

Will the U.S. State Department be Prepared to Welcome International Students to the United States?

May 2021

Issue: Higher education institutions, businesses, and policymakers are concerned about whether our consulates will be able to efficiently process F-1 and M-1 student and J-1 exchange visitor visas in time for the Fall 2021 academic term. COVID-19 has challenged our consulates abroad in unprecedented ways. Thanks to the professionalism and dedication of our foreign affairs offices and other State Department staff, some student and exchange visitor visas have been processed even during the height of the pandemic. But more must be done immediately if we are to ensure our ability to welcome back international students and scholars to our campuses and communities on time this fall.

This is a critically important and time-sensitive issue: one of our nation's greatest foreign policy assets – our ability to welcome international students and scholars to our campuses and communities – could be jeopardized for years to come if the U.S. State Department does not use every means available under the law to ensure adequate preparation for visa processing this spring.

Update - Visa Policy:

We commend the [April 26 announcement](#) that students and certain academics from China, Iran, Brazil, South Africa, the Schengen area, the United Kingdom and Ireland may now qualify for a National Interest Exception (NIE) to Presidential Proclamations related to the spread of COVID-19 if their academic program begins on August 1, 2021 or later. We applaud this essential foreign policy decision, together with an earlier [announcement that the visa renewal interview waiver program has been extended](#) to December 31, 2021 for all those seeking visa renewals. We continue to need flexibility for new students and would recommend extending this waiver program to the fullest extent allowed by the law.

Now that we have the right policies in place, we look forward to the State Department's focus on the vitally important logistical and communications issues. We encourage the U.S. State Department to use every means available under the law to ensure adequate preparation for visa processing this spring. We request that the State Department provide an update no later than May 15, 2021 about what measures have been put in place to ensure timely, transparent and efficient processing of F, J and M visas, so that we may reassure and inform current and prospective students and exchange visitors abroad about the visa process. We also expect that the State Department will take the lead on updating U.S. government websites, including <https://educationusa.state.gov/> and <https://travel.state.gov/content/travel/en/us-visas.html>, in addition to local [embassy websites](#), on a regular basis to provide timely and relevant information to prospective and continuing students and exchange visitors.

Next action needed: We urge the Department of State to provide an update about what measures have been put in place to ensure timely, transparent and efficient processing of F, J and M visas.

Specifically, we respectfully request that the State Department update the higher education community on these matters, including the following information:

1. Ongoing Communications/Messaging:

- When will DOS begin regular dialogue with the higher education and international education community? Until the visa issuance issues are resolved, we recommend a weekly meeting between Consular Affairs and key stakeholders. Over time, it may be useful to include other USG offices and perhaps shift to a biweekly meeting until all the issues are resolved to ensure timely arrival of international students and exchange visitors seeking to come to the United States.

2. Processing:

- What is being done to improve and expedite consular processing for student and exchange visitor visas, and what plans are underway to ensure processing to allow for the timely arrival of these students, scholars, researchers and exchange visitors?
- When does the State Department anticipate that we will be able to return to the standard three-week goal for visa interview appointments?
- Does the State Department plan to return to DC-based visa renewal processing and other thoughtful efficiencies, such as conducting interviews via video conferencing, to help clear the backlog and ensure funding for consular operations?

We look forward to updates from the State Department and stand prepared to help communicate with students and exchange visitors about how they can acquire their visas in a timely manner under these extraordinary circumstances.