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Gwynedd Mercy University

**International Student  
Handbook  
2015-16**

**Office of International Student Learning (ISL)  
Griffin Complex, Student Services Suite  
Tel +1 215 641 5598 · [isl@gmercyu.edu](mailto:isl@gmercyu.edu)**

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**Welcome** to Gwynedd Mercy University! We're delighted you're here!

Gwynedd Mercy University was founded on the Catholic principles of service and knowledge for the common good. Whether you're here for a semester, or pursuing a degree, you'll find faculty committed to academic excellence, as well as social responsibility, justice, and mercy. You'll also find faculty and staff who know your name and are committed to your learning and growth while you're here.

Gwynedd Mercy University (GMercyU, as you'll sometimes hear it called) is also 30 minutes from the center of Philadelphia, with easy access to cultural events, history, shopping, and internship opportunities. From Philadelphia, you can catch buses and trains (see page ?) to other cities on the east coast. We encourage you to take advantage of the opportunities inside and outside of the classroom—try a few student activities. Catch the train to the city and explore a museum on your own—or join us for a trip.

In this handbook, you'll find information that will help you prepare for your time at Gwynedd Mercy University, as well as resources for after you arrive on campus.

If you have any questions that aren't covered here, or can't be answered by any department in the contact list at the end of this handbook, stop by. My office is located in the Student Services suite in Griffin Complex, near the campus bookstore.



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## **Before you come**

### **Immigration documents**

- I-20: A form given to students on F-1 student visas. This document shows the start and end date of your visit, program of study, and finances. It is issued by the designated school official (DSO) and is only valid for the school that issues it.
- I-901 SEVIS fee: You must pay this after receiving your I-20. You can pay online at [www.fmjfee.com/i901fee](http://www.fmjfee.com/i901fee). After you pay the fee, print the receipt and take it with you to your visa appointment.
- I-94: The I-94 is your proof of legal entry into the United States. It is issued by the U.S. Customs & Border Protection when you enter the United States, and gives your visa status and how long you may remain in the country. *You will need your I-94 for employment authorization, getting a driver's license, and other functions. To print off a copy of your I-94, go to [cbp.gov/i94](http://cbp.gov/i94).*

### **Preparing for your interview**

- Make sure that your passport is up-to-date.
- Pay your SEVIS fee. (See above for instructions.)
- Schedule an appointment at the nearest U.S. embassy or consulate to be interviewed for an F-1 visa. Check the website ([www.usembassy.gov](http://www.usembassy.gov)) for the nearest location and appointment wait times. They vary, and can be as long as three months.
- Bring the following items to your interview:
  - Signed I-20
  - Acceptance letter from Gwynedd Mercy University
  - Financial documentation that shows you can pay for your tuition and living expenses while you're in the U.S.
  - Valid passport and another form of picture identification

### **General tips:**

It's natural to be nervous when going for an interview. And while there's no formula that will guarantee you a visa, these are helpful things to remember:

- Show your ties to your home country. The officer is most concerned about whether you plan to return home at the end of your studies, so anything that shows a strong connection to your home country is helpful—such as family, dependents, a job or financial prospects.
- Know your program, and how it fits into your long-term plans. Why do you want to study in the U.S.? Why do you want to study at Gwynedd Mercy University?
- Be concise. Have short, direct answers prepared. You will probably only have a few minutes with the officer.
- Above all, stay positive! Greet the officer when you walk in. Make eye contact, as direct eye contact is important in U.S. culture, and not considered disrespectful.

- Some embassies have additional requirements. Check the website of the embassy or consulate where your appointment will take place for specific instructions.

*Make sure that you have your immigration documents easily available when you arrive at the airport (or land crossing). Do not pack them in checked baggage.*

## **Transportation & Travel**

Getting around Gwynedd Valley and the Philadelphia area

Trains, buses, and air travel

The **Philadelphia International Airport** (airport code: PHL) is located within the southern city limits of Philadelphia, about 40 miles from Gwynedd Mercy University. It offers direct service to cities across the U.S. and Canada, as well as various international locations. *To get to Gwynedd Mercy University, take the Airport train line to Jefferson Station (formerly Market East) and transfer to the Lansdale-Doylestown Line.*

**SEPTA** (Southeastern Pennsylvania Transportation Authority) operates buses, light rail, trolleys and the subway in Philadelphia and surrounding towns. Timetables and fares can be found at [www.septa.org](http://www.septa.org). The Gwynedd Valley stop is on the Lansdale-Doylestown line.

