

# International Students & the Job Search



As an international student seeking post-graduation employment in the United States, you will have to deal with a few special issues. This guide is intended to provide information about the job search and interviewing. It should be used for informational purposes only; it is NOT a substitute for professional legal advice.

## ILLEGAL EMPLOYMENT PRACTICES

The governmental regulations that forbid discrimination on the basis of national origin and citizenship are somewhat more complicated than the regulations concerning such characteristics as race, sex, and age. Before you go into an interview, and even before you apply for a job, you should know what kinds of information you cannot be required to provide.

### National Origin

A company is required by law to hire only "authorized aliens," or those foreign citizens eligible to work legally in the U.S. According to the Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) of 1986, "authorized aliens" include:

1. those who, by virtue of status, may be employed generally (e.g., permanent residents, conditional permanent residents, refugees, asylees).
2. those who, by virtue of status, may work for a specific employer (e.g., H-1Bs, F-1s under limited circumstances like on-campus and curricular practical training).
3. those with employment authorization documents (EADs).

As an international student, you almost certainly qualify as "authorized," which means that you are protected from discrimination on the basis of national origin. National origin encompasses your place of origin, your ancestors' place of origin, and the physical, cultural, or linguistic characteristics of a particular nationality. An employer who treats a job applicant differently than other applicants or employees violates IRCA.

### Citizenship

IRCA also prohibits discriminating against a U.S. citizen or intending citizen because of citizenship status. Intending citizens include lawful permanent residents, temporary residents under the legalization provision for pre-1982 entrants, special agricultural workers, refugees, or those granted asylum.

### An Unsolved Dilemma

There is no government-endorsed way for employers to

distinguish applicants who are authorized for a limited time or a specific employer. Some employers may approach this question in the following way, which is probably legal even though it has not been officially endorsed. The employer may ask, "Are you a U.S. citizen, permanent resident, temporary resident, asylee, or refugee?" If the answer is yes, the employer should not inquire further. If no, the employer may ask if the applicant has a legal right to work in the U.S. If the answer is yes, the employer may ask the applicant to explain and can then inquire into the duration and basis of their authorization. However, an employer who uses this approach runs the risk of inquiring about citizenship or national origin.

## FINDING OPPORTUNITIES AND APPLYING FOR JOBS

As an international student, you should start your job search early. Because of the legal issues that may be involved with hiring international students, you should expect that your job search will take as much as a year. You may find that it takes longer to find companies that are interested in hiring international students.

The best way to find companies that are willing to hire international students is to talk to other international students and alumni, since companies that have hired international students in the past are likely to continue to do so. Also, if a company is participating in on-campus recruiting at the Center for Career Development (CCD), you can search the online database to see if they indicate that they will hire students for practical training.

It is possible that a company that has recruited international students in the past will no longer be willing to do so, as hiring policies often change. However, you may find that although the company no longer actively recruits international students, it is still willing to hire international students in some instances. It is a good idea to find out the specifics of the situation if you still want to apply for a job at the company in question. Alumni currently working for the organization are a good source of information.

# What Employers Can and Cannot Ask

## Name

### **May ask**

- whether you ever used another name
- any additional information regarding an assumed name, changed name, or nickname necessary to enable a check on your work and educational record

### **May NOT ask**

- your maiden name

## Age

### **May ask**

- Are you 18 years or older? If not, what is your age?

### **May NOT ask (before hiring)**

- age
- birthdate
- ages of your children

## National origin

### **May ask**

- which languages you read, speak, or write, provided foreign language ability is job-related

### **May NOT ask**

- your nationality, lineage, ancestry, national origin, or place of birth
- the nationality, lineage, ancestry, national origin, or place of birth of your parents or spouse
- What is your native language? or, What language do you most often speak?
- How did you acquire your foreign language ability?

## Color and race

### **May ask**

- NOTHING

### **May NOT ask**

- race or color
- questions regarding the color of your skin, eyes, or hair

## Citizenship

### **May ask**

- Are you legally authorized to work in the United States?
- Will you now or in the future require sponsorship for an employment visa status (e.g., H-1B visa status)?

