



International Programs and Services

Dear Exchange Visitor Student,

We are glad to welcome you to our Exchange Visitor Program at George Mason University! The Exchange Visitor Program, also known as [BridgeUSA](#), operates under the auspices of the U.S. Department of State's Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs. Its purpose is to provide you with an opportunity to participate in an educational and cultural program in the United States, return home to share your experiences, and to encourage Americans to participate in educational and cultural programs abroad.

Exchange Visitors enter the United States on a J visa. Title 22 of the Code of Federal Regulations (CFR) regulates Foreign Relations. Part 62 regulates the Exchange Visitor Program. As a designated sponsor, George Mason University complies with the regulations and compliance administration outlined in 22 CFR Part 62. As a participant of the Exchange Visitor Program, you are expected to comply with 22 CFR Part 62.

For the Fall 2021 semester, GMU plans to have in-person, hybrid (partially in-person and partially online), and fully online classes. **As a new J-1 Exchange Visitor student, at least 50% of your classes will need to be in-person or hybrid classes.** Appropriate physical distancing procedures will be in place as mentioned in the [Safe Return to Campus Plan](#). Please note that government guidance and GMU policies may change before the start of classes or during your program.

Once you have received your Certificate of Eligibility for Exchange Visitor Status (DS-2019 Form), please check the dates and biographical information carefully to make certain everything is correct. **Read the instructions on the back of the form and sign the bottom of the front page.** You are allowed to enter the United States up to 30 days before the program begin date listed on your Form DS-2019. You also have a 30-day grace period at the end of the program which allows you to stay up to 30 days in the United States after your program end date before departing the U.S.

Once you have arrived in the United States, you must complete the online check-in process with the Office of International Programs and Services to have your SEVIS record validated. SEVIS validation is a legal requirement. If not validated in a timely manner, your SEVIS record will automatically be invalidated, which will significantly complicate your status at GMU.

Obtaining a U.S. Visa

Due to pandemic conditions, you should first confirm that the consulate in your country is open for routine visa processing or will accept emergency appointments for J-1 Exchange Visitor students with an upcoming program start date of August 15. If you plan to travel to the U.S. from or through a country that has an entry restriction, you should also check to see if you are able to obtain a National Interest Exception (NIE). J1 students need to request a NIE as part of their visa process.

Otherwise, you will need to plan your travel to allow time in another country that is not subject to the 14-day restriction: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/travelers/from-other-countries.html>

Paying the SEVIS fee:

Open an international visitor record in the Student Exchange Visitor Information System (SEVIS) and pay your SEVIS fee online:

- Go to: <https://www.fmjfee.com/>
- Enter your SEVIS ID (the number at the top right of your DS2019 form that begins with N), Last Name, Given Name (First and Middle names) and Date of Birth. Click submit and follow any additional instructions
- Pay Fee and Print Receipt (receipt is needed for visa interview)

Applying for your visa at the U.S. embassy/consulate: <http://www.usembassy.gov>

Find the nearest consulate on this website and follow their specific directions and requirements. Read the directions carefully and make certain that your answers are accurate.

Approximate wait time to receive a visa appointment can be found on the site listed below. However, due to the pandemic, it may or may not be accurate. It is also a good idea to read the updates about visas on the consulate website and follow the specific consulate on social media.

