

# BEST PRACTICES FOR UTILIZING INTERNATIONAL BRIDGEUSA J-1 PARTICIPANTS IN CAMPS

The Exchange Visitor (J) non-immigrant visa category is administered by the US Department of State's Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs with the goal of increasing mutual understanding through cultural exchange and educational exchanges. These private sector exchange programs receive no government funding. Over the last several decades, the addition of international participants has evolved from a value-added opportunity into a vital cultural resource for many American summer camps.

- These international participants are placed in a variety of positions from general counselors to program counselors and support personnel, and, by regulation, must not displace American workers.
- As this increased need continues, camps must take care not to lose sight of the cultural exchange dimension of these programs.
- These programs carry with them a number of regulatory obligations that all parties involved, including international participants, camps, and visa sponsoring agencies, must meet. Compliance with these regulations will help to ensure sustainability of these programs.

American Camp Association (ACA) volunteers and staff meet regularly with the leaders of the international cultural exchange organizations that work with the camp community. This relationship has allowed ACA to promote the benefits of cultural exchange programs while monitoring public policy issues that affect them. Some of these organizations are US Department of State designated BridgeUSA J-1 Visa sponsors, and others are recruitment partners providing support to the cultural exchange process.

ACA also maintains a relationship with key personnel from the US Department of State Bureau of Educational and Cultural Exchange. Taking a unified approach allows ACA to address emerging issues and trends and better understand the needs and expectations of participating camps while helping to safeguard health, safety, and welfare of participants. Together, we have collaborated on a set of best practices, which include minimum expectations and exemplary actions that display a still higher degree of commitment to the education and welfare of participants and to the tenets of cultural exchange.

As camp professionals, we unite to address a wide array of environmental, educational, legal, and financial issues. We set standards to which we hold ourselves accountable, and we understand the moral and ethical aspects of conducting an enterprise that is essentially human in nature. It is reasonable, therefore, that we identify and engage in best practices as we host counselors and support staff from other countries. Moreover, following such practices is consistent with ACA's mission of "enriching the lives of children, youth, and adults through the camp experience."

We are proud of the fact that many camp programs already make extensive use of these practices. Whether you currently host international exchange program participants, or plan to do so in the future, we hope that this guide serves as a useful tool for benchmarking current methods and procedures. We look forward to ongoing cooperation with camps, sponsors, and agencies as we maximize and enhance our use of this highly important human resource and celebrate the youth development opportunities that these programs provide.

- For the most current information about the US Department of State's BridgeUSA J-1 Visa program, visit: [j1visa.state.gov/basics/](https://j1visa.state.gov/basics/).
- For a list of the international cultural exchange organizations that are ACA Business Affiliates, visit: [ACAcamps.org/buyers-guide](https://ACAcamps.org/buyers-guide).

# BRIDGEUSA PROGRAM TYPES

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There are currently two BridgeUSA J-1 Visa programs that are most commonly utilized by camps — **Camp Counselor Program** and the Summer Work Travel (SWT) Program. Some camps may also use the Intern or Trainee programs.

- **Camp Counselor Program** participants have direct responsibility for supervision of American campers and of activities that bring participants into interaction with their campers. The category is open to foreign nationals who are bona fide youth workers, students, teachers, or individuals with specialized skills at least 18 years of age and sufficiently proficient in the English language to supervise and interact with American youth.
- **The SWT Program** provides opportunities for foreign students to experience the US and its citizens, travel, and work in jobs that require minimal training and are seasonal or temporary. Applicants must be post-secondary school students enrolled in and actively pursuing a degree or other full-time course of study at an accredited, classroom-based, post-secondary educational institution outside the United States; have successfully completed at least one semester or equivalent of post-secondary academic study; and are sufficiently proficient in English to successfully interact in an English-speaking environment; and are pre-placed in a job prior to entry unless from a visa waiver country. Participants in this program are placed in support positions in camps and not working directly with campers.
- **Intern and Trainee** — This category is designed for foreign nationals who are currently enrolled full-time and pursuing studies at a degree or certificate-granting post-secondary academic institution or who have graduated from such an institution no more than twelve months prior to their program period.

## Important distinctions among the categories include:

- **Mutual Exclusivity** — While regulations recognize that some non-counseling chores are an essential part of camp life for counselors, participants in one category are not to serve in positions for which another category exists. For example, those in the Camp Counselor category are therefore not to be utilized in office, maintenance, or kitchen positions, or other support roles; and SWT participants are not to supervise campers or serve as activity leaders.
- **Program Dates** — J-1 camp counselors may arrive at camp as early as May 1; however, they are not to have program end dates later than September 21. Start and end dates for SWT participants are determined by the Department of State according to each individual country's student calendar. Intern participants have a program period of 12 months and Trainees up to 18 months.
- **Program Exclusions** — Some categories have prohibited duties. For example, among other restrictions, SWT participants may not serve as domestic help, night watch persons, or drivers of vehicles for which licenses are required.