### **May NOT ask**

- Of which country are you a citizen?
- Are you a naturalized or native-born citizen?
- Can you produce your naturalization papers?
- date when you acquired citizenship
- visa type
- whether your parents or spouse are naturalized or native-born U.S. citizens, or the date when your parents or spouse acquired citizenship

## Sex and marital status

### **May ask**

- name and address of parent or guardian, if you are a minor
- names of relatives already employed by the employer (may state the employer's policy regarding work assignments of employees who are related)

### **May NOT ask**

- questions that would indicate your sex
- questions that would indicate your marital status
- number and/or ages of children or dependents
- questions regarding pregnancy, childbearing, or birth control
- name or address of relatives, spouse, or children, if you are not a minor

## Religion

### **May ask**

- NOTHING (may state the employer's regular days, hours, and shifts)

## Physical Description and Abilities

### **May ask**

- height and weight, but only commensurate with the specific job requirements

### **May NOT request**

- a photograph, either required or optional, at any time before an offer is made

## Disability

### **May ask**

- whether you can perform the essential functions of the job, either with or without accommodation

### **May NOT ask**

- if you have a disability
- if you have ever been treated for any specific diseases
- whether you have, or ever had, a drug or alcohol problem

## Arrest Record

### **May ask**

- if you have ever been convicted of a crime (if yes, may ask for details, but there must be a direct relationship between the job and the offense in order to use conviction as a basis for denial)

### **May NOT ask**

- whether you have ever been arrested

## Membership in Organizations

### **May ask**

- membership in organizations that you consider relevant to your ability to perform the job

### **May NOT ask**

- all organizations, clubs, societies, and lodges to which you belong

## Military Service

### **May ask**

- questions regarding relevant skills acquired during U.S. military service
- whether you received a dishonorable discharge

### **May NOT ask**

- questions regarding service in a foreign military

## Education

### **May ask**

- your academic, vocational, or professional education
- which schools you attended

### **May NOT ask (before hiring)**

- dates of attendance or dates of degrees obtained

## Miscellaneous

### **Should not ask**

- questions about financial credit
- questions about union membership
- questions about financial status

If a company indicates in their material for on-campus recruiting that they are not accepting applications from international students, you will not be eligible to apply through the CCD. However, if they have a history of hiring international students, you can send a cover letter and resume directly to the contact listed in RICElink (if there is one available). The letter should detail your qualifications and reasons for your interest in the company. You can bring the letter to the CCD for a critique.

Sometimes, a company will simply indicate that they only hire U.S. citizens. You should not take this personally—the company may be obligated to do so because of contracts with the government.

When you apply for a job, you should not list your visa status on your resume or CV, although it is appropriate to mention your status in your cover letter. If you have any doubt about whether your employer understands your visa status, make sure you reiterate the terms of your eligibility before you accept a job. Hiring organizations will ask the appropriate questions as the process continues. You should never lie about your visa status or try to conceal it, but you do not have to draw attention to it if you do not think that this would be to your advantage.

## PREPARING FOR THE INTERVIEW

Some international students are initially uncomfortable with American-style job interviews. Cultural differences can lead to difficulties if you go into an interview without a good idea of what to expect and what will be expected of you. For example, American job interviews require you to sell yourself by discussing your career goals, qualifications, achievements, and expectations. Members of some cultures may find it difficult to talk about themselves in such detail when addressing a potential employer. The best way to prepare for a job interview is to understand these differences, then get a lot of practice. Contact the CCD to set up a mock interview.

## INTERVIEWING

This section will deal exclusively with a few issues that are of particular importance to international students. For a more complete look at the interviewing process, check out the CSPD's Interview Guide.

### Conventions of the American Job Search

Here is a short list of some of the conventions that you will be expected to adhere to in your job search. Some international students have to make an effort to adjust to these standards, since many of these expectations conflict with the values of other cultures.

**Self-promotion.** The interviewer will expect you to be assertive and display confidence in openly discussing your goals and accomplishments. It is also normal to follow up on your interview with thank-you notes and telephone inquiries about the status of your application.

**Directness in communication.** You will be expected to give open and direct responses to the interviewer's questions. Eye

contact with the interviewer and a relaxed posture are appropriate.

**Self-disclosure.** The interviewer will probably ask for personal descriptions of your experiences, hobbies, strengths, and weaknesses. You may also have to answer questions about your personality—for example, your leadership style.

