

NAFSA: Association of International Educators
Updated March 2024

U.S. Department of State (DOS)

Below are recommendations for advancing international education priorities:

Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs (ECA)

- **Develop Special Student Relief (SSR).**

ECA has the authority to suspend or alter rules for J-1 students regarding duration of status, full course of study, and employment eligibility, for specific groups of students from parts of the world that are experiencing emergent circumstances. Unlike the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) for F-1 and M-1 students, ECA has not developed SSR regulations for J-1 students. ECA should develop regulations that establish reduced course load authorization and employment as independent benefits under the program, clarify that "emergent circumstances" covers both domestic and international emergencies of any kind, and coordinate the finding of emergent circumstances for J-1 students with the DHS secretary, who makes similar determinations for F-1 students.

- **Establish a National Strategy on International Student Recruitment in Partnership with Relevant Federal Agencies.**

We appreciate ECA's recent efforts to scale up the recruitment of international students to the United States. However, to ensure that the government's policies and messages create a welcoming environment for international students, scholars and researchers, a whole-of-government national recruitment strategy is necessary. Led by the White House in partnership with the Departments of State (ECA), Homeland Security, Education, and Commerce, it would shift the United States into a proactive posture demonstrating that the U.S. government is serious about attracting a diverse pool of talented individuals to study or conduct research at our institutions of higher education. Competitor countries are already undertaking similar efforts, and they are yielding the benefits of their investments. A national recruitment strategy would rely on active collaboration between government, higher education institutions, and international exchange organizations and result in a strategic plan for enhancing global competitiveness with respect to attracting international students, scientists, and scholars from a wider variety of cultures, backgrounds, and perspectives to the United States.

UPDATES:

- *On July 26, 2021, the U.S. Departments of State and Education, with support from the U.S. Departments of Commerce and Homeland Security, released a ["Joint Statement of Principles in Support of International Education"](#), outlining their shared commitment to promoting international education, and to undertaking actions to support a renewed focus on international education.*

- *On November 15, 2021, NAFSA joined with international and higher education partners to urge the U.S. government to partner with the higher education community to [develop and implement a national strategy](#) to return international student enrollment and exchanges to pre-COVID 19 numbers.*
- *On November 8, 2023, building off the Joint Statement of Principles led by the U.S. Departments of State and Education and the Biden-Harris administration's 2023 National Export Strategy, NAFSA joined in the formation of the multi-sector [U.S. for Success Coalition](#) to advocate for the removal of barriers and expansion of opportunities in welcoming and increasing diversity of international students to the United States.*
- **Revise and Modernize the Exchange Visitor Program Category (J Visa).**

The J Exchange Visitor category, managed by ECA, was developed to implement the Mutual Educational and Cultural Exchange Act (Fulbright-Hayes Act) of 1961. The overall purpose of that Act, and the objective of the Exchange Visitor category, is "to increase mutual understanding between the people of the United States and the people of other countries by means of educational and cultural exchanges." This broad goal is as relevant now as it was in 1961, but regulation of this program needs to be brought into line with the realities of today's world. The regulations governing the J-1 exchange visitor category and the Immigration and Nationality Act 212(e) two-year home residence requirement should be revisited to ensure that they reflect what the individuals who run exchange visitor programs have observed through managing these exchanges daily. For example, the 12-month and 24-month bars on repeat participation by exchange visitor professors and researchers, while rooted in the important goal of preventing abuse of the program, applies a "fix" that hampers legitimate academic exchanges that do not fall neatly into a simple "start-once, stop-once" model. In today's world, it is the norm for collaborative scientific research to operate on a global scale. The way the current regulations are written, however, makes this kind of collaboration more difficult, and puts the United States at a distinct disadvantage in its efforts to be a global hub for innovation and science. It is time to revisit these bars on repeat participation so that programs can provide input about how they impact certain kinds of exchange.

***UPDATE:** An ECA interim final rule published at [88 FR 18249 \(March 28, 2023\)](#) allows digital signing and electronic transmission of exchange visitor Form DS-2019, effective April 27, 2023. This is a welcome improvement. The remainder of the rule revised some obsolete language and procedures, but did not address more substantive issues.*
- **Coordinate a National Strategy on Study Abroad in Partnership with the U.S. Department of Education.**

Just over 347,000 U.S. students studied abroad for credit during the 2018-2019 academic year, which is less than two percent of U.S. students enrolled in U.S. higher education. Less than 10 percent graduate with a study abroad experience on their transcript, meaning that 90 percent of graduates are entering the workforce without the global skills, knowledge, and experiences that would position them for success in the global economy. ECA established the

USA Study Abroad Branch within the Office of Global Education Programs during the Obama administration. Working in collaboration with the U.S. Department of Education and with stakeholders in U.S. higher education and international exchange, we urge ECA to develop a national strategy to grow and diversify U.S. college student participation in study abroad. The administration also should seek increased funds for the Increasing and Diversifying Education Abroad for U.S. Students (IDEAS) program and increased or newly established funding for virtual exchange programs like the ECA-funded Stevens Initiative.

