

NEW INTERNATIONAL STUDENT WELCOME GUIDE



Virginia Commonwealth University

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WELCOME!

Hello!

Greetings from the **VCU Global Education Office!**

The International Admissions Office has informed me that you have been admitted to Virginia Commonwealth University. I am pleased to be among the first to say CONGRATULATIONS!

Studying and living in a foreign country can be both exciting and challenging and we want your time at VCU to be as rewarding as possible. All of the staff of the Global Education Office are ready to help you in any way we can.

We have many programs in place to help you get comfortable in your new home, succeed in your classes and be happy at VCU. Our team has created this **New International Student Welcome Guide**. In addition to this guide, you will be receiving weekly emails from the Global Education Office's Student Engagement unit and Immigration Services team about important steps to take prior to arrival, university orientations, housing, enrolling in classes, and much more. Please read through these weekly emails and reach out to our staff if you have any questions.

But before you do anything further, please be sure to accept your offer of admission with the International Admissions Office if you have not already done so.

I speak for our entire staff when I say we look forward to meeting and working with you to achieve your academic and personal goals.

Welcome to VCU!

Sincerely,

Jill Blondin, Ph.D.

Associate Vice Provost of Global Initiatives

VCU Global Education Office

VISA APPLICATION

As the recipient of a VCU Form I-20 you are now eligible to begin the process of applying for your visa. To ensure that you are able to arrive on time, we recommend that you apply for your visa as early as possible.

Pay the SEVIS I-901 Fee

Visit www.fmjfee.com for payment instructions.

***Citizens of Canada and Bermuda do not require visas to enter the U.S.*

Complete the Online Nonimmigrant Visa Application (Form DS-160)

Visit the [U.S. Department of State](http://www.usdepartmentofstate.gov) website to access Form DS-160, pay the required DS-160 fee, and upload the required personal photograph.

Schedule Your Visa Interview

Your visa interview should be scheduled at a U.S. Embassy or Consulate in the country where you live. A list of U.S. embassies and consulates, and the approximate appointment wait times at each, can be found on the [U.S. Department of State](http://www.usdepartmentofstate.gov) website. This website also contains a specific list of the items that should be taken with you to your interview.

The following are some general points to consider in advance of your interview. We recommend that you reach out to an [EducationUSA](http://www.educationusa.gov) advising center in your region if you would like additional assistance with preparing.

- **Consider your plans to return to your home country.** To be eligible for a nonimmigrant visa like the F-1, you must establish to the satisfaction of the consular officer that you have strong ties to your home country or country of residence and intend to return there following completion of your studies. These “ties” can include a job, family members, investments, the potential for inheritance, etc.
- **Anticipate that the interview will be conducted in English.** You may want to practice your language skills beforehand with a friend or using an app like Duolingo. You should also be prepared to provide evidence of any English language tests that you have taken to be admitted to your program.
- **Speak for yourself.** Remember that this is your visa interview.

- **Be brief.** Visa interviews are generally only a few minutes long so you only have a short period of time to make a good impression. Keep your answers to the point and only speak to topics you are directly asked about.
- **Understand your degree program and know how it fits your career plans.** You must be able to articulate why you have chosen a particular degree program. The consular officer should also be able to determine how you plan to use your degree from the United States when you return home.
- **Have your documentation in order.** Remember, visa interviews are fairly quick. Consular officers do not have a lot of time to sort through lengthy or wordy documents. Your documents should be neatly sorted and labeled to ensure that your interview goes as smoothly as possible.
- **Remember that your main purpose for coming to the U.S. is to study, not to work.** While some F-1 students have the opportunity to work on or off campus, that employment is secondary to completing their program of study. You need to consider again how you will convey your plans to return home after getting your education.

(Adapted from NAFSA's [10 Points to Remember When Applying for a Student Visa](#))

Students unable to secure an interview date or a visa in time for the start of the semester should contact International Admissions at vcuia@vcu.edu to defer or decline their offer of admission. The Global Education Office will only send an updated I-20 to students who have formally deferred their admission.

*English language students should contact geo-elp@vcu.edu to request their deferral. You must request deferral before the first day of classes.

