

Final Semester Checklist (Summarized)

- ☐ **Meet with your advisor** – Discuss your final term registration and review your DegreeWorks plan in CougarNet to ensure all requirements are either completed or in progress.
- ☐ **Apply for a Reduced Course Load (RCL), if eligible** – For your final semester, you may qualify for a reduced course load. Submit the request in advance.
- ☐ **Check your I-20 or DS-2019 end date** – If it does not cover your final semester, apply for an extension of stay before it expires.
- ☐ **Complete your degree exit requirements** – Exit requirements differ from coursework completion and are required for all degrees. Depending on your program, this may include a thesis, research project, exit exam, or other requirements. Take notice of and comply with the Graduate School's thesis [submission process](#) and [deadlines](#).
- ☐ **Plan your next step after graduation** – Options include:
 - Applying for OPT (apply early!)
 - Apply for Academic Training (J-1 students)
 - Transferring to another SEVP-approved school
 - Starting a new program at SIUE
 - Returning home
- ☐ **Apply for graduation (Mandatory)** – Submit your graduation application by the published deadline.
- ☐ **Apply for the commencement ceremony (Optional)** – Register to participate in the ceremony.
- ☐ **Update your address in CougarNet** – Keep your U.S. and permanent addresses current.
- ☐ **Resolve all financial obligations** – Pay any outstanding bills, tuition, or fees before graduation.
- ☐ **Request official documents** – Order your diploma, transcript, or proof of degree verification (needed for OPT applications).
- ☐ **Learn about UNIV 500 (Graduate students only)** – If applicable, confirm whether you must enroll in UNIV 500 (continuing enrollment).
- ☐ **Keep the 60-day grace period in mind** – Students must take action (apply for OPT, transfer, change status, or depart) within 60 days of program completion.
- ☐ **Check the end date of your health insurance** – SIUE student health insurance ends shortly after graduation. Arrange new coverage if staying in the U.S.
- ☐ **Track important documents and expiration dates** – This includes your I-20/DS-2019, EAD card (if on OPT), I-94, driver's license, SSN, and passport.

Final Semester Checklist (Detailed)

☐ Ensure you are on track to complete all of your degree requirements.

Discuss this with your advisor when planning your registration for your final term and review your plan in [DegreeWorks](#) in CougarNet to be sure all requirements are either met or in progress. If you have questions about your DegreeWorks plan, direct them to your advisor.

You are eligible for a reduced course load authorization if you expect to complete less than a full course load for remaining coursework for degree completion in your final semester. If you have a final term reduced course load and are unable to graduate due to failing a course, you are allowed one more additional final RCL.

Do not drop courses until approved by your international advisor. In all cases mentioned here, you are required to meet with an advisor in our office before you stop attending or withdraw from classes.

You can submit a request through [Reduced Course Load Form](#).

Note: There is a physical presence requirement during your last semester; you cannot be enrolled in only online credits. For more information see [Enrollment Requirements](#).

☐ Check your I-20 or DS-2019 end date and see if you need an extension of stay

The completion date on your I-20 or DS-2019 is an estimate. If you will not complete your program by that date, you must request an extension before your I-20 or DS-2019 expires. The U.S. Immigration regulations require that I-20s and DS-2019s remain valid during the course of study. Students who have applied for graduation and eligibility has been confirmed by the Registrar, will not be granted an extension. The maximum extension period is up to one year.

For an extension, regulations require that the delays are caused by compelling academic or medical reasons, such as changes of major or research topics, unexpected research problems, or documented illnesses. An extension cannot be done for sake of employment or to enroll in additional courses not required for your program.

When and how to Apply:

Extensions to program dates are not granted until during the semester of your program end date shown on your I-20. An extension of your I-20 should be completed 30 days before the end date listed on the document. If your I-20 expires while you are still a student, you will violate your immigration status.

Complete the [I-20/DS-2019 Extension Request](#) and upload the required documentation. You must have the following documents completed, prior to submitting the I-20/DS-2019 request.