**Career self-awareness.** You should be prepared to demonstrate a clear knowledge of your long-range career goals and how they relate to the job at hand.

**Individual responsibility in finding employment.** You should use a wide variety of resources in finding and pursuing jobs. Your friends, family, and contacts, as well as professional associations, academic mentors, and the CCD, are all useful resources in your job search. Networking is an important part of the job search process.

**Informality in the interview process.** The interview environment is often quite congenial. Some joking and a free exchange of information are acceptable.

**Punctuality.** You should arrive 5 to 15 minutes before your appointment.

**Effective letters of application and resumes.** Your resume should be error-free. It should be a concise and attractive outline of your relevant job experience, skills, accomplishments, and academic credentials. It will be personalized to reflect your qualifications and professional interests. See CCD's Resume Guide for more information.

**Preparation about the organization.** You should obtain as much information as possible about the job and organization before the interview and demonstrate an awareness of the organization's specific needs and expectations in your letter of application and during your interview.

### Types of Interviews

Several kinds of interviews are commonly used by American employers. You should be familiar with these types.

**"Tell me about yourself" interview.** In this type of interview, the first question from the interviewer is "Tell me about yourself," and the follow-up questions are all derived from your answer to this first question. This is a highly unstructured interview.

**How to prepare.** Think about what three or four things you would want the interviewer to know if this were the only question in the interview. Be prepared to summarize your work history, career goals, and other relevant information.

**Highly structured interview.** Sometimes the recruiter has a fixed list of questions that are asked of all the interviewees. You can tell when you are in a highly structured interview because the recruiter may frequently refer to his or her question sheet to decide what to ask next. Also, the interviewer is unlikely to probe your answers or ask related questions.

## Common Cultural Barriers to the Job Search

	<b>U.S. Employer Expectations</b>	<b>Conflicting Values of Another Culture</b>
<b>Self Promotion</b>	<p>Assertiveness, openly discussing accomplishments.</p> <p>Follow-up with employers (telephone inquiries about application, thank-you notes, etc.).</p>	<p>Unless presented as part of a group activity, citing achieved goals, accomplishments, and skills is viewed as boastful, self-serving, and too individualistic.</p> <p>Asking employers directly about status of application is rude.</p>
<b>Directness in Communication</b>	<p>Eye contact with interviewer, relaxed posture, and other appropriate nonverbal behavior.</p> <p>Open and direct responses to questions.</p>	<p>Eye contact, especially with persons of higher status (e.g., employer, interviewer), is disrespectful.</p> <p>Appearance of criticism must be avoided to save face.</p>
<b>Self Disclosure</b>	<p>Personal descriptions of experiences, hobbies, strengths, weaknesses. Answers to questions related to personality (e.g., leadership style, problem-solving abilities).</p>	<p>Personal questions about likes, dislikes, etc. are considered an invasion of privacy and are discussed only with close friends and family.</p>
<b>Career Self-Awareness</b>	<p>Demonstrating knowledge of self, career goals, and how they relate to the job.</p> <p>Discussion of long-range career goals, company-assigned work responsibilities.</p> <p>Individual must be flexible to accept whatever job becomes available.</p>	<p>Questions about role in a company indicate potential disloyalty.</p> <p>Jobs are assigned by government or family.</p>
<b>Individual Responsibilities in Finding Employment</b>	<p>Use of wide variety of resources in identifying jobs (friends, family, contacts, associations, career services, academic mentors, etc.).</p> <p>Networking</p>	<p>Jobs are found through government or family.</p> <p>Dependency relationships in job search are fostered. One resource (e.g. academic advisor, employment agent) will find work for job seeker.</p>
<b>Informality in the Interview Process</b>	<p>Congenial interviewing environment that encourages openness, some joking, exchange of information.</p>	<p>Sitting with a person of higher status requires deference. The job applicant is very polite and does not ask any questions or provide information that may indicate lack of respect for interviewer's position. Handshaking, touching, using first name, crossing legs, etc., are inappropriate.</p>
<b>Punctuality</b>	<p>Arrive 5–15 minutes before appointment.</p>	<p>Personal relationships are more important than time. Anywhere from 15 minutes to two hours lateness from agreed meeting time is not insulting.</p>
<b>Effective Letters of Application and Resumes</b>	<p>Short, error-free, concise and attractive outline of relevant job experience, skills, accomplishments, and academic credentials. Personalized to reflect each individual's strengths and capabilities.</p>	<p>Resumes are a detailed chronology of academic and formal work experiences and not a tool for self-promotion qualifications and professional interests.</p>
<b>Individual Equality</b>	<p>Race, sex, age should not affect interview relationship.</p>	<p>Males are expected to assume dominance in interactions with females. Younger persons defer to older persons.</p>
<b>Preparation about Organization</b>	<p>Obtain as much information as possible about the company prior to the interview. Demonstrate awareness of organization in letter of application and during interview.</p>	<p>Research about the job and organization before the interview may indicate excessive and undesirable initiative or independence.</p>

