is a time-consuming, more expensive and it's a process that can potentially result in failure, but you only take that step if that's really, really needed and that's the criteria I'm going to talk about that. So I got admission in the year 2021, January, and I was originally a member of the UB MBA class of 2023 and I was supposed to start in August of 2022, sorry, August of 2021. And due to travel restrictions and increasing COVID cases, I wasn't able to travel out of the US because I was visiting my family. So the only option that I could apply for my F1 visa was through the USCIS I-539 change of status. So basically how the process works is, you have to be in the US legally on a non-immigrant visa and you have to sufficiently establish the reason why you are opting for this route and why you could not just travel out of the US and apply for a consular processing. So I had a case because of travel restrictions and limited interview appointments in India and other countries. So I opted for this one. So how this works is, on your existing non-immigrant visa, for example, I was on a visitor visa, which was B-2, you first have to apply for an extension of your status

and you do that by applying with form I-539. Once you submit that application, you also apply for a change of status. So you're requesting the United States Citizenship and Immigration Services to change your status from B-2 to F1 for reasons in your application. Wherein in my case I stated that I wasn't able to travel because of travel restrictions and things like that. Originally, before COVID, the processing time would be somewhere like three to six months, but because of COVID, there were backlog of applications and visa officers who were really, really overwhelmed, burdened with so many applications that the processing times increased all over the US and there are seven visa offices in the US that can potentially pick your application.

One is in Vermont, the other one is in California, then Nebraska, then Potomac and few other places. One is in Texas too, but you do not have a preference. That's just system generated. You can stay, like I was living, in Pennsylvania state and I applied and my location was Vermont. So the processing times for that was 12 to 20 months. So it would take 12 months minimum because for obvious reasons. So I applied and, like Jenna said, I would strongly encourage people to connect with an immigration attorney because a licensed immigration attorney would have the knowledge of the technicalities and they can work on your applications better and that's what increases your visa fee because the application cost is a lot and also you're going to pay for your immigration attorney. And on top of that, there are other challenges too.

So in my case, I applied for the change of status and six months had passed. I had no update. I reached out to the USCIS and they said that you are still within your processing time so we [inaudible 01:01:27] give you more information. You do have the option to expedite. I did try that. I reached out to the senator of Pennsylvania with the US federal legislature and another one was the congressman. They helped me, they reached out to the USCIS but even with their involvement it was of no use because it wouldn't have been fair for the officers to pick my application while they already have applications from previous years because it'll be unfair to those candidates and that makes sense.

So as a result, I went past the deadline, the last day that I couldn't join as a late comer, and as a result I had to defer from fall 2021 intake to fall 2022 intake and I became a member of the class of 2024. So during the extension process, once you apply, there's a website, I'm forgetting the exact website, the USCIS website, basically, it gives you all the information. You can either apply online or you can do it physically, but if you have your immigration attorney, a licensed immigration attorney, they can handle everything on your behalf. In terms of documents, you need all the documents.

And in addition to those documents that Akshay was talking about, like the valid passport and financial documents, you also need a I-94 and your current visa status and you also have to write a letter of intent stating that this was the reason that you were not able to go back to the country and you plan on studying.

I wrote that this was my plan and yeah, after I'm finishing my studies, I'm going to go back to my home country and work there. This will help me get more skills. So my application was processed in the 16th month. I applied in January, actually February 2021 and I got my visa in July 2022, just a month before and even July for the fall 2022 intake I was really pessimistic because there was no hope and I reached out to many people and because it's an internal processing, nobody could influence that. So to put in summary, you do have that option, but if you can travel out of the US and get your visa through F1 consular processing, you should go for that one. Only in very extreme cases you are able to get your F1 visa through change of status.

Patrick Lageraen:

So the reason yours took so long is because you had to do the change of status and you weren't able to travel out of the country to start from scratch and file for the F1 visa.