- Complete [Academic/Faculty Advisor Recommendation Form](#) for I-20/DS-2019 extension.
- Provide documentation showing [proof of funding](#) dated within the last 6 months for additional time needed to complete your program.
 - Examples of acceptable documents include; official personal bank statement, letter on bank stationery signed and dated by a bank official, scholarship letter, or graduate assistantship contract
 - Scanned copies of originals are accepted
- Complete the [Financial affidavit](#) if family or other individuals are contributing to your education.

If you have a GA, you need to determine the value of your assistantship by adding the amount of tuition and your stipend or pay.

Example: A graduate student with a graduate assistantship from January-May submitting an extension for the spring semester, would calculate the value of their assistantship as:

Amount of tuition for one semester (see proof of funding link above and divide tuition amount by 2)

- 4.5 months of \$950 stipend per month

= Total GA Value

Subtract this value from the overall semester cost (full amount listed on the link above divided by 2) to determine the amount you still need to show.

❑ Complete your Senior Assignment/degree exit requirement.

Senior Assignment (Undergrad Students):

The Senior Assignment represents the culmination of the entire undergraduate experience at SIUE and should integrate the best aspects of each student 's baccalaureate education. All seniors are required to complete the Senior Assignment that demonstrates breadth commensurate with SIUE's general education expectations and proficiency in the academic major. Each academic major has its own senior assignment and, therefore, an individual assignment may involve, for example, library inquiry, laboratory experiments, field inquiry, or artistic creativity.

You should visit your academic advisor if you have questions regarding your senior assignment.

Degree Exit (Graduate Students):

All graduate students need to complete the exit requirement for the degree by the last day of classes for the graduating term. Completing the coursework alone does not mean your degree will be awarded. The exit requirement options vary by graduate program, so discuss this with your advisor if you are unsure of your options. Your exit requirement may be in the form of a thesis, research project, exit exam, or others.

IMPORTANT: If you are completing a formal thesis or dissertation, take notice of and comply with the Graduate School's thesis [submission process](#) and [deadlines](#). Other types of exit requirements, such as research projects or papers, are NOT submitted to the ProQuest system for Graduate School formatting review.

You also have to complete any program requirements such as internship, practicum, or foreign language requirements where appropriate.

Your degree will not be awarded until the final thesis, or dissertation has been accepted and processed, and all other graduation requirements have been met.

❑ Plan your next step after graduation

It is important to decide what your next step is going to be, before you graduate and while you are in your last semester. Depending on your visa type, you have these options:

F1 Students:

Apply for OPT Work Authorization:

Post-completion Optional Practical Training (OPT) is temporary off-campus employment authorization that you apply for during your final semester while enrolled in classes and begin employment after your program end date. OPT is available to international students who have been in valid F-1 status for at least two consecutive semesters and who plan to seek employment in the U.S. related to their program of study. Work while on OPT must be related to the student's program of study. OPT is recommended by the Office of International Affairs and then approved by U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS). It will take the USCIS Service Center **approximately 3-5 months to process** your application, so we recommend that you apply early. You cannot start employment until you receive your Employment Authorization Document (EAD) card.

Read when and how to apply here: <https://www.siue.edu/opt/index.shtml>

Start a new program at SIUE:

You can start a different program or move to a higher degree level in SIUE (start a master's or a PHD) and request an updated I-20.

Transfer to another school:

Students who transfer to another school may request that ISS transfers their immigration record.

Read everything about how to transfer here: <https://www.siue.edu/iss/immigration-status/transferring.shtml>

Change visa status if eligible:

If you are planning to apply for a change of status, make sure you do this early.

You can get important information about change of status here: <https://www.siue.edu/iss/immigration-status/changing-your-visa-status.shtml>

Prepare to leave the country:

If you do not intend to remain on the F-1 status, you can depart the U.S. and close your immigration record. Once you depart, you will not be allowed to re-enter under the F-1 status or apply for OPT.