Note: These factors are not indigenous to one particular society, but represent a cross-section of countries and continents. From "International Students and the Job Search." Goodman, A.P., J.A. Hartt, M.K. Pennington, and K.P. Terrell. *Journal of Career Planning & Employment*, Summer 1988.

*How to prepare.* Know before you go into the interview what you want the interviewer to know about you and plan to emphasize those points during the interview. Once in the interview, listen to each question carefully to understand what explicit and implicit question is being asked. You can often gauge the kind of candidate the company is looking for from the questions asked. If at the end of the interview there are some important things that the interviewer has not asked about, say, "I would like to point out a couple of other important items in my background that we have not yet had an opportunity to discuss."

**Stress interview.** In this type of interview, the interviewer deliberately introduces some stress to see how you respond. For example, the interviewer may ask your opinion about a controversial subject and then disagree with you.

*How to prepare.* Your best preparation is to anticipate when an interviewer will use a stress interview. If the job for which you are

interviewing is "stressful" or demands that you regularly think on your feet, the interviewer may use this interview to test you. Stay calm, do not take it personally, and remember that how you answer is more important than what you answer.

**Group interview.** Many companies are now using group or panel interviews as part of their process. It is more efficient to have several people interview you at one time rather than individually.

*How to prepare.* Ask ahead of time who will be conducting the interview. Remember during the interview to speak to all the people on the interview panel and not just the person who asked you the question.

**Telephone interview.** Some organizations resort to telephone interviews for screening purposes, either to reduce a too-large pool of highly qualified candidates or when geographic distance precludes an in-person interview until the final stages.

## Some Common Selection Standards

### Analytical Ability

#### Ability to

- define parameters of task and desired objectives
- gather relevant data from appropriate sources
- identify all relevant factors or restrictions
- apply logical reasoning to determine relationships of variables
- develop result-oriented conclusions
- test assumptions, observe results, and incorporate revisions or corrections

### Assertiveness and Enthusiasm

#### Ability to

- pursue goals with commitment and pride in past accomplishments
- take initiative eagerly, persist at tasks, and maintain a high energy level
- demonstrate self-confidence and a positive attitude toward self and others
- enjoy reasonable risk-taking and competition
- express personal and organizational needs in a positive manner

### Technical Knowledge

#### Ability to

- demonstrate understanding of terminology, principles, and theory
- read manuals, blueprints, or journals as required
- follow required technical, industrial, and regulatory guidelines
- demonstrate knowledge of issues, problems, and/or innovations specific to industry
- diagnose, maintain, and troubleshoot equipment or systems

### Responsibility and Maturity

#### Ability to

- do a thorough job on each task and complete assignments on time

- implement or work within organizational policies and guidelines, relating own efforts to organized goals
- maintain composure, effectiveness, and flexibility under pressure
- recognize problems and enlist outside assistance when necessary
- encourage flow of information about decisions, problems, and successes

### Intellectual Ability

#### Ability to

- analyze problems with an open mind
- process information from a variety of sources
- develop new ideas, products, and solutions
- quickly grasp new concepts, approaches, or systems
- organize or reorganize information in unique ways
- apply creative thinking and imagination

### Interpersonal Skills

#### Ability to

- work cooperatively with a variety of individuals
- interface effectively with customers, the public, and coworkers
- recognize strengths and limitations of self and others
- exhibit appropriate sensitivity to others
- focus on task or performance rather than on personality when supervising or relating with others

