

International Scholars

The following is an attempt by members of the Genome Sciences Community to provide answers to frequently asked questions from International Scholars in our community. We want to acknowledge that there are many other resources where some of this information can be found.

International applicants who desire to come to the UW and the Department of Genome Sciences as a postdoc will need to have a professor sponsor their visit. In order to determine the status, prospective scholars must interview with a lab to find an appropriate Genome Sciences mentor to work with.

Please do not make travel arrangements until you have received instructions from the Administrative office in our Department, have your official documents in hand, and have made your appointment with the US Consulate or Embassy. *It can sometimes take several months to get an appointment!* If you make travel arrangements first, you may find that your Consulate appointment date is delayed, and the airline will not issue a refund.

Visas and nonimmigrant documents

New Scholars

Once you have negotiated your visa application, travel to Seattle, and attendance at your various orientation sessions, you can settle into your routine as an international scholar in the Department of Genome Sciences. We hope that your visit will prove rewarding, both professionally and personally.

During your stay here it will be important for you to [maintain contact with International Scholars Operations \(ISO\)](#). ISO will help to provide you with visa guidance advising for maintaining your legal status.

Follow this list to help prepare for your arrival at Genome Sciences:

1. Receive your employment invitation documents

Before applying for your visa stamp, make sure you have the appropriate employment authorization document:

F-1 OPT / STEM OPT: EAD or I-20 authorization, respectively

J-1: DS-2019

Pay [SEVIS Fee](#)

H-1B: I-797 Approval Notice

TN: Employment offer letter (Canadian TN persons will not need visa stamps, but they will need this document to apply for admission)

While most international scholars will need a J-1 visa, there are certain variables that may require an H-1B visa. Consult the International Scholars Operations (ISO) team if you have questions about this (their contact information can be found at the abovementioned website).

If your spouse or child will travel with you to the US, they should apply for a dependent visa. Check here for [dependents information](#).

2. Understand your J-1 category (J-1 scholars only)

If you are a prospective J-1 Exchange Visitor, make sure you understand the limitations of your J-1 category:

- You have been assigned a J-1 “[category of participation](#),” based on the nature and duration of your activity at the UW. This category is indicated in item 4 of your DS-2019 and should not be confused with your [UW academic appointment title](#). Exchange visitor categories available to international scholars at the UW include: Professor, Research Scholar, and Short-Term Scholar. Your activities in the US must remain consistent with your category. You will not be able to change your category after you have entered the US.
- 12 and 24 month “bars” on repeat participation. Time spent in the US as a J-1 or J-2 might affect your eligibility for future J-1 status. The [12 and 24 month “bars”](#) apply only to persons beginning an Exchange Visitor program in the categories of Research Scholar or Professor.
- Program duration and extension of stay. The duration of your program is stated in item 3 of the DS-2019. ISO has the discretion to extend your program participation to the limit allowed by law (up to five years for persons in the Professor and Research Scholar categories, up to six months for persons in the Short-Term Scholar category, up to one year for persons in the Specialist category, and up to one year for persons in the Student Intern category). To request an extension, the sponsoring academic department or school submits the [UW J Visa Request Form](#). ISO then issues a new DS-2019 reflecting the extension.
- Following completion of the program, you are no longer in J status. However, immigration law allows a 30-day “grace period” beyond the program completion date to settle your affairs and return home. During the grace period employment is not permitted and if you depart the US you cannot return in J status.

3. Apply for your visa

- Step 1: Schedule a visa appointment at a [US Embassy or Consulate](#), you may find it helpful to be aware of [visa appointment wait times](#) in advance
- Step 2: Gather all your documents for the visa interview
- Step 3: Review [tips to remember when applying for a nonimmigrant status](#)

4. Purchase your flights to the US

Do not make final travel plans or buy tickets until you have a visa, unless your visa appointment specifically requires tickets and travel plans.

