Online Orientation for Graduate International Students
Updated 5/10/13

This orientation is required of all new graduate international students arriving from overseas and those transferring from other U.S. institutions.

Please read this entire document. At the end of the orientation, please print out the last page, sign your name as indicated, and bring it to me when you arrive. If you do not complete this orientation and turn in the signed page, your SEVIS record will not be activated at MTSU and your F1 status will be terminated.
Welcome to Middle Tennessee State University

Roles and Responsibilities

It is the role of the Designated School Official (DSO) to:

1) Advise F1 international students on immigration-related issues and help file important applications for the student to USCIS
2) Maintain accurate reporting and record-keeping as required by the Department of Homeland Security (DHS)
3) Keep the university compliant with all federal rules & regulations pertaining the tracking of F1 international students

The DSO must balance the responsibilities he/she has to the Department of Homeland Security, the State of Tennessee, Middle Tennessee State University, and the student. The DSO is knowledgeable of the F1 rules and regulations and is able to properly advise an F1 student on matters of immigration. Melissa Lowrance is currently the DSO for all graduate international students. She is there to help you with immigration questions and to advise you in immigration matters to the best of her ability. She is there to help you maintain your F1 status. However, it is ultimately the individual student’s responsibility to maintain his/her status as an F1 student. Please familiarize yourself with the rules and regulations of your F1 visa before you arrive at MTSU.

It is the responsibility of the student to maintain his/her F1 student status. This includes keeping the DSO updated with important information and making satisfactory progress towards his/her degree. Below is a list (not comprehensive) of things that the student is responsible for while here at MTSU.

1) Enroll in a full course of study at the beginning of every session (excluding the summer term)
2) Consult with the DSO before dropping below a full course of study for any reason
3) Report a change of address to the DSO within 10 days of the change
4) Report any change in sources of financial support to the DSO
5) Report any changes in program of study to the DSO
6) Report any changes in academic status to the DSO
7) Seek the approval of the DSO/USCIS before engaging in employment or practical training
8) Notify the DSO prior to traveling outside of the U.S.
9) Report to the DSO upon arrival in the U.S. after traveling outside of the U.S.
10) Notify the DSO upon wanting to apply for a Change of Non-Immigrant Status
11) Notify the DSO upon approval or denial of a Change of Non-Immigrant Status
12) Consult with the DSO for approval to extend the end date on the I-20
13) Notify the DSO if planning to transfer out of MTSU to another U.S. institution
14) Notify the DSO of any changes in dependent status

Again, it is the student’s responsibility to maintain his/her status while in the U.S. The DSO is to advise the student but the responsibility to remain in the U.S. legally falls to the student.
**Important Legal Documents**

As an F1 international student, you are in possession of very important legal documents that prove you are allowed to be here in the U.S., for how long, and for what purpose. The four important documents are the I-20, I-94, visa, and passport.

1) **I-20:** This is the document used for obtaining an F1 visa. Important information on the I-20 includes your SEVIS ID number (top right corner), program of study, beginning and ending date of your program, and any authorizations (CPT, OPT, Reduced Course Load). The DSO will have signed the I-20. Number 11 on the first page must be signed by the student upon receipt of the I-20.

2) **I-94:** This document is very important while you remain in the U.S. It tells what date you entered the U.S., the port of entry, your visa type, and how long you can stay in the U.S. Upon arriving in the U.S., the ending date on your I-94 should not be a date. It should read “D/S” for “Duration of Stay.” This means that you are allowed to remain in the U.S. for as long as you maintain your F1 student status.

3) **Visa:** The visa is an entry document only. It indicates for how long you are allowed to enter or re-enter the U.S. Important items on the visa to note are your visa type (F1 or your dependents will show F2), the expiration date, and whether you can enter the U.S. only once or multiple times during the time period for which the visa is valid. Each country issues U.S. visas for different lengths of time. It is important to know when your visa expires. You may not enter the U.S. on an expired visa. However, you can remain in the U.S. on an expired visa. If your visa expires while you are here in the U.S. that is ok. You are not out-of-status with immigration. It just means that should you choose to leave the U.S. you will not be allowed to re-enter unless you renew the visa in your home country.

4) **Passport:** Unlike the visa, you must have a valid (non-expired) passport at all times. You should never allow your passport to expire. Immigration suggests that you should renew your passport when it is within six months of expiring.