# BEST PRACTICES

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The following “best practices” have been identified as those that directly contribute to the success of the cultural exchange experience for camps, staff, and the campers they serve. They also support the legal and regulatory obligations of the exchange visa program.

## THE CAMP

### Administrative Practices

#### Expected practices of directors:

- Understand and accept the premise that the purpose of the J-1 Visa program is cultural exchange and implement that philosophy.
- Understand and comply with the regulatory opportunities and limitations of the J-1 Visa program and respective provisions of each individual program category including prohibited duties.
- Establish a strong relationship with agencies that you partner with and know the designated sponsor for each participant.
- Gain thorough knowledge of each participant’s health insurance coverage and provisions.
- Complete SEVIS (Student and Exchange Visitor Information System) validation for arriving participants promptly in accordance with individual agency procedures.
- Assist international participants in obtaining a Social Security card.
- Compensate appropriately and provide access to cash. Ensure that compensation is commensurate with American counterparts.
- Withhold all federal, state, and local taxes required for international exchange visitors and provide participants with appropriate tax paperwork. Participants do not pay Social Security, Medicare (FICA) and Federal Unemployment (FUTA) taxes unless considered a resident alien for tax purposes.
- Provide worker’s compensation insurance in accordance with state laws and regulations.
- Develop and implement a crisis plan for dealing with the illness, injury, arrest, or death of an international participant or a family emergency back home.
- Develop public health protocols that comply with local, state, and federal guidelines for international travelers.
- Formulate and administer policies that include providing immediate notification to the sponsoring agency of any personnel action, including changes to location/site within the organization, or any emergency situation involving an international participant.
- Plan cultural exchange opportunities for each participant, including those that take place outside of camp or in the local community.
- Ensure that all supervisors of participants are competent and trained in regulatory elements, cultural sensitivity, and inclusion techniques.
- Exemplary Practices:
  - Feature cultural programming at camp.
  - Showcase international programs and staff in camp marketing materials.

# BEST PRACTICES

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## THE CAMP

### Placement Process

#### Expected practices of directors:

- Ensure that you do not displace American workers by participating in the program.
- Define and articulate why your camp wants to include international participants other than to fill vacancies.
- Conduct a comprehensive interview with program applicants through the most effective means possible.
- Be thorough in your evaluation and selection processes.
- Spend as much time on the selection process as you would with American staff.
- Be forthright in matching candidates' skills and interests with the camp's needs.
- Prior to the interview, provide applicants with appropriate resources that are specific to your camp and the positions you are seeking to fill, so they may adequately prepare.
- Provide clear expectations to participants of their expected responsibilities, accommodations, schedule, etc., before arrival to camp.
- Exemplary practices:
  - Embrace cultural exchange by defining and articulating how inclusion of international participants fits into your camp philosophy.
  - Avoid stereotyping nationalities by demonstrating a willingness to host international participants from a wide variety of countries in a broad range of positions.

### After Placement – Prior to Camp

#### Expected practices of directors:

- Communicate regularly with the participants before they arrive at camp and give timely answers to follow-up questions that you may receive. Address the nature of the local community, camp location, type of accommodation, facilities, and food service.
- Provide information such as policies, handbooks, organizational charts, maps, weather reports, lists of what to bring, camp website information, orientation/training schedules, job descriptions, camper profiles, rules and regulations, camp mission statements, time-off policies, transportation-to-town options, email addresses of mentors/buddies, local attractions/local community information, etc.
- Present a realistic picture of the camp and establish expectations.
- Make sure that plans for cultural programming and opportunities for cultural activities outside of camp are firmly in place.

#### Exemplary practices:

- Provide opportunities for networking with former international participants from their home country (e.g., share email addresses of former camp staff).
- Help establish dialogue with current and former participants as well as American staff. Share email addresses and promote connections through social networking.
- Keep your participants excited about the upcoming season through publications, news flashes, spotlights on activities and events, and other creative techniques to help them eagerly identify with the experience.