<https://travel.state.gov/content/travel/en/us-visas.html>

You will also need to pay the fee to accompany your DS-160, [Application for Non-Immigrant Visa](#). Bring to your visa interview: your GMU acceptance letter, this welcome letter that confirms you will be taking some of your classes in person, proof of funding documents, a printed copy of your DS-160 confirmation page, your DS-160/visa (MRV) fee receipt, your I-901 SEVIS fee receipt, your DS-2019 Form, a passport photo that meets Department of State requirements and your passport. If you need an NIE, please bring any additional information required by the specific consulate. If they do not request anything in advance, bring at least written documentation of when you would need your NIE to be active so that it will cover your arrival to the US and any potential travel delays. To date, NIEs are granted for a 30-day window. As of September 2020, the current SEVIS fee is \$220 and the J-1 non-immigrant visa fee is \$160. These costs are subject to change. Please note, the visa and SEVIS fees are nonrefundable, but are valid for a year. The visa fee is valid for the country listed on the original application. Please check the embassy/consulate website to see what additional paperwork you will need to bring with you. Requirements may vary depending on the consulate. Be prepared, honest, and confident when presenting yourself to the consular officer. You may be asked to show your invitation or admission letter from GMU (if applicable), proof of financial support, proof of strong ties to your home country, etc. The consular officer will review whether you have sufficient funds to cover expenses and confirm your non-immigrant intent. Consular review of financial documentation can range from a very cursory review to a very detailed review of both the form and content of the documentation. The consular officer must be "satisfied" that the funding exists and is sufficient, which means the consular officer has a great deal of discretion in determining whether sufficient financial support exists.

Travelling to the United States and Arriving at GMU

Please refer to your Welcome Letter for more detailed information regarding these topics. You can also find resources regarding travelling to the U.S. during the pandemic at: <https://oips.gmu.edu/coronavirus/>

What is an I-94 Record?

The I-94 record is the "Arrival/Departure Record" issued by U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) whenever you enter the United States. This record confirms that you have been legally admitted to the U.S. in a specific visa status, and for a specific duration of time. For F and J visa holders the amount of time is indicated by the notation "D/S" which means you can be in the U.S. for the Duration of Status of your student program. The CBP officers will enter the I-94 data into an on-line registration system using your passport and visa stamp. You will be able to access an electronic version of the I-94 record by visiting <https://i94.cbp.dhs.gov/I94/#/home> This record can be printed when applying for immigration benefits, such as a driver's license or a Social Security Number (SSN).



Housing

On campus housing for graduate students is offered at Beacon Hall on the Science and Technology Campus. More information about on campus housing can be found at: <https://housing.gmu.edu/> As there is no on-campus housing for married students, we recommend the Contemporary Student Services website for your off-campus housing search: <https://contemporary.gmu.edu>

Tip: The current minimum figure needed to meet basic living and health insurance expenses for a graduate student with no dependents (excluding tuition and fees) at GMU is: \$26,500 per year. Please note that the cost of living in the metro Washington, DC area is one of the highest in the United States. Thus, it is very important that you research the cost of housing and other living expenses before you arrive in the U.S. Review [the Scam Awareness](#) website and the resources on the Contemporary Student Services website to learn about costs and potential housing scams.

Health Insurance

U.S. laws require Exchange Visitors and their dependents to maintain health insurance for the entire period of J-1 status in the United States. Federal regulations require the following:

1. Medical benefits of **at least** \$100,000 U.S. per accident or illness
2. Repatriation of remains in the amount of \$25,000 U.S.
3. Expenses associated with medical evacuation of the Exchange Visitor to his or her home country in the amount of \$50,000 U.S.
4. A deductible not to exceed \$500 per accident or illness

The George Mason University Health Insurance plan is offered by [Aetna Student Health](#) and meets and exceeds the requirements. Along with your DS-2019 you will get a Newly Admitted International Student Welcome letter from the Student Health Insurance office. Failure to pay the health insurance fees by the deadline will result in termination from the exchange program. If you are bringing a spouse or children with you on a J-2 visa, you will need to show proof of health insurance for your accompanying dependents that meets the requirements. You may either select the GMU plan for dependents or enroll in another plan. Please follow the link for the details including student plan benefits and enrollment options for dependents:

<http://shs.gmu.edu/insurance/international/>

There cannot be any breaks or lapses in insurance coverage even if one travels outside the U.S for an extended period of time during the J program. Below are some outside insurance companies that provide health insurance for dependents or Exchange Visitor Students on post-completion Academic Training:

VISIT® International Health Insurance Program for International Students, Scholars, Spouses, Families & Visitors

Website: <http://www.visitinsurance.com/>

ISO Insurance:

<https://www.iso.org/>

Tips for selecting a health insurance provider:

There are many health insurance providers available and the options can be overwhelming. When selecting an insurance plan, you should select a plan that meets your individual needs and the minimum requirements mentioned above. A plan that worked for your friend or colleague may not be the best option for you. You should carefully review the details of any insurance plan you are considering. Some plans have a higher deductible than others. Some may require you to pay out-of-pocket and submit claim forms for reimbursement. Consider your budget and ability to meet the terms of the specific insurance plan.

