



Explainer: Final Duration of Status Rule Establishes Limited Periods of Admission for International Students and Journalists

Introduction

On July 17, 2026, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) [published](#) a [final rule](#) establishing a fixed four-year period of admission for international students entering the United States. Under the rule, students needing additional time to complete their studies, including those whose programs exceed four years, will be required to apply for an extension of stay before their authorized stay expires.

The new rule replaces long-established “[duration of status](#)” policies for international students and their dependents. Under the [previous framework](#), international students with [F](#) and [J](#) visas¹ were generally permitted to remain lawfully in the United States for the duration of their approved program, rather than for a fixed period. For example, F-1 students could remain in the United States for the full length of their academic program, regardless of how long it took to complete. Once implemented, the rule will fundamentally change how these nonimmigrants maintain lawful status by replacing the previous duration of status framework with fixed admission periods and increasing DHS’s role in the process.

The new rule will also [affect](#) foreign journalists traveling to the United States on I visas.² While I visas for international journalists could previously be issued for up to five years, the final rule limits most to a maximum validity of 240 days. For journalists who are Chinese nationals, I visas will be limited to 90 days.

[According](#) to DHS, the new regulations will allow them to “monitor and oversee these nonimmigrants while they are in the United States” and, more specifically, ensure that they are actively participating in the programs that allow them to be lawfully present.

¹ The F and J visa programs are two different classifications of nonimmigrant statuses for international students. Both F-1 and J-1 visas [allow](#) international students to attend a college or university in the United States. However, there are [key differences](#) between the two programs. The [main difference](#) between the F-1 and J-1 visas for international students is that while both allow international students to come to the United States, J-1 visas are only available for students who receive at least 50% of their financial support from a source other than personal or family funds. For instance, students who receive at least 50% of their financial support from a scholarship or fellowship are eligible for J-1 visas.

² The [I visa program](#) is for individuals who represent a foreign information media outlet—press, radio, film, or other foreign information media—and who are coming to the United States solely to engage in that profession. Additionally, they must have a home office in a foreign country. Typical I visa applicants include reporters, editors, and film crews.

However, some critics of the rule have [highlighted](#) that imposing restrictive time limits on international students will have far-reaching consequences for U.S. educational institutions, international students, and the broader U.S. economy.

This explainer provides an overview of the duration of status policy, summarizes the major provisions of the final rule, and examines its potential implications for international students, foreign media representatives, U.S. educational institutions, and the broader economy.

Overview of Duration of Status

Since 1979, federal regulations allowed international students to remain lawfully in the United States for as long as it took to complete their academic or exchange program. This practice, commonly referred to as “[duration of status](#),” meant that federal immigration laws did not set a fixed period for how long international students could remain in the United States. Instead, their lawful presence in the country depended on the length of their approved academic program.

For decades, under the previous [duration of status framework](#), F-1 and J-1 students did not need to apply to U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) for additional time in the United States if their program was extended. Instead, [designated school officials](#) (DSOs) for F students or [responsible officers](#) (ROs) for J exchange visitors were authorized to issue extensions by updating the respective immigration documents — for F students a [Form I-20](#) and for J visitors a [DS-2019](#). That system allowed participants to remain in the United States without obtaining a new admission period from DHS.

Major Provisions of the Final Rule

The new rule makes significant changes to the F, J, and I nonimmigrant classifications. Collectively, these changes shift responsibility for maintaining lawful status from educational institutions and exchange program sponsors toward more direct oversight and discretion by DHS.

1. Fixed Admission Periods

As noted above, the central component of the rule is the replacement of duration of status policies with fixed admission periods. Under the rule, F and J nonimmigrants will be admitted for the length of their academic or exchange program, as reflected on their Form I-20 or DS-2019, up to a maximum of [four years](#).

International journalists with I visas will be [granted](#) an admission period up to 240 days or 90 days for Chinese nationals. Individuals whose programs extend beyond their admission period would be required to apply to USCIS for an Extension of Stay ([EOS](#))

before their authorized stay expires. [According to DHS](#), in 2023, more than 32,000 foreign media representatives were admitted into the U.S. under I visas.

2. Extension of Stay (EOS)

As part of the EOS process, DHS is [requiring](#) applicants to undergo biometric collection, including fingerprints and photographs, when requested. In taking on this more prominent role in the process, DHS [argues](#) that this additional review would allow USCIS to verify that applicants continue to meet their requirements and ensure they have not violated the conditions of their status. Additionally, students will need to [demonstrate](#) their academic success and financial stability for EOS approval.

3. Changes Specific to F-1 Students

In addition to replacing duration of status policies, the rule includes several policy changes that specifically affect F-1 students. These include [reducing](#) the post-completion grace period from 60 days to 30 days, [prohibiting](#) graduate-level F-1 students from changing programs after beginning graduate study, [limiting](#) certain educational transfers, and establishing new [requirements](#) governing extensions and educational progression. The rule also revises rules [affecting Optional Practical Training \(OPT\) programs](#) that allow foreign students to work in the United States for up to three years after graduation. Although DHS [states](#) that the rule “does not make any substantive changes to OPT” other than in the “context of admission period and extensions of stay,” it changes how students maintain lawful presence while participating in those programs. Students whose authorized period of admission expires before or during post-completion OPT will be required to file both an EOS application and an application for employment authorization. The rule also [clarifies](#) how travel abroad affects pending OPT and EOS applications. Students may either file an EOS application with USCIS or travel abroad and seek readmission with a Form I-20 containing the DSO's OPT recommendation. The [rule](#) also provides temporary transition relief by allowing certain F-1 students who timely file applications for post-completion OPT during the six-month transition period to obtain employment authorization without filing a separate EOS application.

