

Columbia University
American Language Program

Guidelines for Maintaining Your Visa Status

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MAINTAINING VISA STATUS IS YOUR JOB

You must take full personal responsibility for learning about and following the law.

The ALP must tell the government if you withdraw from the program, stop coming to class, register for part-time instead of full-time study, or simply do not register at all.

Being “out of status” is serious—you may be deported, and it may be difficult to return to the United States in the future.

Read the visa-related notices on the ALP bulletin boards.

When you have questions, talk with the ALP’s International Student Adviser, he is available to answer your questions between 9am and 3pm, Monday through Thursday.

WHEN YOU ARRIVE IN THE U.S.

Read the instructions on your I-20: Carefully read and follow the "Instructions to Students" section that you will find on the second page of your I-20.

You may not enter the U.S. more than 30 days before the start date on your I-20.

Use your ALP I-20 to enter the country: In order to study at the ALP, you *must* use your ALP-issued I-20 and not an I-20 issued by any other school.

Show your I-20 and have it stamped by a DHS official when you arrive in the United States.

WHEN YOU ARRIVE AT THE ALP

Report to the ALP as soon as you arrive in New York: After you arrive in this country, you have 30 days to register for classes and have your record updated in SEVIS. Submit the completed (yellow) SEVIS form and a copy of your I-94 after you have registered for classes. If more than 30 days have passed, the government will consider you out of status.

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WHILE YOU ARE STUDYING AT THE ALP

Update your SEVIS information at the beginning of each term. Also, you must give us your new address every time you move.

If you don't give us the information to keep your SEVIS record up to date, you may be deported or may have problems getting another visa in the future.

Keep all of your I-20s the whole time you are in the U.S.

Study full-time with us. Part time studies are not permitted on an F-1 visa. Also, if you asked for an I-20 of three months or longer, we expect you to stay at the ALP for a minimum of three months before you transfer to another school.

Keep your passport valid: Always make sure that your passport is valid for at least six months into the future. If your passport will expire in six months or less, contact your country's consulate in New York or its embassy in Washington, D.C., for help.

Do not accept any off-campus jobs: The U.S. government considers working without proper authorization to be an extremely serious violation that may result in deportation. F-1 students are eligible to work on campus (but not off campus) for up to 20 hours per week (35 hours per week during vacation periods). However, it is extremely difficult for international students to find on-campus work at Columbia University.

Extend your I-20 before it expires: If you want to continue at the ALP beyond the end date on your I-20, you must come into our office to ask for an extension several weeks before your current I-20 expires. All extensions require you to provide new financial documentation (a new bank statement and a letter of sponsorship, if necessary). The financial documents must be no more than three months old.

IF YOU WANT TO LEAVE AND COME BACK

If you need to travel outside the U.S. during the time that you are a student here:

- 1) Have your I-20 re-certified before you leave the country
- 2) Carry your I-20 with you when you travel
- 3) Carry your financial documents with you when you travel
- 4) find out if the country where you are going requires you to have an entry visa

Except for short trips to Canada, Mexico, every time that you leave the U.S. while you are a student here, your old I-94 form will be collected when you leave, and a new I-94 will be issued to you when you return.

Vacation: ALP Intensive Program students must study two full semesters in a row before they can qualify for a vacation from their studies while remaining in the US legally. For example: Fall + Spring; or Winter + Spring + all Summer; or all Summer + Fall.

There are regular breaks between sessions when the ALP does not offer courses. You are not required to be in school during these periods. For example: the period between the end of the summer session and the beginning of the fall session; the period between the end of the fall session and the beginning of the winter session; the period between the end of the spring session and the beginning of the summer session.

You must notify the ALP International Student Advisor that you will be on vacation so that your SEVIS records can be updated accordingly. Whenever you travel outside New York, you should be sure to have your passport and your original I-94 with you—as well as a re-certified I-20 if you plan to leave and re-enter the country.

WHEN YOU FINISH YOUR STUDIES AT THE ALP

Leave the U.S. within 60 days after your studies are completed: When you finish studying at the ALP, you have 60 days to leave the United States, to transfer to another school, or to change to another immigration status. If you stay in the U.S. longer than 60 days after you have finished studying, you will be considered out of status and may have problems returning to this country in the future.

Leave the U.S. within 15 days if you withdraw from the program before the end of the course: You can withdraw during a course only if you are planning to return to your home country immediately. You must personally see an ALP academic advisor to fill out the necessary papers. You must then leave the United States within 15 days. Once you have returned home, you must send the ALP proof (an original airline boarding pass) that you have left the country; only then will the withdrawal be processed and reported to SEVIS. If the University owes you money, you must apply directly to the Office of Student Financial Services in 210 Kent Hall after the withdrawal is processed. In all cases, the University charges a \$75 fee for withdrawals.

IMPORTANT TERMS YOU SHOULD KNOW

SEVIS

The Student and Exchange Visitor Information System (SEVIS) is an Internet-based government system that keeps track of international students, scholars, and their dependents. SEVIS communicates with schools and universities, U.S. Embassies and Consulates, airports and other ports of entry into the U.S., the Immigration Service (USCIS), and the Department of Homeland Security (DHS).

I-20

The I-20 (also called the *certificate of visa eligibility* or *visa certificate*) is created by schools and universities through SEVIS. Your I-20 and electronic updates in SEVIS are a permanent record of your activities as a student in the U.S.

F-1 Visa

The U.S. Embassy or Consulate abroad gives you your visa and stamps it into your passport. Visas are never issued or extended by schools or universities. After you are in the U.S., it does not matter if your visa expires; permission for you to be in the U.S. will remain current for the whole time written on your I-20, if you are attending classes on a full-time basis, and if you are registered in SEVIS each term. If your visa has not expired and then you leave the country, you may use it to return. If your visa expires while you are here and then you leave the country, you will need a new visa in order to return. You will need to apply again at the U.S. Embassy or Consulate for a new visa.

I-94

Your I-94 is a small white paper that you get on the airplane (or at the border) when you travel to the United States. Your I-94 is your most important immigration document because, together with your valid I-20, it proves that you are in this country legally. It is stamped by a DHS official when you enter the country. The notation “D/S,” which you will see on your I-94, means “duration of status” and refers to the period during which you may remain in the U.S. on your current I-20. The I-94 is also a record of your arrivals and departures.

SOME HELPFUL RESOURCES

You may visit the following Web sites if you wish to learn more about U.S. immigration regulations. These links may change at any time. Please contact the ALP if you have trouble finding these sites.

- U.S. embassies/consulates abroad: http://travel.state.gov/visa/questions_embassy.html
- Fees for visa services: <http://travel.state.gov/visa/vofees.html>
- Visa denials: http://travel.state.gov/visa/frvi_denials.html
- US-VISIT: http://www.dhs.gov/xtrvlsec/programs/content_multi_image_0006.shtm
- Department of Homeland Security: <http://www.dhs.gov/dhspublic/>
- The United States Citizen and Immigration Services: <http://uscis.gov>
- Immigration and Customs Enforcement: <http://www.ice.gov/graphics/index.htm>