* *Medical evacuation and repatriation requirements.* Note the explicit requirement for medical evacuation and repatriation insurance. Most domestic health insurance policies do not include this feature, or include it only for bringing people or remains back to the United States from abroad. You may have to purchase medical

evacuation and repatriation coverage separately for your J-2 dependents. Many insurance companies provide this special coverage at reasonable cost.

OIPS must terminate the SEVIS record of an exchange visitor who: 1) does not provide OIPS with a valid health insurance by the start of the Exchange Visitor program at GMU; and 2) does not submit updated health insurance when s/he seeks to extend their program.

The willful failure to carry the required insurance or material misrepresentation of insurance coverage will result in the termination of your program and legal status in the U.S. If you have a sponsor that pays your health insurance fee and they do not submit payment in a timely manner, you may be required to pay for the fee and then request a re-imbusement when the credit appears on your account.

If you are employed GMU and eligible for health insurance benefits, please attend Benefits Orientation in Human Resources (Fairfax campus, Merten Hall, 4th floor).

Exchange visitors and automatic payroll deductions for insurance: 22 CFR 62.14(b) requires that, "If the sponsor provides health insurance, or arranges for health insurance to be offered the exchange visitor, via payroll deduction at the host organization, the exchange visitor must voluntarily authorize this action in writing and also be given the opportunity to make other arrangements to obtain insurance.

Understanding the U.S. Health Care System

THE COST OF U.S. HEALTH CARE

Your health insurance may not cover the full cost of your doctor's visit, hospitalization or medication. Review the rules related to your plan to understand fully what is covered. Here are some of the terms defined:

Premium

The amount you pay to your insurance company for you insurance policy. This is paid on a monthly or a yearly basis, depending on your insurance plan.

Co-Pay

The co-pay or co-payment, is the amount you are expected to pay directly to the healthcare provider at the time you receive medical treatment. This is usually a small amount and varies depending on your insurance.

Deductible

The deductible is a part of the medical bill that you are expected to pay in addition to the co-pay. Insurance plans usually specify the amount of a medical bill they cover and the amount you must pay. The deductible is usually described as a flat amount or as a percentage, depending upon the policy. Generally high premiums have a lower deductible while lower premiums have a high deductible.

In many cases, the doctor's office or hospital where you seek treatment may not bill your insurance directly. They may require you to pay them directly and for you to be reimbursed by your health insurance company.

Information on the Possible Applicability of the Affordable Care Act

The general rules regarding applicability of the individual mandate of the ACA and availability of ACA-compliant coverage also apply to J nonimmigrants, but that the minimum levels and types of coverage are still required as a condition of J-1 or J-2 status, even if those nonimmigrants are additionally subject to the ACA's individual mandate. For more information please visit: <https://shs.gmu.edu/insurance/resources/>

DURING YOUR PROGRAM

The OIPS website has many resources for J-1 students regarding J-1 student responsibilities, remaining in status, employment, program extension and much more at: <https://oips.gmu.edu/j-1-students/>

Cultural Activities

Pursuing a degree program at George Mason University as an Exchange Visitor Student is also a commitment to engage in cultural activities in the U.S. and share your culture with Americans. OIPS offers a variety of cultural programming for our international students. Due to the pandemic, there are many virtual opportunities, but we have hosted some appropriate socially distanced in-person activities. Please read the OIPS weekly newsletter and follow us on social media and check out [our website](#) to find out about events and programs. Additionally, your department will also host and share information about a variety of engagement opportunities. We encourage you and your family members to become involved in campus and local organizations and clubs. Mason 360 is a great resource to discover campus groups and activities: <https://mason360.gmu.edu/> GMU's Graduate Student Life is also an excellent resource: <https://gradlife.gmu.edu/>

If you need assistance to locate any additional resources, please do not hesitate to contact us. We also want to recognize and celebrate your participation in cultural events during your program. Please share with us any significant involvement or achievement. In the past, GMU J-1 students have been involved in student government, OIPS iCafes, GMU club sports, student research symposiums and campus award ceremonies celebrating their achievements to name a few.