5. Enroll in Healthcare coverage

Before arriving in Seattle:

- Purchase Medical evacuation and repatriation insurance **BEFORE YOU ARRIVE!**
 - It is not only unwise to be in the US without adequate health insurance, for J-1 Exchange Visitors and their J-2 dependents it is also illegal. You and your family are required by federal law to have sickness and accident insurance for the duration of your program. Minimum coverage must provide medical benefits, a deductible not to exceed \$500 per accident or illness, expenses associated with the medical evacuation to the home country, and repatriation of remains.
 - You can find out more about the requirements and options [here](#) (published for scholars) and [here](#) (published for administrators).
 - Your health insurance through the UW covers medical benefits and the maximum deductible, but be aware this coverage does not start until after employment. You might want to obtain a travel insurance policy to provide this coverage between your arrival and beginning employment.
 - Note that [International SOS](#) offers a policy that provides *medical evacuation and repatriation* benefits only. This may be useful for scholars whose insurance requirements are covered in part by their UW employment. See the Healthcare section for more details about the UW's insurance options.
- Keep in mind that the health insurance requirements also pertain to your family members.

- Exchange Visitors are often able to obtain inexpensive international travel insurance in their home country. In the US, many insurance companies offer policies designed for Exchange Visitors, but benefits vary and policy details are often available only in English. It is important that you consider what type of coverage is needed and who will be included on the plan. For example, some policies cost less because they do not provide coverage for J-2 dependents. Some policies exclude coverage for pregnancies, or coverage for care received in the home country. Before choosing a plan, carefully consider your personal and family health needs.
- Verify with your PI who will be responsible for payment of the insurance premiums (you or the UW). This will depend on your funding and if you have questions please ask!
- There are many insurance providers both within and outside the US, including those listed below. It is possible to enroll in most insurance plans by completing an online registration form, using a credit card for payment. The policies listed below do not represent an endorsement by the UW. You are solely responsible for procuring and maintaining suitable health insurance.
 - [Gateway USA](#)
 - [Cultural Insurance Services International \(CISI\)](#)
 - [ISO Student Health Insurance](#)
- Statement of Compliance
 - At the [check-in](#) session, you must present to ISO a [Statement of Compliance](#) with the Insurance Requirements of the Exchange Visitor program.

6. Prepare to Enter the US

Review your passport and visa page. Your first/given name and last/family name should be the same on both documents. If there are any errors, contact our office immediately. Place your original passport, financial statement or support letter, and employment documents in your purse or carry-on baggage to present to the inspector upon entering the US.

- [Information for International Visitors to the US](#)
- [Information for J-1 Exchange Visitors](#)

7. Register with UW International Scholars Operations

All new international scholars (**including** postdocs and visitors) must visit the UW's International Scholars Operations (ISO) upon arrival in the US. Registration is required for ALL new scholars who are not US citizens or permanent residents of the US. Please make sure to provide them with your contact information (address, phone number, and email address) in Seattle. A failure to [check in with ISO](#) within 30 days of your program start date could have serious consequences. Review this information carefully and contact ISO if you have questions.

- Federal law requires that J-1 Exchange Visitors report in person to their program sponsor within 30 days of the start date indicated in item 3 of the DS-2019.
- You must visit ISO in [Gerberding Hall](#), Room 239, so that your arrival on campus can be reported to the government as required by law.

Please bring the following documents, depending on your status:

F-1 Optional Practical Training (OPT)

- Passport
- I-94 Arrival/Departure Card ([electronic](#) is OK)
- I-20
- Employment Authorization Document Card (EAD)

J-1 Exchange Visitor

- Passport
- Form I-94 ([electronic](#) is OK)
- DS-2019
- Dependent(s) documents (if applicable)

NOTE: Failure to register may result in the termination of your SEVIS record and/or loss of your J-1 status.

H-1B Temporary Specialty Worker

- Passport

- Form I-94 ([electronic](#) is OK)
- Dependent(s) documents (if applicable)

TN: Trade NAFTA

- Passport
- I-94 Arrival/Departure Card ([electronic](#) is OK)

**For all Change of Status bring your I-797 Approval Notice.

The Difference Between Visa and Status

It is common to confuse the terms visa and I-94/nonimmigrant status. Yet you will need to clearly know the difference in order to understand your rights and responsibilities while in the United States.

Remember, both visas and statuses are specific to the primary purpose of your application for admission to the US and the duration of your visit. Your nonimmigrant status determines which rules you will need to follow once in the US.

