Maintaining F-1 Student Status  
Associate Degree Program Students

Your eligibility for employment, to transfer from one college/university to another and changes in your academic program depend on maintaining F-1 status. Maintaining F-1 status is generally not difficult if you follow the F-1 regulations and meet with an International Student Advisor when you have a question. Although this handout is specifically for the Northern Virginia Community College, the regulations apply to any college or university.

To maintain your F-1 status, you must:

1. **Register for a full course of study each fall and spring semester.** Degree level students must enroll in 12 credit hours per semester to be considered full time. If you find that you must withdraw from a course you should talk to an international student advisor before you withdraw. F-1 regulations give the College the authority to authorize exceptions to the full course of study requirement only for limited and specific reasons.

2. **Have a valid I-20 from Northern Virginia Community College.** F-1 students must possess an I-20 from the institution they attend. The I-20 is valid until you complete the associate degree in the major listed on the I-20 or until the expected completion date in #5 on the I-20, whichever occurs first. If you make good academic progress in your major program, but cannot finish before the expected completion date you need to request a “program extension” at least 30 days before the I-20 expires.
   - Changes of Major: You may decide to pursue a new degree program that requires a change in “major”. If you are maintaining F-1 status, you may make such changes as long as you follow the F-1 procedures. To ensure that you follow the procedures, you should meet with an international student advisor in advance.
   - Transfer to another school: F-1 Students may transfer to another school by completing the SEVIS transfer out procedure. You will need to request an international student advisor to release your SEVIS record to the new school.
   - Change of address: Log in to MyNOVA to update your address in SIS, the Student Information System. Please always use “Mail” as the address type for your US address and “Permanent” for your address in your home country. NOVA will report the changes to the US Department of Homeland Security (DHS).

3. **Do not work without written authorization.** Employment opportunities for F-1 students are limited and are available only to students who have maintained their immigration status. Working without a written work authorization from DHS or the Office of International Student Services is a violation of your F-1 status and the consequences are severe. The International Student Offices have a handout outlining types of employment and procedures for obtaining employment authorization.

4. **Make good academic progress.** The purpose of F-1 status is to study and complete a degree. Although F-1 regulations recognize that students may have academic problems and delays, getting poor grades may result in problems. If you are having difficulty we strongly recommend that you meet with an International Student Advisor to discuss your situation.

5. **Maintain a passport that is valid for at least six months into the future.** Contact your country’s embassy in the US for more information on how to renew your passport.
Frequently Asked Questions

**Why does my I-20 say I have 36 months to complete an associate's degree?** The I-20 was issued based on the amount of time required by most international students to complete their associate degree. However, if you need to take College ESL or developmental math, you may need additional time. The actual time is determined by the number of credits required for your degree + number of ESL credits + number of developmental math credits. The total number of credits divided by 12 credits per semester equals the number of semesters required to complete your program. If you need additional time based on this formula, see an international student advisor.

**May I take classes outside my degree program?** Many students at NOVA are preparing to transfer to four-year colleges or universities and want to take courses to transfer, which are not required for the degree at NOVA. Taking these courses is fine as long as you complete your degree within the timeframe on your I-20. The same is true for taking courses for a certificate or retaking courses to improve your GPA. However, if you do not finish your degree in the allowable time, you will not be eligible for the extension of your I-20.

**I have an I-20 from NOVA and the expected completion date is next year. Is the I-20 valid if I complete my degree requirements and want/need to take credits to transfer?** The I-20 is issued for a specific degree program and the amount of time it takes to complete that program. Once you have completed all courses in that program, the I-20 is no longer valid. If you want to take credits to transfer, you need to complete the transfer credits and the degree requirements at the same time.

**If I take all the required courses, but don’t register to graduate, is the I-20 valid?** No, when you complete the requirements for the degree, the I-20 is no longer valid.

**I want to register for less than 12 credits in the spring or fall term. May I register in the summer term and make up the credits?** No. F-1 regulations do not recognize summer registration as part of the academic year. You may take a few classes in the summer term. However, because it is a concentrated session (shorter time to learn the same amount of material), it is not advisable to register for 12 credits. Also, a smaller choice of classes is offered in the summer term. Keep in mind you may not find the classes you need for your major. F-1 students may use the summer semester to explore classes they are interested in.

**If I had to take an Incomplete. How many credits do I need to take in the next semester?** If the next semester is spring or fall, you need to register for 12 credits. You may be completing an Incomplete, but those credits apply to the semester you took the course.

**I studied for a class, but my final grade was an F. What happens to my F-1 status?** F-1 regulations require that students should be making “good academic progress.” However, DHS has recognized that students may fail a class and this does not affect your status.

**May I take Extended Learning Institute (ELI) classes?** Yes, BUT you may count no more than 1 class or 3 credits of ELI courses towards the required 12 credits per semester.

**What might happen if I work without authorization?** DHS views working without authorization as the most serious violation of F-1 status. Unlike other violations of F-1 status, the only way to recover F-1 status when you work without permission is to leave the United States. Your employer will also provide a record of your employment to the Social Security Administration. If you ever apply for permanent residence, the INS may check the Social Security records and your application may be denied based on unauthorized employment and failure to maintain F-1 status.

**What is a “grace period”?** F-1 students are eligible to remain in the U.S. for 60 days after completing their program. During this time you should make arrangements to leave, request a transfer or apply for change of status. Students who do not complete a program are not eligible for any “grace period.”