Visa Denial

In the event that your request for a student visa is denied, do not argue with the consular officer. You may politely ask for a list of the documents that you should present to overcome the denial and request the reason for the denial in writing.

Please contact geois@vcu.edu to inform us of the denial and reach out to International Admissions at vcuia@vcu.edu if you wish to defer your admission and try again for a visa at a later date.

PRE-ARRIVAL RESOURCES & SUPPORT

Admitted students are advised to [claim their VCU eID](#) and set a password to access their online VCU accounts, including their student Gmail. You can find your **VCU V-Number** on your official acceptance letter.

Information will be sent to your student accounts from various VCU departments, so it is important that you be able to access them. Logging in will also give you access to our **Pre-Arrival Canvas portal**, an online platform that houses a plethora of resources for new F-1 students. You can view our [“Get Started”](#) website for additional support in advance of your trip to the U.S.

Pre-Arrival Meetups

As you prepare to travel to the United States, you will likely have a lot of questions. Our [Pre-Arrival Meetups](#) are designed to help answer those questions and get you on the path to starting your academic journey here at Virginia Commonwealth University. [Sign up](#) for a Pre-Arrival Meetup on the Immigration Services website.

F-2 Dependents

F-1 students must request an F-2 I-20 for their spouse and any minor children that they wish to have accompany them to the U.S. as dependents. Evidence of additional financial support must be provided for each F-2 I-20 that is requested. Please email geois@vcu.edu for more information.

To assist with settling any dependents in the Richmond area, VCU’s Family Programs office has compiled a [Resource Guide for Parenting, Expecting, & Caregiving Students](#).

Arrival & Check-In

F-1 students may enter the U.S. up to 30 days before the Program Start Date on their Form I-20 and no later than the Start of Classes Date. F-1 students can refer to the Earliest Admission Date on their I-20. Arriving before your I-20 Program Start Date allows you to get settled and attend your orientations.

Can’t wait until you arrive to look around? Check out our [Virtual Campus Tour!](#)

Check-In

Upon arrival, students must email GEO Immigration Services at geois@vcu.edu to complete their virtual Immigration Check-In. During the Check-In process, our immigration advisors will obtain emailed copies of your new immigration documents and your [New Student Information Form](#).

Immigration Check-In must be completed no later than the end of the [Add/Drop period](#) to ensure timely registration of your SEVIS record.

ORIENTATION INFORMATION

Global Education Office Orientation Programs

International Student Orientation (ISO)

The International Student Orientation is mandatory for all new international students, including those transferring to VCU from other U.S. schools.

ISO is not intended to take the place of any other orientation programs being offered by VCU, the ELP, the Graduate School, or your individual academic department. Students should arrange to attend ISO in addition to any of these other relevant orientations.

English Language Program (ELP) Orientation

In addition to the ISO, students admitted to the ELP must attend the ELP Orientation. Please contact geo-elp@vcu.edu for more information.

The Global Education Office will facilitate additional orientation workshops and programs for new international students throughout August and September during VCU's Weeks of Welcome.

University-Sponsored Orientation Programs

VCU Orientation

VCU Orientation is for new undergraduate students, both international and domestic. Please be sure to [register for VCU Orientation](#) on a date that does not conflict with the ISO.

Graduate Student Orientation

The Graduate School and the [Graduate Student Association](#) sponsor an orientation to introduce new graduate students to VCU and the city of Richmond. Check the Graduate School [website](#) for dates and registration information.

	International Student Orientation (ISO)	English Language Program (ELP) Orientation	VCU Orientation	Graduate School Orientation	Departmental Orientation
New Undergraduate Student					
ELP Student					
New Graduate Student					
Transfer Student (Undergraduate or Graduate)					

HOUSING

Housing arrangements should be made as soon as possible following your admission. **DO NOT wait until your arrival.** GEO does not have emergency or temporary housing units available for students who arrive in the U.S. without housing assignments.

On-Campus Housing

On-campus housing is limited and assigned in the order in which applications are received. For important information about living on campus and to submit an application, visit the [Residential Life & Housing](#) website. On-campus housing for graduate and upper-class students is reserved for returning students and those admitted to specialized programs. If you are a new graduate or upper-class student, you are encouraged to seek off-campus housing.