4. Transition Periods

Recognizing that hundreds of thousands of individuals are currently maintaining lawful presence under the existing duration of status framework, DHS also included [transition procedures](#). Therefore, all F and J nonimmigrants present in the United States on the final rule's effective date who are “validly maintaining that status and who were admitted for Duration of Status” are allowed to remain in the United States in F or J status, without filing an EOS request, “up to the program end date.” DHS argues that the

transition periods are intended to minimize disruption while gradually moving all affected nonimmigrants into the new system with fixed admission periods.

Impact on Affected Nonimmigrants and Universities

Currently, millions of international students rely on the F and J visa programs. According to DHS, in the three-year period spanning fiscal year (FY) 2022 to FY 2024, [approximately](#) 1.6 million F-1 visa recipients and 500,000 J-1 recipients were active each year. Due to the importance of these programs, international students will face major impacts from the final rule, with [some advocates](#) predicting it will lead to “chaos.”

Specifically, these advocates have expressed concern about the timing of the final rule, which will affect incoming students for the 2026–2027 academic year. With the release of the final rule coming in mid-July 2026, students, universities, and international student offices have little time to prepare before the start of the academic year.

Similarly, [experts](#) note that the requirements for EOS applications have yet to be fully specified, creating uncertainty for both students and universities, who face the possibility of being unable to complete a course of study due to a potential EOS rejection. Additionally, others have expressed concern that extensions and

authorizations required by the rule will “create additional backlogs within USCIS.” These concerns come at a time when USCIS is already experiencing visa delays due to [increased](#) vetting and stricter social media restrictions. Notably, education advocates [argue](#) that the rule “places life-changing educational decisions in the hands of an already overburdened immigration system—not educators, and not institutions.”

Beyond the immediate implementation challenges, many worry about the long-term effects on international students themselves. Notably, F-1 students will no longer be able to pursue a second degree at the same or lower educational level after completing a program of study. DHS utilizes the National Center for Education Statistics’ (NCES) [definitions](#) of educational levels to ensure that F-1 students don’t use the U.S. education system to “unnecessarily (or under false pretenses) prolong their stay in this country.”

Additionally, the new rule means foreign Ph.D. students, whose programs typically run around six years, and others taking part in programs more than four years long will be [required](#) to apply for EOS and risk denials years into their programs. Likewise, many students seeking to participate in OPT may also be required to apply for EOS before beginning or continuing employment authorization, limiting their ability to take part in these programs. Because of this uncertainty over whether international students will be permitted to complete their course of study and/or be permitted to enter into additional studies and training opportunities, it is likely that many international students [will not seek opportunities](#) in the United States and will study elsewhere. [NAFSA](#), a major nonprofit focused on international education issues, states that the rule “tells the

world's brightest students and scholars that the United States is becoming less welcoming, less predictable, and less committed.”

These concerns also extend to colleges and universities, many of which [rely](#) on international students both academically and financially. International students [contributed](#) 42.9 billion to the U.S. economy and supported more than 355,000 jobs during the 2024-2025 academic year. DHS [acknowledged](#) that annualized costs of the rule could exceed \$440 million, but “disagrees” that it will lead to larger impacts, generally asserting that universities and colleges would presumably be able to “attract other students who are not dissuaded by the requirements of this rule.” [NAFSA](#) warns that the rule will have these larger negative impacts, stating that the rule “is not just bad for higher education, it is bad for American innovation, economic growth, workforce development, and global leadership.”

Critics also [argue](#) that these restrictions could have unintended consequences for both students and the American economy. In growing technological fields, including artificial intelligence (AI), the [founders](#) of many leading American companies first came to the U.S. to study as international students. And recent graduates are an important part of the talent pipeline for American firms. U.S. companies frequently hire recent international graduates through OPT before sponsoring them for longer-term visas such as the [H-1B](#). If students are unable to use OPT or face additional uncertainty surrounding their ability to remain in the United States, they are much less likely to qualify for an H-1B visa, reducing their opportunities to remain in the country after graduation while also limiting employers' access to skilled talent.

[Supporters](#) of the rule, however, argue that placing fixed limits on these visas and providing additional oversight is necessary. They assert that student visas have been used to improperly prolong stays in the United States by allowing individuals to repeatedly enroll in additional programs to maintain lawful status.

Critics have also expressed concerns with the OPT program, [arguing](#) that it allows American companies to hire foreign graduates without sufficient safeguards to ensure they are not being paid less than similarly qualified American workers.

Conclusion

The final rule represents one of the most significant changes to the F, J, and I nonimmigrant visa programs in nearly five decades. By replacing the existing duration of status framework with fixed admission periods and an expanded DHS role, the final rule fundamentally changes how international students and their dependents, exchange visitors, and foreign media representatives maintain lawful presence in the United States. Supporters argue these changes strengthen immigration enforcement and reduce opportunities for fraud, while critics contend they create additional uncertainty for

students and universities and may ultimately diminish the United States' attractiveness as a destination for international talent. As implementation begins in September 2026, its long-term effects on enrollment, higher education, and the American economy will become clearer.