

Introduction

International students in F-1 and J-1 status are required to maintain full-time enrollment during the academic year. If you cannot or will not meet this requirement, you must complete a Request for Reduced Course Load (RCL) and meet an international student and scholar advisor in International Student and Scholar Services (ISSS) to discuss your request.

Federal immigration regulations limit the international student's ability to enroll less than full time, but it *may* be allowed in some circumstances explained below. Please note that if you drop below full-time enrollment without authorization *in advance* from an ISSS advisor, ISSS is federally mandated to report this in the Student and Exchange Visitor Information System (SEVIS, the online database created by the US Department of Homeland Security to track and monitor students and scholars in F, J, and M status); and you will lose your F-1 or J-1 status.

According to immigration regulations governing international students, **only a Designated School Official (DSO, a designation held by ISSS advisors, *not your academic advisor*) may allow an F-1 student to engage in less than a full course of study as provided below. For J-1 students, a Responsible or Alternate Responsible Officer (RO/ARO – again, ISSS advisors have this designation, *not your academic advisor*) may allow such reduced course load.**

A student who wishes to drop below full time must obtain the approval in writing from a DSO/ARO *in advance*, regardless of what the reason might be. **A student who registers for fewer classes than a full course load, or drops below a full course of study, without appropriate prior approval from an ISSS advisor will be considered out of status.** Please be advised that a lack of financial support does not constitute a valid reason to reduce course load.

Definition of Full Time

An undergraduate student, including students in post-baccalaureate programs, must register for *and* complete at least four course units (CUs) per semester. As a graduate student, you must register for and complete a minimum of three CUs per semester. If you are not enrolled full-time as defined here, please see an ISSS advisor immediately.

NOTE: Courses that you **audit** or any **incompletes** that you are working to complete do not count toward the full-time enrollment requirement for immigration purposes.

NOTE: Federal Regulations limit the number of **online/web courses** that could count towards the full-time enrollment requirement for immigration purposes Please see an ISSS advisor **prior** to registering for any online/web courses.

Academic Difficulties

A student may apply for Reduced Course Load if, due to academic difficulties, he/she is unable to be enrolled full time. Academic difficulties are exclusively limited to:

- Initial difficulties *during the first year* of an academic program at Penn with the English language, reading requirements, or unfamiliarity with American teaching methods

Or:

- Improper course-level placement during his/her academic program

A student may be authorized for Reduced Course Load on the “academic difficulties” basis **only for a single semester during any one course of study at a particular program level** and must resume a full course of study at the next available semester (excluding eligible vacation semester).

Important! Even with the reason of academic difficulties (listed above), Reduced Course Load must still consist of at least 2 CUs per semester for undergraduates; and at least 1.5 CUs per semester for graduate students.

Master's & Doctoral Students on Thesis/Dissertation Track

If this is your final semester of coursework before the start of your thesis or dissertation status, an ISSS advisor could approve you to register for a course or courses left for completion. Once you have completed your coursework and begin working full-time on your thesis or dissertation, you are required to continue to register for master's thesis or doctoral dissertation tuition (or registration) during each semester until you graduate.

Medical Conditions

A student may apply for Reduced Course Load if, due to a serious illness or medical condition, he/she is unable to be enrolled full time (or, if necessary, no course load).

The student must provide medical documentation from a *licensed medical doctor, doctor of osteopathy, or licensed clinical psychologist* to the DSO/ARO to substantiate the illness or medical condition.

Please show this handout to your doctor so that his/her letter will include required information. If not, we might have to ask you to obtain a new letter from your doctor. **The letter must be prepared on the official letterhead and signed by the doctor.**

A letter from your doctor must contain the following:

- In your doctor's *medical opinion*, it is advised that you take a reduced course load or not take any classes because of your *current illness*.
- *Duration of time*, including a beginning and end date (or indicate for the entire Fall/Spring/Summer semester), that your doctor advises you reduce your course load or suspend your study due to medical reasons affecting you personally.
- If a *reduction* of your course load is advised, the doctor must *specify* whether he or she advises you to take $\frac{3}{4}$ load, $\frac{1}{2}$ load, or $\frac{1}{4}$ load for medical reasons.

Reduced Course Load for a medical condition can be granted for a period of time not to exceed a total of 12 months while the student is pursuing a course of study at a particular program level. A DSO/ARO must authorize the drop below full time for each new semester.

Completion of Course of Study

A student may apply for Reduced Course Load in his/her final semester if fewer courses (i.e. less than full time) are needed to complete the course of study. If approved, he/she must complete his/her study at the end of the particular semester.

How to Apply for Reduced Course Load

1. Set up an appointment with your academic advisor to obtain his/her recommendation for Reduced Course Load.
2. If you are requesting a Reduced Course Load for medical reasons, set up an appointment to see a licensed medical doctor (or doctor of osteopathy or licensed clinical psychologist) to request a letter detailing information needed. Please carefully follow the instructions listed above.
3. Bring the following documents with you to meet with an international student advisor at ISSS:
 - Request for Reduced Course Load form (see next page) completed by you and your academic advisor
 - Copy of your I-20(s)
 - Copy of your passport
 - Copy of your I-94 card, front and back, from your most recent entry to the U.S.
 - (if requesting RCL based on illness) Letter from a doctor substantiating your illness
4. An ISSS advisor will review the documents and will decide whether to approve your Request for Reduced Course Load.
5. If approved, you will be given a copy of the approved Reduced Course Load form signed by an ISSS advisor.



Request for Reduced Course Load

F-1
J-1

International Student and Scholar Services

Due by the **third week of each semester** that you are under-enrolled, except for requests based on serious illness. You must read the Request for Reduced Course Load instructions carefully prior to completing the request.

Section A: To Be Completed by Student

Name: _____ / _____ / _____
(Family/Last) (Given/First) (Middle I.)

Date of Birth: Month: _____ Day: _____ Year: _____ Email: _____

Major: _____ Academic Level (BA, MA, PhD, etc.): _____

I am registering for _____ course units (CUs) during the:

Spring Summer (if first or last semester at Penn) Fall Semester of (year) _____

I request that my academic load be considered as full-time enrollment for immigration purposes for the reason below:

Check one that applies:

#1 Academic difficulties: Specify and remember you can use one of the following four academic difficulty reasons only once per degree and must be enrolled at least half of full-time course load.

- initial difficulties with the English language (during the first year only)
- initial difficulties with reading requirements (during the first year only)
- unfamiliarity with American teaching methods (during the first year only)
- improper course level placement

#2 Medical reason: Attach an official letter from a licensed medical doctor, doctor of osteopathy, or licensed clinical psychologist. Show the ISSS Reduced Course Load Information to your doctor to ensure that the doctor's letter will include the required information.

#3 Master's or Doctoral student on thesis or dissertation track: This is my final semester of coursework before the start of my thesis or dissertation status (only once per degree).

#4 Expected completion date of course of study: Month: _____ Day: _____ Year: _____ (must graduate this semester).

Student Signature: _____ Date: _____

Section B: To Be Completed by Student's Academic Advisor

I have reviewed and recommend the above request. I confirm that the information provided on this form is accurate and in conformance with applicable departmental/college/university policies and an exchange agreement (if any).

I do NOT recommend that the above request be granted to this student for the following reason(s):

Academic Advisor's Name: _____ Department: _____

Advisor Signature: _____ Date: _____

Section C: To Be Completed by an ISSS Advisor

Approved Denied for the following reasons:

Name of ISSS DSO/ARO: _____

Signature of ISSS DSO/ARO: _____ Date: _____