

Foreign Visa Applications for Students Going Abroad

GETTING A FOREIGN VISA HAS ALWAYS BEEN A BIT OF AN EFFORT. Acquiring the documents and getting them to the consulate office on time were the biggest challenges before September 11, 2001. Since then, and as the United States began new and stricter procedures for foreign students to study here, some foreign countries, especially in Europe, took their procedural lead for security from the United States. Many international educators on both sides of the ocean believe that the European trend to require more and more documentation, personal visits, and appointments is in reaction to the U.S. immigration policies. Others believe that foreign nations were increasing security measures on their own accord, as all nations have felt the need to develop new procedures to ensure greater security. The larger issue, however, is ensuring safety for any and all nations. Whatever the motive to augment documentation and tighten up measures to bring the burden of financial resources and personal identity upon student travelers, it should be clear to university administrators that new procedures require a heightened awareness of international security systems and the expanded bureaucratic network.



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At the same time, these changes offer education abroad administrators an additional opportunity to educate and prepare students for departure and arrival in a foreign host country. The cultural and personal knowledge that our U.S. programs abroad are designed to impart now begins with the impact of the student visa application process, long before students arrive in the host country. The challenges of collaborating with consulate staff and understanding foreign immigration regulations provide international educators with a ready-made, real-life context for learning—a technique often used in classroom teaching and automatically in place once the student is in the host country.

Our success is directly related to how we meet the demands of students and parents as well as program leaders to “take care of this,” “to provide a service they are entitled to,” and to somehow make it all work and work quickly. On the other hand, many of us have experienced something similar to the mother’s call in the summer of 2005 just to let me know that her son, about to join the fall term in another country, was on the bus that blew up in London. His hearing had been temporarily damaged,

but he was all right and still very excited about the coming semester abroad.

We need to understand the real fears of our students and parents about terrible events that we cannot guarantee will not happen. We live in a wondrous and sometimes dangerous world where students continue to move forward with their plans to study in a foreign country steadfastly learning to better cope with that world. As they proceed forward, we need to assure them that our principle interest is to prepare and protect them in every way we can to respond to the mixed situations they will experience. Part of that preparation is to help them develop an understanding of the scrutiny and immigration control processes associated with the foreign visa application process.

Guidelines for Helping Students Secure a Visa

Know Your Consulate Staffers

This seems self-evident but it should be a priority to know the name of the person responsible for processing your students’ visas, when they will take their vacation, and what kind of support staff they have at their disposal. If you or your faculty or staff will be visiting a city where a consulate office is located, touching base personally with that consulate staff can be very meaningful and will strengthen relationships with your university and students. Be sure to call ahead and schedule a good time to meet (drop-in’s could be difficult) and take a small appreciation for the consulate such as university mouse pads, note pads, etc.

It helps to ask in what order consulate staffers prefer the application materials. Where some prefer early submission, others are stricter and will not accept an application before the window begins or without an appointment *made well in advance*. In some cases, the staffer may ask that you wait or ask your students to wait until a specified date when the consulate office is prepared to handle the applications efficiently. You should take advantage of any way possible to communicate on a regular basis with the people that deal with your students’ applications. This might be anything from giving them a heads up as to how many students you expect will apply for the upcoming term to thanking them for solving a problem, however minor, to remembering them at holiday time.

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Use NAFSA's Resources to Help!

- Consult with colleagues and other Web resources at www.nafsa.org/eavisatips.
- Take a moment to document your problem situation on Issue Net so that NAFSA's Public Policy subcommittee can incorporate that into advocating efforts for changes abroad and in the United States at www.nafsa.org/issuenet.

Let Students Know About the Nature of the Situation in the Consulate Office

Students need to understand the nature of embassies and consulates and that although foreign consulate offices are located in the United States, they represent autonomous countries subject to their own laws. They need to understand that many officers in consulates rotate through their positions every couple of years. This realization on the part of the student opens the door to recognizing cultural and national differences. The understanding that security and safety are at the heart of the visa situation brings many other issues to the fore: that students will be living under those foreign laws and customs and not their own while abroad. Of course, this is nothing new. But reading it in predeparture materials is not the same as experiencing it when confronted with the frustrations of getting the visa. One of the biggest mistakes an adviser can make is to speak for any government. Not only will the visa officer inevitably prove you wrong, even if you've taken the information from the consulate Web page, but not deferring to the consulate staffers when dealing with visa applicants ignores the nuances of the process as well as the sovereignty of foreign governments. On the other hand, one of the greatest contributions we can make to a student's intercultural, international experience is to guide them to a greater respect for the 'other', a mature flexibility and a willingness to understand and accept the inconvenience that studying abroad often entails.

Help Students and Parents to Inform Themselves

It is a must to check consulate Web sites. But most advisers know that checking them regularly is not enough to provide students with accurate information since rules and requirements change faster than information on the Web can be updated. Therefore, confirmation of requirements needs to be petitioned by fax, providing visa officers with a completed visa application and documentation to approve, or faxing a list of the requirements for verification.