Shashwat Raj Singh:

Yes. That's a great point that you brought up and it skipped my mind. So there's another disadvantage to this. So in Akshay's case, he has a visa stamp on his passport so he can easily travel out of the US, but in my case, I do not have a visa stamp on my passport. I just have a document that states that I'm a legal student here and I'm pursuing my MBA program at UB, but as soon as I move out of the US for any reason whatsoever, I'll have to go through the same process that Akshay had to go through and get a visa stamped on my passport before I can return. So my application would be banned. And so not only is it an expensive, time-consuming and complicated process, but it also put restrictions in your ability to travel out of the US.

Patrick Lageraen:

Okay, so we've touched on documents a lot throughout this podcast. I just think it'd be good to go over them one more time. What sort of documents are students required to carry once they're actually traveling into the US and going through customs at an airport?

Jenna Lenz:

Yeah, that's a good question. There's a couple of documents that are required and then there are a couple additional documents that we recommend students carry. So first and foremost, you always have to have a valid unexpired passport, in that passport likely is going to be your unexpired F1 visa stamp. The only exception would be if you are a Canadian citizen, you don't need that. But for the vast majority of our students, the F1 visa stamp is a requirement. In addition to that, you'll have your I-20 with you, make sure that it's printed, you have it in hand. Border agent, it does not want to look at your phone, make sure you've signed your I-20 on the bottom of page one.

If you're an incoming student, it will not have a signature on page two, but if you are a current enrolled student traveling, you always need to make sure that you have a travel signature from your DSO on page two that's valid for 12 calendar months.

So, and once you're here, you're settled. If you think you're going to be traveling, I'd recommend go ahead and requesting that signature with us at our office and so that way you just have it for any travels during the holidays. In addition to those required documents, we also recommend carrying a copy of your SEVIS Fee receipt, especially if you're a newly entering student. We also recommend carrying copies of your financial documentation and proof of enrollment if you are enrolled. Generally, the CBP does not ask to see those things, but if there are questions, it's always better to have those documents and be prepared just to pass them over to make things smoother for you.

And speaking of CBP, a question that we get a lot from students is they're worried about the visa stamp, rather the entry stamp in their passport. When you enter, you are admitted to the US in your status and a document called an I-94, which has been mentioned, is created for you.

That is the proof that you were legally admitted to the US in your current status. A lot of times in the past they would also stamp, physically, in your passport and write something in there. They are phasing that out. Most places don't have it. So sometimes students call us, they're worried they didn't get that stamp, but it's nothing that you need to worry about. The most important thing is once you're here, you see that you have that I-94. So right after you enter, I would recommend going to CBP's website and you can just Google I-94, it comes right up and get a copy of that.

It's electronic document, but you're going to want to save that as a PDF for yourself. You'll need it for ISS check-in. It's what we need to complete your requirements and then for you to prove that you were admitted in the correct status. Every once in a while, customs and border protection make some mistakes. So take a look at your I-94. If there's issues you'll need to reach out to them to get that

corrected so that way everything is in alignment with your record itself. But again, we need that for your last step of officially reporting that you entered the US as an F1 student at UB.

Patrick Lageraen:

Okay, so the I-94 is the final proof that you've gone through the process and everything has been done legally and you're all set.

Shashwat Raj Singh:

I would also add to that, as an international student and that comes from my own experience and I think Akshay can also share his experience, you should always have copies of your passport, your Visa, your I-20 and your I-94 because these are the four documents that you're going to need everywhere here for any, even for bank or opening a bank account, applying for social security number or even getting a state ID or a driver's license here. And I would recommend personally that you should definitely do get your state ID because that's one of the questions that I get in my student ambassador hours from prospective students, having a state ID would do away the need of always carrying your passport, especially if you want to go do travel anywhere within the US or want to go to a restaurant where alcohol is being served or anything like that. So always have these copies and do apply for a state ID or driver's license.

Akshay Prabhakar Koltewar:

It is also highly recommended that every student keeps the copies of their I-20, of all the revisions of the I-20 because I-20 goes through a lot of revisions every time you have a travel endorsement, every time you get CPT. There are a lot of revisions to I-20. So it is super, super important that the candidate keeps all the copies of their I-20, all the revisions of the versions of I-20 so that when they're applying for the H-1B sponsorship or when they're applying for green card, they will have these records stored with them, preferably have a backup of it also stored on some cloud so that it is accessible by everyone and anyone, especially with your credentials and all, so that you could use it in case someone else wants to access it to facilitate any of your journeys.

