

December 8, 2023

The Honorable Antony Blinken
U.S. Department of State
Office of the Secretary
Room 7226
Harry S. Truman Building
2201 C Street, NW
Washington, DC 20520

Dear Secretary Blinken,

On behalf of the American Council on Education (ACE) and the undersigned higher education associations, we write to urge you to extend and make permanent the current authorities to waive the in-person interview requirement for certain nonimmigrant visa applicants.¹ The waiver, which was established in 2022 as we emerged from the COVID-19 pandemic and is set to expire at the end of the year, has allowed for faster processing for international students and scholars applying for F-1 and J-1 visas to study and complete research in the U.S.

As you are aware, international students and their enrollment in U.S. institutions make a significant contribution to our campuses and to the overall U.S. economy. This year, the *Open Doors* report found that international student enrollment grew during the 2022-2023 academic year to over 1 million international students from over 210 places of origin. This growth has had a positive impact on the U.S. economy, contributing over \$40.1 billion and creating over 363,000 jobs in the 2022-2023 academic year.²

In addition to pent-up demand, much of this growth can be attributed to actions the administration has taken to communicate a welcoming environment for international students, as well as specific actions by the State Department to allow for the prioritization of student visa processing, and efforts to ramp up processing following the COVID-19 pandemic. Currently, the interview waiver only applies to applicants who meet certain conditions, including if they previously held a visa, were never previously denied a visa, or are citizens of a country that participates in the visa waiver program. In addition, applicants renewing a visa in the same classification within four years of the prior visa's expiration are eligible.

Since this flexibility has been granted, we know that the State Department was able to issue over 586,000 visas in fiscal year (FY) 2023. This is more than the 411,000 plus visas issued in

¹ See December 23, 2022 "Important Announcement on Waivers on the Interview Requirement for Certain Nonimmigrant Visas" <https://travel.state.gov/content/travel/en/News/visas-news/important-announcement-on-waivers-of-the-interview-requirement-for-certain-nonimmigrant-visas.html> Also see policy codification in the Foreign Affairs Manual at: 9 FAM 403.5-4(A)(1)(a)(5)-(6).

² <https://www.nafsa.org/policy-and-advocacy/policy-resources/nafsa-international-student-economic-value-tool-v2>

FY 2022, which was the largest number issued since FY 2016. We understand the need to address national security and immigration concerns during the visa application process and consular officers still retain the authority to require an in-person interview on a case-by-case basis. Retaining the visa interview waiver, which only applies to a certain population, helps all international students and scholars by allowing the faster processing of visas overall while maintaining national security.

The secretary has the authority to waive in-person visa interviews if the secretary determines that such waiver is (i) in the national interest of the United States; or (ii) necessary as a result of unusual or emergent circumstances.”³ During the COVID-19 pandemic, providing flexibility clearly fell under the “unusual or emergent circumstances” provision. Moving forward, it is clear that maintaining the flexibility is “in the national interest of the United States.” We ask that this flexibility be extended permanently, in order to continue to attract and welcome international students and scholars to our institutions while maintaining national security.

Sincerely,



Ted Mitchell
President

On behalf of:

ACPA-College Student Educators International
American Association of Colleges and Universities
American Association of Colleges of Nursing
American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers
American Association of Community Colleges
American Association of State Colleges and Universities
American Council on Education
American Dental Education Association
APPA, “Leadership in Educational Facilities”
Association of American Universities
Association of Catholic Colleges and Universities
Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges
Association of Jesuit Colleges and Universities
Association of Public and Land-grant Universities
Association of Research Libraries
Career Education Colleges and Universities
Council of Graduate Schools
ETS
NAFSA: Association of International Educators
NASPA - Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education
National Association for College Admission Counseling

³ Immigration and Nationality Act (INA) section 222(h)(1)(C)(i).

National Association of Colleges and Employers
National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities
National Association of System Heads
Presidents' Alliance on Higher Education and Immigration
UPCEA, The Online & Professional Education Association