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March 18, 2021

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

The Honorable Alejandro Mayorkas
U.S. Department of Homeland Security
Office of the Secretary
Nebraska Avenue Complex
3801 Nebraska Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20395

Dear Secretary Blinken and Secretary Mayorkas,

On behalf of the American Council on Education (ACE) and the undersigned higher education associations, we write to urge you to take actions now that will allow for our international students to return to our campuses and our institutions in the coming fall semester. Given the processing time for visas, we believe there are actions that need to be taken now to allow enough time for processing and for international students to make plans to travel to the United States safely.

As you are aware, international students and their enrollment in U.S. institutions have an enormous economic impact on the overall U.S. economy. Unfortunately, recent surveys have shown a 43 percent decline in new international student enrollment at U.S. institutions during the COVID-19 pandemic. A recent study from NAFSA: Association of International Educators found that the overall economic impact generated by international students had declined by \$1.8 billion during the 2019-2020 academic year, from \$40.5 billion in the prior year.¹ The declining enrollment numbers for 2020 will unfortunately contribute to the challenges our economy confronts as we rebuild from the global pandemic.

March and April are critical months for the processing of visas for the fall 2021 semester. International students around the world must make their country choices and begin the visa process in April to ensure they can arrive for the beginning of the fall semester. By taking action on these immediate issues, you can also deliver a welcoming message to current and prospective international students, which can help restore the U.S. as a destination of choice, as well as supporting an important economic activity as the U.S. economy recovers from the COVID-19 pandemic.

To prepare for the fall 2021 semester, there are several steps you can take:

¹ <https://www.nafsa.org/policy-and-advocacy/policy-resources/nafsa-international-student-economic-value-tool-v2>

1. The State Department and Department of Homeland Security can ensure the timely and efficient processing of visa applications and work authorizations for international students and scholars. This could include prioritizing the processing for student visas and work authorizations, such as Optional Practical Training (OPT). The federal government may also need to target additional resources to ramp up the processing of visas and authorizations post COVID-19.
2. If consulates are unable to re-open this spring in time to allow for the timely processing of visas, State should allow consular officers to waive the requirement for in-person interviews, or if a waiver is unavailable allow for online visa interviews. State has already waived the interview requirement for categories of H-2 visa applicants during the COVID-19 pandemic and State has the authority under 8 USC § 1202 (h)(1)(C) to waive the personal interview requirement “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.” We believe a waiver for F-1 and M-1 applicants, with no apparent or potential ineligibility, is in the national interest and necessary due to COVID-19 and would ensure smooth enrollment for our international students in fall 2021. In addition, we appreciate that State has extended the current guidance that allows for an interview waiver for nonimmigrants who are applying in the same visa category within a specific time period, and ask that they provide further flexibilities.²
3. The ICE guidance issued in July 2020, before it was withdrawn, caused massive confusion and concern for our international students. The current guidance is still problematic for new international students who are not allowed to come to the U.S. if their programs of study are completely online.
 - We ask that the current guidance be relaxed for fall 2021 for several reasons, including that U.S. institutions are prohibited from providing instruction to individuals in comprehensively sanctioned countries (Iran, North Korea, Cuba, Syria, and the Crimea region of Ukraine) making it difficult for students based in these countries to continue their studies; issues with government censorship of websites and platforms (we recently saw this during the Myanmar coup); limited high speed internet access, especially for students in rural areas; and differences in time zones.
 - We ask that DHS issue new guidance for the fall in a timely manner, as early as this spring, and allow for our institutions and international students to plan in an orderly manner.
4. As travel restrictions continue for several countries and regions, we ask that a student exemption be considered. Currently, there is an exemption for students traveling from European Schengen area, the U.K., and Ireland.³ This exemption for students should be extended to other countries included under the travel restrictions.

² <https://travel.state.gov/content/travel/en/News/visas-news/expansion-of-interview-waiver-eligibility.html>

³ <https://travel.state.gov/content/travel/en/News/visas-news/national-interest-exceptions-from-certain-travelers-from-the-schengen-area-uk-and-ireland.html#.XxDYpqq0BLo.twitter>

We look forward to working with you and the Biden administration on these important issues, as our country continues to reopen and recover from the COVID-19 pandemic.

Sincerely,



Ted Mitchell
President

On behalf of:

ACPA-College Student Educators International
Alliance for International Exchange
American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education
American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers
American Association of Community Colleges
American Association of State Colleges and Universities
American Association of University Professors
American College Health Association
American Council on Education
American Dental Education Association
APPA, "Leadership in Educational Facilities"
Association of American Colleges and Universities
Association of American Universities
Association of Catholic Colleges and Universities
Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges
Association of Independent Colleges and Universities in Pennsylvania
Association of International Education Administrators
Association of Jesuit Colleges and Universities
Association of Public and Land-grant Universities
Association of Research Libraries
Common App
Connecticut Conference of Independent Colleges
Consortium of Universities of the Washington Metropolitan Area
Council for Advancement and Support of Education
Council for Christian Colleges & Universities
Council of Independent Colleges
Council of Graduate Schools
Council on Governmental Relations
Council on Social Work Education
EDUCAUSE
ETS
Higher Education Consultants Association
Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities
NAFSA: Association of International Educators
NASPA - Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education

National Association of College and University Business Officers
National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities
National Association of Student Financial Aid Administrators
National Collegiate Athletic Association
Presidents' Alliance on Higher Education and Immigration
State Higher Education Executive Officers Association