

April 7, 2021

The Honorable Antony Blinken
Secretary
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
Secretary
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,

As presidents and chancellors of universities throughout New York, we are writing to respectfully urge the administration to take a series of immediate actions that will allow greater numbers of international students to return to our campuses for the fall 2021 semester. While colleges and universities in our state vary in size, mission, and the makeup of our student profiles, we share common ground in our desire to attract the top students and faculty from within the United States and around the globe.

Specifically, we are concerned that many embassies and consulates around the world remain closed and therefore unable to process international student visas. Given the average length of processing times, this is a matter of some urgency for international students who need to begin making plans to travel to the United States safely by the start of the next academic year. While visa processing has resumed safely throughout much of the world, the problem is particularly acute in China where F-1 visa processing services have been closed for over 13 months. Our institutions are also experiencing significant delays in India. This has led to a backlog of hundreds of thousands of cases. Given the fact that Chinese and Indian nationals comprise the largest cohort of international students in the United States, this issue is of paramount concern to us.

Throughout most of its history, the United States has generously opened the doors of our higher education system to talented people from around the world. Their contributions are evident in practically every sector of American society, bringing us discoveries, innovation, artistic creativity, and economic vibrancy. Moreover, in addition to their immeasurable intellectual impact, according to NAFSA: Association of International Educators, the presence of international students in New York adds \$5 billion to the state economy and supports over 58,000 jobs—a very substantial economic contribution.

Recent surveys have shown a 43 percent decline in new international student enrollment at United States institutions during the COVID-19 pandemic, partly because of public health-related travel restrictions and partly because of policies of the previous administration. According to NAFSA, the overall economic activity generated by international students declined by \$1.8 billion during the 2019-2020 academic year, from \$40.5 billion in the prior year. The

declining enrollment numbers in 2020 simply adds to the challenges of our economic recovery as we rebuild from the global pandemic.

April and May are critical months for the processing of visas for the fall 2021 semester. International students must make their country choices and begin applying for their visas in April to ensure they can arrive in time for the beginning of the fall semester. By taking action now, you can deliver a welcoming message to current and prospective international students, restore the United States as a destination of choice, and support an important source of economic activity as we recover from the COVID-19 pandemic.

As the fall 2021 fall academic semester fast approaches, we urge you to move forward immediately with the following actions:

- Open the embassy and consulates in China for F-1 student visa appointments and processing, consistent with State Department procedures in countries throughout the world.
- Allow consular officers either to waive the requirement for in-person interviews or if a waiver is unavailable allow for online interviews, if consulates are unable to reopen safely this spring to allow timely processing of visas. 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.” Indeed, State has already waived the interview requirement for categories of H-2 visa applicants during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Consider authorizing a student exemption, even as travel restrictions continue for several countries and regions. Currently, there is an exemption for students traveling from European Schengen area, the U.K., and Ireland. This exemption for students should be extended to other countries subject to the travel restrictions.

American universities have historically been the envy of the world, enabling them to recruit and retain the most talented students from around the globe. This, in turn, has been a leading driver of American innovation, economic strength, and robust job creation. If the United States is to retain its position of preeminence in the wake of COVID-19, our policies must not only keep students and communities safe, but also ensure minimal disruption for the students and scholars whose academic contributions are essential to maintaining steady economic growth.

We appreciate your past support for international education and we look forward to working with you and the Biden administration as our country continues to reopen and recover from the COVID-19 pandemic. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,



Andrew Hamilton
President
New York University



Lee C. Bollinger
President
Columbia University



Martha E. Pollack
President
Cornell University



Sarah C. Mangelsdorf
President
University of Rochester



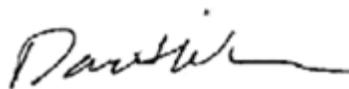
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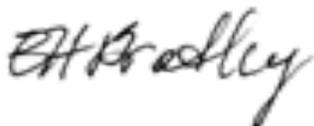
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Cc: The New York Congressional Delegation