Safety and Well-Being During Your Exchange Program

Your safety and well-being during your Exchange Visitor Program are among our highest priorities. As you begin your program, we would like to share the following resources offered by GMU and inform you of the requirements for reporting health and safety incidents to OIPS.

OIPS has a website for [Coronavirus \(COVID-19\) Information](#) for international students and Scholars. It includes a link [GMU's Safe Return to Campus website](#). Please note that throughout the semester, individual offices may change in person and virtual service operations. Please remember to check directly with the office to confirm their most updated services.

The [Mason Ready website](#) has links to campus offices and resources to assist in emergency and disaster preparedness including the university's [Active Threats Awareness and Prevention Video](#). If you have not yet signed up, please register your cell phone number with the [Mason Alert](#) Emergency Notification System to receive timely information about campus emergencies.

Educating yourself about the safety and security of your environment can be different in the U.S. than in your home country. There are a number of campus and local resources that will assist you in understanding crimes in the area and crime prevention. GMU's Department of Police and Public Safety publishes a daily [Crime and Fire log](#) so that you can be informed about the crimes that have occurred on campus. If you are traveling off-campus, other cities and counties provide a similar log often called a police blotter. The [GMU Department of Police and Public Safety](#) has links to other area law enforcement websites and also information regarding promoting awareness and responding to campus violence. If you ever feel unsafe walking across campus, call (703) 993-2810 and a Police cadet can escort you to your destination.

With the worldwide increase in scams targeting international students, OIPS has also created a [Scam Awareness Website](#). **We highly encourage you to read over the scam awareness website as soon as possible.**

Rave Guardian Public Safety App: This free public safety app offers a variety of features including a virtual safety option and a panic call button to alert GMU Police. It's free at [iTunes](#) and the [Google Play store](#).

As a model well-being university, GMU strives to provide everyone in the campus community with the support to thrive together. Please check out [Center for the Advancement of Well-Being](#) and discover links to online well-being assessments, campus offices and campus events that promote well-being.

GMU's [Student Support and Advocacy Center](#) (SSAC) offers programming, consultations, and resources in the areas of interpersonal violence, financial wellbeing, personal wellness, and alcohol and drug use.

[Counseling and Psychological Services](#) (CAPS) provides important resources for students. In addition to having counselors on staff for guidance, they also have crisis hotlines available 24/7, a text line and an online chat. They offer online information and workshops focusing on a variety of issues such as stress reduction, suicide prevention and eating disorders. CAPS provides referrals for off-campus services. They also have a [virtual outreach program](#).

[Learning Services](#) offers online academic coaching and virtual academic success workshops. They have an [online library of video presentations](#) on topics such as: Exam Strategies, Managing Academic Anxiety, Time Management, Notetaking and Studying among others. These workshops are a great resource for international students to also become better acquainted with American academic culture! They also have a guide on [how to be a successful online learner](#).

The CAPS website has [Multicultural Resources](#) with links to [Disability Services](#); [LGBTQ Resources](#); and the Center for Culture, Equity and Empowerment. On the [CCEE website](#), you can find information about reporting an incident that was motivated by bias (act of discrimination, harassment, intimidation, violence or criminal offense that appears to be intentional and motivated by prejudice or bias).

[GMU's Student Health Services](#) (SHS) provides high quality health care, counseling, health education and prevention services to George Mason University students. The Fairfax location is open. Students need to first call 703-993-2831 to speak to a nurse before scheduling an appointment. For assistance when the clinic is closed, SHS has an after-hours nurse advice hotline at the same number (703-993-2831) and a list of [after-hours urgent care centers](#) (walk-in clinics) on their website.