These documents are very important and anyone who is unable to produce these documents should they be questioned by a government official is subject to deportation. Therefore, we suggest you keep these documents in a safe and secure place at all times. We do not recommend that you carry them with you (unless you are traveling) but keep them in a secure location. It is recommended that you keep copies of your documents on you, but not the originals. Replacing lost or stolen documents of this kind is difficult and time-consuming. Should your documents become lost or stolen, see the DSO immediately to begin procedures to replace them.
Course Load

The F1 student must maintain a full course load while enrolled at a university. You have obtained an F1 visa because your primary purpose of coming to the U.S. is to study in a degree-seeking program. Therefore, since study is your primary purpose, you must enroll full-time each Fall and Spring semester. The Summer term is optional for international students, therefore, there are no restrictions on the number of credit hours that must be taken during the Summer. The student can register for a full-time course load in the Summer or not register for anything. The College of Graduate Studies considers nine graduate credit hours to be a full course load. Courses are typically three credits each (with some exceptions), so a full course load is generally three courses each semester.

There are certain occasions where an F1 student may be permitted to drop below a full course load. This is called a Reduced Course Load (RCL) and permission from the DSO must be obtained to authorize this. There are very few reasons that an F1 student can be approved for an RCL (i.e. medical condition, improper course placement, or initial difficulty with the English language). These reasons will require all the proper documentation necessary to prove them and the decision remains at the discretion of the DSO. Once the student has been registered in the SEVIS system each semester, dropping a course or courses is not permitted. Dropping below a full course load without the permission of the DSO first, results in the student being immediately out-of-status and in danger of his/her SEVIS record being terminated.

*If an F1 student has been awarded a Full Graduate Assistantship, the full course load requirement is six hours each semester instead of nine hours.

GPA Requirement

The College of Graduate Studies requires that a Master’s student maintain a GPA of 3.0 (out of 4.0) during his/her course of study at MTSU. A Doctoral student must maintain a GPA of 3.25 (out of 4.0).

Failure to maintain the required GPA has consequences. The student will be placed on probation if, at the end of the semester, the GPA is below the required minimum. Once on probation, the student has three consecutive semesters in which to restore the GPA to the minimum required. Probation itself has no serious consequences to the student’s academic status or immigration status other than to warn the student of potential academic problems. If the student cannot bring the GPA up to the required minimum by the end of the third semester of probation, the student will be suspended. This is very serious and results in immediate termination of the F1 student status. The student then must make plans to return to their home country. The student can appeal the suspension if they wish. Below is a link for more information on the academic standards, probation, and suspension.

http://www.mtsu.edu/graduate/student/regulations/suspension.shtml
*The student must also be aware that by falling below the required minimum GPA, he/she is at risk of losing his/her graduate assistantship or his/her home government scholarship.

**Employment**

Federal regulations state that off-campus employment is not permitted for a student on an F1 visa. There are a few exceptions and these exceptions must be authorized by the DSO and USCIS. These exceptions include Curricular Practical Training (CPT) or Employment Authorization for Economic Hardship. Both instances require USCIS approval and the proper documentation.

An F1 student is permitted to work on campus as a graduate assistantship or a student worker. If a graduate assistantship is awarded to the student or if the student finds work on campus as a student worker, contact the DSO to make sure that the proper authorizations have been given to approve the on-campus work.

Per federal regulations, an F1 student is permitted to work a maximum of 20 hours per week during the regular academic year (Fall and Spring semesters). During university holidays and the Summer semester, a student is permitted to work for up to 40 hours per week. If a student has a full graduate assistantship, he/she is not permitted to also hold a student worker position (except during the Summer semester) since this would put him/her over 20 hours per week.

**Graduate Assistantships**

If you have been awarded a Graduate Assistantship (GA), upon arrival on campus you will go to the Department that has awarded you the assistantship. You must sign the assistantship contract and submit other appropriate employment documentation. You should also bring with you your I-20, I-94, passport, and visa so that the Human Resources department has this on file.

A full graduate assistantship will cover all of the student’s tuition and 42% of the student fees. The student is responsible for paying the remaining fees each semester (and the health insurance premium if the student has chose the health insurance through MTSU). You can expect to pay about $350-$600 in fees and insurance each semester. Pay attention to payment deadlines! Make sure the assistantship has covered the tuition and pay the remaining fees before the payment deadline. If payment is not made before the deadline, you will be dropped from all courses for which you have registered.