J1 Students:

Apply for Academic Training:

Academic Training (AT) is a J-1 work authorization that allows exchange students to participate in an employment experience. The employment experience must be related to the student's field of study at SIUE. It is the only way for J-1 students to work off-campus. The length of AT a student is eligible for is 18 months or the total amount of time the student has studied at SIUE, whichever is shorter. PhD students are eligible for a total of 36 months of AT. Students may be approved for AT during enrollment at SIUE or after completing their program. Any job you are authorized to work while on AT must be directly related to your field and level of study and must be for at least 20 hours/week in a paid or unpaid position.

Make sure you are eligible to apply for Academic Training by reviewing this page: <https://www.siue.edu/iss/employment/academic-training.shtml>

You can read about the application procedure and all extra information here: <https://www.siue.edu/iss/employment/academic-training.shtml>

Change visa status if eligible:

If you are planning to apply for a change of status, make sure you do this early.

You can get important information about change of status here: <https://www.siue.edu/iss/immigration-status/changing-your-visa-status.shtml>

Prepare to leave the country:

If you do not intend to remain on the J-1 status, you can depart the U.S. and close your record. Once you depart, you will not be allowed to re-enter under the J-1 status or apply for Academic Training.

J1 Students' Two-Year Home Residency Requirement

Your visa and DS-2019 form will indicate whether or not you are subject to the 212(e) two-year home country residency requirement. J-1 students are usually subject to 212(e) if they receive government funding to attend their program or their home government wishes to ensure they return home to share the skills they have learned abroad.

Visitors who are subject to this statute must return to their home countries and be physically present there for two years before being able to return to the U.S. on employment-based visas such as H-1B or L-1.

If you are unsure whether or not you are subject to the 212(e) Two-year Home Country Residency Requirement, check both your visa and DS-2019. They should match and tell you whether or not you are subject.

Note: All students can travel within the U.S. during their grace period. Do not travel outside of the U.S., as students cannot re-enter the U.S. as a J-1 visa holder during the grace period.

□ Apply for graduation.

Graduation is the completion of all degree requirements as recorded on a student's official transcript. Every student must apply for graduation in order to graduate, regardless of whether they wish to participate in commencement (graduation ceremony) or not.

Be sure to complete your [graduation application](#) in CougarNet by the [deadline for your graduation term](#). If you have questions or need to defer your graduation to a later term following application, reach out to graduation@siue.edu.

Applications for graduation are due by the following deadlines:

- Spring Semester Graduates: March 1st
- Fall Semester Graduates: October 1st

Summer Semester Graduates: March 1st for students who are within nine hours of degree completion at the end of the spring semester, preceding their graduation and planning to participate in spring commencement. July 1st for students planning to participate in fall commencement, or students who do not plan to participate in commencement.

Changes – Once you submit your graduation application, you must report any changes to your graduation officer at graduation@siue.edu.

Graduation application fee – The graduation application fee of \$60.00 will be charged to your student account when you apply. The \$60 application fee is to process your application to graduate, produce your official diploma and enter the Alumni Association. It is not a fee associated with commencement ceremonies. Please check CougarNet to confirm your account balance and arrange payment.

Waiver of application fee – A fee is not required for students receiving the following scholarships: Teacher Special Education Scholarship, General Assembly Scholarship, Illinois ROTC Scholarship, Illinois Veterans Grant, Illinois National Guard Grant and Meridian Scholars.

Application for more than one degree – Students applying for two separate degrees should submit two graduation applications, one for each degree. Students with a double major should only submit one graduation application.

Transfer Credit – Graduate students transferring credit from either unclassified status or from another institution should use the [Graduate Student Request Form](#) available at the Service Center located in Rendleman Hall, Room 1309 or online to request approval.

