



February 28, 2022

Ms. Johanna Cruz
Management Analyst
Office of the Comptroller
Bureau of Consular Affairs
U.S. Department of State

RE: "Schedule of Fees for Consular Services—Nonimmigrant and Special Visa Fees" [RIN 1400–AF33]

Dear Ms. Cruz:

The Alliance for International Exchange, an association of nongovernmental organizations comprising the international educational and cultural exchange community in the United States, writes to comment on the U.S. Department of State's proposed rule published in the Federal Register December 29, 2021, concerning the "Schedule of Fees for Consular Services—Nonimmigrant and Special Visa Fees" [RIN 1400–AF33]. While we understand the need for fee increases to fund consular services, we have significant concerns with the proposed rule. As a result, we urge the Department to implement a phased approach for gradual fee increases over time, rather than immediate sharp increases.

First, while we agree that it is important for the visa processing fees to reflect Cost of Living Adjustments as described in the methodology, we believe that these calculations should be conducted annually rather than once every ten years. This would prevent substantial changes in affordability over a short period of time. The proposed rule also points to decreased demand due to the pandemic as a justification for these increases; however, we are concerned that the large fee increase will only exacerbate the problem and reduce the available candidates who could afford this increase along with any programmatic fees. The Cost-of-Service Model does not appear to consider the impact on prospective applications from substantial fee increases.

Additionally, we urge the Department to consider minimizing barriers for international students and exchange visitors, particularly for those who may already be in economically challenging situations. The 53% increase of \$165 to \$245 for processing of non-petition-based nonimmigrant visas will add a significant financial burden for participants, particularly those from low-income and developing countries. For many potential exchange visitors, the current fee is already too high a cost. The increased fee would likely put exchange programs out of reach for many.

Given the impact on participation, this significant fee increase will create less diverse and inclusive programs, which runs counter to the Department's DEIA efforts. Highly qualified applicants who come from impoverished families and do not have the financial means to pay the increased fee will be further alienated from these programs. As a result, international education and exchange opportunities will increasingly serve applicants with substantial means and will prevent otherwise qualified candidates who lack the financial resources from participating. Moreover, for many, participating in an exchange program is the only way for them to travel to the United States for an

extended visit. The large fee increase will reduce access for these types of visitors, thereby reducing the cultural exchange impact of the programs.

Substantial fee increases also disproportionately impact short-term programs. Participants from Summer Work Travel and Camp Counselor BridgeUSA programs, as well as short-term English language programs that require an F-1 visa, typically stay in the United States for only a few months. These participants would be asked to pay the same as those international students and exchange visitors coming to the U.S. for longer programs. Sponsors of these programs would, consequently, be unequally impacted by the fees.

With reduced program participation, organizations that sponsor exchange programs will have greater difficulty rebuilding their organizations from the devastating impact of the Covid pandemic. The financial impact of the pandemic and related travel restrictions led to an estimated loss of 6500 jobs and \$303M in the international exchange community in 2020 alone. Some sponsors may seek to absorb these increased costs or lessen their program fees to encourage enrollment, which would likely further harm their economic recovery. That would hinder their ability to administer educational and cultural exchange programs that are critical for U.S. foreign policy.

Furthermore, the increase in fees would likely reduce America's competitiveness as a top destination for international visitors, students, and scholars. Many potential visitors are already considering programs in Canada, the United Kingdom, and Australia. Fee increases in the United States would make programs in those countries even more affordable and, therefore, more appealing. For example, Australia has recently announced that student and working holiday visa holders will be eligible for refunds of their visa application fees over the next few months, including new applications during this period. This policy change demonstrates the prioritization of international education and exchange in other nations, which further incentivizes students and exchange visitors to participate in their programs.

At a time when the international exchange community is working to rebuild international student and exchange visitor participation, the proposed visa fee increases create an additional challenge that threatens this effort. We are in favor of DOS having the resources it needs to process visas and retain qualified and well-trained staff. The best way to do that, while also protecting exchange programs and the sponsors who administer them, is to implement increases in small amounts each year.

Sincerely,



Ilir Zherka
Executive Director