I-94/Nonimmigrant status

The I-94 status, also known as a nonimmigrant status, defines the terms under which noncitizen visitors can temporarily reside in the US. Your I-94 can be accessed through the [US Customs and Border Protection website](#).

Each I-94 status has a set of regulations that govern the activities of international visitors. I-94 status imposes both rights and responsibilities.

Your rights include:

- The right to be in the US as long as you continue to pursue your primary purpose.
- Various rights in support of your primary purpose.
- The right to all federal, state, and local legal protections.

Also, an I-94 status requires you to fulfill certain responsibilities.

Your responsibilities include:

- Report any change of address to ISO within ten days of the change here. Failure to do so may result in revocation of your exchange visitor status.

J-1 holders: Don't let your DS-2019 expire

- This document allows you to apply for a visa, to enter or reenter the US, and establishes your legal eligibility to remain in the US.
- The DS-2019 must remain valid at all times.
- The duration of your program is stated in item 3 of your DS-2019.
- Request a new form prior to the current form's expiration date.
- To request an extension, contact your sponsoring academic department.
- Keep every DS-2019 for your permanent record.

Don't let your passport expire

- Your passport must be valid at all times.
- Keep it and other important documents in a safe place.
- Report a lost or stolen passport to the police, as your government may require a police report before issuing a new passport.
- To renew or replace your passport, contact your country's [consulate](#) in the US.
- While in the US, always carry with you a photocopy of your passport's identity page, and a photocopy of your DS-2019.
- When traveling, carry the original documents, but guard them carefully against theft.

Work only with authorization

- J-1 Exchange Visitors may receive compensation for the [employment](#) stated in item 5 on the DS-2019.
- Additionally, occasional lectures or short-term consultations that involve wages or other remuneration may be authorized by ISO on a case-by-case basis.
- The occasional lectures or consultations must be authorized in advance and in writing.

- Dependents in J-2 status may [request employment authorization](#) from USCIS. Income from the J-2's employment may be used to support the family's customary recreational and cultural activities and related travel, among other things.
- Employment will not be authorized if the income is needed to support the J-1.

Maintain health insurance

- The US government requires all J-1 Exchange Visitors and their J-2 dependents to carry health insurance.
- Failure to maintain [health insurance](#) will result in termination of your Exchange Visitor program.

30-day "grace period"

- The Department of Homeland Security allows all Exchange Visitors 30 days of lawful status in the US following completion of their program.
- This 30-day "grace period" is NOT included in the program dates listed in item 3 of your DS-2019 form.
- During the grace period you are expected to settle your affairs and prepare to return home.
- If you travel outside the US during the grace period, you will not be permitted to re-enter the US in J-1 or J-2 status.
- Employment is prohibited during the 30-day grace period.

Registration Documentation

- You may be surprised to learn that US law requires foreign nationals 18 years of age and older to carry "registration" documentation with them "at all times."
- For individuals in J-1 and J-2 status, evidence of registration is your most recent [Form I-94 Record of Departure](#). If you were issued an electronic I-94 record, the stamp in your passport is your registration document.
- The law is found at INA § 264(e) and the list of documents that qualify as evidence of registration is found at 8 CFR § 264.1(b).

Travel within the US

If you travel by air, train, bus or ship within the US, you may be required to show your passport and I-94 record when boarding. Keep photocopies of your passport and I-94 in a separate location from the original documents. Photocopies do not substitute for the originals but can make replacing them a bit easier in the event they are lost or stolen. Guard your documents carefully!

Travel outside the US

Please contact ISO well in advance before you travel internationally so they may review your documents and discuss travel procedures.

Leaving UW: Important visa and tax information

[Please review this important information.](#) It was our pleasure serving you and we wish you success in your future activities.

Life in the US and Washington State

What is a Social Security number (SSN) and do I need it?

If you work in the US, make sure you have work authorization and an SSN. See more details on how to apply for SSN [here](#).

ID, PAYROLL, AND TAXES

How do I obtain a Washington State driver license or identification card?

Apply through the Washington State Department of Licensing. Follow this UW [link](#) to learn about the different kinds of identification cards for Washington state and find instructions on how to apply.

I already have a driver license. Do I need to obtain a Washington state driver license?

Driver licenses issued by another country to a nonresident are valid in Washington state for one year (RCW 46.20.025). You will need a Washington State driver license for longer periods of time.

