

# The RHS/GCA Interchange Fellowship Exchange Programme

## Getting to America

### Section 1: Overview of the Process

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Should you be successful in your application, there are two major hurdles you will have to overcome shortly after being selected as the in-coming *GCA Interchange Fellow*.

1. **Getting accepted to a university**
2. **Getting a VISA**

Although these two steps are very much intertwined, it is important to note that you can only start applying for the visa once you have been accepted to a US University (usually around March/April).

#### Getting into university

First off, it's really important you get savvy with the various requirements for graduate level study in the States. Most US universities have a dedicated **graduate school** that will be responsible for making sure you have submitted all the appropriate paper work. However the decision to accept you will more than likely be made by the faculty (**landscape architecture, horticulture, biological sciences etc.,**) you are applying to.

#### Gather the right information

Most, if not all, degrees require the following information before you can be considered for acceptance.

1. **Online application** – This is where you provide most of the basic information about yourself, who you are, where you are from, what you have studied. The application will also often provide ways of uploading some of the other required information. For example, past **university transcripts, C.V. and letters of recommendation.**
2. **Statement of Purpose** – Why do you want to apply to this university? What can you bring? How do you hope to develop your studies, etc.?
3. **Personal History Statement** – Often combined with statement of purpose. Explores how your life experiences have influenced your decision to apply for this degree.
4. **Three Letters of Recommendation** – At least two of these will usually need to be from university professors/lecturers. These letters can usually be uploaded to the online application.
5. **GRE** – The Graduate Record Examination is required for most universities (sitting the GRE is covered in detail in Section 2: Timeline below).
6. **University Transcripts** – Official documentation detailing your past university degree results. Grades for all modules must be included. You can usually upload a copy of your transcripts to your online application. However many US universities also require official transcripts to be sent direct from your UK University, once you have been accepted to the programme.
7. **C.V.** – Many, but not all U.S. universities will ask you to include a copy of your C.V. in your online application.

8. **Evidence of funds** – It's very important to make sure the university is aware of your Interchange Fellowship. You can acquire a letter from your GCA contact stating proof of funds. Send a copy to the University.
9. **Portfolio of creative work (if applicable)** – This is perhaps the most important part of a landscape architecture application. **Important:** Most, if not all U.S. universities will ask you to present your portfolio in 11X 8.5inch paper size. This is roughly A4 sized paper (usually around 15-20 in sheets max).

## Getting a visa

As a student you will apply for the F-1 visa which will allow you to remain in the U.S. as long as you are enrolled in a university.

To get one you will be required to attend an interview at either the **London Embassy** or **Belfast Consulate**. This is the **most** important part of the whole process. Before attending this interview you will have to gather all the appropriate documents. It is absolutely vital that all this documentation is accurate, if you are missing anything you will need to return for another appointment (at extra expense).

**The Documentation** – Some of it will need to come from the U.S. University you have been accepted at; some will be filled out online and some you will need to acquire from the GCA. The current requirements for F-1 Visa documentation can be found at: <http://london.usembassy.gov/visas.html> Print the relevant pages off and familiarise yourself with each form and how/when you need to have them completed by.

## The Documents needed for the interview:

1. **Confirmation page of the DS-160:** you will fill out the DS-160 form online after you have been accepted at your chosen university.
2. **The Nonimmigrant Visa Interview Confirmation letter:** when you book your interview appointment you will be told to print off your confirmation letter. This letter is vital and you will not be allowed into the embassy without it.
3. **A print out of the receipt for the MRV application fee:** this is sent together with the Nonimmigrant Interview Confirmation Letter. It is proof that you have already paid for everything regarding the application.
4. **A passport:** obviously the most important piece of documentation. The embassy will hold on to your passport and add in the visa before sending it back to you.
5. **A photograph:** it is very important to note that this is not a standard passport photograph. The dimensions are slightly different. You can upload the picture electronically which means you won't need it during the interview.
6. **The I-20A-B, Certificate of Eligibility for Nonimmigrant (F-1) Student Status:** once you have been accepted to your chosen university and provided all the appropriate information they will issue you an I-20A-B form.
7. **A SEVIS fee receipt:** another online fee you will have to pay. Again you will be provided with a printed bill. They may also send you something official.
8. **University transcripts:** Some interviewers may ask for these so make sure you have official ones just in case.
9. **Evidence of sufficient funds:** you will need a letter from the GCA stating that they will be providing you with the appropriate funding. You may also need to bring bank statements of your own showing that you can cover any gaps that the funding provided by the *Fellowship* might not.

10. **Evidence to show that the applicant has a residence abroad to which s/he intends to return at the end of the stay in the United States:** a parental address should be fine for this one.
11. **Evidence of previous travel, including U.S. visas:** may be required.
12. **A stamped, addressed Royal Mail Special Delivery envelope:** Failure to have it at the time will result in you having to go away and coming back with one later in the day.