[GMU Student Rights and Responsibilities](#) can be found in the catalog. This section also lists what steps can be taken for various concerns including a Student Conflict Resolution Center.

If you have been approved by OIPS to work, either on-campus or off-campus as part of Academic Training, it is important that you feel safe and are treated fairly in your work environment. The "[Know your Rights](#)" Pamphlet you received during your visa interview also details your rights as an exchange visitor. Please remember to review approval requirements for on-campus and off-campus employment at [the OIPS website](#) or contact your J-1 student advisor: cbodziak@gmu.edu.

In certain cases, we are required to report incidents concerning the Health and Safety of Exchange Visitors to the US Department of State. Please inform us if you are involved in any of the following types of incidents:

- lost or stolen immigration documents (i.e., passport and visa)
- theft of intellectual property or violations of export controls
- serious illness or injury or if you are quarantined due to COVID-19
- incident involving litigation or the criminal justice system (incidents with police including arrests or court system)
- incidents involving sexual harassment, abuse or exploitation
- other incidents that involve health and safety (e.g. if you are involved in a natural disaster, civil unrest or outbreak of violence)
- if you become aware of a death of another exchange visitor or if another exchange visitor is missing.

There may be situations not listed where we can help you resolve an issue affecting your health or safety. Please reach out to us with any concern or question you have, and we will help you sort it out. We share the goal of the US Department of State that you have whatever assistance you need, and that you understand how a situation may affect your J-1 status. We also need to know how to reach you, and by law you must

[update your contact information](#) (address and phone number) within 10 days of making any change. In addition, if your permanent address in your home country changes or your emergency contact person either here or abroad changes, please inform us right away.

Remember, for an urgent or life-threatening emergency, call 911 for immediate assistance. While on-campus, you can report suspicious activity, crimes, and emergencies to Mason Police at 703-993-2810 (non-emergencies) or 9-1-1 (emergencies). Remember to report to OIPS any emergencies INVOLVING AN EXCHANGE VISITOR'S HEALTH, SAFETY, AND WELFARE by calling (703) 993-2970 or emailing GMU's Responsible Officer at: ichizhov@gmu.edu

The Department of State also provides a 24 hour/7 days a week J-1 Visa Emergency Hotline toll-free number at 1-866-283-9090. The Hotline number is reserved for the use of current J-1 visa exchange visitor participants, or individuals calling on their behalf, in need of immediate contact with the State Department to address a matter concerning their health, safety or welfare. More information about the Department of State and J-1 program can be found at: <https://j1visa.state.gov/> GMU students can also find links to many of these resources on the [OIPS website](#).

We also need to know how to reach you. By law you must update your contact information (address and phone number) within 10 days of making a change. Also, if your permanent address in your home country changes or your emergency contact person either here or abroad changes, please inform us right away.

NEAR THE END OF YOUR PROGRAM

Program Completion

Please note that your J-1 program end date is generally the date of your last exam or your defense date. Your J-1 program end date on your current DS2019 is the last day of exams for that semester. If your defense date is earlier in the Fall or Spring semester, then OIPS will need to shorten your program end date on your DS2019 form and your 30-day grace period will begin after your updated J-1 program end date. Students with summer defense dates should consult the university calendar and note the summer session of their defense. Their J-1 program end date will be the last exam date of that summer session. Please keep this timing in mind if you want to attend your graduation ceremony during your 30-day grace period. For post-completion Academic Training, your application should be received at least three weeks before your program end date (or updated program end date as mentioned above).

Understanding the Two-Year Home Country Residence Requirement

Some J-1 Exchange Visitors are subject to what is called the [two-year home country physical presence requirement](#). The "two-year residence" requirement applies to J-1 Exchange Visitors in the following situations:

- If you receive any indirect or direct funding (including nominal travel grants) from your home government or a U.S. government agency at any point during your J-1 visa stay in the U.S.
- If your country of citizenship or permanent residency and field of work are identified by your home government as being in short supply and consequently listed on the U.S. State Department's Exchange Visitor's "[Skills List](#)." here: <https://travel.state.gov/content/travel/en/us-visas/visa-information-resources/skill-list-by-country.html>

How to Fulfill?

