Frequently Asked Questions: Coronavirus (COVID-19)

Updated March 16, 2020

Do I need to leave the U.S. / What will happen if my home is outside the U.S.?

Students may remain in the U.S. for the remainder of the spring 2020 semester. Students who are considering leaving the U.S. should carefully consider international travel plans as online access to courses may be limited. Additionally, with a rapidly evolving global situation, students who elect to leave the U.S. may not be able to re-enter at the time they wish to return, which could impact future immigration benefits. Students in F-1 or J-1 status should consult their OIE advisor prior to traveling to discuss potential impacts with respect to their specific immigration situation.

Do I need a travel signature if I decide to leave the U.S.?

Students/scholars do not need an OIE travel signature to depart the U.S., only to re-enter the U.S. A valid passport with a valid visa sticker along with a valid I-20/DS-2019 will be required to re-enter the U.S. at the time you are returning to campus. To see if you need an updated travel signature, check your document. If your I-20 or DS-2019 was signed earlier than August 2019, you may wish to request a new travel signature. If your document was signed in August 2019 or afterwards, you do not need a travel signature at this time.

If I am planning to leave the U.S. and my visa sticker is valid and my I-2/DS-2019 was signed in August 2019 (or since then), do I need to report to OIE or stop by the OIE office?

No, you do not need to stop at the OIE office to report your departure or obtain any immigration documents. Students who are considering leaving the U.S. should
carefully consider international travel plans, though, as online access to courses may be limited. Additionally, with a rapidly evolving global situation, students who elect to leave the U.S. may not be able to re-enter at the time they wish to return, which could impact future immigration benefits. Students in F-1 or J-1 status should consult their OIE advisor prior to traveling to discuss potential impacts with respect to their specific immigration situation.

If I decide to leave the U.S., do I need to report my departure to OIE?

No, at this time, you do not need to advise OIE that you are departing the U.S., although we urge students who are considering leaving the U.S. to carefully consider international travel plans as online access to courses may be limited. Additionally, with a rapidly evolving global situation, students who elect to leave the U.S. may not be able to re-enter at the time they wish to return, which could impact future immigration benefits. Students in F-1 or J-1 status should consult their OIE advisor prior to traveling to discuss potential impacts with respect to their specific immigration situation. We encourage students to also consult with their academic advisors when making these decisions.

I am in my last semester and am applying for OPT. I’m thinking of leaving the U.S. for the rest of the semester, is that ok?

We recommend carefully considering international travel at this time because we do not know how the situation will develop and when students will be able to return. The risk increases if this is your last semester and you are applying for OPT. There may be problems with your OPT application that may be hard to deal with from outside the U.S. Receiving your EAD if you are not in the U.S. is also problematic. Once your OPT is approved and starts, you are subject to the 90 day unemployment limit. If you are not able to come back and start your job, this will result in the loss of your F-1 status and OPT.

**NOTE**: you must be physically present in the U.S. to apply for OPT; you cannot apply for OPT after you have left the U.S. If you have additional questions, you may wish to discuss your situation with your OIE advisor.
If an international student stays in their home country and does not come back to the U.S. until fall semester, can they maintain F-1 student visa status?

International students who choose to return to their home country (or other non-U.S. location), will be able to retain their current F-1 status provided they remain enrolled full-time and participating in their courses and return to the U.S. for their next academic semester (fall 2020 for most students, unless summer 2020 is a required semester). Students who are not able to remain enrolled, who drop classes and/or who remain outside the U.S. more than 5 months without being enrolled, may need to obtain a new I-20 and should consult with their OIE advisor.

If a student leaves the U.S. for a period of 5 months or more, will their I-20 be terminated or inactivated?

F-1 students who are enrolled full-time and participating in their courses with school authorization are allowed to study remotely and retain their status. F-1 students are also allowed to have temporary absences from the U.S. As long as students remain fully enrolled this semester and return for fall 2020, they will be able to retain their current F-1 status.

What will happen if students leave the U.S. and then cannot obtain visa appointments or receive their visas before the fall semester? Should students stay in the U.S. if they need visas?

OIE recommends that students (from all countries) consider international travel plans carefully as travel bans/restrictions may be in place at the time they want to return to the U.S. Visa processing may be delayed or unavailable due to health and safety concerns at many U.S. Consulates.
How will remote courses affect international students’ immigration status?

Carnegie Mellon students who have been physically present and engaged in their courses in the spring 2020 semester and are moving to remote/online education either temporarily, or for the remainder of the spring 2020 semester, will not have a negative impact on their F-1 or J-1 status. While immigration regulations require F-1 students to be enrolled full-time and restrict students to one online course per semester that would count toward the full-time enrollment requirement, that requirement has already been met for students for the spring semester.

Per recent federal guidance, OIE will provide information to the Student and Exchange Visitor Program (SEVP) about the university’s plans for remote learning to ensure institutional compliance with federal immigration regulations.

Will the online teaching platform work in other countries if students decide to leave the U.S.?

The university and OIE recommend that students (from all countries) consider international travel plans carefully: online course access, bandwidth, and distance education modalities that are commonly available in the U.S. and many non-U.S. countries, may be limited and thereby impact the ability of some students to have full access to Canvas, Zoom and other remote education methods.

Will courses be offered in “real time”?

Currently, the university is asking students to attend spring 2020 classes remotely and in “real time.” This is also referred to as synchronous delivery. Students residing in locations with multi-hour time differences from Pittsburgh’s Eastern Daylight time (EDT) need to plan accordingly.
A note on OIE Express Service:

We have temporarily suspended our weekly OIE Express Signature hour, but we are still currently accepting travel signature requests at our front desk (Cyert Hall, First Floor Atrium). A travel signature is not needed to depart the US. International students who are thinking about traveling should contact their OIE advisor (per guidance in the FAQs).