☐ **Apply and participate in the commencement ceremony (Optional)**

Commencement is the ceremony in which graduates celebrate the completion of a degree by receiving a diploma cover. Commencement is held in the fall and spring semesters. Graduation staff will notify you if you are found ineligible to participate in **commencement**. Students may not participate in more than one ceremony for the same degree. Commencement staff will send communications to your SIUE email address pertaining to ceremony information, RSVP forms and day of instructions. All commencement information can also be found at siue.edu/commencement. Participation in commencement does not guarantee your degree requirements have been met.

Also, due to international travel arrangements, international students are eligible to participate in commencement up to two years after their graduation term.

Inviting family:

A letter of invitation is not required to apply for a nonimmigrant tourist visa per the U.S. Department of State U.S. Consular Affairs. Therefore, the Office of International Affairs and the Registrar no longer provide invitation letters for graduating international students.

Students can instead provide a copy of their most recent I-20 or DS-2019 and copy of their unofficial transcript which can be obtained from CougarNet.

Family members applying for a tourist visa should contact the nearest U.S. embassy/consulate for a list of required documents. In general, officers would want to see information showing applicants are in good economic terms back at home, and have strong ties to their home countries, proving that they will not overstay their visa once in the U.S. Please visit the U.S. Department of State website for more information about applying for a tourist visa.

For additional information about applying for graduation and graduation eligibility contact graduation@siue.edu and for questions regarding participating in commencement, please visit [SIUE Commencement](#).

☐ **Update your address on CougarNet**

Addresses can be changed by contacting the Service Center or through [CougarNet](#) - *General Personal Information*.

It is important to keep your mailing address current on CougarNet as you will receive your documents including your diploma to the address you have listed there. After mailing, if your diploma is returned to the Office of the Registrar, you will be responsible for providing a corrected address and paying for any forwarding mail charges. If your diploma is not returned to the Office of the Registrar and 60 days have passed since the mailing date, you will be responsible for providing a correct address and paying for the cost of replacement diploma.

☐ **Resolve all financial obligations**

Your diploma will not be mailed if you have an outstanding financial obligation to the University. For questions about your account, contact the Office of the Bursar at 618-650-3123.

☐ **Receive your diploma/ transcript/ Verification Letter/ Proof of degree verification for OPT**

Degrees are awarded and posted to transcripts in the weeks following the end of the semester. See the [Student Records website](#) for more information on when to expect your diploma to arrive in the mail.

Diplomas will be sent to your mailing address approximately ten weeks after all graduation requirements have been met. Certified electronic e-Diplomas are available for purchase at <http://www.michaelsutter.com/siue>

Official transcripts can be ordered online. You can read all the information on how to order and receive them here: [Student Records - Services - Registrar | SIUE](#)

Degree verifications can be obtained through the registrar's office. You can read all the information on how to request it here: [Enrollment & Degree Verification - Registrar | SIUE](#)

Verification letters can be obtained through the registrar's office. However, it must accurately state any remaining requirements. For example:

- If a student is graduating in the spring and requests a verification letter before the end of the term while requirements are still outstanding, the letter will state that remaining requirements exist.
- If a student is graduating in the spring and has already met all requirements, the letter can confirm that requirements are fulfilled and that the degree will be awarded at the end of the term.

☐ **Learn about UNIV 500 (Graduate Students only)**

It is important for students who are planning to apply for OPT to know about UNIV 500.

Univ 500 is a zero-credit hour course required by the Graduate School. It does not satisfy enrollment requirements for international students. Enrolling in UNIV 500 allows students to access campus systems including SIUE email address. Students will lose access to their SIUE email address 180 days after they are no longer enrolled in courses. Students who choose to apply for OPT STEM extension will need to show proof of degree verification therefore we recommend that students complete their project/thesis within 2 semesters of their final semester enrolled in courses. Students incur a [Health insurance charge](#) as well as the administrative fee for each semester they are only enrolled in UNIV 500.

Most students on OPT choose not to enroll in Univ 500 because of the SIUE health insurance charges incurred. While in the U.S. we do recommend students carry medical insurance to help cover the cost of medical bills. Many students on OPT are offered the option of purchasing health insurance coverage through their employer.

