



International Student Program

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DRIVING IN THE U.S.

International Driver's License vs California Driver's License

California does not accept the international driver's license. To drive, you must have either a valid driver's license from your home country or a California driver's license. If your home country's license is not in English, you must also carry an international driver's license. However, some police officers may not know that you are allowed to drive with a foreign license. To avoid problems, we recommend getting a California driver's license if you plan to drive in California or want to buy a car, motorcycle, or other motor vehicle. Many car insurance companies require a California driver's license or offer better rates if you have one. Having car insurance is required by law in California.

The California State Identity Card

If you do not plan to drive, we recommend getting a California Identification (ID) Card. This card is widely accepted and can be used to cash checks, show proof of age, and confirm your identity. Plan to make an appointment before going to the DMV. To do so, visit the [Department of Motor Vehicles](#) website.

How To Apply for the California Driver License

You will need to complete an application, pass a written test, and pass a behind-the-wheel driving test. If you already have a driver's license from another U.S. state, you do not need to take the written test. Visit the [Department of Motor Vehicles](#) (DMV) for the latest California Driver Handbook, forms, and instructions on how to apply for a California Driver License. We recommend reviewing the sections in the handbook on frequently asked questions and residency requirements. If you carefully study the California Driver's Handbook, you should be able to pass the written test.

After you pass the written test and receive your driver's permit, you must take the behind-the-wheel driving test within one year. You must [make an appointment](#) for the driving test. We recommend scheduling your appointment at the [West Covina DMV Office](#) or the [Pomona DMV Office](#). A DMV examiner will sit in the car with you during the test, so you should practice driving the car you will use. You must also show proof that the car is registered and insured. You may borrow a car from a friend, use a local driving school (for a fee), or rent a car for the test. After you pass the test, you will receive a temporary license. Your official license will arrive by mail within 1 to 3 months.

Choosing Between the REAL ID and a regular CA DL

A REAL ID is needed fly on trips within the United States. If you do not have a REAL ID, you must use your valid, unexpired passport to fly. To apply for a REAL ID, you must have an unexpired passport, a valid visa or Employment Authorization Document (EAD), and your I-94. You will also need documents that prove who you are (such as a passport or birth certificate) and where you live (such as a utility bill or bank statement). You should also bring a copy of your I-20 to show your legal status. A REAL ID can only be issued for one year because F-1 & J-1 students are granted "duration of status" (D/S), which does not provide the DMV with a specific status end date. Please consider these factors when determining whether to apply for a REAL ID. You may find it more helpful to apply for a non-REAL ID and travel within the US using your unexpired passport.

Timing is Everything: Getting Your Driver's License

Follow these four simple tips to make for a faster and smoother process:

1. **Wait 10 days after you enter the United States.** The 10-day wait gives government systems time to update your arrival information. When at all possible, we actually recommend waiting 10 days **after the start of the semester** to make sure your SEVIS I-20 record shows as active. If you apply too early, your application may be delayed or denied. This rule also applies to continuing students and scholars. If you travel outside the U.S. and return, you should wait 10 days after your most recent entry before applying. **Please remember that we cannot activate your SEVIS record until you are registered full-time and your Student Portal shows your local US address.**
2. **Check all of your immigration documents to make sure your information is correct.** If different documents show different information, such as name order or birth date, your application may be greatly delayed. If you find that the information on your [I-94](#) does not match your passport, visa or I-20/DS-2019, please immediately [contact your DSO](#) for help.
3. **Read. Practice. Review.** In addition to carefully studying the [California Driver Handbook](#), you can use the California DMV's [sample exams](#) to help you prepare for the written exam.
4. **Bring all your paperwork.** When you go to the DMV remember to take the following documents:
 - a. I-20 or DS-2019
 - i. NOTE: Only **you** need to sign the I-20 with a physical (wet) signature. **You must sign and date your I-20 in the Student Attestation section using ink.** No one else needs to sign it by hand. The school's signature on your I-20 is digital, and this is official and valid. If someone says your I-20 is not original because the signature is digital, explain that SEVP officially approved electronic I-20s in 2021, and this is how schools now issue I-20s. If needed, you can show them [this SEVP document for proof](#) (open it on your phone or bring a printed copy.) If the issue is not resolved, politely ask to speak with a supervisor so you can continue with your appointment.
 - b. [I-94 record](#) – If you changed your immigration status in the US, your new I-94 is on your change of status approval notice. DO NOT use the website to print your old I-94. It is no longer valid.
 - c. Passport and visa – If your documents are in different passports, bring every passport with you.
 - d. Two documents showing proof that you live in California
 - e. Social security card, if issued. If you don't have a social security number, this is not required.

