

F-1 / J-1 Fixed-Clock Guide

Your deadlines, your grace period, and exactly when to file — before the clock starts.

Final rule published July 17, 2026 · Effective September 15, 2026 · Over 1 million students & scholars affected

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THE KEY DATES

JUL 17

The final rule publishes in the Federal Register. This is no longer a proposal — it is law pending its effective date.

SEP 15

Fixed admission periods take effect. From this date, F-1 and J-1 admissions carry a hard expiration on the I-94 — up to four years maximum.

YOUR I-94

Your personal deadline. After any entry or approval, your I-94 record — not your I-20 or DS-2019 — controls how long you may stay.

WHAT CHANGED

- ☐ **4-year cap:** Admission runs the length of your program — but never more than four years at a time.
- ☐ **30-day grace:** The F-1 grace period after completing your program shrinks from 60 days to 30.
- ☐ **I-539 extensions:** Need more time? Your DSO can no longer simply update your record. You must file Form I-539 with USCIS, pay the fee, and wait for adjudication.
- ☐ **Mobility limits:** Changing programs, schools, or education levels mid-stay now faces new restrictions — especially in year one.

FIND YOUR CLOCK — DO THIS TODAY

- ☐ Look up your most recent I-94 at i94.cbp.dhs.gov after every entry. That date is your real deadline.
- ☐ Compare it against your program end date (I-20 / DS-2019) and your OPT or STEM OPT EAD dates.
- ☐ Check your spouse's and children's I-94s too — F-2 and J-2 dependents run on your clock.
- ☐ If your program or OPT runs past your admission period, you need an extension strategy — now, not later.

WHEN TO FILE YOUR EXTENSION

- ☐ **The golden rule:** Your I-539 must be received by USCIS before your I-94 expires. A timely filing generally lets you remain while it is pending.
- ☐ **File early:** USCIS processing backlogs are real. Build your filing calendar 4–6 months ahead of your expiration date.
- ☐ **Don't rely on grace:** The 30-day grace period is for departure preparation — it is not extra time to file or work.
- ☐ **Know the stakes:** A denial or late filing can trigger unlawful presence, which can lead to 3- and 10-year bars on returning.

YOUR OPTIONS TO STAY

- ☐ **Buy time:** File your I-539 extension early and finish your program without a status gap.
- ☐ **Change status:** F-1 can become H-1B, O-1, E-2, TN, and other work categories that keep your career on U.S. soil.
- ☐ **Go permanent:** Self-petitioned green cards — the EB-2 National Interest Waiver and EB-1A extraordinary ability — require no employer sponsor and no spouse. Researchers, STEM graduates, and founders often qualify sooner than they think.
- ☐ **Fight back:** If USCIS unreasonably delays or wrongly denies you, federal court remedies — appeals and mandamus — exist for exactly this.

RED FLAGS — GET HELP IMMEDIATELY IF

- Your I-94 expires in less than 6 months and your program or OPT runs longer.
- You've already passed a deadline, received an RFE or denial, or fallen out of status.
- Anyone suggests marriage, a fake program, or a 'consultant' shortcut to fix your status.

THE BOTTOM LINE

The rule is final, but your options are not gone — they are simply on a schedule now. Students and scholars who map their clock and file early will barely feel this change. Those who wait will feel all of it.

You don't need a wedding. You need a plan.

Free 15-Minute Initial Consultation

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