# BEST PRACTICES

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## THE CAMP

### During the Summer

#### Expected practices of directors:

- Provide positive feedback and reinforcement.
- Continue to show patience with differences in language and dialect.
- Help arrange transportation for time off.
- Partner with the sponsoring agency on any problems or issues that arise.
- Facilitate communication between international participants and sponsoring agency.
- Help with financial issues such as accessing cash, establishing bank accounts, etc.
- Provide a secure place for storing important documents and other valuable items.
- Ensure internet, email, and telephone access.
- Establish equal and respectful treatment.
- Train supervisory staff in all aspects of the BridgeUSA J-1 Exchange Visitor Program.
- Keep open lines of communication between the director, supervisors, and international participants.
- Demonstrate commitment and an understanding of cultural differences.
- Provide ongoing training and support.
- Include cultural programming as a part of the camp's activities.
- Attend to health issues with proper access to doctors, dentists, medications, etc.
- Encourage participants to obey the rules of the exchange program and to return to their home country after the summer.
- Comply with rules governing the BridgeUSA J-1 Visa Program, including the mutual exclusivity of camp counseling and support roles.
- Develop a program of training and support designed to solve problems related to participants.
- Create opportunities for out-of-camp recreational, cultural, and community-based experiences for participants.
- Make laundry provisions.
- Provide equal access to camp activities and facilities for international participants.
- Treat American staff and international participants equally, with respect to opportunities, work hours, and time off.
- Consult with the respective agency well in advance of participant termination and have a firm plan in place to protect health, safety, and welfare during the transition process.
- Engage with participants to help plan and arrange post-camp travel.

#### Exemplary practices of directors:

- Design and implement outstanding cultural programming.
- Allow international participants access to food, drinks, and newspapers from their home country.
- Feature international participants and programming in camp media and marketing materials.
- Identify and work with local families or alumni to help integrate international participants into the local community.
- Give international participants equal access to key positions and leadership opportunities.

# BEST PRACTICES

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## THE VISA SPONSORING AGENCY

### Expected practices of agencies:

- Understand, monitor, and comply with all issues, regulations, and requirements of the J-1 cultural exchange programs.
- Observe and ensure regulatory compliance on the part of associated recruitment parties.
- Conduct thorough in-person interviews with every applicant and maintain a trained and qualified interviewer network.
- Recruit applicants with an appropriate level of English proficiency.
- Conduct thorough and in-depth pre-departure and/or arrival orientation that include information on American culture as well as different types of camps, the nature of camp life, and working with children.
- Maintain ongoing communication with the participant and the camp throughout the camp experience.
- Provide 24-hour emergency support for participants during the camp season.
- Implement an application process that facilitates thorough assessment of applicant skills, backgrounds, and attributes, and results in quality matches.
- Check references to ensure quality applicants are being accepted.
- Require participants to provide the best available criminal background check and provide help for this when necessary.
- Ensure participants are clearly aware of the program sponsor from time of recruitment onward.
- Place participants at camps and in positions best suited to their skills, interests, background, and experience.
- Ensure that participants placed as camp counselors understand they will be working with children and are suitable candidates to do so.
- Encourage camps to select participants from a variety of countries.
- Provide camps with information about participants' countries of origin and cultural background.
- Educate camps on the best way to host international participants.
- Provide readily accessible and quality ongoing care, advice, and support for participants and camps during the summer, including visiting, monitoring, and collecting feedback.
- Monitor and evaluate the quality of the experience provided to international participants by each camp and work with camps and participants to improve the overall program experience and level of agency service.

### Exemplary practices:

- Present consistent messaging to the camp community regarding developments in the Department of State affecting our programs.

# BEST PRACTICES

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## THE AMERICAN CAMP ASSOCIATION

### Expected practices of ACA:

- Monitor public policy issues related to the BridgeUSA J-1 Visa exchange program and keep camp professionals informed of these policies.
- Maintain J-1 Visa regulatory and legislative issues as a priority focus of ACA's public policy work.
- Facilitate communication with and among visa sponsoring agencies.
- Promote the benefits of cultural exchange programs to camps as well as to the general public.
- Develop and track statistical information that is of value to camps, the agencies, and ACA.
- Maintain relationship with Department of State personnel and provide information and resources to them as appropriate.
- Provide educational resources to help camp professionals address international participant issues they may encounter.

### Exemplary practices:

- Provide opportunities for camp directors to interact with Department of State personnel.

## THE UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF STATE (DOS)

### Expected practices of DOS:

- Establish and oversee regulations pertaining to BridgeUSA J-1 Visa programs.
- Monitor J-1 Visa program compliance through communication with visa sponsoring agencies, host camps and international participants.
- Collect and analyze data on international exchange participants and placements.
- Conduct field site reviews.
- Assist with problem solving and complaint resolution.
- Perform the associated functions of designation, program administration, and compliance.

### Exemplary practices of DOS:

- Seek input on trends and challenges from all stakeholders, including participants, visa sponsoring agencies, and host camps.
- Participate in educational opportunities with camp directors and staff.