

High-Skilled Immigrants' Pathway to Citizenship

Foreigners who wanted to move to the United States through education and work would have to go through 6 main stages, with durations ranging from 8 to 20+ years post-grad and numerous uncertainties along the way

STEP1: F-1 VISA

Students begin their journey under the F-1 visa, which allows them to pursue full-time studies in the U.S. This stage includes tight restrictions on employment and a requirement to maintain continuous enrollment.

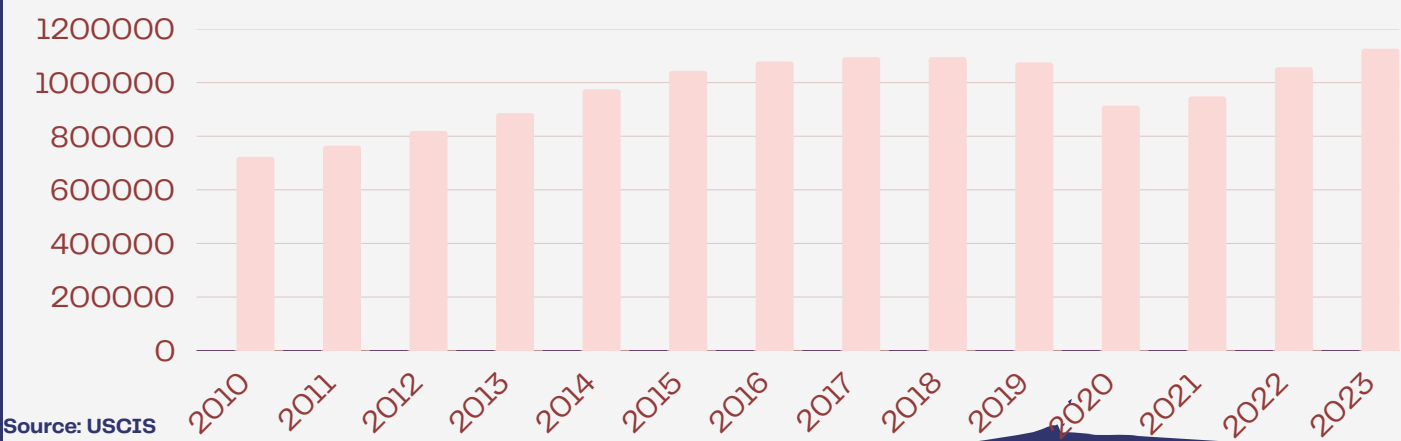
Timeframe: **3-4 years** for undergraduates; varying timeline for advanced degrees.

STEP2: OPT

After graduation, international students can work through OPT, a temporary extension of their F-1 status. Delays, employer compliance issues, and job loss within 90 days can all jeopardize a student's status.

Timeframe: **12 months** for non-STEM degree candidates, **36 months** for STEM candidates.

FIGURE 1: NUMBER OF REGISTERED F1 STUDENTS IN THE US PER YEAR



STEP3: H1-B

The H-1B offers a limited pathway to work in specialized fields but is subject to an **annual cap and a random lottery**. Selection is not guaranteed, and even successful applicants face high scrutiny. The visa ties workers to their employers and offers limited flexibility. Long-term use depends on timely green card sponsorship.

Timeframe: 3 years of initial stage + 3 years of prolonged stage (no lottery needed)

FIGURE 2: PERCENTAGE OF CASES SELECTED IN H1-B LOTTERY, FY24



Source: USCIS

STEP4: TRANSITORY PERIOD H1B -> PR

The shift from H-1B to permanent residency is often the most uncertain and prolonged stage. Most H1-B holders choose to go through EB-1 or EB-2 immigration process, with some technical professionals going through the NIW program. Approved I-140 petitions do not guarantee a green card. As of 2024, **over 1.4 million skilled workers were trapped in PR (green card) backlogs**, most of them Indian and Chinese nationals. Workers remain visa-bound, and dependent children risk aging out of eligibility.

Timeframe: Ranging from **3 years to 15 years** (Variety stems from fixed quota per original countries, with Chinese and Indian nationals having to queue for years)

STEP5: PR & NATURALIZATION

A green card offers greater freedom—workers can change jobs and begin the path to citizenship. But this status can still be fragile, especially if held for years without naturalizing. Long green card queues delay this relief, and bureaucratic missteps can still disrupt stability.

Five years after receiving a green card, immigrants can apply for citizenship. This brings full legal rights and civic membership. Yet for many, it marks the end of a 10–20+ year journey that began with a student visa.

See more at:

<https://www.uscis.gov/working-in-the-united-states/students-and-exchange-visitors/students-and-employment>
<https://www.uscis.gov/working-in-the-united-states/students-and-exchange-visitors/optional-practical-training-opt-for-f-1-students>
<https://www.uscis.gov/working-in-the-united-states/h-1b-specialty-occupations>
<https://www.uscis.gov/working-in-the-united-states/permanent-workers/employment-based-immigration-first-preference-eb-1>