Jenna Lenz:

Yeah, I mean that's a good point. It looks like just a piece of paper, but it is a printout from a government database with your specific information. So it is part of your immigration records and so every time you

get a new I-20, you are going to want to make sure that you keep copies. It's nice now because we can digitally sign and email it. So you will already have the digital copy. So in past it was always printed in paper and so having students scan it was our old recommendation, but these days you'll get the email whether you save those emails for yourself in a folder or you create a secure box folder or something where you can access those because you will probably need them for some point in the future.

And the same is true with the I-94, every time you enter the US you'll be getting an I-94 unless you did a short trip across the land border. So for example, if you go to Toronto for a weekend, you may not get a new one, but in most cases, every time you come in you get a new I-94. And those are not saved forever on CBP's website. So each time you reenter, my recommendation would be to go to the website, save a copy of that I-94, put it with your records so that you have all of them handy.

Patrick Lageraen:

Okay, a really great point. Thank you. So we get a lot of questions about campus jobs and assistantships while students are going to UB. So as international students, how many hours per week can they work?,

Jenna Lenz:

Yeah, so by regulation international students are limited to 20 hours per week during required semesters. So during a fall and a spring semester, you are limited to 20 hours of work a week. Additionally, if summer term is your first or final term, that 20 hour limit also applies during the breaks. So during winter break or summer, if it's not your final term, the 20-hour limit is not applicable. Your on-campus employer may still have their own working limits, but basically during the academic year, you're limited to 20 hours of work per week.

Patrick Lageraen:

Okay. Do you guys have any tips about scams? I know personally I get tons of emails about on campus work from home jobs.

Akshay Prabhakar Koltewar:

So personally do not go to any mail which is not from the Buffalo.edu domain because every time you receive tons of emails, as soon as your Buffalo.edu email is created, you would be receiving a ton of emails from spam email IDs.

Shashwat Raj Singh:

You would be receiving a ton of emails from spam email IDs. Check for the domain. That's the first thing to check, for spam. Secondly, go through the Handshake and Bizlink platform for any on-campus employment opportunities. They are the official platforms wherein all the openings are actually released. This comes more than just often. Every time a student is coming down here in pursuit of an on-campus opportunity, I think one of the platforms, which is Handshake, is the official platform. Another platform where they can apply is the CDS. That is the Campus Dining, where a lot of international students apply for on-campus part-time jobs, where they can work for up to 20 hours per week.

Jenna Lenz:

Yeah. When you get emails, always be mindful. Is this something that you started? Did you apply somewhere? If not, look at it. Other things to look at, is the sender email different from the email in the signature? Are there a million people on this email, especially if they all are listed alphabetically? Sometimes what we'll see from students who forward scam emails to us is someone will have gone to the UB directory, for example, and they'll just copy and paste emails from Section A, everyone with the last name of A-A through A-L, and everyone's on that email. That's another red flag to look out for. Especially for international students, something to keep in mind ... and I think we're going to touch on this ... is the type of work that you do, there are limitations to. If it's not a specific on-campus employer, which you can find through Handshake and Bizlink ... and there are resources through the Career Resource Center to connect you with that ... if it's an off-campus job, you probably need specific work authorization for it. Even if it's someone claiming to be a UB professor but it's for their personal business, you can't even do that job even if it's real. If you're ever not sure, talk to your department. Come talk to ISS. We have a page about scams, because they do get your emails and they'll reach out to you.

Patrick Lageraen:

Okay. Yeah, great points. Key takeaways there are make sure you're looking for jobs through official channels like Handshake, Bizlink and the Campus Dining website. If a job is too good to be true, it's probably too good to be true. Investigate. Be careful.

Shashwat Raj Singh:

I would also say that in my experience, I work on campus. For most departments, they do not only advertise the jobs on Handshake or Bizlink or other places like Exchange that I mentioned, but also they would email you. We get so many emails for on-campus jobs, and there are so many on-campus jobs. There will always be an opportunity for international students to work on campus while they're at UB.

