



October 16, 2024

Ur M. Jaddou
Director
U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services

VIA EMAIL: Ur.M.Jaddou@uscis.dhs.gov

Dear Director Jaddou,

I write on behalf of NAFSA: Association of International Educators to follow up on the [September 13, 2024 comment](#) we submitted concerning the August 27, 2024 [USCIS Policy Alert and revisions to the USCIS Policy Manual](#). NAFSA is the world’s largest professional association dedicated to international education and exchange, with over 10,000 members at approximately 3,500 colleges and universities throughout the United States and around the world. Our members include professionals who advise international students and manage international student programs and professionals who manage education abroad programs and advise students who study outside of the United States during their educational programs.

As you know, it is increasingly common for international students pursuing a U. S.-based program to study abroad during that program by spending a term or an academic year studying in a third country. International students engage in study abroad programs approved and encouraged by universities and they are considered bona fide students by the universities during that period and earn credits toward their degrees.

USCIS’ August 27, 2024, policy guidance on study abroad for international students has led to great concern and even alarm among those who advise these students and manage education abroad programs and led many to question whether certain education abroad programs for international students remain viable.

Briefly, the Policy Manual was revised to state:

“A student enrolled in an ICE SEVP-certified school during a study abroad program may remain active in SEVIS if the study abroad program lasts less than 5 months. If the program lasts longer than 5 months, then the student will need a new Form I-20 to be readmitted in student status.”

This is changed from the prior (December 20, 2023) version of this section which made no reference to a 5-month period, and which was consistent with almost two decades of SEVP policy. The prior version stated, correctly we believe:

“For an F-1 student who has been continuously enrolled in an ICE SEVP-certified school and who undertakes study in a program abroad, DHS considers the student to have taken a temporary absence and may be admitted into the United States with a current Form I-20.”

As we mentioned in our comment letter, it seems that USCIS may be "improperly applying the standard ‘5 - month’ temporary absence rule of 8 CFR 214.2(f)(4) to study abroad participants," and that the language could be read to require DSOs to terminate the SEVIS status of F-1 participants in study abroad programs lasting more than five months.

Many hope that USCIS may have just been using inartful language. For example, USCIS's saying that a student would need a "new Form I-20" could be something as simple as an I-20 reissuance with a fresh DSO travel signature, rather than a new requirement to terminate a SEVIS record. Indeed, members who have contacted their SEVP Field Representatives have reported that SEVP responded with a standardized statement from their policy division that:

"The language in the USCIS Policy Manual clarification on F-1 participation in a study abroad program is not intended to be a change to, or deviation from, SEVP's longstanding interpretation regarding students spending time outside of the United States.

We respectfully urge USCIS to recognize that F-1 students are uniquely positioned to be global citizens, already having crossed international borders to pursue higher education in the United States. Their participation in the full range of U.S. study abroad programs, including those that last for more than five months, enables them to engage with the world from the perspective of an American initiative, further strengthening cultural ties and fostering diplomatic goodwill. Universities integrate study abroad in the curriculum and would want their students to benefit from such educational offerings irrespective of whether they are domestic or international. Limiting their ability to experience these programs risks undermining a core aspect of international education's mission: to prepare students-whether domestic or international-to navigate and contribute meaningfully to our interconnected world.

We ask that the language in this part of the USCIS Policy Manual be revised once more, to clarify that a student fully enrolled in an SEVP-certified school during a study abroad program may remain in Active SEVIS status and reenter the United States on that SEVIS record even if the study abroad program lasts more than 5 months, and that to reenter the United States in F-1 status the student must be in Active SEVIS status, have a valid F-1 visa (if required), and have a valid Form I-20 properly endorsed by the DSO. This would ensure that F-1 students can continue to benefit from these invaluable global learning opportunities without having to suffer new and unnecessary immigration consequences.

I appreciate your attention to this matter.

Sincerely,

[Signature redacted]

Fanta Aw, PhD
Executive Director and CEO
NAFSA: Association of International Educators

U.S. Department of Homeland Security
U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services
Office of the Director
Camp Springs, MD 20588-0009



**U.S. Citizenship
and Immigration
Services**

December 3, 2024

Fanta Aw, PhD
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Dear Dr. Aw:

Thank you for your October 16, 2024 letter to United States Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS).

In your letter, you expressed concern about USCIS' August 27, 2024 update¹ to the USCIS Policy Manual discussing the effect of study abroad on an F-1 student's active Student and Exchange Visitor Information System (SEVIS) status. On November 26, 2024, USCIS removed this Policy Manual language and now refers stakeholders to <https://studyinthestates.dhs.gov/> for information regarding F-1 student participation in study abroad programs.

Thank you again for your letter and interest in this important issue. Should you wish to discuss this matter further, please do not hesitate to contact the USCIS Public Engagement Division by email at public.engagement@uscis.dhs.gov.

Sincerely,

Ur M. Jaddou
Director

¹ See <https://www.uscis.gov/sites/default/files/document/policy-manual-updates/20240827-STEMOPT.pdf>.