### Mathematical Ability

#### Ability to

- work comfortably with figures
- develop or apply pricing or financial plans
- perform calculations accurately
- formulate measurement systems
- forecast budget and/or report quantitative data
- identify and correct mathematical errors

## “When in the hiring process do I reveal that I’m an international student?”

From a presentation by Adrienne Nussbaum,  
Assistant Dean for International Student Services,  
Boston College, 1999

One of the most frequent and difficult questions that I am asked in my position as assistant dean for international student services at Boston College is “When and how should I tell a prospective employer that I am an international student?” There is certainly no easy or correct answer to this question. For example, I recently heard a representative from the human resources department of a multinational company state that she actually likes to see this information listed on the person’s resume so that she knows right from the start. I have to admit that I found this response quite surprising as it is not what I usually recommend to students! However, it just demonstrates that there are many approaches to how to handle this situation.

I’d like to take a few moments to share some of the advice that I tell my students on this subject. Let’s start with the “when.” I personally feel that it is not necessary to list your nationality on your resume. An astute employer may in fact deduce that you are a foreign national based on where you received your education or the location of past work experiences, but you do not necessarily want to draw attention to this fact at this early stage of the process. Your goal, of course, is to get past the initial screening and be invited for an interview. Some employers have a policy of not hiring foreign nationals and strictly adhere to it, but many start with that attitude and may be convinced otherwise when given the chance. You need to give them that chance.

On the other hand, you also do not want to wait until your third or fourth interview to bring it up. I personally know of a student who lost a job offer because he waited too long. American employers value honesty and directness, and if they feel you have been hiding something from them, they won’t trust you. They also might then come to think that your immigration status is a bigger “problem” than it actually is and therefore not want to bother. I usually recommend that students address the issue in either their first or second interview, once they have had the opportunity to “sell themselves” and feel that the employer is potentially interested in hiring them.

As for the “how” to bring it up, this is absolutely critical to your success in securing a position. As I mentioned earlier, there are employers who absolutely won’t hire foreign nationals, there are employers who do it routinely, but the majority falls somewhere in the middle. They simply do not know what is involved in the process and it is your responsibility to “educate” them. It is therefore crucial that you have complete and accurate knowledge of your options and can communicate them to an employer in a clear and confident manner. If you simply say, “I don’t really know what has to be done,” most employers are not going to take the time to find out.

Most international students on F-1 student visas are eligible for 12 months of “practical training” upon completion of their studies without any job offer or letter from an employer. Therefore, you can start by explaining to your potential employer that you have a one-year employment authorization that requires absolutely no work on their part.

As for discussing the H-1, I do not want to turn this into an immigration lecture, but what I can tell you is that there are many myths and misunderstandings out there on the part of employers about the H-1 visa. They often confuse it with the process of applying for permanent residency and getting a “green card.” Once again, it is your responsibility to dispel those myths. I tell students to avoid using the word “sponsor” when talking about an H-1 because this term is often associated with green cards. Instead, use the phrase, “petition for an H-1.” You should also explain that employers are NOT required to show that there are no U.S. citizens available who can do the job, but simply that you meet their minimum qualifications. This small fact will often open the door to further discussion.

If the employer does not have someone on staff who is familiar with the H-1 process, it is generally advisable to hire an immigration attorney, not because it is required but because he or she processes these applications routinely and knows exactly what the immigration service is looking for. A minor mistake can cause delays of weeks or even months in the process during which you will be losing salary. The legal fee associated with applying for an H-1 visa usually runs (in the Boston area) from \$1,800 to \$2,000. You can often negotiate with your employer who will pay the fee; if necessary, offer to pay it yourself. It is an investment in your future, and you will make up the money in no time. The process usually takes about six to eight weeks, so be sure to leave plenty of time on your practical training so you do not fall “out of status” or have a gap in your employment eligibility.

Lastly, don’t forget that you should not try to hide the fact that you are an international student, but rather you should be proud of it. It is an asset, not a burden! International students bring with them many skills and experiences that set them apart from American students. They often know more than one language, have been exposed to other cultures and systems, are mature, flexible, adaptable, and deal well with change and ambiguity, just by virtue of having come to the U.S. to study. These are all qualities that are sought after by employers. Highlight your special and unique background! It will make you stand out from the crowd.