Visa officers should be provided with a friendly reminder of the dates of your program so that they know what kind of a timeline your students have for getting the visa and passport back to you or to your student. We can make the process easier for them by providing prepaid express mail, giving them our personal phone numbers they can reach us at 24 hours, 7 days a week, and telling them to let us know of any problems.

Revise Your Admissions Timeline and Information Materials

Many education abroad offices have moved travel confirmation deadlines and even application due dates ahead to be able to accommodate the demands of timely visa application submissions. Students should know, even before applying, that they may have to plan a trip to the consulate office in their jurisdiction, need a round-trip ticket, and have proof of financial resources as part of their visa documentation.

Program informational materials should include repeated mention of the visa appli-

cation for, as a professor once said, *strategic redundancy* is required to get the message across to students. Students that live in a jurisdiction where proof of round-trip travel is required should be urged early on to decide on a return date and counseled about the advantages of having a free or inexpensive option to change the return date.

Late acceptance is sometimes dependent on your informed opinion regarding the likelihood of obtaining the visa before departure.

Students need counseling about how to choose a return date, which until recently was usually left open. When consulates require exact return dates, advise students to buy a return that provides for one free or inexpensive change.

Work Closely with Financial Aid

Work closely with the financial aid staff making them aware of additional costs, including travel costs related to the visa application process, and any documentation required by their offices for proof of financial coverage for the duration of study abroad. Having a contact in the financial aid office who is familiar with the financial requirements for the visa is a blessing and well worth cultivating before a crisis situation occurs.

Think About Visa Issues in Terms of Overall Emergency Procedures

The events of Madrid in 2004 and in London the following year brought myriad parent calls, the necessity to mobilize overseas staff, and to immediately account for the whereabouts of all students studying through American programs overseas. Emergency teams and the planning we do to handle tragedies, personal as well as those involving world health and safety, need to include communication protocols for locating and providing information to students and parents. If, for example, a student chooses to enter a host country on a tourist visa, what kind of ramifications might that have if in an emergency situation airport security checks suddenly include verifying visa status? Should you advise a semester

student who wants to continue in the spring to go to the U.S. Embassy for the papers that will allow them to send the passport to the U.S. for visa processing? (Occasionally, a U.S. Embassy may grant students a document that serves as a temporary passport replacement but is not a common practice.)

The question of requiring a visa for short-term or summer programs is one that education abroad professionals are still unsure about. "Some people will say no," says Margaret Riley, dean of international programs at Duke University. "But there are programs that don't require the visa for summer study in Italy, for example. We must continue to find ways around the issues and this is an avenue some have taken."

Would those papers be sufficient to travel in an emergency situation? We just don't know what airport security will require in an emergency. The overnight change in travel security in August of this year is an example of how the effectiveness of your communication systems, emergency and regular, can determine timely identification of the students that need the information and your success in getting the information needed to students. The legal documentation and status of your students is essential and should underlie all of your policies and procedures regarding the foreign visa. James Ellis, director of international education at Auburn University, makes his students accountable for taking responsibility for their own legal status and only advises students to enter as tourists "for programs under four weeks and only on the advice of the consulate staffers who confirm that tourist status is accepted for that period of study." Although his office also verifies immigration requirements with the consulates on a routine basis to ensure firsthand knowledge about any requirements.

Semester Students Who Want to Continue for the Academic Year or Summer

It is no longer an easy decision to stay on for continued study or experiential work or to travel extensively before the term be-

gins. Italy, for example, generally will not process a visa for both summer and fall programs if there are more than two weeks between terms. Students who decide they would like to continue for the spring term often must return to the United States to process the appropriate visa.

Fall students can no longer decide in November that they want to continue on in the spring term without some difficulty getting another student visa. Although students generally must return to the United States, if they are studying in one country and want to continue in another, they should visit the foreign consulate in the country they are studying in to see if it is possible to obtain the visa from abroad. Although Spanish visas have been obtained in Paris and Italian visas in Madrid, there is no guarantee that your student will be able to obtain the visa abroad.

Another possible solution to this problem is to fax the consulate office that covers the student's jurisdiction and ask if it is possible to submit by fax or mail all of the documentation with a copy of the passport ahead of time so that the visa can be processed before the student returns. If consulate staff agree, the student then has to make only one trip to have the approved student visa stamped in the passport.

Of course, students can return, present their documentation in person, and then pick-up the visa in person, which requires two trips. In this case, students should be advised to have all of their documentation prepared ahead of time. If you are processing the visas, as in the case of Italy or Spain,

you can ask the student to send you all of the materials early so you can check them and then overnight deliver the passport to you upon arrival so you can submit the completed application. The success of this option depends on the dates you have available for submission. If you have already made a group submission, the consulate may be willing to process only one visa at a later date and with a shorter window. Unfortunately, there is no guarantee that the student will have the visa in time for the second semester and a late arrival date should be prepared for just in case.

