F-1 INFORMATION AND DEADLINES FOR STUDENTS WITH AN I-20 
EXPIRING MAY 18, 2016

Please scroll down for more information on the first 6 topics.

1. Less than full-time enrollment may be allowed in your final term
2. Leaving the U.S. after completing a program. 60-day grace period
3. Applying for F-1 Optional Practical Training (OPT) employment authorization
4. Needing an extension of your I-20 to complete your program of study. EXCEPTIONAL
5. Needing a new I-20 for admission to another program of study at Columbia
6. Transferring your F-1 SEVIS record to another university in the U.S. for a new program of study

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7. Inviting relatives for graduation or any other visit. See
   http://www.columbia.edu/cu/issonvisavisiting_relatives.html

8. Check the CUIT page for alumni continuing use of Columbia email address. It is especially important to
   have a reliable email address if you will remain in F-1 status under OPT.
   http://cuit.columbia.edu/email-alumni

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1. IN YOUR FINAL TERM, IMMIGRATION REGULATIONS ALLOW YOU TO BE ENROLLED LESS THAN FULL-TIME if you need fewer than fulltime credits to complete your degree requirements. (Your School, however, may have an academic policy of requiring full-time registration at all times, or a minimum number of points per term. Check with your school or department before contemplating less than fulltime registration).

YOU DO NOT NEED SPECIAL AUTHORIZATION FOR A REDUCED COURSE LOAD or to submit any form for a reduced course load (RCL) in your final term (UNLESS you are finishing earlier than the completion date on your I-20) but be very sure that you will complete your degree requirements as you will not be eligible for an extension for another term if you miscalculate.

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2. ARE YOU PLANNING TO LEAVE THE UNITED STATES AFTER COMPLETING YOUR PROGRAM?

If you are planning to leave the U.S. after completing your program and not apply for OPT, F-1 regulations allow you to remain in the U.S. for up to sixty days beyond your completion date of May 18, 2016—i.e. until July 17, 2016.

The grace period does NOT permit you to leave and return in F-1 status, but only to remain in the US while preparing for departure. After the completion of your program on as indicated on your I-20, you will not be able to return in F-1 status.
3. ARE YOU PLANNING TO REMAIN IN THE UNITED STATES AND SEEK EMPLOYMENT IN YOUR FIELD OF STUDY?
You may apply for permission to work in your field of study after completing a program of study as a BENEFIT AND EXTENSION OF YOUR F-1 STATUS under the provisions of Optional Practical Training (OPT). F-1 regulations require students to submit an application for OPT authorization to the USCIS (part of the Department of Homeland Security). There is a 5-month window for this application to be filed, beginning 90 days in advance of the completion date of the program. We recommend that you apply early to avoid problems and you have to factor in time to apply for the OPT I-20 from the ISSO.

THE ISSO PREFERRED DEADLINE for your OPT application is APRIL 1ST, 2016

OPT employment authorization in your field of study is a maximum of 12 months per each higher educational level, unless you are in a government-designated STEM field in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics, that may confer eligibility for an additional extension of OPT before the conclusion of the initial period.

Here are links to the PowerPoint presentation and to the application procedures and forms:

Application Procedures and forms:  http://tinyurl.com/ISSOopt

Important points to keep in mind:

a) APPLICATION PERIOD: There is a 5-month application period for OPT. You may apply for OPT as early as three months in advance of your completion date (February 19) and as late as near the end of your grace period— as long as the application is received by USCIS by that date, AND you have remained in the U.S. before applying.

