



CPW-UAW

A UNION FOR POSTDOCTORAL RESEARCHERS AT COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY



July 27, 2021

To: President Lee Bolinger, Provost Mary C. Boyce, and Executive Vice President for Public Affairs Shailagh J. Murray.

We are writing on behalf of the Postdoctoral and Associate Researchers employed by Columbia University on temporary employment visas or exchange visitor visas. The majority of the more than 1,600 researchers represented by our Union at Columbia are international scholars, from all over the world. We are proud of how that diversity brings new perspectives, strengthening the quality of research, innovation, and discovery, making Columbia one of the most highly-recognized research institutions in the United States and across the world. Our work at Columbia is crucial to sustain and advance this mission, and ultimately bring long-term societal benefits.

Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic back in Spring 2020, the federal administration has suspended entry into the United States to many non-citizens of the United States who were physically present in 33 countries during the 14-day period preceding their entry: China (Presidential Proclamation 9984); Iran (Presidential Proclamation 9992); Schengen Area, United Kingdom, Ireland, Brazil, and South Africa (Presidential Proclamation 10143); and India (Presidential Proclamation 10199).

The suspension of entry is motivated by the fact that such immigrant or nonimmigrant non-citizens would otherwise pose a risk of transmitting COVID-19 and therefore threaten the health and security of the United States. However, the suspension of entry for individuals who travel internationally does not apply to U.S. citizens as well as a variety of noncitizens, including lawful permanent residents (green card holders) and others.

While we understand the importance of evaluating the public health risks of travel into the United States, and the need to contain the overall risk of increasing COVID-19 transmission rates in our communities, we strongly believe that the entry into the United States of international scholars is as essential and valuable as that of other immigrant and nonimmigrant categories that are currently exempted from the travel bans, such as green card holders and international students on F and M visas.

Due to the travel restrictions described above, those of us who are in possession of a valid visa need to apply for a National Interest Exception (NIE) from an embassy or consulate abroad. The

NIE application process is often cumbersome and can require long processing times (up to 60 business days in some countries of the Schengen Area), which would force us to stay outside the United States for long periods of time. Moreover, the uncertainty of the overall application process means that international scholars cannot rely on securing a NIE should they apply.

Those of us whose visas have expired during the pandemic face the additional challenge of scheduling a visa appointment at an embassy or consulate outside the U.S. The COVID-19 restrictions targeting certain countries and regions mentioned above, as well as other restrictions targeting non-citizens, combined with local COVID-19 protocols specific to each embassy or consulate, have created unimaginable backlogs of visa appointments, with next available appointments many months out, or simply no appointments available at all. In addition, this complex situation will prevent international scholars and employees with expired visas from attending conferences which take place outside the United States and which will soon be held in person again.

[Students on F and M visas are automatically considered for NIE](#) at the Port of Entry and do not require advanced approval of a NIE from an embassy or consulate. Unfortunately, this automatic consideration for a NIE of F/M students leaves out thousands of international scholars and their dependents who hold visas of types other than F and M (such as J-1, J-2, H-1B, H-4, O-1, O-3, and others).

The current situation places an unacceptable burden on members of our research community on visas. We strongly ask you to support the international scholars and employees who have decided to dedicate their time and work to Columbia's research mission, and at the same time support the important work they are engaged in. In particular, we urge your administration to consider all of the following measures to address this urgent situation:

- Take a clear position of support for international researchers in the spirit of our first collective bargaining agreement that ensures that no appointment is jeopardized due to immigration-related procedures outside of the researcher's control.
- Request that *all* international scholars and employees, holding visas of types other than F and M, be automatically considered for NIE at the Port of Entry and specifically address this point with New York Senators Charles Schumer and Kirsten Gillibrand, as well as the members of the COVID Task Force appointed by President Biden. Moreover, while travel restrictions and NIE requirements are still in place, request that the U.S. Department of State allows international scholars and employees to apply for a NIE while still physically present in the United States (that is, in advance, before traveling).
- Release a public statement directed to the U.S. Departments of State and Homeland Security and the Biden administration. This statement should present requests similar to those of the above-mentioned letter, extending each of those for international scholars and employees on *all* visa types, to demand an end to the travel and visa restrictions imposed against foreign nationals and their families. We strongly encourage you to

gather support and signatures by leadership of other institutions across the country. We believe that the travel restriction exemption should be requested for *all* international scholars and employees, regardless of their visa type, and not just for specific visa categories.

- Request further actions to fix the delays in processing times of visas (renewals or new applications) at embassies and consulates abroad. For example, (i) request to expand the waiver of in-person visa interviews, or allow for online interviews, for *all* visa types (and not just for F students and J exchange visitors), and (ii) suggest that the U.S. Department of State allows foreign nationals to process and obtain visa renewals from within the United States, through local federal offices, without leaving the country. These solutions would allow international scholars and employees who are currently physically present in the United States to avoid leaving the country and being forced to remain abroad (and therefore away from work, possibly unable to perform lab/field work) for extended amounts of time - time needed to handle all the necessary steps for visa renewals. In addition, these solutions could substantially reduce the workload of embassies and consulates abroad, resulting in quicker processing of new visas for new international scholars and employees currently outside the U.S. as well as of visa renewals for current international scholars and employees who are unable to travel back to the United States.

We appreciate your support for international scholars and employees and hope that you will promptly respond to these points by taking the above actions in a timely manner. As a national and international leader in higher education, Columbia has the opportunity to ask for and make necessary changes to end this unacceptable situation for the international community that proudly drives the research mission of so many world-class institutions like Columbia.

We appreciate your consideration of our requests and look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

Executive Board of Columbia Postdoctoral Workers, UAW Local 4100