

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

August 6, 2021

The Honorable Antony Blinken
Secretary
U.S. Department of State
2201 C Street NW
Washington, DC 20520

Dear Secretary Blinken:

We write to express our concerns regarding the slow pace of processing student visas as we continue to recover from the COVID-19 pandemic. In order to welcome international students and scholars in the fall, as competitor countries are doing, we urge the State Department to provide predictable and consistent consular services; maximize alternatives to in-person visa interviews by providing waivers and virtual interviews; extend visa eligibility waivers; authorize staff overtime and increase hiring; and initiate meaningful engagement with outside stakeholders and agencies.

We are at a critical point in the academic calendar when international students and scholars must make visa appointments and plan their travel to the United States. While some U.S. consulates are reopening, most are still operating at lower capacity levels, and there remains limited access to visa appointments. Prospective students cannot be certain about whether their visas will be processed in time for them to travel to the United States to begin their studies.

While we appreciate that a National Interest Exception for international students has been created, the processing of these visas in a timely way continues to be a challenge. International students coming to the United States provide significant and essential value to the higher education system and our economy. Data from the NAFSA: Association of International Educators show that more than one million international students at U.S. colleges and universities during the 2018-2019 academic year contributed \$41 billion to the U.S. economy. Furthermore, bringing international students to the United States enriches the educational experience of domestic students that would be more difficult to achieve through online formats. There are also practical barriers to online learning by international students while physically outside the United States: not all countries have reliable electricity or internet access, and time zone differences require some students to appear online for classes in the middle of the night. There are also countries that limit access to certain information or websites, while the U.S. also bars the sharing of certain information with other countries.

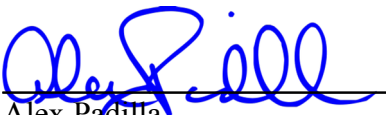
While we recognize that the COVID-19 pandemic remains a challenge, other competitor countries have issued clear guidance for international students, and we urge the State Department to do everything it can to expeditiously process student visas. We also welcome a dialogue on how Congress can be helpful in clearing the backlog of student visas. Attached are some recommendations for the State Department to consider in streamlining international student visa processing, and we look forward to hearing from you on how the State Department plans to address these concerns.

Enclosure: Recommendations to streamline international student visa processing

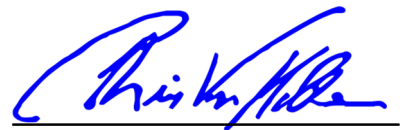
Recommendations to streamline international student visa processing

- Implement a policy of international student and scholar visa prioritization to address the backlog of visa applicants who deferred or began their studies online in 2020, and for initial students beginning their studies in the fall of 2021; and consider implementing a long-term policy to prioritize international student visa requests.
- Maximize alternatives to in-person visa interview by providing waivers, virtual interviews, extension of visa eligibility waivers, and all other practicable options.
- Implement a timely and predictable process from applying for a visa, scheduling a visa interview, and receiving a visa.
- Provide flexibility for class or program start dates by eliminating the August 1 start date requirement and allow visa issuance to students who, due to visa appointment or issuance delays, started classes online, but when issued a visa will seek entry to the United States to transition to in-person classes.
- Expand the National Interest Waiver policy to include university faculty, medical residents, and researchers on Cap-Exempt H-1B and O-1 visas to allow travel to the United States.
- Allow additional staff overtime, end hiring freezes, and increase hiring at U.S. consulates as needed to speed visa processing and resolve any backlogs.
- Implement regular, ongoing outreach and collaboration with stakeholders and relevant agencies.
- Make available on consular post websites and on the main State Department website timely and relevant information for visa applicants about current U.S. consulate operations including visa appointment availability and approximate processing times.
- Provide information about timely alternative visas appointment processes, such as online interviewing if local conditions require consulate closings.
- Report to Congress on what resources and supports would be helpful to process the backlogs and streamline processing of student visas.

Sincerely,



Alex Padilla
United States Senator



Chris Van Hollen
United States Senator



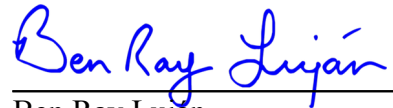
Sheldon Whitehouse
United States Senator



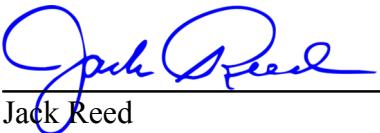
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Dianne Feinstein
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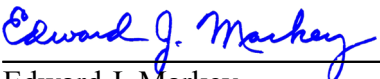
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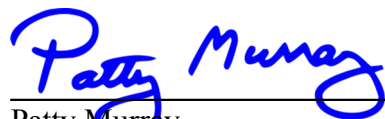
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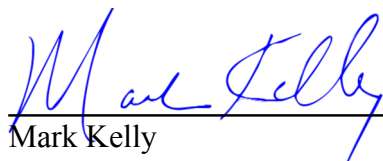
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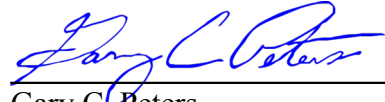
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