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## Voluntary Leave of Absence for Columbia College Students

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Columbia College <columbiacollege@columbia.edu>

Tue, Jul 14, 2020 at 8:38 PM

To: [REDACTED]

Dear Michael,

Thank you for your messages to us and many others, regarding Columbia's voluntary leave policy and your concerns for your fellow students. We write to respond to you on behalf of all of the individuals you've contacted at the College and the University.

We understand what a challenging moment this is, with so many alterations to next academic year as Columbia strives to achieve our educational goals and, importantly, protect the health of all of our community members. We truly empathize with the many students who feel that taking a voluntary leave would be an appropriate choice for them as they consider their personal and academic situations and goals. Our current voluntary leave policy encourages students to make thoughtful choices based on what they feel is best for their academic engagement at Columbia, and we'd like to help you understand the principles behind the policies for Columbia College students.

The requirement that students be in good academic standing in order to take a voluntary leave is designed to ensure that students can maintain meaningful connections to resources and support that will enable them to make progress towards their degree, when they may already be struggling to do so. Students in this situation should be in touch directly with their advisers to have more individualized conversations about their circumstances and concerns, and we recommend that these conversations happen as soon as possible so that students can make thoughtful decisions about whether to commit to a full semester, rather than anticipating the need to leave in the last part of an ongoing semester (as your query about the transcript suggests).

While Columbia cannot guarantee housing for students who make the choice to take a voluntary leave of absence, we have historically been able to accommodate most students who need housing upon their return. Columbia College and Columbia Engineering are committed to the values of a residential experience and guaranteed housing is part of the promise made to each incoming class for their four years as a student. If we were to guarantee the future housing needs of all students taking voluntary leaves, we could not uphold our underlying commitment to incoming classes and their four-year residential experience, because of our limited housing. We know this creates uncertainty for students who would like to consider a leave this upcoming year. We will continue to make every effort to secure housing for students returning from a voluntary leave, but this process would occur, as it does now, after first assigning all students with guaranteed housing status. It's important to note that if we see a significant increase in students interested in taking a leave due to COVID-19, we would likely experience greater housing and enrollment constraints in subsequent semesters and years.

We also want to respond to your interest in waiving a students' academic record should they decide to take a voluntary leave after the pass/D/Fail and course withdrawal deadline. As this deadline is two-thirds into the semester, any student still enrolled past the deadline cannot have their academic record erased at that late date. We strongly believe that it is better for students to make a thoughtful decision about the need to

that.

We maintain our commitment to need-based financial aid support for our students, and those who take a voluntary leave of absence before the start of a semester would continue to be eligible for financial support upon their return, subject to the standard review of their financial aid application materials. Students who initiate their leave after a semester begins may require some adjustment to their aid and should reach out to Financial Aid when they plan their return to campus. We encourage any student with questions about this process to be in touch with Financial Aid to discuss their individual circumstances.

Lastly, when students choose to take a voluntary leave of absence, they are temporarily unaffiliated with the University. Eligibility for Columbia's Student Health Insurance plan is based on having Columbia student status and registering in a full-time course load for credit. Columbia has a special arrangement for students on medical leave that offers a continuation of the Student Health Insurance Plan for up to two terms, to help students address the medical (i.e., involuntary) nature of their leave, but students who choose to disconnect from the College for a period of time are not eligible for the benefits provided to full-time students.

We hope we have clarified the concerns mentioned in your petition, and that this information will be helpful to you and to other College students as they discuss the option of a voluntary leave of absence with their advisers in the coming weeks.

Sincerely,

Lisa Hollibaugh  
Dean of Academic Affairs, Columbia College

Cristen Kromm  
Dean of Undergraduate Student Life, Columbia College and Columbia Engineering