Car Insurance & Registration

Car insurance is required to drive legally in the United States. In addition, all vehicles must be [registered](#) with the California DMV. You should always keep proof of insurance and registration in your car. If you are driving a friend's car, make sure you know where these documents are kept in the vehicle. If you buy your own car, you can search online for US car insurance companies or ask friends for recommendations. It is always recommended that you get quotes from several companies before deciding. When choosing insurance, **consider what is covered**, not just the price. Accidents can be expensive, so be careful of plans with very high out-of-pocket costs (deductibles). If you buy insurance from a company outside California, make sure the coverage is valid in California. [OCHO](#) is an insurance company built by immigrants for immigrants, and might be an option to consider during your search.

Parking on Campus

Do not forget: if you plan on driving to Mt. SAC, you must register your vehicle and obtain a parking permit. Please visit Mt. SAC's [Parking](#) page for information on Student Parking Permits.

Traffic Stops: What To Do If You Get Pulled Over

Being stopped by a police officer for a small traffic issue is common in the United States. Police stops may be very different from those in other countries, so we are sharing some helpful tips in case this happens to you. While this situation can feel stressful, staying calm, polite, and respectful can help it go smoothly. The tips below will help you know what to do and what to expect:

- **Be safe.** If a police officer wants you to stop, they will drive behind your car and turn on their flashing lights. Calmly and safely pull to the right side of the road, the curb, or into a nearby parking lot. Be sure to use your turn signal. This shows the police officer that you are following directions and lets other drivers know what you are about to do.
- **DO NOT GET OUT OF YOUR VEHICLE.** This will be taken as a sign of aggression in the U.S., and the police may respond more seriously. Do not make sudden movements. Instead, roll down your window, turn off your car, and keep both hands visible on the steering wheel. Wait for the officer to come to your car. If it is dark outside, turn on the inside (dome) light of your car before putting your hands on the steering wheel.
- **Communicate with the Officer.** The officer will ask to see your driver's license, registration, and proof of insurance. Before you reach for them, say something like: "My documents are in the glove box. I am going to get them now." This helps the officer understand what you are doing. Reach slowly for the documents so the officer knows you are not reaching for a weapon. After you give the documents to the officer, place your hands back on the steering wheel.
- **Remain polite and calm.** Police officers are not evil or scary. They are just people who happen to have dangerous jobs. They will appreciate being spoken with in a polite manner. Follow any orders given and address the officer as "officer," "sir," or "ma'am" when speaking. You should never argue with an officer, no matter his/her temperament.
- **Know your rights.** You should not lie, but you do not have to say you are at fault. Answer questions briefly and carefully. Police officers may ask specific questions to write their report, and what you say can be used against you if you choose to fight a ticket. It is okay to answer with "no" or "I'm not sure." For example, an officer may ask, "Do you know how fast you were going?" Saying "no" may sound careless. A better answer is, "I believe I was going about X miles per hour." This answers the question without admitting fault. If an officer decides to arrest you, they must read you your rights (often called Miranda rights). At that point, you have the right to remain silent, and you should use that right. If you are arrested, you will be taken to jail and can ask to call a lawyer. If you are ever arrested, contact our [Assistant Director of Admissions and Records](#) right away to talk about how this may affect your visa and next steps you should take.

NOTE: An arrest of any kind, including for driving under the influence (DUI), will result in your visa being revoked!

DO NOT DRINK AND DRIVE UNDER ANY CIRCUMSTANCES.