Students who wish to not enroll in Univ 500 will need to request a waiver for continuous enrollment. Submit [Graduate Student Request Form](#) and choose "Graduate student seeking either to enroll in UNIV 500 (Continuous Enrollment) or to request to waive the Continuous Enrollment requirement."

❑ Remember the 60-day grace period

Upon completion of your program of study at a Student and Exchange Visitor Program (SEVP)-certified school and any authorized period of practical training, you have a grace period during which you can stay in the United States. The length of your grace period depends on your visa type.

F-1 visa holders have 60 days after their program end date.

J-1 visa holders have 30 days after their program end date.

During this time, students need to decide whether they are going to stay in the country and pursue the steps explained earlier in “Plan your next step after graduation”, or they will depart the country.

You may not depart and return to the United States during your grace period. If you depart the United States before the end of your grace period, the rest of the grace period is lost.

If you fail to depart during your post-completion grace period, this could adversely impact your ability to re-enter the United States under a different nonimmigrant or immigrant classification in the future.

❑ Insurance After Graduation

All international students are required to enroll in the Health Insurance plan if they are enrolled in (1) or more credit hours or are enrolled in Univ500. The credit hours can be on-campus or off-campus. Your Bursar bill will automatically include this fee.

It is always recommended to have health insurance when you are in the US. After graduation, you will typically fall into one of two situations: either you'll have employer-based insurance (if you get a full-time job that offers health coverage), or you'll need to purchase your own plan. In the latter case, you can choose between Marketplace insurance, private/OPT-specific international student plans, or short-term coverage to bridge any gap until employer insurance kicks in.

You can see when your insurance coverage period ends in SIUE here: https://www.siu.edu/counseling-health/pdf/SIUE_PHF_INTL_25-26cc_rev.pdf?utm_source=chatgpt.com

If you have other specific questions about your insurance, contact SIUE Health Services through cougarcare@siue.edu or call (618-650-2842)

❑ Track important documents and expiration dates

I-20 (Certificate of Eligibility)

Your student I-20 ends when you graduate. If you apply for OPT or STEM OPT, you'll receive a new I-20 that shows your work authorization. Always keep all I-20s (old and new) for your permanent record. You may need them years later for future visas, H-1B, or Green Card applications.

EAD Card (Employment Authorization Document)

If you apply for OPT or STEM OPT, USCIS issues this card as proof that you're allowed to work. It lists the start and end dates of your work authorization.

Passport

Must always be valid at least 6 months into the future while you're in the U.S. Renew it at your home country's embassy/consulate if it's expiring.

Visa Stamp in Passport

This is only needed for re-entry to the U.S. If you stay inside the U.S., you don't need a valid visa stamp. If it expires and you travel abroad, you'll need to renew it before coming back.

I-94 Record

This is your official arrival/departure record. You can look it up online. Always check that it matches your current status (F-1, OPT, etc.) and that the "D/S = Duration of Status" date is correct.

Driver's License (DL) or State ID

Your license or ID is tied to your **immigration status** (I-20 or EAD dates). After graduation, if you're on OPT, your DL expiration will usually match your EAD end date. You'll need a new I-20/EAD to renew it if it expires. If you let your status lapse, your DL renewal will also be denied.

If you don't drive, you can still get a state ID card for identification. Rules are similar; expiration will match your immigration status.

Social Security Number (SSN)

If you already applied for one (through on-campus work or OPT), you keep it for life.

If you do not yet have one and are applying for OPT, you can request an SSN directly on **Form I-765** when submitting your OPT application, instead of filing a separate application at the Social Security office. The form includes a section where you can indicate that you need an SSN, and if selected, USCIS will share your information with the Social Security Administration, which will then mail your SSN card to you.

Taxes

Even after graduation, you must file taxes if you earn income on OPT.

Health Insurance Proof

If you buy Marketplace insurance or employer insurance, keep your insurance card and policy. You may need to show this for medical visits or tax purposes.