## Section 2: Timeline

(from applying to the *Interchange Fellowship* to starting your programme)

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### September/October

**University research** – It is important that you have a clear idea of the course(s) and college(s) that you are interested in attending **before** you submit your application for the *RHS/GCA Interchange Fellowship* by 31 October.

Firstly, find a list of all the colleges that deal with your area of interest. You should be able to do this by checking out the US national websites responsible for your discipline. For example, ASLA (American Society of Landscape Architects) has a full list of accredited landscape architecture programs in the US.

Secondly, find a contact at each college you are interested in and open up a dialogue. Send out as many e-mails as you can, but also where possible Skype call a few universities that really interest you. Target the head of graduate studies for your program, give them a call. **Tell them about the Interchange Fellowship, and the funding involved should you be selected.** Make them aware of the time constraints – you won't know whether you have been selected as *GCA Interchange Fellow* until the mid-November – you may be able to negotiate a bit of flexibility regarding the application deadlines.

### University research Resources:

- **American Horticultural Society:** <http://www.ahs.org/>
- **American Society of Landscape Architects:** <http://www.asla.org/>

**The GRE** – You should also at this stage, begin to get familiar with the GRE (Graduate Record Examination). Depending on the university/course you are applying for you will probably need to sit the GRE. Not all universities require this exam however most would not let you in without it.

The exam is a four hour long test of literacy and mathematics. The literacy section tests your ability to write, through two short essays and a set of questions with multiple choice answers. The math section again gets you to answer a number of multiple choice questions.

### November/December

**Book the GRE** – Once your selection as the in-coming *GCA Interchange Fellow* has been confirmed, **sign up on the GRE website** ([www.ets.org/gre](http://www.ets.org/gre)) to take the exam. On the site you will also have access to a few example questions – familiarise yourself with the format.

The GRE test is taken on computer, so there are no set test dates – you can take the test throughout the year and you simply book an appointment at a computerized testing center local to you. Please note that you can only take this test once per calendar month, and no more than five times within any 12-month period.

### **GRE Exam resources:**

- **The GRE website** - [www.ets.org/gre](http://www.ets.org/gre)
- **GRE books** - <http://www.amazon.com/GRE-Books>

**Finalise your university list** – By late November/ early December you will need to know exactly how many colleges you want to apply to (up to a maximum of five). It is a fairly complicated process so obviously the more you wish to apply for the longer it is going to take. Furthermore, each university has a slightly different application requirement so it is really important to create a detailed list of exactly what each university requires.

**Deadlines** – Find out when the **application deadline** is for each college and structure your application process accordingly. Remember that some universities may have closing dates as early as the first week in December.

### **January/February**

Use this time to finish the online applications for later dated universities. Make sure all required documents have been sent to each university and remember to put the US date format on all your applications!

### **March**

**Visa** – Familiarise yourself with the visa application process; the complexity of acquiring a US Visa; which visa is right for you and how long it is likely to take etc.

**University acceptance** – Towards the end of March beginning of April you should get word from your universities. If it is getting towards the end of March, get in contact with the head of graduate studies for your department. Explain your situation regarding visas etc.

**Book flights** – Once you have been accepted at a university and have a confirmed start date, book your return flight in order to keep down costs.

### **April**

**Start preparing for the visa interview** – Start collecting all the relevant documentation before you go for the Visa appointment.

**Book visa appointment** (if possible) – You can probably afford to wait until the beginning of May before booking your appointment, but it is definitely worth trying to get it sorted sooner rather than later if you can.

The U.S. Embassy website will tell you to allow up to 90 days after your visa interview to allow for the visa to be ‘processed’ and sent to you. However it is very unlikely that it will take this long. Embassy officials are totally aware that students are working to a tight schedule, and will more than likely try to get the visa sent to you within a week or two.

## May

**Attend visa appointment** – Do not panic! As long as you have gathered all the appropriate documents and double checked that all the information on them is accurate, you should be fine.

When you arrive at the embassy the whole process may feel a bit daunting, but as soon as you have your interview, and they realise you've been given a prestigious scholarship they should very happily give you a visa.

### **Visa appointment resources:**

List of required docs: <http://london.usembassy.gov>

## June

**Accommodation in America** – Look for university accommodation. Talk to your GCA contact about any potential leads they might be able to give you.

**Immunizations and medical history** – Gather all your medical documents (this may vary depending on the State) make sure all of your injections are up to date (check the requirements for your university).

**Health insurance** – See what the health insurance requirements are for your university, and check if you can get cheaper from the UK.

## July

Establish contact with your university and get an idea of all the inductions you will need to go to when you arrive.

## August

Overview all the documentation you will require at the immigration desk in the airport. Make sure you have all these pieces of information to hand when you fly!

*[Original note by Ronan Watson 2011 GCA Interchange Fellow, last updated in Dec 2014]*