If you have a valid license from another US state (including District of Columbia, US Territory or possession, or US Department of State), British Columbia (Class 5 only; Class 7 doesn't

transfer), Germany, or South Korea, you do not need to take any tests if you are 18 years or older. Individuals with other driver licenses usually are required to take a written and driving test. Read more on [this page](#) by the Department of Licensing.

How do I determine my tax obligations?

Every international scholar has an obligation to file. Review [this website](#) for more information.

Do I have to pay the same taxes as everyone else?

Largely, yes. If you are on a J-1 visa, you can get an exemption from the deductions to your payslip that are paid into the Washington Cares Fund. See this FAQ.

People from some countries might benefit from a tax treaty. Check if this option is available and apply to it. The [Glacier Tax Compliance system](#) provided to assist in filing taxes should notify you when you first register your profile (note the link needs UW NetID login).

Do I have the same retirement fund options as everyone else?

As of 2025, postdoctoral scholars are offered two retirement fund options: the UW Retirement Plan ([UWRP](#)) and the Public Employment Retirement System ([PERS 3](#)). Note that in order to get the full benefits from the PERS 3 option, you must work as a public employee in Washington State for a defined number of “service credit” years. The UWRP option (the default plan) has no such requirement and if you leave UW before retiring, you can keep your retirement funds with the option to transfer them to a different retirement account, so this is likely the most suitable option for most international employees in temporary positions. See the “Leaving UW” section of the two links for additional details.

HEALTHCARE

Do I need healthcare insurance?

Yes. You can find out more about the requirements and options [here](#).

What health insurance is available to me?

As a UW employee, there are several health plan options for benefit eligible employees. On [this page](#), you can find out details about:

- Different health, dental and vision plan options
- Considerations to compare health plans
- Eligibility for insurance and options if you are not eligible for UW coverage
- And more

Healthcare covered by your insurance plan usually comes at a lower cost to you. Health insurance plans are either Health Maintenance Organizations (HMOs) or Preferred Provider Organizations (PPOs). Read about the difference on [MedlinePlus](#). If you have health insurance through the UW, you can also enroll your spouse or partner, and your dependent children under the age of 26. Read more about the employee plans [here](#).

There are several different types of healthcare you can receive:

- Primary care is the healthcare you seek for day-to-day health and medical needs.
- Preventative care services usually come at no cost to you; read about preventative services on [HealthCare.gov](#).
- Emergency care is for medical emergencies that require immediate attention, including life-threatening emergencies. If you need an ambulance or paramedics, call 911.
- Urgent care is for when you are not having a medical emergency but need to be treated right away and cannot see your regular doctor. Urgent care and emergency care are both same-day medical services, but urgent care facilities do not address life-threatening emergencies.

Mental health, counseling, and vision services are usually included as part of your health care plan. For employees, dental care is a separate insurance plan from your health insurance.

What forms of payment does the healthcare system use?

A premium is what you pay every month for your health insurance plan. A deductible, co-payment, and co-insurance are different forms of payment when you visit the doctor. Read about the differences on the UW HR website. If you visit a healthcare provider not covered by your health insurance plan, you pay out-of-pocket.

I found the health coverage and medical terms too confusing; can you explain?

This [glossary](#) might help!

How do I choose a health insurance plan?

Everyone's healthcare situation is different. Your choice of a plan may depend on what services you expect you will need, the cost, and the network. You can compare plans and learn about differences on the [UW HR website](#). For additional questions, contact [Employee Workday Help](#).

CREDIT

What is a credit score? What is a credit score used for?

A credit score indicates your ability to make payments on time and is used by lenders, such as when you are applying to rent an apartment or buying a car or home. Read more about credit scores and suggestions of how to build credit [here](#).

How do I determine my credit score?

You can get a free credit score once per year by visiting AnnualCreditReport.com. Some banking institutions also provide monthly credit scores for free. Learn more about obtaining credit reports on [this federal website](#).

LIVING IN SEATTLE

How do I make housing arrangements and find affordable housing in Seattle?

Genome Sciences has a Moving and Relocation Information webpage with more information [here](#).