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- **Continue to Support and Grow Young Leaders Initiatives.**

The Obama administration launched several international education initiatives focusing on young leaders, specifically the Young African, Young Southeast Asian, and Young Leaders of the Americas initiatives. We urge the next administration to continue these programs and grow their numbers and reach.

UPDATE: The Biden administration proposed increased funding (\$48.8 million) for FY2025.

Bureau of Consular Affairs (CA)

- **Restore a Three-Week Goal for Visa Interview Appointments.**

Executive Order 13802 [82 FR 28747 (June 26, 2017)], signed by President Trump on June 21, 2017, deleted section 2(b)(ii) of President Obama's Executive Order 13597 of January 19, 2012, which had directed DOS and DHS to "ensure that 80 percent of nonimmigrant visa applicants are interviewed within 3 weeks of receipt of application." The 3-week goal should be restored.

- **Establish a Frequent Traveler Program for Visa Issuance.**

Building on the in-person interview waiver policy detailed above, we urge DOS to go further and establish a “Frequent Traveler Program” modeled after existing DHS trusted traveler programs such as “Global Entry”, which allows expedited processing of certain pre-approved low-risk travelers at U.S. ports-of-entry. Allowing U.S. consulates to expedite applications for pre-approved, low-risk academic and business travelers who require an entry visa to travel to the United States would help CA relieve stretched resources by further reducing the number of brief, pro-forma interviews with low-risk visitors, which ultimately do little to enhance our security.

- **Improve Visa Application Processing for Researchers and Scientists.**

The unpredictable timeframe for security clearances and administrative processing as part of the visa application process runs counter to the critical needs of time-sensitive experiments and research. The lack of transparency when applications take longer than 30 to 60 days to

adjudicate further frustrates the ability of researchers and scientists to do their work.

- **In Cooperation with DHS Customs and Border Protection (CBP), Clarify Entry Visa Validity Period for Admission of F-1 and J-1 Visa Holders.**
CA and CBP have issued varying guidance on the visa validity period for F-1 and J-1 nonimmigrants who have transferred to a new program or will return after a leave of absence, creating uncertainty for returning foreign students and scholars. Both agencies' regulations and guidance must clearly establish that a visa is presumed valid for the duration of period and number of entries for which it was issued and that it can be used to apply for future admission to the United States in the same nonimmigrant category during the period of validity, given valid SEVIS documentation, even after a transfer to a new academic or exchange visitor program.
- **Use Authority to Reduce Demands on U.S. Embassies and Consulates and Recurring Backlogs by Revalidating Visas in the United States.**
Prior to July 17, 2004, DOS issued revalidated C, E, H, L, O, and P visas in the United States. In order to increase predictability in travel and reduce delays abroad, DOS should revive this practice and expand the range of visas revalidated in the United States to include F, J, and M visas.

UPDATES:

- *On December 21, 2024, DOS [announced](#) that from January 29 to April 1, 2024, it will run a pilot program to resume domestic visa renewal of H-1B visas that were issued by Mission Canada between January 1, 2020 and April 1, 2023, or by Mission India between February 1, 2021 and September 30, 2021.*

Adopted CA Recommendations

- **Restore Confidence in the Travel Advisories System.**
NAFSA urges CA to increase the transparency on how and when travel advisories are reviewed and updated, and by what criteria. Prior to COVID-19, the U.S. higher education community relied heavily on these advisories to guide their risk assessment protocols. However, the lack of transparency and infrequency of updates during the pandemic eroded trust within the U.S. higher education community, who increasingly turned to non-U.S. sources for information. The higher education community should be able to use these advisories as reliable risk assessments so that institutions can successfully meet *in loco parentis* expectations.

ADOPTED *On June 8, 2021, after NAFSA and others advocated on this issue, CA adjusted its travel advisories in accordance with new travel health notices from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. As of October 3, 2022, the CDC has suspended its country-specific travel advisories related to COVID-19. NAFSA will continue to engage with key stakeholders and agencies to ensure the travel advisory system serves as an effective tool for evaluating health and safety for study abroad.*

- **Continue the Expanded 48-Month Visa Interview Waiver Policy.**

ADOPTED: *DOS announced a temporary expansion of visa interview waiver eligibility under 22 CFR 41.102(b)(3). That provision allows consular officers to waive the in-person interview requirement for individuals applying to renew a visa in the same visa classification and category if not more than 12 months have passed since the prior visa expired. The temporary expansion reflected in 9 FAM 403.5-4(A)(1)(a)(3) allows such waivers if the prior visa has not expired more than 48 months ago. A separate personal appearance waiver authority under 22 CFR 41.102(c) allows the Secretary of State to waive the personal appearance requirement for an individual or class of applicants if the Secretary finds that such a waiver is in the national interest. On December 31, 2023, the Secretary exercised this authority to waive the interview requirement for nonimmigrant visa applicants applying for any nonimmigrant visa classification who were 1) previously issued a nonimmigrant visa in any classification, unless the only prior issued visa was a B visa; and 2) are applying within 48 months of their most recent nonimmigrant visa's expiration date. Implementation of this authority begins January 1, 2024, and will be reviewed annually, but is otherwise in place until further notice.*