Patrick Lageraen:

Are international students required to have jobs to maintain status?

Jenna Lenz:

No, it's not a status requirement. Obviously there are options if it's something that you're interested in, but for F-1 status, of all the requirements out there, work is not one of them. If it's not something that you're interested in doing, especially if you know don't necessarily need the additional cash or fund money and you want to focus on your education, you can absolutely do that.

Patrick Lageraen:

Then for those who want to get a job, are they required to have a Social Security number?

Jenna Lenz:

You don't need a Social Security number right away. Actually, as an F-1 student, you're not even eligible to request a Social Security number until you have that job first, so the job offer is the first step. Once you have that, you would work with ISS to get a letter confirming your F-1 status, and then you would go and apply for that with the Social Security Administration. The job offer is actually the first step. Now, if it's a paid job, you probably do need an SSN to be part of payroll, but the process starts with the job offer itself.

Shashwat Raj Singh:

Just to quickly add to what she said, so you need a Social Security number for a job here. You would need that, and you can get that once you have the job offer. Let's say that you do not have a job offer and you have some Social Security requirement, for let's say that you want to apply for a driver's license or a state ID. You can get a Social Security ineligibility letter from ISS that you can carry, and you can do your work, all the work. You need to produce that letter to the SSN office and they're going to issue you another letter, and you can use that later for any place that requires a Social Security number, just to

state that you do not legally have a Social Security number because of your international student visa status.

Jenna Lenz:

Yeah, that's actually a really good point. There are certain things that might ask for a Social Security number like opening a bank account, and the letter of ineligibility from the SSA would actually take the place of that. Applying for a job that you don't intend to work for specifically to get a Social Security number is something that I would avoid. It doesn't look good on you, it makes it harder to find a job for you in the future, but it also impacts other future students who are applying for jobs. If you need an SSN for work, that's absolutely part of the process. In a lot of cases where you don't need an SSN, that letter of ineligibility takes the place.

Patrick Lageraen:

Okay. To recap, F-1 visa students need a job offer, then they can get a Social Security number, and then they can get paid?

Jenna Lenz:

That's pretty much it, yeah.

Patrick Lageraen:

If they have a Social Security ineligibility letter, then they can get paid right away?

Jenna Lenz:

The ineligibility letter is not really related to jobs, because if you have a job, then you can get the Social Security number. If you don't have a job so that you're not eligible for that number itself, but let's say the DMV is asking for it, you can go to the Social Security office to get that ineligibility letter, and it basically takes the place of the SSN in whatever other process you're doing. If you're going for a driver's license, instead of having the SSN number, you would have the SSN letter of ineligibility.

Patrick Lageraen:

If it's a paid position, you do need a Social Security number?

Jenna Lenz:

Correct.

Patrick Lageraaen:

Okay. Then what's the time frame, as far as job offer to actually getting paid? Because I know a lot of students are concerned with money.

Jenna Lenz:

Yeah, absolutely. From start to finish, time you get the job offer, you'll get the letter from our office, you'll apply with the SSN. They can take two to four weeks, so probably start to finish, you're looking at a month and a half. Two months is probably a realistic expectation.

Patrick Lageraaen:

Okay. All right. Let's talk about off-campus work. Can international students work off campus during the semester? Then what about on summer or winter breaks?

Jenna Lenz:

Yeah, so off-campus employment might be possible, but it always requires prior authorization. If you are an F-1 student, you can work on campus. You don't need special work permission from ISS. It's just part of your status benefits. If you are looking to do an internship, for example, you would need work authorization. Basically that is either going to be CPT, which stands for Curricular Practical Training, or OPT, which stands for Optional Practical Training. There is another type of work authorization called economic hardship, but it's pretty rare. That one is for extreme circumstances, if something is outside of your control like economic collapse in your home country, that kind of thing.

The vast majority of our students, if you are doing off-campus work, especially if it's during the degree program, you're looking at Curricular Practical Training, which is something that you would apply first with your department to get the department process, and then with ISS to get your work authorization and I-20. This sort of off-campus work authorization requirement is part of regulations. This is not a UB policy, this is an F-1 policy, because your primary reason for being in the U.S. and F-1 status is to study. There are ways to get off-campus work experience, but you just need to have the permission to do that before you can actually start any of the work.