Please remember that all of this is simply one person’s advice from having worked with international students for the past 16 years. Ask another adviser and you will probably get other opinions! If you haven’t already, I strongly recommend that you visit your own international student office and learn as much as you can about practical training and H-1s. Good luck!

*How to prepare.* Schedule your interview for a time when you will be fresh and undistracted. Try to imagine a person on the other end of the phone to make the conversation feel more personal so that you can convey warmth and congeniality in your voice.

**Inexperienced interview.** If the interviewer has not had much experience interviewing, you may notice that the pace of the interview is uneven. The inexperienced interviewer may not know how to take the lead in the interview and may let you control the content. This interviewer might also ask illegal questions simply because he or she is unfamiliar with employment law.

*How to prepare.* Use the situation to your advantage! The interview is likely to be more informal, which will give you more opportunity to talk about your selling points. Also, since these interviewers are unlikely to be very familiar with the job (after all, they are inexperienced because they are not professional interviewers), ask them technical questions about the position.

### Stages of the Interview

**Icebreaker.** A good interviewer will begin with a few minutes of small talk to help you relax and to get a sense of your personality. Even though this may be a conversation about things completely unrelated to the job, this is still an important part of the interview. The interviewer is getting his or her first impression of you, and this is a chance for you to develop rapport with the interviewer. Remember, the interview begins the moment you introduce yourself and shake hands.

**Personal qualifications and interest in the position.** The adept interviewer will move subtly from a casual exchange to a more specific level of questions. Now he or she will begin to probe your background with “when, where, and why” questions. Although the interviewer is asking the questions at this point, you can usually control the course of the interview with your answers. Make sure you get across what you want to, including character traits they cannot ask you about directly (e.g., integrity, dependability). You want to be conversational but concise.

**Organization and position.** Once the interviewer has a good sense of your skills and interests, he or she will begin to talk with you about the company and the specific position for which you are interviewing.

**Candidate questions.** The interviewer should leave a few minutes at the end of the interview to answer your questions about the company and position.

**Close and follow-up.** At the end of the interview, ask the interviewer, “Do you need any additional information?” Make sure you are clear about the next step in the interview process and when you can expect to hear from the organization. Ask the recruiter for his or her business card. Send a thank-you letter to the interviewer within 24 hours of the interview.

### How to Approach the Questions

Think from the interviewer’s perspective. When preparing to answer a question, ask yourself why the interviewer chose that question so that you can provide an answer that he or she is

really interested in. In general, when you are asked about your personal or professional qualifications, do not answer with dry lists of your talents and skills. Instead, try to answer with “success stories” or anecdotes that illustrate those talents and skills.

### TALKING ABOUT YOUR STATUS AS AN INTERNATIONAL STUDENT

It is difficult to know when to reveal to a potential employer your status as an international student. It is not necessary to list your nationality on your resume. It is unlikely that giving this information to an employer immediately will help your chances, and there is a possibility that it will make the employer less likely to consider you. On the other hand, you do not want to wait too long before telling the employer about your status, because the employer might think that you have something to hide or that your status is a bigger problem than it really is. There is no universal agreement about when you should discuss this issue with an employer, but a good rule of thumb is to address it in either your first or your second interview. At this stage of the job search, you have attracted the employer’s attention and your position is more secure than it is at the very beginning of the search.

An equally important issue is what to say about your status. Most employers are not averse to hiring foreign nationals, but they do not have a good idea of what is involved in the process. It is your responsibility to have complete and accurate knowledge of your options so that you can communicate them to the employer in a clear and confident manner. If your employer does not know what a practical training extension is or the difference between an H-1 visa and a green card, you must be able to explain these issues. This will benefit both you and the employer.

Whatever you do, do not try to hide your status from a potential employer. Your background is not a liability; it is an asset. Most international students bring with them skills and experiences that set them apart from American students. They often know more than one language, have been exposed to other cultures and systems, are mature, flexible, and adaptable, and deal well with change and ambiguity, just by virtue of having come to the U.S. to study. All of these qualities are sought after by employers. Your unique background sets you apart from the crowd; use it to your advantage.

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