Students admitted to the English Language Program (ELP) will not be able to access the housing application online. If you are unable to submit an online housing application through the Residential Life & Housing website, please contact global@vcu.edu for assistance.

Off-Campus Housing

There are a variety of off-campus housing options in the Richmond area - many are located within close proximity of campus grounds or easily accessible via [public transportation](#).

Housing resources, including for first-time and international renters, are available through the VCU [Off-Campus Housing](#) website and in our [International Student Housing Guide](#).

HEALTH INSURANCE AND IMMUNIZATION

Immunization

All new VCU students are required to submit a [Certificate of Immunization](#).

Prior to your arrival, you should work with a health care provider in your country to:

- Gather your immunization records
- Obtain any outstanding immunizations [required](#) for enrollment at VCU
- Complete the [Certificate of Immunization](#)

Visit the University Student Health Services (USHS) website to submit your [Certificate of Immunization](#) through the online [Student Health Web Portal](#).

Please note that USHS does **NOT** accept Tuberculosis (TB) screenings performed outside of the U.S. If your home country is on the current [High Burden TB list](#), you must get your TB screening no later than the end of the first week of classes. Be sure to check your emails for updates about available on-campus TB screening opportunities offered by USHS.

Health Insurance

To assist you as an international student with managing the high cost of healthcare in the United States, VCU has contracted with UnitedHealthCare (UHC) to provide all international students with an individual insurance plan (policy).

International students, with the exception of NCAA athletes and those admitted to the VCU ELP program, are **REQUIRED** to participate in the university's [student health insurance program](#) and billed for the program each semester along with their tuition and fees.

The estimated annual cost of this plan has already been included on your Form I-20.

Enrolling In the VCU Student Health Insurance Program

Though you are automatically billed for the plan each semester, you must proactively enroll (opt-in) during the Open Enrollment period to receive your insurance card and begin accessing your benefits.

Requesting a Waiver to the Insurance Requirement

Students who receive insurance coverage through their embassies (home governments), must have a current Financial Guarantee or Support Letter on file AND must [submit proof of their health insurance coverage](#) during the Open Enrollment period to avoid being billed for the VCU UnitedHealthCare plan.

The health insurance program includes a waiver process, but only plans that comply with the university's standards will be eligible for a waiver. Most travel and health insurance plans designed for international students will NOT meet these standards because they do not comply with the [Affordable Care Act](#) (ACA).

Please do not purchase a plan that is not ACA-compliant. If you submit a plan that is not ACA-compliant, your waiver request will be denied and you will be billed for the VCU student plan in addition to the alternative plan you have purchased.

Take the Necessary Action to Ensure You Are Covered!

Student on F 1 or J 1 Visa	Enroll in VCU's Student Health Insurance plan through the portal during the Open Enrollment period.
Student with Embassy Sponsorship	Submit proof of health insurance coverage through the portal during the Open Enrollment period.
English Language Program student	ELP students are not eligible for the VCU plan. If you have questions about health insurance plans, please email intlhealthins@vcu.edu .
NCAA Student Athlete	No Action

Incoming students should make arrangements for medical, vision and dental checkups prior to departing for the U.S. Vision and dental coverage is generally not included in health insurance, so plan ahead and take care of any concerns at home.

BANKING AND FINANCIAL SUPPORT

Scholarship Information for International Students

[Rams Scholarship Hub](#): A resource database of scholarship opportunities at VCU. Sort and filter for scholarship opportunities by keyword, criteria, or department!

[Institute of International Education Scholarships](#): IIE manages more than 200 programs with participants from more than 180 countries and offers Emergency Funding for students from countries experiencing economic or political turmoil. Often this funding requires a nomination through the Global Education Office and eligible students would be notified by GEO through email. Email global@vcu.edu with any questions about IIE funding.

The [Dean of Students Office](#) has an application process for emergency funding here; students should check to ensure they meet all eligibility requirements.

Additional funding may be available through your sponsoring embassy, or through organizations that promote study in the US. For more information, reach out to your sponsoring embassy or consulate.