Additionally, if you're ever not sure, if you have an opportunity, if it needs off-campus authorization or not, you can always come talk to ISS. Sometimes the definition of what is or is not on campus can be a

little bit murky, right? If it is on campus, if you're serving students and it's paid through a UB source, like a student assistant position, a graduate assistant position, those are very clearly on-campus positions, right? Working with Campus Dining and Shops, it's an on-campus job, but perhaps if it's for a UB entity but you're working remotely. Does that count or not? Or if you're working for a company that's tied to UB but they're not UB, bring those to ISS. We can help you figure out if you need work authorization or not.

Shashwat Raj Singh:

I just have a quick question to ask. For example, if an international student doesn't have an internship during the break, but they get an offer to work off campus, let's say work at a restaurant or a coffee shop, are they eligible to work there during the break, and how does that work?

Jenna Lenz:

Yeah, that's a really good question, and the answer is probably no. With the CPT and OPT work authorization types, the work always has to be directly related to your field of study. CPT, which I'll get into in a second, has to be tied to your curriculum too. Doing work that's not tied to your degree, not related to your degree, really would only be limited to that economic hardship that I talked about. For 99% of the students that are here, you're not going to be working off campus at a restaurant. It's going to be something related to your degree.

Shashwat Raj Singh:

We can do that on campus, like working in a restaurant or Campus Dining? We can definitely work there always, as long as it's an on-campus?

Jenna Lenz:

Exactly, as long as it's on campus. On-campus work is a little bit different. It doesn't have to be tied to your degree. Whether it's Campus Dining at Shops, the UB Commons, UB Bookstore, that can happen no matter what. It's part of being a UB student. It's that off-campus work where that tied-to-your-degree-program requirement comes into play.

Patrick Lageraen:

It sounds like for off-campus work, the key here is that it has to be tied to your degree, which is what CPT is. Can you explain a little bit more what CPT work authorization is?

Jenna Lenz:

Yeah. CPT, Curricular Practical Training, is a type of work authorization that is meant to allow students to be able to get experience outside of the campus in something that will help them complete their degree requirements. A lot of programs, especially graduate programs, may have internship or co-op or practicum components, and generally that requires working with a U.S. company or U.S. partnership organization, something. In order to be able to fulfill that requirement, you would be working with your department, probably enrolling in a specific internship type course, and then working with us to get that authorization.

In order to be eligible for CPT, you have to first have been enrolled for one academic year, so one fall and one spring semester. There are some exceptions, but for the vast majority of our students, you'll be here for a year. If you're a fall-entering student, likely the earliest you could apply for CPT would be summer of the following year, because you'll have completed one fall and one spring semester.

You talk to your department. That's always the first step, to see does the department support CPT. Most do, because you'll need to have that CPT course, and you'll be working with your department to fill out some forms to let us know how the work is related to your field of study.

Because it has to be tied to your curriculum, part of what ISS needs to see before we can approve the authorization is what are your goals and objectives. How is this tied to your curriculum? Are there courses that this is related to? Are you doing a thesis and this is part of a project that you're a part of? Outlining that information, and then we will input the information into SEVIS and get you a new I-20 that has that work authorization on there.

CPT is a process, so if it's something that you know that you're going to be doing, you know that you're looking for internships in the summer, I would recommend seeking out information from our website, talking to your department as soon as possible. Again, being prepared, being ahead of the plan, knowing what your deadlines are, can be really important.

Patrick Lageraen:

I'm not sure about other programs, but I know the MBA program definitely has an internship requirement, especially for those students with less work experience. If they have CPT work approval for that summer internship, does that company also have to sponsor them in order to do that internship, or is that just for post-graduation work?

Jenna Lenz:

Yeah, so visa sponsorship would be entirely separate. On CPT, you're using your F-1 work authorization to do the work, so they don't need to do any of visa sponsorship for you. Likely they will ask for your CPT I-20. That's proof of your authorization. They'll ask for a copy of your I-94. Again, they need to make sure that you were here admitted, in addition to the other usual onboarding forms that you might get.