There are different types of Graduate Assistantships (Administrative, Research, Teaching) and there are different contract lengths (9-month and 12-month). It is important to know what type of GA you have and for how long it lasts. You will work with the department to determine your duties and your schedule of work. Remember, that as a GA, a full course load is considered to be six graduate credit hours. Also, you must maintain the minimum required GPA or you will lose your graduate assistantship. If this becomes the case, you will be responsible for paying full out-of-state tuition and fees.
In order for Middle Tennessee State University to compensate you for your work as a GA, you must obtain a Social Security Card (see section entitled, “Social Security Card”).

**Student Worker**

If you have found a position on campus as a student worker, you will need work authorization. Have the department contact the DSO, Melissa Lowrance, for authorization procedures.

The number of hours a student worker can work each week is the same as the Graduate Assistant. The maximum hours worked per week is 20 during the Fall and Spring semesters. The student worker can also work up to 40 hours per week during university holidays and the Summer semester.

In order for Middle Tennessee State University to compensate you for your work as a student worker, you must obtain a Social Security Card (see section entitled, “Social Security Card.”)

**Social Security Card**

Social Security is how the U.S. Government tracks those working in the U.S. Each citizen has a social security card with a social security number on it. Each international student who wishes to work in the U.S. must obtain a Social Security Card in order to get paid for his/her work. To obtain a social security card, you must first have a graduate assistantship or a student worker position. The department that is hiring you must send the DSO a letter to verify that you have been hired. You will then take a letter from the DSO to the Social Security Administration Office and apply for a card. The card will take 2-3 weeks to arrive. When it arrives, the Human Resources office will need a copy of it so that you can get paid for your work.

We ask all international Graduate Assistants to come to the U.S. prepared to pay for the first two months of living expenses. Due to payroll deadlines at MTSU combined with the process of obtaining a Social Security card, you will not get paid in September. The first paycheck you receive will be at the end of October. The payment will be for all the work you did during September and October. So, please come to school prepared to afford your first two months of living expenses on your own.

**Taxes**

As a student being paid for your work at MTSU, you will have income taxes withheld from your paycheck each month. On April 15th of each year, you must file your income taxes. This means that by April 15th of each year, you must report to the federal government all the income you have earned and how much in taxes you have paid. At this time, they will determine if you have paid too much or paid too little. If more taxes were withheld from your paycheck than necessary throughout the year, then you will get some money back. If they determine that you have not paid enough taxes, then you will owe money. There are tax agencies in Murfreesboro that can help you file your taxes correctly.
Course Registration

If you have not already done so, it is important to get registered for courses as soon as you can. You should have received an email with Registration instructions shortly after you received your acceptance email. Registration must be done online. If you have questions about what courses to register for, contact your academic advisor (listed on your acceptance letter) for advisement. If you have trouble registering for courses due to departmental restrictions, contact the department. They will be able to help.

Registration Guide & PipelineMT Account Creation Instructions

Payment of Fees

It is very important to pay attention to the fee payment deadlines each semester. Students can pay online through their student account or they can pay in person at the Business Office (Cope Administration Building).

If you have been awarded a Graduate Assistantship, make sure the assistantship pays the tuition and then pay the remaining fees.

If you have a scholarship from your home government, make sure that Sherri Justice in the Business Office has your Financial Guarantee Letter. The Financial Guarantee Letter must state that tuition and fees are being covered by the scholarship and there should be an address to where the Business Office can send an invoice. It is the student’s responsibility to ensure that the Business Office has the Financial Guarantee Letter by the payment deadline.

Please keep in mind that if your tuition and fees are not paid by the payment deadline each semester, your courses will be dropped. You will lose your entire schedule and it is difficult to get back into the classes.

Immunizations and Health Services

You should be very aware by now of the immunization requirements of the State of Tennessee. All international students must proof of 2 MMR doses, 2 Varicella doses, and a TB skin test. If you have not already had these immunizations, get them as soon as possible. You can get these immunizations upon arrival at MTSU at the Health Services Office. A TB test will cost $12 USD and each dose of MMR and Varicella vaccine will cost $50 and $95 USD, respectively. See forms below.

TB Screening Form
TB Risk Assessment Form
MMR Form
Varicella Form
MTSU has a Health Services Office on campus. It is a full doctor’s office with qualified doctors and nurses. It also has a pharmacy. Most services are free for MTSU students. The Health Services Office is located in the Recreation Center.

*You must go to Health Services and take the TB test (if you have not had it yet) within the first 30 days of classes. This means that you must have the test taken by June 20th. http://www.mtsu.edu/records/reg-guide-online.php 2013! This is the State of Tennessee law! If your TB test is not completed within the first 30 days of classes starting, your immigration status may be terminated.