Students should reach out to their academic advisor for more information regarding scholarship opportunities based on your program of study. Some academic departments additionally have emergency funding for students who are in a financial crisis.

[The VCU Office of Student Advocacy](#): The Office of Student Advocacy was created to serve as a one-stop shop for students at VCU with the primary aim to be a guide and gateway to all services and resources offered at the university. Students with emergency needs can reach out to this office (advocacy@vcu.edu) or GEO (global@vcu.edu) for assistance.

A Few Local Richmond Banking Options

This list is not exhaustive.

Truist

1801 W Broad Street
Richmond, VA, 23220
Phone: (804) 614-3880

Wells Fargo

3201 W Cary Street
Richmond, VA, 23221
Phone: (804) 278-6150

If you need to transfer money, you may find Western Union helpful:

Western Union

2729 West Broad Street, #B
Richmond, Virginia 23220
Phone: (804) 359-8608

There are several important things to keep in mind about your finances while at VCU:

- Your budget should include your tuition **and** your monthly living expenses. Even if you are receiving a scholarship or stipend, it is your responsibility to ensure you have sufficient funds to meet your financial obligations.
- We recommend bringing at least \$3,000 in cash or traveler's checks for your immediate expenses upon arriving in Richmond: food, transportation, apartment deposit and rent, and other incidentals.
- If you are married or have dependents, please allow for their additional expenses.
- Be aware that promised scholarship or stipend funds may not be available to you until several weeks after classes begin. Additionally, stipends are paid over a period of time, so you will not receive all of these funds in one payment.
- The VCU Student Accounting Department is responsible for all university billing and collection of charges. Questions regarding payments or account balances should be made directly to VCU Student Accounting.
- Students can view their invoices and statements online through eServices by selecting the "Student" tab and then the "Student Accounts" menu.
- Students may make online payments with a credit card or web check by visiting eServices and selecting "Make a Payment" under the "Student Accounts" menu.

COURSE REGISTRATION

Course registration information for undergraduate students:

1. Check your eServices (myVCU) account for any [holds and restrictions](#) that may prevent your enrollment. Contact the appropriate office to get any necessary holds or restrictions removed.
2. Complete the [First-Year Advising and Registration Survey](#)
3. Review the [First-Year Orientation Advising Guide](#) for information about placement tests and course registration. Note: Please make your advisor aware of your F-1 status and your need to comply with the FCS requirements when choosing courses.
4. Review the recommended first-semester courses for your major and learn more about each course by reviewing course descriptions in the [VCU Bulletin](#).
5. Contact [University Academic Advising](#) or rar@vcu.edu if you have any questions about course registration.

Course registration information for graduate and professional students:

1. Check your eServices (myVCU) account for any [holds and restrictions](#) that may prevent your enrollment. Contact the appropriate office to get any necessary holds or restrictions removed.
2. Check your VCU email for details from your academic department about the process for course registration.
3. Review the recommended first-semester courses for your major and learn more about each course by reviewing course descriptions in the [VCU Bulletin](#).

F-1 Full Course of Study Requirements

F-1 students are advised to register as early as possible. This ensures not only that they have the best selection of available courses, but that they can more easily meet the F-1 [full course of study](#) (FCS) requirements.

- **Undergraduate** students must enroll in a minimum of 12 credits each Spring & Fall semester to meet the FCS requirements and maintain their legal status. At least 9 of those 12 credits must be in-person or hybrid and not 100% online.
- **Graduate and Professional** students must enroll in a minimum of 9 credits each semester and ensure that at least 6 of those 9 credits are in-person or hybrid.
- Students admitted to the **English Language Program** (ELP) in the Fall or Spring semester must enroll in a minimum of 22 credits, all of which are in-person. Students admitted to 8-week sessions must be enrolled in at least 11 credits.

Tuition and Fees

View your tuition bill and submit payment to [Student Financial Services](#).

Registering for classes early grants you the most possible flexibility in terms of payment options, including access to the [Installment Payment Plan](#).

Access to Funds

Plan to have funds available to spend immediately your first few weeks in the U.S. Setting up a [bank account](#) and getting your first paycheck (if you have on-campus employment) can take some time, but chances are you will need to spend some money right away.