It takes approximately 40 minutes from the Gwynedd Valley SEPTA train stop to the center of Philadelphia, and about 50 minutes to the 30<sup>th</sup> Street Station, where you can catch buses and trains to other parts of the country. **Amtrak**, the national railroad service, stops here ([www.amtrak.com](http://www.amtrak.com)). **BoltBus** ([www.boltbus.com](http://www.boltbus.com)) and **Megabus** ([www.megabus.com](http://www.megabus.com)) both have stops within walking distance of the 30<sup>th</sup> Street Station. And both offer bargain bus fares to major cities on the East Coast, including New York, Boston, Washington, D.C. and more.

### **Shuttle & Griffin Loop**

Gwynedd Mercy University has a shuttle that runs to and from the train (SEPTA) station in Gwynedd Valley, located about two miles south of campus. There is also a shuttle known as the Griffin Loop that goes past local shops and restaurants on the weekend. The shuttle is operated by the Department of Public Safety (on campus extension: **21522**).

### **UHaul car share**

There are two cars on campus that can be rented by students. You must be at least 18 years old and have a valid driver's license (U.S. or international).

Users have to create an account at [uhaulcarshare.com](http://uhaulcarshare.com). If you have an international driver's license it may take up to 48 hours to process; those with a U.S. license can register and use vehicles immediately. Cost is \$4.95 per hour plus 49 cents per mile and tax; it includes gas and insurance. More information is available on the website ([uhaulcarshare.com](http://uhaulcarshare.com)) or by contacting Jasmin Hall ([hall.j@gmercyu.edu](mailto:hall.j@gmercyu.edu)).

## **Required immunizations**

Gwynedd Mercy University requires all students to be immunized against certain diseases, and to share record of this information with the university.

*If you do not submit your health form and proof of immunizations, you will not be allowed to register for courses the following semester.*

If you do not have one or more of the required immunizations, we recommend you get vaccinations in your home country before you leave.

The university health form and information about required immunizations can be found at [www.gmercyu.edu/student-life/campus-resources/health-wellness-center/new-students](http://www.gmercyu.edu/student-life/campus-resources/health-wellness-center/new-students).

## **Health Insurance**

The United States does not have a national healthcare plan, and medical costs in the U.S. can be very high. Because of this, Gwynedd Mercy University requires that all international students purchase the university's health insurance plan.

**Exchange students:** You are only charged for the semester you spend on campus.

The **Health + Wellness Center** on campus is staffed by two nurses, and a doctor comes to campus two days per week. The center is open 8:30 a.m.-4:30 p.m., Monday-Friday.

Appointments at the Health + Wellness Center are free for students. (There are additional costs for prescriptions, lab work, etc. that must be sent off campus, and students are responsible for those costs.)

## **Weather**

Summers (June-September) in the Philadelphia area are hot and muggy, winters (December-February) are cold, and autumns and springs are mild. It usually rains several days each month, while snowfall is most common late November to early March. Occasionally, the area sees heavy snowfall, but winter temperatures are variable—it may be very cold for several days, followed by a week of milder weather. Winter temperatures can drop as low as 10° Fahrenheit (-12° Celcius), while summer heat waves can bring highs of 100° (38° Celcius).

Lightweight clothing is recommended for summer, while a heavy coat and boots are necessary in the winter. Clothing can be purchased nearby at local stores.

Average temperatures usually look like this:

Summer	75-90° Fahrenheit	24-32° Celcius
Winter	30-50° F	-1-10° Celcius
Spring/Autumn (Fall)	60-70° F	15-21° Celcius

**School closings & emergencies:** Occasionally, this area gets heavy winter storms that make it unsafe to drive. If classes are delayed or cancelled due to heavy snow, that information will be shared in several ways:

- **Text messaging & email:** Alerts for any kind of campus-wide emergency or weather-related cancellations and closings are sent to cell phones and email via the university emergency notification system. This notification system is known as e2campus, and you can sign up at <http://www.gmercyu.edu/student-life/current-students/e2campus>.
- **On the website:** Updates will be posted on the homepage at [www.gmercyu.edu](http://www.gmercyu.edu) and on the student portal, [my.gmercyu.edu](http://my.gmercyu.edu).
- **By phone:** The university's main number, 215-646-7300, will have information about closings.
- **Radio and television:** Tune into 1060 AM radio (KYW) and listen for Gwynedd Mercy University. The code "344" indicates day classes and "2344" indicates evening classes. Local television stations (such as ABC and NBC) also list closings.

## **Housing**

GMercyU offers two types of housing for **undergraduate** students: dormitory-style rooms, and suites with shared bathrooms (for upperclassmen). All students living on campus must purchase a meal plan. **Exchange students** are required to live on campus. Information on housing options, rules and requirements, as well as an application can be found at [www.gmercyu.edu/student-life/campus-resources/resident-life-housing](http://www.gmercyu.edu/student-life/campus-resources/resident-life-housing).

**Graduate** students usually live in apartments within a few miles of campus. The Office of Residence Life keeps a listing of off-campus housing options, but does not assist with renting apartments.