On average Seattle has expensive rent compared to some other major cities (check out costs [here](#)), but there are definitely a wide variety of options depending on personal preference around the type of housing you want. [This UW website](#) has information on finding off-campus housing in neighborhoods around the university.

Social media networks, such as [UWPA Facebook](#) for postdocs or the [classifieds section](#) in the UW Daily can also be helpful in locating housing.

If you decide to rent, knowing your rights as a renter is helpful. For example, Seattle has a [First-in-Time ordinance](#) that requires landlords to offer a rental agreement to the first qualified applicant who submits a full application. More information on all of Seattle's renter laws can be found [here](#).

What transportation options are there in Seattle?

Public transportation:

Seattle has a pretty decent network of public transportation options (Link Light Rail, Metro transit buses, Seattle streetcars) and this is an important thing to take into consideration as you look into housing options.

All employees of the University are given a [U-PASS](#) that allows for free transport on these options, among other things.

Biking:

Rain or shine, seasonally or all year round, many UW workers commute by bicycle. Lots of bike lanes make biking relatively easy and accessible from many neighborhoods in Seattle and Seattle's [Burke-Gilman Trail](#), an extensive paved roadway for bikers and walkers, leads directly to campus.

Check out "[Bike Commuting 101](#)" from the UW Transportation Services for more information.

UNION REPRESENTATION

I heard that there is a union at UW. Who does the union represent?

If you are a graduate student (Academic Student Employee), postdoc, or research scientist/engineer, you are represented by [UAW Local 4121](#). The union is a local chapter that negotiates with the UW on behalf of these three groups (bargaining units). You choose whether or not to join the union.

What role does the union play in my benefits?

Certain benefits are governed by a contract between the UW and UAW Local 4121. These contracts usually expire every few years and must be renegotiated during bargaining periods. If you are represented by UAW Local 4121, you are covered by the contract regardless of if you joined the union. Each bargaining unit has its own contract. You can read more about the union contracts on the UAW Local 4121 [website](#).

ARRIVAL TO THE US

When you first arrive in the US, there are several things to do to get settled. To make this process easier, we have compiled the following checklist based on recommendations from international scholars in Genome Sciences.

1. **Prior to arriving in the US**, book a hotel or Airbnb for your first week or two and make appointments to tour apartments. Some landlords will request an application fee, holding fee, and/or your work contract before offering a lease contract to you.
2. Get a SIM card for your cell phone.
3. Complete your immigration check-in
4. Once you have proof of address (such as a bill with your name and address), open a bank account. Banks within walking distance of campus include:
 - a. [Bank of America](#), 4701 University Way NE
 - b. [KeyBank](#), 400 NE Ravenna Blvd
 - c. [Chase Bank](#), 4501 University Way NE

- d. [Wells Fargo](#), 4100 University Way NE
5. Apply for an SSN as soon as possible, if eligible.
6. Choose a healthcare plan when you are notified by the university through Workday.

CAMPUS RESOURCES

What resources do I have on campus?

Here is [a knowledge database](#) where you can look up all sorts of campus resources you might need.

Over the years, the Graduate School has created hundreds of articles aimed at helping students and postdocs get the most out of their experience at the UW. They are searchable [here](#).

Is there a list of student organizations on campus that might provide a supportive community?

UW has hundreds of community organizations on campus. You can find these organizations or lists of community events [here](#). You can search these organizations via filters for cultural/international organizations [here](#).

What sources of funding are available for international scholars?

A list of graduate and postdoctoral fellowships, compiled by UW, can be filtered into those available to international scholars [here](#).

Funding databases for postdocs, including those with filters for searching by citizenship, can be found [here](#).

Who can I reach out to to ask additional questions?

The following resources are available at multiple levels if you have more questions!

The University:

Resources for international scholars can be found [here](#).

The Department:

Josh Malamy - Assistant to the Chair and Director and Faculty Affairs (jmalamy@uw.edu) - Can assist with most questions!

Brian Giebel - Assistant Director of Academic Services (bgiebel@uw.edu) - A good resource for questions about the graduate program and courses.

Serena Newhall - Human Resources Manager (serenn2@uw.edu)

Your fellow international colleagues!

Genome Sciences is developing a buddy system to pair incoming international students and scholars with those who have already made the transition into the department. Stay tuned for more information!