FIGHTING THE CLOCK

Why This Is the Most Damaging Time to Restrict Student Visas

By *Karin Fischer*   June 4, 2025

The U.S. Department of State's decision to halt the scheduling of all new student-visa interviews has sent

shock waves across college campuses and among students worldwide.

The singling out of international students and the lack of clarity about the duration of the suspension — which the State Department said is needed to put in place a plan to screen all students' social-media accounts — has fed the anxiety.

But a big part of the heartburn is the timing of the freeze. Here's why:

Students can't apply for a visa until they are sent a document, called an I-20, issued by their college. Colleges send out I-20s after they have admitted students and confirmed they meet certain requirements like having sufficient funding to pay for their degree. It takes about two weeks for students to receive their I-20s, although the wait time could be longer or shorter depending on staffing and student volume.

Although some colleges have rolling admissions deadlines and students can apply early decision, the majority of

students make their college choices just before or on May 1, traditionally deadline day for college decisions.

That sets up a ticking clock for students to apply for a visa at their local U.S. embassy or consulate. While student visas accounted for less than five percent of the 10.4 million immigrant and nonimmigrant visas issued during the 2023 fiscal year, their issuance is unusually concentrated: Businessmen don't apply for visas all at once; visitors don't come for vacations or to visit family en masse.

In recent years, however, seven in 10 student visas have been issued during four critical months of May through August (except during the pandemic). Another 15 to 20 percent of visas are awarded ahead of the spring semester.

During the rest of the year, as few as 7,000 visas may be issued in a month — worldwide.

Adding to the bottleneck: [wait times for visa interviews](#), which are required for all new applicants for student and scholarly visas. As of late May, when the State Department announced the interview pause, the four American consulates in India, which sends the largest number of foreign students to the United States, all had a wait time of two months for student-visa appointments. That means that the best-case scenario for those students, *before* interviews were suspended, was to have them in July, as the start of the fall semester draws ever nearer.

Students applying for a visa in Abuja, Nigeria, face a three-month delay. In Dhaka, Bangladesh, it takes nine months. To keep up, some particularly busy consulates have had to add staff members or prioritize student over other visa interviews — and that's in a normal year. Students are told at the time of their interview if they are approved for a visa, but it can take a few days or weeks to receive it.

Also in a normal year, almost all applicants are just starting their degrees — that's because most students receive multiyear visas. Some experts worry that other actions by the Trump administration, such as efforts to revoke [Harvard University's](#) ability to enroll international students, could force some current students who are overseas for the summer to reapply for visas, adding to the demand.

While some colleges allowed students to arrive late or start their semester online during the pandemic, such flexibility is atypical. And most students want to arrive earlier, not later — to attend orientation, to find a place to stay, to get over their jet lag. By mid-August — or late September for colleges on the quarter system — students need to be moved in and ready to begin their studies.

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