New F-1 Rule: Master's Students

Simple guidance for graduate students

> **Important:** This guide gives general educational information, not legal advice. The rule may be delayed, challenged, or changed. Confirm your personal case before acting.

Final rule: 91 FR 44976, published July 17, 2026 **Scheduled effective date:** September 15, 2026

What changed?

- The DHS final rule replaces Duration of Status (D/S) with a fixed admission period for many F-1 students starting September 15, 2026.
- After entry, reentry, or an approved Extension of Stay, you will normally have a date-specific I-94.
- Four years is not a lifetime limit. It is the maximum for one admission period.
- You may still enter the U.S. up to 30 days before the program start date on your I-20. That early window does not count against your maximum stay.

Students already in the U.S. under D/S on September 15, 2026

- You generally do not need to file Form I-539 immediately.
- Your transition period generally ends on the earlier of: the program end date on your current I-20, the end date on your OPT EAD card, or four years after September 15, 2026.
- Transition students keep the old 60-day grace period until they travel and reenter, or until USCIS approves an Extension of Stay. After that, the grace period becomes 30 days.

> **Travel warning.** Do not travel casually after September 15, 2026. Reentry can give you a fixed I-94 date and reduce your grace period from 60 days to 30 days.

Graduate transfer and program-change rules

- Graduate students cannot change their educational objective - major or educational level - during the program.
- A graduate-school transfer is allowed only if SEVP gives case-by-case approval for extenuating circumstances.
- Do not assume a normal SEVIS transfer is enough.

Same-level and lower-level study

- The ban on starting another program at the same or lower educational level applies to programs you complete after September 15, 2026.
- If you complete a program after that date, a second master's, or a move from a master's to a certificate, bachelor's, or ESL program, may be barred.
- Programs completed before September 15, 2026 are not counted for this restriction.
- A doctoral program should fit your real academic and career goals.

OPT, STEM OPT, and extensions

- OPT and STEM OPT still exist.
- Some transition students who timely file Form I-765 by approximately March 18, 2027 may not need a separate I-539 for that OPT or STEM OPT period.
- If you need extra time to finish, speak with your DSO early. Academic probation, suspension, or repeated failure to progress are generally not good extension reasons.
- CPT, H-1B, EB-2, EB-3, and other processes do not automatically extend F-1 status.

Working while an Extension of Stay is pending

- If you **timely file** Form I-539 before your I-94 expires, on-campus employment, CPT, and severe economic hardship work authorization may continue automatically for up to 240 days.
- At day 240 you must stop working, even if USCIS has not decided your case. You may generally remain in the U.S. and keep studying while it is pending.
- If you file the I-539 **during the 30-day departure grace period** instead, you get no automatic work extension. You must wait for approval before working.
- Plan CPT and on-campus work around these dates. Do not assume a pending case protects your paycheck indefinitely.

> **Day 1 CPT students, read this twice.** Day 1 CPT is not a separate immigration status. Your CPT work authorization depends on your F-1 admission period, and the 240-day rule above can stop your employment while an Extension of Stay is still pending.

> **Could this change?** The rule is classified as a major rule, so Congress has a limited window to pass a resolution of disapproval, and lawsuits are possible. Until something actually changes, plan as if the September 15, 2026 date will hold.

Questions in the Otips group

- Post general questions in the group. We answer there so everyone can learn from the response.
- Read earlier questions first. Someone may have already asked the same thing.
- Do not post private documents, passport numbers, SEVIS numbers, or bank statements in the group.
- Send personal documents privately to the Otips team.

For a personal review, prepare

- Current I-20
- I-94
- Passport and visa
- OPT EAD card, if any
- Highest diploma or degree
- Your planned next program and long-term goal

> **Contact Otips**
> Otips Inc. | otips.com | info@otips.com | +1 (415) 235-8080
> 1311 Park St STE 1006, Alameda, CA 94501

Sources: DHS Final Rule, 91 FR 44976; NAFSA final-rule analysis dated July 17, 2026. Otips Inc. (DBA Otips) is not a law firm and does not provide legal advice.