**Health Insurance**

The federal regulations state that the F1 international student must have health insurance while enrolled at the university. If you have chosen to enroll in the health insurance provided by MTSU, you will pay the insurance premium through your student account when you pay your tuition and fees. The insurance company that MTSU uses is called Pearce and Pearce, Inc. Below is a link to the website.

http://www.studentinsurance.com/Schools/TN/MTS/?CollegeID=183

The contact person for MTSU at Pearce and Pearce is Jason Coker, cokerj@pearceandpearce.com.

Also, below is link to the summary of benefits that the international health insurance plan includes.

http://www.studentinsurance.com/Schools/TN/source/PDFs/1213tnborINT.pdf

For minor cold/flu/allergies symptoms, we recommend that you go to the Health Services Office on campus. However, off campus hospitals and doctor’s offices will accept the insurance through Pearce and Pearce.

After you begin classes, you will be enrolled in the MTSU health insurance. After you have been enrolled in the plan, you will go to the Pearce and Pearce website and create your own student account. In your student account, you will be able to print out your insurance card, add dental insurance, and add any dependents to your insurance. The added cost of dental insurance and your dependents insurance will be billed to you directly. Please keep in mind that you may only add dental and dependent insurance during the Open Enrollment period from mid-August to mid-September.

If you do not enroll in courses in the Summer semester since it is optional, you will not automatically be enrolled in the insurance for the Summer semester if you have chosen to pay for the insurance each semester and not annually. If you wish to be enrolled in the insurance for the summer even though you haven’t registered for courses you will have to let the DSO know so that she can add you to the insurance roster.

If you have private insurance, you must ensure that it stays valid. If your private insurance expires you will be automatically enrolled in the MTSU health insurance through Pearce and Pearce.
Traveling Abroad

If you are traveling abroad, you must bring your I-20 to the DSO for an endorsement signature on page 3 of your I-20. Please bring the I-20 to the DSO several weeks before your travel date.

Upon your return to the U.S., bring your original documents to the DSO so that he/she can make new copies. This ensures that the DSO has your most current immigration documentation in your file at all times. Be sure to know the expiration dates of your visa and passport. Know before you travel if you will have to renew your passport or visa while in your home country so that you can plan accordingly.

As a student on a nonimmigrant visa, travel abroad is always risky and there are no guarantees that you will not have trouble re-entering the U.S. Obtaining the signature on the I-20 does not guarantee that the border patrol agent will allow your re-entry. The DSO can advise you on how risky your travel is depending on when you are traveling and what country you are from. If you stay out of the country for five or more months, you take the risk of your F1 student status being terminated. In this case, to re-enter the U.S. you will have to go through the process of obtaining a visa all over again.

Safety and Security

While no place is entirely without crime, Murfreesboro and MTSU is a very safe place to live. As most instances of crime involve theft, you should take special care to secure your belongings and always lock your car door and the door of your residence. It is also a good idea to walk with friends, especially at night. Students may contact the Campus Police at 615-898-2424 if they need an escort across campus or if there is an emergency. There are red emergency phones that can be found around campus.

International students are advised that laws in the U.S. might differ greatly from those in their home country. You should know that in the U.S. the legal drinking age is 21. Buying or consuming alcohol by persons under the age of 21 is illegal. Additionally, strict laws govern drinking and driving, even for person 21 years of age or older. A blood alcohol content of .10% or higher is legal evidence of driving under the influence and is punishable by a fine, jail time, and revocation of one’s driver’s license. Be certain to familiarize yourself with U.S. laws such as these to prevent unnecessary problems.

Student ID

Upon arrival on campus, you must obtain your MTSU Student ID card. To do this, go to the James Union Building, Room 306. They will take your picture and print you out a student ID card.
**Parking Pass**

If you will have a car on campus, you will need a parking pass in order to park anywhere on campus. Parking passes cost money, even for students. If you register for a parking pass, your student account will be charged for the cost. You must display this pass in the windshield of your car while parking on campus.

**Banking**

Living and studying in the U.S. is often more expensive than most foreign nationals think it is. Be sure that your finances are in order before departing for the U.S. Make sure that you have sufficient funds to cover all your expenses for at least one year. Do not carry large sums of cash with you as you travel. We recommend that you purchase traveler’s checks drawn on a U.S. bank and use these along with a debit card to cover the bulk of your expenses. A small amount of cash can be exchanged at the airport for those first expenses like transportation or food, but banks will generally offer a better rate of exchange. Therefore, it is best not to exchange too much initially.