I do also want to mention that CPT is semester-specific. If you have an internship that maybe goes from summer in through fall, you would be applying for both a summer CPT with ISS and a fall CPT. Each time you're doing CPT, it has to be for a course. Sometimes students ask, "How many CPTs can I do?" Part of that answer is talking to your department to see how many times can you take an internship course. Sometimes there's a maximum number of times that you can do that, but usually most students can do the CPT that they want and need to do.

Patrick Lageraen:

Okay, so if you have CPT for a summer internship, you can't just stay at that company through the fall semester?

Jenna Lenz:

Correct. You can only work as long as you've been authorized, and those dates are going to be on your I-20. If you have a summer CPT, let's say it went through mid-August and they offered to extend you through the fall. You would want to talk to your department right away, get enrolled for that fall CPT course and then submit the new application with us, to get the new I-20 with the additional fall dates on there.

It's also employer-specific. Again, part of your CPT is the goals and objectives, and how you're meeting the requirements and getting the experience you need for your graduation requirements. Part of what happens is we need the offer letter from your CPT employer, and we put that employer and the site information into SEVIS. When you're applying for CPT and you have that internship offer, it's important to be mindful that you can't just swap if you get a better one. Again, planning comes into a lot of important parts here.

Patrick Lageraen:

Sure.

Shashwat Raj Singh:

I have two quick questions. For CPT approval, who approves it, and how long does it take? What is the processing time for that?

Jenna Lenz:

Yeah, so CPT approval goes through ISS. Of course, the first step is your department, making sure that they feel that it is academic in nature and tied to the curriculum. Your department knows the curriculum better than ISS does, so we always defer to them on that. Once you have department approval, the application goes to ISS through UB Global, the same system as your ISS check-in.

Our processing time right now is 12 to 15 business days. If we can get it done sooner, we absolutely will. We know that CPT is time-sensitive. We know that it can be really challenging to find internships, and we know how excited people are to start. If we can get it done faster, we will. At this point we get so many, which is good because people are getting internships, but we can't expedite.

Shashwat Raj Singh:

Okay. Another question is, for example, if an international student gets an opportunity to work in more like a freelance or a volunteering role ... it's not a paid job ... during their summer break or during their semesters. Do they need CPT for that, or can they work as a freelancer if there's no paid component to that?

Jenna Lenz:

Yeah, that's a really good question. For a volunteer, if it's at all related to your field of study, you do want CPT for it, because it could be considered work even if you're not being paid for it. If you're looking at other future benefits, like applying for OPT after you graduate or a future visa sponsorship, change of status, a lot of times they look at your employment history, what's on your resume, what's on your LinkedIn.

If they ever see anything that could be construed as work, even if you didn't get paid for it ... you got another benefit, maybe you got experience or stock or something like that ... if you received a benefit, it could be considered employment. You never want to have work without work authorization. If it's at all related to your field of study, you're going to want CPT for it.

Generally the only kind of off-campus volunteering that you can do without special authorization is really general humanitarian work, so doing a soup kitchen, an animal shelter. A really popular

fundraising event in Buffalo is Ride for Roswell. It's a cancer charity fundraising event. Things that really are just community-based, you don't need work authorization for, but unpaid internships, freelancing experiences, you do need it for.

Patrick Lageraen:

Thank you. Great. The last topic I'd like to touch on while I have you all here in the studio is the STEM program. We mentioned it a couple times. I just think we should go through and clarify what it is and how it's different to the typical MBA program.

Shashwat Raj Singh:

All of the programs that are offered by School of Management, all full-time degree programs ... the business analytics, the MSBA, the management information systems and the MBA program ... all three of them are STEM-designated. What that does is there are two benefits that I see in my experience. I've interviewed for my internship at quite a few companies, and employers, they favor and they have a more positive outlook towards a candidate who has a STEM degree, simply because it's more rigorous and you're learning more on the tech side and different parts of that, of course.