Additionally, you should arrive in the U.S. with some cash to spend on urgent needs. Budget how much you will need to get set up in Richmond and for immediate personal expenses, including:

- Transportation from the airport or train station to campus or your lodgings
- Food, toiletries, and cleaning supplies
- Textbooks and school supplies

In addition, if you are living off campus:

- Deposit and first month's rent for apartment
- Deposit fees for utilities (electric, water, internet, etc.)
- Costs of transportation to campus
- Housewares, including kitchen items and furniture

Just in case:

- Copays for urgent medical visits and prescriptions

After you get settled in the Richmond area, budget for ongoing expenses, including basic needs such as food, housing, seasonal clothing, and medical care.

Other typical expenses for students include: cell phone plan, laptop, [transportation](#), and associated off campus living costs, such as utilities, auto insurance (and taxes!), and renter's insurance.

ENTERING THE UNITED STATES

You are expected to report to VCU in time for the ISO and any other relevant orientation programs, but you may not enter more than 30 days before the Program Start Date on your Form I-20.

Customs & Border Protection (CBP) has the discretion to allow or deny anyone admission to the U.S. at the Port-of-Entry. You should not expect to be granted entry after your I-20 Start of Classes Date. If you are facing unexpected delays in arriving and need to report later than the date listed on your I-20 document, you must notify Immigration Services as soon as possible to discuss your options.

Prior to purchasing your plane tickets, refer to VCU's [Academic Calendar](#). Be sure to keep all of your orientation dates and the first day of classes in mind when selecting flights.

Carry the following documents with you on the plane:

- Passport booklet containing your F-1 visa
- SEVIS Form I-20 (signed in **blue ink**)
- Confirmation of SEVIS Fee payment (I-901 receipt)
- Evidence of financial support (the same documents you used at your visa interview)
- Evidence of student status, such as letter of acceptance, tuition receipts, or transcripts
- Contact information for Immigration Services (listed on the back of this Welcome Guide)

If you have more than one type of visa, inform the immigration officer at the Port of Entry that you will be a student in the United States to ensure that you are admitted with F-1 student status.

STUDENT ENGAGEMENT PROGRAMS & ACTIVITIES —

As you prepare to arrive on campus, we want to share with you some ways to engage with GEO and the VCU campus community outside of the classroom!

GEO's Global Student Engagement team oversees the creation of an annual calendar of engagement programs and events that provide international students the opportunity to connect with their fellow students - international and domestic - and experience campus life to the fullest.

Here is just a small sampling of the types of programs and events you can look forward to:

- [Global Buddies](#) - Fluent English speakers are paired with international students and scholars for weekly cultural exchange meetings.
- [Family Cultural Exchange Program](#) - Community volunteer families and international students are matched to be "paired" and meet at least once a month to participate in activities such as family dinners, sporting events, museum visits, and more!

- Global Cafe, Tea Times, and International Coffee Hours - These social events are designed to increase awareness and appreciation of cultural diversity at VCU, and provide the opportunity to meet students from across the globe.
- [Phi Beta Delta](#) - Phi Beta Delta is an honor society dedicated to recognizing scholarly achievement in international education
- [International Student Support Advisory Board \(ISSAB\)](#) - A group of students brought together to share issues of concern for international students at VCU and to offer feedback on GEO-sponsored programs, activities and resources.

For more information about our various programs and events, visit GEO's Student Engagement [website](#).

Contact Us

Global Education Office (GEO)

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Richmond, VA 23284-3043

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🌐 www.global.vcu.edu



VCU

Global Education Office



CHECKLIST

Claim

[Your eID](#) and set a password to access your student accounts, **including your VCU email**. *Your VCU V # can be found on your acceptance letter.*

Pay

the required [SEVIS I-901 Fee](#) and [apply for your F-1 Visa](#)

Register

for the [ISO](#) and any other relevant orientation programs

Research

Your [housing options](#)

Complete

[health insurance and immunization](#) requirements

Register

For your [classes](#)

Evaluate

Your finances

Plan

Your travel to the United States

Email

geois@vcu.edu when you arrive in the Richmond area to begin the virtual check-in process