## **Your mail**

Students who live on campus have secure mailboxes in their residence halls.

If you live on campus, mail to you should be addressed like this:

[Your name]  
GMercyU Box [Your box number here]  
1325 Sumneytown Pike  
P.O. Box 901  
Gwynedd Valley, PA 19437-0901

If you do not live on campus, you will need to have mail sent to your home or apartment.

The nearest United States Postal office is located at 527 Plymouth Road in Gwynedd Valley, Pennsylvania, right next to the Gwynedd Valley train (SEPTA) station. At this office, you can purchase stamps and money orders, and send regular mail, packages and express mail.

## **What to bring**

In addition to your clothing and other belongings you'll want for your studies, you should also bring:

- Prescriptions for eyeglasses or any medications you take. Consider bringing an additional pair of eyeglasses and extra medication (should be in a clearly labeled container).
- Traditional clothing, photos, or small mementos that will help your room feel like home, and also help you—if you choose—to share with other students about your home culture and life.
- Important addresses and phone numbers—friends, family, contacts here in the U.S.

## **Paying your tuition**

Tuition is due prior to the start of the semester.

You may make payments online with a credit card (Visa or Mastercard). If you do not have a credit card, you can wire a payment for your tuition only. If you choose to wire funds, you will need to let our bursar know when you send the wire, the amount of money you are wiring, and from what country you are sending it.

## **Other money matters**

When you first arrive on campus, you should bring enough money to cover immediate expenses such as food, housing costs, and other needs. If you bring funds with you to the United States, we do not recommend carrying large amounts of cash.

If you are going to be in the United States for at least a year, consider setting up a checking account at a local bank. You can deposit a check that you bring along, or have funds wired to that account once it has been set up. There are many banks within a few miles of campus; First Niagara ([firstniagara.com](http://firstniagara.com)) offers student accounts; TD Bank ([tdbank.com](http://tdbank.com)) offers similar accounts to those under the age of 24.

Please note that traveler's checks and money orders are not widely accepted in the United States; if you bring them, make sure that they are in U.S. dollars. Small amounts (\$50 or less) are recommended if you hope to use them at local grocery stores or superstores (such as WalMart).

There is one **ATM** on campus, where you can use a debit card to pull cash from your bank account. It is owned by TD Bank, and you will be charged a small fee for each transaction. Most ATMs in the United States have a daily limit (\$200-300) for withdrawals and charge a fee for using the service.

## **Academics & student life**

The United States government monitors students on an F-1 visa through the Student Exchange Visitor Information System (SEVIS). U.S. law requires that both the student and the university must report certain information to SEVIS in order for the student to maintain legal status.

In addition, students on F-1 visas are required maintain a full course of study, and make “normal progress” in their studies.

### **Full course of study**

A full course load is 12 credits for undergraduates and 9 for graduate students, and must be maintained every semester. Failure to carry a full course of study without authorization will result in termination of your immigration status.

If you cannot meet this requirement, you must request a **Reduced Course Load (RCL)**. Federal regulations require that a student be enrolled full time, but allow some exceptions. These include:

- Initial difficulties with the English language or reading requirements (in first year only).
- Unfamiliarity with American teaching methods.
- Improper course level placement.
- Due to a medical illness or condition. The student must provide documentation from a medical doctor or licensed psychologist; the letter must be on letterhead, signed, and dated within 30 days of the start of the term for which the reduced course load is requested. It must state that the student is unable to enroll full time (or at all) due to a current condition.
- If the student is in his or her final semester and does not need a full course load for degree completion. Student must obtain a letter from his or her academic advisor verifying that the student is in the final term of studies and does not need to be enrolled full time.

You must apply for a reduced course load **before** the term in which you wish to take RCL.

A reduced course load for **academic** reasons can only be authorized for one term and the student must resume a normal course of study at the next term.

A reduced course load for **medical** reasons may not be approved for more than 12 months.

***If you drop below full time without permission after the drop/add period has ended, you will lose your F-1 status.***

## Normal progress

Federal regulations require that students on F-1 visas make normal progress towards their degree. This means that you're expected to be completing your studies at the rate a full-time student in your major or program normally advances towards a degree.

Undergraduate students are expected to maintain a grade point average (GPA) of at least 2.0, while graduate students should have a 3.0 or higher.

Students whose GPA falls below the minimum or who are dismissed from a degree program lose F-1 status and will be required to file for reinstatement.