That, and also your work status. As an international student, after your graduate degree program, you are allowed to work in the U.S. for 12 months on your OPT, which is your Optional Practical Training. Once that period comes to a close with your STEM designation of your degree program, you are eligible to apply for another 24 months of extension. That would allow you to easily work in the U.S. for 36 months total. That also is taken favorably by the employers, because if an employer sees that you have the ability to work in the U.S. for a longer period of time, that can work in your favor when you start applying for jobs. Those are two important benefits.

Patrick Lageraen:

Yeah. Those are huge benefits.

Jenna Lenz:

Just to mention, it's probably early for some people to start thinking about it, but never too early to start looking into it. When it comes to applying for OPT, and then later on, the STEM extension for your OPT, those are applications where you would work with ISS to get a new I-20, but then the application itself goes to the USCIS, so the same government agency that processes change-of-status applications.

They're also the ones processing these work benefits for after graduation work. There is longer processing times, let's say.

Patrick Lageraen:

Yeah, that makes sense. It sounds like STEM has a lot of benefits, but is there anything different about it to the normal degree program? For example, the normal degree program is 60 credits. Do you have to take more credits to get a STEM version?

Shashwat Raj Singh:

That's a great question. That's another reason why I chose UB. Studying at UB, you just need 60 credits to graduate. If for a reason, like you have a concentration requirement ... for example, I'm concentrating in data analytics marketing information systems ... I am going to go past 60 credits, so I'm going to be somewhere around 66 credits. The good thing about UB is that anything over 60 credits, you don't have to pay any additional tuition fee. That is covered in your overall tuition fees, as of today. The policy, that is as of today.

For a STEM requirement, you need to have 21 credits worth of STEM-approved courses within your concentrations. A list of that would be provided to you or any student by your academic advisor, and you can all just connect to your academic department to understand more about it.

Patrick Lageraen:

Okay, great.

Akshay Prabhakar Koltewar:

This list of courses is also available as part of the curriculum under the designated program. There is MBA, there is MFIN, there is MIS, MSBA. If you go and land on the Admissions page, you'll find the Curriculum page on the left tab. Students can just open the curriculum. They can have a look at the subjects and they can delve deep into what these subjects are, deep-dive into what kind of aspects that they will be touching upon.

Patrick Lageraen:

Great. I think that's all we have time for today.

Jenna Lenz:

Yeah. I just want to add that if anyone has any questions about the F-1 regulation side of the house, they can always come check our website. Again, buffalo.edu/iss. We have some information sessions that are recorded. We do a couple every semester, but if you're interested in CPT. We have one that'll come up on travel, OPT. You can always either join us on them, or we'll put them out in our social media and our bulletins, so as you come, you'll get our emails, don't worry, or you can always find them on the websites too.

Shashwat Raj Singh:

I can also say I am a Dean's Student Ambassador for the MBA program, so my role as ambassador is to connect with all the prospective students and answer their questions that they may have about the application, visas, or anything. Much like Akshay, we both are the student ambassadors. I would strongly encourage anybody who's listening to this, if you want to connect with a fellow student who's already studying, who's been through that process, you can connect with us on the website. All of our information is available on the UB website, and we'll be very happy to answer any of your questions that you might have.

Patrick Lageraen:

That's Shashwat or Akshay?

Shashwat Raj Singh:

Yeah, Shashwat or Akshay, and there are other ambassadors too. There is a list of ambassadors, and you have the ability to choose any ambassador that you want to connect with.

Akshay Prabhakar Koltewar:

Lastly, if you would like to get in touch with the admissions office with reference to your application instructions, with reference to any aspect or any requirement in your application which you want to delve deep upon or you need more information, just write an email to som-apps@buffalo.edu. I'll repeat that. It is S-O-M, hyphen, A-P-P-S, @buffalo.edu.

Patrick Lageraen:

Okay, great. Jenna, thank you so much for being here.

Jenna Lenz:

Yeah, thank you guys for having me.

Akshay Prabhakar Koltewar:

Thank you, Patrick, for hosting this.

Patrick Lageraen:

Thank you for listening. Again, my name is Patrick Lageraen, one of the hosts of the Manage-A-Bull podcast. Be on the lookout for Part 2 where we talk to Jenna from the ISS again, as well as an alumni who's currently working on an H-1B visa post-graduation.