Summer students now must have a student visa to comply with the current laws. In the past, many programs allowed students to enter as tourists. John Keller, director of education abroad at Pennsylvania State University, does not recommend that we continue that practice: "Not anymore. It's not in the best interests of the students. There are just too many questions and we are putting students at risk."

Coach Students About Going Through Customs

This is especially important at Heathrow Airport in London, but is important in all countries. Students have been held up for hours after demanding or expecting some sort of special consideration or service, for not responding to a customs officer's questions in a mature and respectful way, or for not having the documentation they need to show upon entry. The polite student may be allowed to enter even without necessary information if

Schengen Visas

Schengen visas have one visa application form for Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Iceland, Italy, Greece, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Spain and Sweden. They allow travelers to enter one country and travel freely throughout the other Schengen countries. Travel is handled as if it were domestic-like traveling from state to state in the United States; there are no or few stops and checks. For more information, visit <http://www.eurovisa.info/SchengenVisa.htm>.

they know how to respond with respect and deference to a customs officer. Let students know that their success with the customs officer is a good test of their potential success in understanding and learning from the people and the customs of that country.

Special Problems: Follow the Fax-E-mail-Call Rule of Thumb

Each consulate has their preference but study abroad professionals should always *Follow the Fax-E-mail-Call Rule of Thumb*, except in cases where the consulate staffer has one preference to communicate over another. Calling should be the last alternative but it is often necessary in time-sensitive situations. It seems redundant, but if you e-mail and fax, you have a better chance of getting a response. In written communication, present the details of the problem clearly and briefly. Sometimes writing to the embassies in Washington, D.C. will result in a more speedy response in emergencies but you may not get the details that only a spe-

cific consulate can provide. Given that each consul interprets the laws in their own way, consulate offices, even for the same country, have different requirements. So it's important that your own office have updated lists of requirements for each country for each consulate office representing that country.

Advise students and parents to follow the same procedures that you follow for communication with the consulates. It is usually wise to support their efforts with your own written communication but some consulate offices resent the interference of the institution when they are dealing with individual students.

Changes on the Horizon

Europe is currently in the process of creating biometric passport and visa documents. The Italian consuls in Chicago and New York have stated that the Italian visa application process will incorporate biometric eye-scanning and finger-printing within the year. Other countries in the European Union

will follow and may even begin the new system before Italy does. How will we deal with in-person application and pick-up?

John Keller suggests that the education abroad community seek consistent statements from foreign embassies about what procedures will be in order to better prepare students for the changes being contemplated. "Those of us not in the major cities will have to contemplate group bus trips—we've done that," he says. "But we will need to build these and other additional expenses into our costs."

Until recently, institutions have been able to prepare visa documentation for countries such as Italy and Spain. Some European countries still allow for mailing the application documents and returning the passport and visa by express mail. But the new world system will not allow for that and students will need additional funds for travel to the consulate offices as well as guidance in planning for the trips, especially difficult in the fall.

What else can we expect? James Ellis suggests that we will see "changes in the

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Schengen country procedures this year. The biometric processing can be collected at the port of entry and compared to the passport where it has already entered.” He believes that what we will see is a combination of passport biometrics and personal visa interviews at port of entry security checks. “But it is too early to tell,” Ellis says. “I am convinced, however, that the Schengen countries will soon begin to require an in-person application visit.”

Margaret Riley immediately recognizes that introducing the biometric requirement will eliminate the visa processing services. “If we could certify fingerprinting agencies to facilitate the process, this could be a new industry,” she says. “The issue is security and to ensure that the information cannot be tampered with. It all depends on the security issues involved.”

It is evident that students and international educators have found ways to meet the foreign visa challenges since September 11. “Students and parents are very resourceful,” adds Riley, “It [the foreign visa challenge] doesn’t seem to have affected study abroad since 2001—students still go for study abroad.”

Additional Visa Letters from Foreign Universities

Another anticipated change is that Schengen countries will require that U.S. programs abroad are not only affiliated with universities in their countries but that their accreditation also derive from the foreign ministries of education themselves. “The handwriting is on the wall,” says Jim Ellis. “The Schengen Information System is already in place and the movement is to accredit all university programs in their countries themselves. We can expect changes this year which will be difficult to surmount.”

James Ellis views this change as one that is indicative of a general movement on the part of Ministries of Education in the Schengen countries and around the world to restructure their accreditation policies. Great Britain, for example, is planning to require a British university umbrella so that

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education abroad students can obtain the visa they need to do an internship.

Back to the Predeparture Preparation

In the words of Ellis, “General statements about visas and immigration just don’t work.” That’s because policies change at a moment’s notice, so it’s best to prepare yourself for each term by confirming all your information through the foreign consulates.

Margaret Riley provided some good advice for students that sums up our new

responsibilities as education abroad advisers very well: “We’ve always told students to learn to be flexible and tolerate ambiguity. Now those cross-cultural coping skills will need to be developed before students leave the United States.” **IE**

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