To avoid problems with your application, the ISSO PREFERRED DEADLINE IS APRIL 1ST.

b) START DATE: You may choose a start date within a 60-day period starting with the date after completion, i.e. from MAY 19 until JULY 17. The end date will be one year later unless you have been authorized for pre-completion OPT and that time will be deducted from the 12-month total.

c) YOU MUST BE IN THE US AT THE TIME OF APPLICATION. A copy of your most recent admission to the U.S. in F-1 status printed from https://i94.cbp.dhs.gov is part of the application.

d) THE GRACE PERIOD IS NO LONGER RELEVANT once you have filed a timely application. You may remain in the U.S. in legal status while the application is pending.

e) A JOB OFFER IS NOT REQUIRED to apply, BUT there is a limit of a total of 90 days that you may be unemployed

f) APPLYING FOR OPT IS A 3-STEP PROCESS. You must first submit request forms to the ISSO. The OPT recommendation is processed through SEVIS—a new I-20 is generated with the OPT recommendation printed on page 2. You will receive an email from an ISSO advisor when the OPT I-20 is ready to be picked up, along with instructions for mailing a complete application to USCIS. Note that a new format for an I-20 went into effect on June 29, 2015.

g) USCIS CAN TAKE UP TO 90 DAYS—and sometimes more—to process the application, and you cannot begin employment without the authorization in hand. There is no mechanism to expedite the OPT application.

h) YOU REMAIN IN F-1 STATUS WHILE ON OPT, and need valid F-1 travel documents when you return from travel abroad, including an unexpired F-1 entry visa. The travel signature on an I-20 when you are on OPT is valid only for 6 months as opposed to 12 months when you are an enrolled student.
4. DO YOU NEED AN EXTENSION TO COMPLETE YOUR PROGRAM OF STUDY?

In EXTREMELY EXCEPTIONAL situations, a student in F-1 status may need more time to complete degree requirements than the time given on the I-20 and may be eligible for a Program Extension. If you qualify, you are required to have your I-20 form extended BEFORE IT EXPIRES.

To be sure there is enough time to review and process an extension application, you are requested to submit the the ISSO by May 6th.

To be eligible for an extension, you need to have been fulltime every semester making normal progress toward your degree and have an exceptional academic or health reason for requiring more time. Refer to information on extending your stay in F-1 status on the ISSO web site at http://www.columbia.edu/cu/isson/visa/F-1/F-1_extension_currentprogram.html

You will need a detailed letter from your School (Director of Graduate Studies for GSAS students) describing why an extension is needed and new financial documents that will cover the additional time, so prepare your papers well in advance of the deadline.

5. HAVE YOU BEEN ADMITTED TO A NEW PROGRAM OF STUDY AT COLUMBIA?

If you will be starting a new academic program at Columbia, you will need to get a new I-20 for the new program before it begins. You'll need to provide new financial documents with a new admission record and a copy of your admission letter. Your SEVIS record will automatically "complete" at the end of the 60 day grace period UNLESS you apply to the ISSO for an extension for a new program. When you get a new I-20 to begin a new program, you are considered a continuing student with the same SEVIS record. More information can be found at http://www.columbia.edu/cu/isson/visa/F-1/F-1_extension_newprogram.html.

If you miss the deadline, you will need a new SEVIS record, pay a new SEVIS fee, and leave and re-enter the U.S. with the new I-20.

6. DO YOU PLAN TO ATTEND ANOTHER SCHOOL IN THE U.S. AFTER COMPLETING YOUR PROGRAM AT COLUMBIA?

If you plan to go to another school next term, Columbia must "transfer out" your SEVIS record to the next school. The ISSO must enter a "release date" in your SEVIS record before the 60-day grace period expires, or before the new program begins, whichever is earlier. On the release date—chosen by you—Columbia will no longer have access to your SEVIS record; the next school has "ownership" and can then issue you an I-20 after you have met their requirements.

Many international offices will have a “transfer in” form to be completed by the current school, so check with your new school’s international office. When you transfer the SEVIS record from one school to another, you keep the same SEVIS number and are considered to be a continuing student—you don’t need to pay another SEVIS fee or get another F-1 entry visa if the one you have is still unexpired.

To request a transfer of your SEVIS record, come to the ISSO (or email the documents listed below as one pdf file to isso@columbia.edu with the subject heading Transfer- Out Form).

- a letter of admission from the new school
- the other school's transfer-in form that includes requested release date
- a print-out of your last admission to the U.S. in F-1 status from https://i94.cbp.dhs.gov