



Best Practices For International Staff in American Camp Association Camps *Updated August 2011*

The availability of international staff for job placement in the United States is made possible by a number of organizations that are formally designated as cultural exchange program sponsors by the U.S. Department of State's Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs. Over the last several decades, the employment of international staff has evolved from a value-added opportunity into a vital cultural resource for many American summer camps. As this trend continues, we must take care not to lose sight of the cultural exchange dimension of these programs. It is also important to remember that these governmental programs carry with them a number of regulatory obligations that all parties involved, including international staff, camps, and sponsoring agencies, must meet. Compliance with these regulations will help to ensure that the delicate balance between concerns for homeland security and support for cultural exchange is maintained.

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 these programs. Taking a unified approach with the agencies that recruit and screen young people from other countries for work at American camps also allows ACA to address emerging issues and trends and better understand the needs and expectations of participating camps. In addition, we have enumerated exemplary practices (i.e., those that display a higher degree of commitment to the education and welfare of international staff and to the tenets of cultural exchange). This document provides the best practices as either "expected practices" or "exemplary practices."

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 practice as we employ counselors and support staff from other countries. Moreover, following such practices is consistent with ACA's mission of "...enriching the lives of children 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 employ international staff, 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 and international staffing 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 U.S. Department of State's J-1 visa program, visit: <http://j1visa.state.gov/basics/>. For a list of the international cultural exchange organizations that are ACA Business Affiliates, visit: <http://www.acacamps.org/buyers-guide>.

BEST PRACTICES

For International Staff in American Camp Association Camps

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 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.
- Establish a strong relationship with the sponsoring agency (or agencies) you have selected.
- Complete SEVIS validation for arriving staff promptly in accordance with sponsoring agency procedures.
- Assist international staff in obtaining a Social Security card.
- Provide appropriate wages and access to money owed. (Be aware that checks may be hard for international staff to cash. Offer help with that process!)
- Provide worker’s compensation insurance in accordance with state laws and regulations.
- Develop and implement a crisis plan to deal with the injury, arrest, or death of an international staff member.
- Develop and implement 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 staff member.

Exemplary practices of directors:

- Feature cultural programming at camp.
- Showcase international programs and staff in camp marketing materials.

Hiring Process

Expected practices of directors:

- Define and articulate why your camp wants to include international staff (other than to fill vacancies).
- Interview international applicants on the phone prior to hiring.
- Be thorough in evaluating candidates and selecting staff.
- Spend as much time on the hiring process as you would with American staff.
- Be forthright in matching candidates’ skills and interests with the camp’s staffing needs.
- Provide clear expectations of staff while at camp.

Exemplary practices of directors:

- Define and articulate how inclusion of international staff fits into your camp philosophy.
- Avoid stereotyping by demonstrating a willingness to hire staff from all countries and use them in all positions.

After Hiring – Prior to Camp

Expected practices of directors:

- Communicate with the staff member by phone or e-mail before they arrive at camp.
- Through regular post or e-mail, 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 statement, time-off policies, transportation-to-town options, e-mail address of a mentor/buddy, local attractions/local community info, etc.
- Present a realistic picture of the camp and establish expectations (i.e., help with understanding life in the community, sleeping accommodations, typical menus, etc.).

Exemplary practices of directors:

- Provide opportunities for networking with former international staff from their home country (e.g., share e-mail addresses of former camp staff).

Arrival and Pre-camp*Expected practices of directors:*

- Provide comfortable and efficient transportation to camp from the orientation site.
- Welcome international staff upon arrival.
- Show sensitivity to time and cultural adjustments.
- Provide adequate housing that is welcoming and clean, including fresh linens and bedding.
- Provide additional orientation/training for international staff to help them with cultural adjustments.
- Make an active effort to integrate the entire staff into one group.
- Show sensitivity to language issues.
- Demonstrate in training an understanding of cultural differences (i.e., differences in hygiene, fashions, customs, etc.).
- Provide responsible education/orientation and training for understanding and competence.
- Show sensitivity to food issues, health/stamina issues, allergies, and cultural and religious practices (e.g., lactose intolerance, halal or kosher diet).

Exemplary practices of directors:

- Demonstrate an attitude of: "I care about you and want you to have a successful summer."
- Provide training to American staff on the purpose of the J-1 visa program and how to create a successful international team.
- Utilize a contact/liason on the camp staff who understands international issues.
- Develop a buddy/mentor system.

During the Summer*Expected practices of directors:*

- Provide positive feedback and reinforcement.
- Continue to acknowledge and work with language differences.
- Help arrange transportation on time off.
- Continue to partner with the sponsoring agency on any problems or issues that arise.
- Show sensitivity to financial issues (e.g., cashing checks).
- Provide a secure place for storing important documents and other valuable items.
- Provide access to the Internet, e-mail, and a telephone.
- Treat all staff as adults; treat support staff the same as program staff.
- Have trained/competent supervisors.
- Create open lines of communication between the director and international staff.
- Demonstrate a commitment to working with international staff and an understanding of cultural differences.
- Provide ongoing training and support.
- Provide cultural programming as a part of the camp's activities.
- Show sensitivity to health issues (i.e., access to doctors, dentists, medications, etc.).
- Encourage staff to obey the rules of the program and to return to their home country after the summer.
- Support the rules governing the J-1 program, which restricts switching staff between support and counseling roles.
- Develop a program of training and support to solve problems, using a fair termination policy as a last resort and after consultation with the sponsoring agency.
- Provide opportunities for out-of-camp recreational and/or touristic experiences.
- Make provisions for international staff to do their laundry.
- Provide equal access to camp activities and facilities to all staff members.
- Treat American and international staff equally, especially in number of hours required to work and adequate time off.

Exemplary practices of directors:

- Provide outstanding cultural programming.
- Provide international staff with access to food, drinks, and newspapers from their home country.
- Provide opportunities to show multi-national diversity at camp.
- Feature international staff and programming in camp media and marketing materials.
- Identify and work with local families or alumni to help integrate international staff into the local community.
- Provide international staff with equal access to key positions and leadership opportunities.
- Help with arranging transportation post-camp.

THE SPONSORING AGENCY*Expected practices of agencies:*

- Understand, monitor, and comply with all issues, regulations, and requirements of the J-1 cultural exchange Camp Counselor and Summer Work Travel programs.
- Conduct thorough in-person interviews with every applicant using a suitable and qualified interviewer.
- Recruit applicants with a good level of English proficiency.
- Conduct thorough and in-depth pre-departure and/or arrival orientation.
- Provide twenty-four hour emergency support for applicants during their J-1 visa term.
- Provide camps with as much information as possible on applicants.
- Provide applicants with information about American culture as well as different types of camps, the nature of camp life, and working with children.
- Check references to ensure quality applicants are being accepted.
- Require participants to provide a criminal background check and provide help for this when necessary.
- Place participants in camps and positions best suited to their skills, interests, background, and experience.

Exemplary practices of agencies:

- Ensure that staff placed as camp counselors understand they will be working with children and are suitable candidates to do so.
- Encourage camps to hire 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 staff.
- Provide readily accessible and quality ongoing care, advice, and support for participants and camps during the summer, including camp visiting, monitoring, and collecting of feedback.
- Monitor and evaluate the quality of the experience provided to international staff by each camp and work with camps and participants to improve the overall program experience and level of agency service.

THE AMERICAN CAMP ASSOCIATION*Expected practices of ACA:*

- Monitor public policy issues related to the 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 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.

Exemplary practices of ACA:

- Provide educational resources to help camp professionals address international staff issues.