When you arrive in Murfreesboro, you should open a bank account at a local bank. You can open a checking or a savings account (or both) at any of the banks in Murfreesboro. Be certain to tell the bank that you are a student so that you receive the best rate. Contact the bank for information about international wire transfers, minimum account balance requirements, cost of checks, etc. You must have your MTSU Student ID card to open an account.

The closest bank to campus that many of our international students use is:

SunTrust  
1213 Greenland Dr  
Murfreesboro TN 37130  
615-848-2228  
https://www.suntrust.com/portal/server.pt/community/personal_home/765

**Housing**

On-campus and off-campus housing is available. If you plan on living on campus, you must submit a housing application to the University Housing Office before you arrive. Assignments will be made on a first come, first served basis. There are several different types of campus housing options available, including dormitories with shared bathrooms or apartments with private kitchens and baths. To view all on-campus housing options and their rates, go to: [http://www.mtsu.edu/housing/](http://www.mtsu.edu/housing/)

On-campus housing is based on availability so do not wait until you get here to make on-campus housing arrangements since it is not guaranteed that there will be rooms still available.

If you would prefer to live off campus, you will need to make your own arrangements. Apartment complexes are available in many locations close to the university. Renting an apartment usually requires you to sign a lease ranging from 6 to 12 months. This
lease is a legal and binding contract, so be certain you understand the terms of the lease before you sign it. You can look for an apartment when you get here or you can start looking for an apartment early. Here is a website that may help:
http://www.murfreesboroapartments.com/default.asp?f=display_apartment_listings&d=apartments&city=Murfreesboro&dosearch=1&gclid=CKCg68bHg7QCFSWnnQodGjAAS

If you get to Murfreesboro and need a hotel, you can look for area hotel information at this website: http://www.tripadvisor.com/SmartDeals-g60970-Murfreesboro_Tennessee-Hotel-Deals.html

As soon as you have found a place of residence here in Murfreesboro, you must send an email to Melissa Lowrance with your new local address (melissa.lowrance@mtsu.edu).

Raider Funds

As a student of MTSU, you can use your student ID as a debit card for on-campus purchases (food, books, supplies, library copies, etc.). You can do this by putting money on your student ID card. Please see the following website on how to put funds on your student ID card to be used for on-campus purchases.

http://www.mtsu.edu/bursar/raiderfunds.php

Eating Facilities on Campus

There are several places to eat on campus. Here is a link to the different places on campus: http://www.campusdish.com/en-US/CSS/MiddleTennessee/Locations/LocationsHome.htm

Murfreesboro also offers many, many places to eat in Murfreesboro (restaurants, cafes, grocery stores, etc.).

Tennessee Driver’s License

If you will have a car, you will need a driver's license to drive the car in the State of Tennessee. The below link will take you through the steps you need to take in order to obtain your driver’s license and what documentation will be required.

http://www.state.tn.us/safety/driverlicense/tdl.htm

Remember that the car you drive must be registered in the State of Tennessee. Click here to find out how you can register your vehicle and obtain a Tennessee license plate.
Campus Map

Click here for a Map of Campus.

Helpful Web Links

Graduate International Student Web Page
Graduate Student Forms
Graduate Assistantship Information
Campus Life at MTSU
MTSU’s Top Ten
Additional Information about MTSU for Students & Parents

SEE NEXT PAGE
Check-In at MTSU

It is recommended that international students arrive about one - two weeks before the start of classes. This will enable you to get settle into your dorm or apartment, buy books, get registered (if you still have not), and get to know the campus.

Upon arrival in Murfreesboro, see Melissa Lowrance for new international student check-in. Below is her contact information. Call or email ahead of coming so that she will be expecting you. Check-in is very important and required by the federal regulations. If the DSO sees that you have entered the U.S. but have not checked-in with her within 10 days of arriving in the U.S., your F1 student status will be terminated and you will be forced to return to your home country.

Sam Ingram Building (ING on campus map), 1st floor
615-898-2068
melissa.lowrance@mtsu.edu
Office hours: 8:00am – 3:30pm

Bring with you the following documents and information:

I-20, I-94, visa, passport
New local address
Last page of International Orientation document signed and dated

I, the undersigned, have read and understood this Orientation document and agree to abide by the rules and regulations of my F1 visa to the best of my ability.

Print Name_________________________________________________________

Sign Name__________________________________________________________

Date_______________________________________________________________