



May 3, 2021

The Honorable Antony J. Blinken
Secretary
U.S. Department of State
Washington, D.C. 20520
VIA EMAIL

Dear Secretary Blinken,

I write today on behalf of NAFSA: Association of International Educators, the world's largest professional association dedicated to international education, to thank the Department for its April 26 and April 30 announcements extending eligibility to all international students and exchange visitors for national interest exception waivers from the countries currently covered by COVID-19 travel restrictions.¹ This change is most welcome and does help to allay some of the concerns held by U.S. colleges and universities as they prepare for the return of students and scholars to their campuses this fall. However, as consular operations overseas remain limited and plans for increasing operations are as yet unknown, we are concerned that the Department will not be well-positioned to process the large volume of international student and scholar visa applications submitted this summer ahead of the fall semester, leaving many unable to arrive on U.S. campuses on time.

We recognize that the COVID-19 pandemic continues to present challenges for consular operations overseas. But with the start of the 2021-2022 academic year just a few months away, it is imperative to know what plans the Department is developing to ensure timely, transparent, and efficient processing of an expected large volume of student and scholar visa applications, particularly in high sending countries like China, India, and South Korea, to name a few. This is a critical time on the academic calendar when many incoming students are making their final decision on where they will study in the fall. If students overseas do not have sufficient assurance that they can get a visa in time for the start of the fall semester, they are likely to look elsewhere to study.

NAFSA: ASSOCIATION OF INTERNATIONAL EDUCATORS

Telephone: 1.202.737.3699 • Fax: 1.202.737.3657 • E-mail: inbox@nafsa.org • Web: www.nafsa.org 1

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Over the past four years, our country has already lost international students to competitors like Canada, Australia, and even China. New international student enrollment at U.S. colleges and universities declined more than 11 percent from fall 2016 through fall 2019, largely due to the harmful rhetoric and policies advanced by the prior administration. Then the pandemic hit, and last fall, a snapshot survey by the Institute of International Education showed a 43 percent drop in new international student enrollment. When only looking at the number of new students who made it to campus in person the decline was 72 percent.ⁱⁱ The number of international scholars on U.S. campuses also dropped nearly 10 percent last fall due to the pandemic.ⁱⁱⁱ Rightly, U.S. colleges and universities are very concerned about this coming fall, hoping to avoid a repeat of such steep declines.

As you know, attracting the best and the brightest from across the world contributes immeasurably to our nation's preeminence in academic research and scientific innovation. Welcoming international students and scholars also strengthens diplomatic ties with countries across the globe. Those who have spent time in the United States become our advocates when they return home, sharing an appreciation for common values, counteracting stereotypes about the U.S. and enhancing respect for cultural differences.

NAFSA conducts an annual analysis of the contributions of international students and their families to the U.S. economy, and in the 2019-2020 academic year, they contributed \$38.7 billion and supported nearly 416,000 jobs.^{iv} Unfortunately, this dollar amount is \$1.8 billion lower than the prior year, largely due to the impact of the pandemic, and marks the first time we have recorded a decline in the more than 20 years that we have conducted this analysis.

The Department can do much to restore the confidence of international students and scholars around the world and help reverse the recent declines in the following ways:

- Establish clear and safe policies to optimize the visa process for qualified international students and scholars. Such policies should seek to:
 - Prioritize student and scholar visa application processing at all consulates.
 - Extend temporary in-person visa interview waiver eligibility to all applicants, not just recent renewal applicants.
 - Use video conferencing technology, where possible, to conduct required visa interview appointments.
- Provide timely and relevant information to visa applicants on current U.S. consulate operations.
- Work collaboratively with other relevant agencies to ensure the United States remains open and welcoming to international students, scholars, researchers, faculty, and staff.
- Facilitate regular stakeholder engagement on visa policy between the U.S. academic community and the Bureau of Consular Affairs.
- Revise the current National Interest Exception (NIE) policy:
 - F-1 and M-1 students with valid visas do not need to contact an embassy or consulate to seek an individual NIE to travel to the United States. Extend that same blanket determination to J-1 exchange visitors in the college and university student, professor, research scholar, short-term scholar, and alien physician categories.
 - Remove reference to an August 1, 2021 “condition” in the NIE policy to permit travel by students on Optional Practical Training, students now in the U.S. or abroad who are planning to return to the U.S. to resume their program, and students who are planning to enter to begin a program this summer (before August 1).
 - Expand the National Interest Waiver policy to include university faculty, medical residents, researchers on Cap-Exempt H-1B and O-1 visas to travel



to United States. These scholars are similar to students and exchange visitors, in that they are usually bound by strict academic year deadlines and make essential contributions to the educational sector.

Again, we recognize that the COVID-19 pandemic remains challenging. However, the longer it takes for plans to be shared with the U.S. academic community on what international students and scholars can expect when they apply for visas this summer, the more likely that we will lose these talented individuals to other countries and do further damage to our reputation as the top destination of choice for study and research.

We appreciate your attention to this urgent matter.

Sincerely,

Esther D. Brimmer, DPhil
Executive Director & CEO

ⁱ <https://travel.state.gov/content/travel/en/News/visas-news/national-interest-exceptions-for-certain-travelers-from-china-iran-brazil-south-africa-schengen-area-united-kingdom-and-ireland.html> and

<https://travel.state.gov/content/travel/en/News/visas-news/presidential-proclamation-on-the-suspension-of-entry-as-nonimmigrants-of-certain-additional-persons-who-pose-a-risk-of-transmitting-coronavirus-disease-2019.html>

ⁱⁱ <https://www.iie.org/en/Research-and-Insights/Publications/Fall-2020-International-Student-Enrollment-Snapshot>

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://opendoorsdata.org/data/international-scholars/international-scholars-trends/>

^{iv} <https://www.nafsa.org/economicvalue>