### **Tips for succeeding academically**

1. Attend class regularly. Class attendance is a part of your grade for the course, so if you have to miss a class, make sure you tell your instructor and make arrangements to get the notes or papers from that day.
2. Ask for help. If a problem arises, talk to your instructor. There is also an Academic Resource Center (ARC) in Keiss Library which offers individual tutoring in things like taking notes, writing papers, and more. Many students use this service for assistance large and small.
3. Ask for help. You'll find that your faculty know your name, care about how you're doing, and want you to succeed. Talk to them—they can't help if they don't know there's a problem. And don't wait until the end of the semester. If you start to feel overwhelmed or have concerns, you can stop by ISL. We may be able to help, and it will be easier to work through any problems as soon as they start, rather than later when they may become something big.

## Maintaining your F-1 visa status

The International Student Learning office is here to advise all international students and make sure you have the information you need. However, **maintaining your status as an F-1 student is your responsibility**. Any violation of immigration requirements (like working without authorization or taking less than a full-time course load) could cause serious problems with the U.S. Citizenship & Immigration Services (USCIS) and your ability to remain in the country legally.

A good guideline is, "Talk to the international student learning office first." We're here to answer questions or help you figure out who can.

### **Seven things to do to maintain your F-1 status:**

- Read and respond to all emails from the international student learning (ISL) office.
- Enroll in a full load of courses each semester—12 credits for undergrads and 9 hours for graduate students.
- Let ISL know about any significant changes in your life, from changes in address or major to plans to take a leave of absence or withdrawing from a class.
- Work only with authorization. Check with ISL before beginning any work or internship.
- Get a travel signature before you travel outside of the United States.

- Abide by grace periods. You may enter the U.S. 30 days before your program starts and are required to leave the country within 60 days of the end of your program.
- Stop by the Student Services occasionally and say hello! (We have chocolate.)

### **How to request help:**

If you have a quick question or just need a travel signature, **stop by** the office. You do not need to schedule an appointment.

If you need a letter for a driver's license, an update to your I-20, etc., please **email** us. We will respond to your request within 48 hours.

If you need any of the following, please **schedule an appointment**:

- authorization for employment
- authorization for reduced course load
- assistance in obtaining a driver's license or social security number
- any similar questions

**Schedule an appointment** during the final semester of your studies to review your plans, confirm program end date, and begin applying for optional practical training (OPT) if applicable.

### Work authorization

International students may only be employed on campus, and only when authorized by the ISL office.

All international students who hold an F-1 visa and wish to work off-campus in any capacity (paid or unpaid) must apply for either Curricular Practical Training (CPT) or Optional Practical Training (OPT). This includes practicums and summer internships.

**Working even one day in the U.S. without proper authorization is a serious violation of your visa status;** working full-time when you have part-time authorization (or vice versa) is also a serious violation, and these violations can jeopardize your ability to remain in the United States.

More information about CPT and OPT is available on the International Student Learning website. Contact the ISL office for more information about work authorization, OPT or CPT.

## What's on campus

<p><b>Office of International Student Learning</b> International student orientation, I-20s, immigration questions and visa issues, advising on driver's licenses &amp; social security numbers, employment authorization, any questions not handled elsewhere on campus</p>	Located in Student Services, in the Griffin Complex	isl@gmercyu.edu Phone: 215.641.5584 On campus: 21584
<p><b>Campbell Solution Center</b> Billing, financial aid, registering for classes, identification cards, parking/car registration, meal plan changes and questions</p>	Campbell Hall	campbellsolutioncenter@gmercyu.edu P: 215.641.5595 On campus: 21595
<p><b>ATM</b> Also known as a "cashpoint." Use your debit card to get cash.</p>	St. Bernard Hall	
<p><b>Health + Wellness Center</b> Basic health care for illness and injury, vaccines and immunizations, preventative care</p>	Loyola Hall, First floor	P: 215.646.7300, extension 306 On campus: 21306
<p><b>Residence Life</b> On-campus housing, bike share program; some resources for searching for off-campus housing</p>	Loyola Hall, First floor	P: 267.448.1305 On campus: 21305
<p><b>Campus Ministry</b> Worship, interfaith prayer services, prayer requests, community service opportunities</p>	Visitation House (Christine Eberle, director)	eberle.c@gmercyu.edu P: 215.641.5590 On campus: 21590
<p><b>Public Safety</b> Emergencies, shuttle service, report crimes, security escort program (for ALL students, faculty, staff and visitors to be escorted safely across campus). Staff are on duty around the clock.</p>	St. Brigid Hall, First floor	Shuttle service & security escort: On campus: 21522
<p><b>Academic Resource Center</b> Tutoring in writing, taking tests, and taking notes. Available to all GMercyU students.</p>	The Learning Commons, Keiss Library	P: 267.448.1370 On campus: 21370
<p><b>Postal services</b> See "Mail" section of this guide</p>	Gwynedd Valley U.S. Post Office	
<p><b>Information Technology Service Desk</b> Computer/email issues, assistance with Blackboard</p>	Bernard Hall, Lower level	it@gmercyu.edu P: 267.448.1444 On campus: 21444