To satisfy the home residence requirement, the individual subject to 212(e) must reside in the country of nationality or last legal permanent residence or be physically present in those locations for at least two years. It can also be an aggregate amount of two years if the person departed and returned to the country at various times. The two-year time period begins after the completion of the J1 program and the Exchange

Visitor's departure from the United States. Exchange Visitors who are subject may return to the U.S. while they are still subject in other non-immigrant categories including but not limited to F-1 student, J-1 Exchange Visitor, B visitor and the O-1 foreign national of extraordinary ability. Exchange Visitors that are subject:

- Cannot pursue a change of status in the U.S. (with certain exceptions).
- Apply for H, L, or K visa
- Change status in US to a legal permanent resident/immigrant visa.

Exchange Visitors interested in applying for a waiver of the Two Year Residence Requirement can find more information on the Department of State's website: <https://travel.state.gov/content/travel/en/us-visas/study/exchange/waiver-of-the-exchange-visitor.htm>

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Banking and Driver's License Information

Banking:

GMU's updated on campus banking will be listed here:

<https://shopmason.gmu.edu/banking/>

Banks off-campus used by the Mason Community:

Bank of America (10440 Main Street, Fairfax, VA)

Website: <https://www.bankofamerica.com/>

Sun Trust (4020 University Drive, Fairfax, VA)

Website: <https://www.suntrust.com>

Driver's License:

If you plan to apply for a driver's license, OIPS can assist you. Due to the pandemic, appointments are required at the DMV and appointments may not be immediately available. The most up-to-date information is on the DMV website. The closest DMV office is located inside Fair Oaks mall:

Address: 11805 Fair Oaks Mall, Fairfax, VA

Hours of operation: Monday—Saturday: 10:00 a.m.—6:30 p.m.

Please note that road tests are not given at this location. If the DMV requires that you take a road test, then you may want to visit another location. DMV offices are also located in other locations in Fairfax, Prince William, Loudoun counties and Alexandria. Find other locations here:

<http://www.dmv.state.va.us/DMVLocator/>

Requirements for obtaining a driver's license:

<http://www.dmv.state.va.us/drivers/#eligibility.html>

Transportation from airports to George Mason University

Please follow the link to explore your transportation options from Virginia airports:

<http://transportation.gmu.edu/airportservices.html>

DEPENDENT (J-2) RESOURCES

Working: J-2 dependents can find information about applying for work authorization on the OIPS website:
<https://oips.gmu.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/10-1-J-2-Employment-Instructions-October-2020.pdf>

Please note that due to the pandemic, students have reported that there have been considerable delays in receiving EAD cards.

Daycare and Preschools:

For information about daycare, private pre-schools and childcare, please visit:

<http://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/ofc/>

<http://family.arlingtonva.us/child-care/>

<https://www.loudoun.gov/2503/Child-Care-Providers-Resources>

Public School Enrollment for Children:

Please visit the appropriate county website of where your local address is located:

Fairfax County Public Schools:

<https://www.fcps.edu/registration/general-registration-requirements>

Arlington Public Schools:

<https://www.apsva.us/registering-your-child/>

Loudoun County Public Schools:

<http://www.loudoun.k12.va.us/site/default.aspx?PageID=1>

The GMU Contemporary Student Services Office is also an excellent resource for graduate students:

<https://contemporary.gmu.edu/>

Campus Maps

<https://www.gmu.edu/resources/welcome/Directions-to-GMU.html>

Our office at the Fairfax campus is located in Student Union Building (SUB) I Room 4300 and is open from 8:30am – 5:00 pm M-F. Please visit our website at: <https://oips.gmu.edu/oips-is-online/> to confirm the most recent announcements regarding walk-in hours and virtual services for summer 2021 and Fall 2021.

We look forward to meeting you!

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