UPDATES:

- *On December 23, 2021, DOS extended to the end of 2022 the waiver of in-person visa interviews for certain nonimmigrant applicants (including F, M, and academic J categories) applying for a visa at a U.S. consular office "in their country of nationality or residence." DOS also updated the Foreign Affairs Manual (FAM 9 FAM 403.5-4(A)(1)(a)(5)-(6)) to reflect the December 23, 2021 policy update. However, the new FAM provision states that the in-person interview waiver for F, M, and academic Js excludes "nationals of the People's Republic of China." The FAM language addressing interview waiver expansion to H, L, O, P, and Q visa categories does not contain the PRC exclusion.*
- *On November 17, 2023, NAFSA joined 65 higher education, immigration, and business organizations in a letter to DOS and DHS urging the agencies to extend the interview waiver authorities set to expire at the end of the year.*
- *On November 20, 2023, the U.S. for Success Coalition also sent a letter to DOS and DHS urging them to make the visa interview waiver authorities permanent.*
- *On December 8, 2023, NAFSA joined the American Council on Education and 24 other higher education associations in a letter to U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken urging the agency to extend and make permanent the current authorities to waive the in-person interview requirement for certain nonimmigrant visa applicants. This is the fourth in a series of letters that NAFSA has written to the State Department in support of this change.*

- *On December 21, 2023, DOS announced a revised visa interview waiver policy for certain eligible nonimmigrant visa applicants. The revised policy, effective January 1, is broader in some respects and more limiting in others. While not permanent, the revised policy is in place “until further notice.”*
- *On December 23, 2022, DOS extended until December 31, 2023, the discretionary authority given to consular officers to waive the in-person interview requirement for certain "F, M, and Academic J Visa Holders" and "Petition-Based H, L, O, P, and Q Visa Holders." The FAM provision is unclear as to waiver eligibility for “nationals of Nigeria and of the People's Republic of China.”*
- **Restore F-1 Residence Abroad Language to the Foreign Affairs Manual (FAM).**

On August 8, 2017, DOS updated its FAM guidance on residence abroad for F-1 students, removing well-crafted language that instructed consular officers to consider the "inherent difference" between a young F-1 visa applicant and a short-term B visa applicant. The current FAM entry now applies the standard nonimmigrant residence abroad FAM entry of 9 FAM 401.1-3(F)(2) to F-1 students as well. DOS should restore the following language to the FAM:

b. (U) The context of the residence abroad requirement for student visas inherently differs from the context for B visitor visas or other short-term visas (See 9 FAM 401.1-3(F)(2)). The statute clearly presupposes that the natural circumstances and conditions of being a student do not disqualify that applicant from obtaining a student visa. It is natural that the student does not possess ties of property, employment, family obligation, and continuity of life typical of B visa applicants. These ties are typically weakly held by student applicants, as the student is often young, single, unemployed, without property, and is at the stage in life of deciding and developing his or her future plans. Student visa adjudication is made more complex by the fact that students typically stay in the United States longer than do many other nonimmigrant visitors.

c. (U) The residence abroad requirement for a student should therefore not be exclusively connected to "ties." You must focus on the student applicant's immediate intent, rather than trying to predict what the student may or may not do following completion of studies. Another aspect to consider: students' typical youth often means they do not necessarily have a long-range plan, and hence are relatively less likely to have formed an intent to abandon their homes. Nonetheless, you must be satisfied at the time of application for a visa that the visa applicant possesses the present intent to depart the United States at the conclusion of his or her approved activities. That this intention is subject to change is not a sufficient reason to refuse a visa. Although students may apply to change or adjust status in the United States in the future, this is not a basis to refuse a visa application if the student's present intent is to depart at the conclusion of his or her studies.

ADOPTED: On December 20, 2021, [DOS updated the FAM](#) to restore “inherent difference” distinctions to the residence abroad requirement for F students.

Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs

- **Sustain and Grow 100,000 Strong in the Americas Initiative.**

Announced by President Obama in 2011, the initiative set a goal of sending 100,000 U.S. students to study abroad in Latin America and the Caribbean, while growing the number of international students from the region studying in the United States to 100,000 by 2020. The [100,000 Strong in the Americas Innovation Fund](#), a public-private partnership first launched in 2014 between DOS, NAFSA, and Partners of the Americas, leverages private and corporate giving so that universities and colleges can expand study abroad programs and make international study more broadly available across the Americas. Since 2014, the Fund has granted 282 grants to 550 higher education institutions in 25 countries and 49 U.S. states. Unfortunately, the numbers of students going each direction has not yet hit the goal of 100,000 each way, so efforts must be redoubled. We also encourage the development of innovative programs like this for other regions of the world.