

# Preparing For the Visa Interview



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## **About This Guide**

The *Preparing For The Visa Interview* is designed to address some of the most frequently asked questions posed by international students and scholars about their arrival on campus and getting settled in the community.

The information is presented in a sequence beneficial to the needs of a new arrival: from locating housing to recreational activities.

We hope that you will find this guide helpful. We welcome your suggestions for new material to enhance the experience of further international students and scholars.

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## THE FIVE ISSUES

The questions you will be asked in your interview will be used to determine the following key issues:

1. Whether the sole purpose of your travel is to pursue a program of study.
2. Whether you have the ability and intention to be a full-time student in the U.S.
3. Whether you possess adequate funds to cover all tuition, living and anticipated incidental expenses without taking unauthorized employment.
4. Whether you have sufficiently strong social, economic, and other “ties” to your home country to compel your departure from the U.S. upon completion of the planned program of studies.
5. Whether you are telling the truth.

The Visa Officer simply needs to be able to say “Yes” to these five questions to provide you a student visa. Your job is to convince the officer to say “Yes”.

## HOW CAN I PREPARE FOR THE VISA INTERVIEW?

**Acquire knowledge of the process.** Get free, accurate information from the U.S. Embassy website in your country. It will give you the specifics of what they will require and expect you to know. For example, you must know when to apply. Visas should be applied for no more than 90 days prior to the expected date of arrival at the University as listed on the I-20.

**Be prepared.** Bring the following to the visa interview:

1. Documents:
  - Visa
  - Passport
  - Required photo(s)
  - Visa fee or proof of visa fee payment
  - Federal SEVIS Fee payment receipt
  - U.S. non-immigrant visa application forms (unless you will completing it at the consulate or embassy)
  - Acceptance letter from the International American University
  - IAU SEVIS I-20
  - Test scores and academic records
  - Proof of English proficiency
  - Proof of financial support
  - Evidence of ties to your home country
  - Any other documents required by the embassy or consulate
2. Father’s position at home
3. Business card if you work
4. Letters of recommendation for your educational plan
5. Letters from future employers *in your home country*
6. Be completely familiar with all information on the I-20 form, especially the finance information.

**Answer the questions the officer asks.** Avoid prepared speeches. Don't use a prepared script. Know your personal plan or story. Know or develop your own personal career plan, your story of why you are going to the USA, what you plan to study and why you selected International American University, and what you plan to do in your home country after graduation. Your sincerity and the reasonableness or plausibility of your plan will be most persuasive. They are looking for evidence that you have given serious thought to your plans. Do you have an ambition, and is it believable in the context of your country?

**Tell the truth.** If the visa officer thinks you are lying, you won't get a visa. If you don't know an answer, tell the officer you don't know. Tell him if you don't understand the question and ask him to rephrase it. This is not a test; it is an interview. They know that English is your second language and you may be nervous; stumbling over one question is not fatal. However, one dishonest or faked answer could result in not getting your visa.

## PRACTICING FOR THE VISA INTERVIEW

All the questions asked will seek to answer the five key questions above. Some may be designed to directly answer those issues, other are indirect ways of getting an answer. Look at the five issues and think carefully about how you address them. Then write a few paragraphs which answer each of these five questions: sincerely, truthfully, completely, concisely and persuasively. Read the letter out loud to a friend or relative. Re-write it. Read it out again. This is your story.

You may or may not have the opportunity to tell some of your story at the interview, depending on the questions being asked. The most important part of the interview is that you respond to the question asked, not that you tell your story. Having developed your story, however, you will naturally be able to tell it if a question relating to it comes up, which is likely.

Below are some sample questions that are often asked of our applicants:

- How did you learn about the University?
- How many other universities did you apply to?
- Why did you choose this University? (Why not a bigger school?)
- Which school did you graduate from?
- Tell me why you want to go to America?
- Where do you work now?
- How much do you earn now?
- What is your academic background and why do you want to pursue this degree?
- What is this program?
- How is it structured academically and financially?
- What is meant by "Internship" on the I-20?
- Do you want to work in the U.S.?
- What are your resources to pay your university charges?
- Why didn't you apply for a graduate program directly after your bachelor's degree?
- Why don't you study for this degree in your home country?
- What arrangements have you made for your wife (and children) during your absence?
- What will you do after you go back to your home country?
- Have you taken GRE, GMAT or ESL? If not, why not?

Have a friend or relative ask you these questions and provide responses.

**IMPORTANT:** Many of our international students did not receive their visa after their first interview. So don't be discouraged if you don't immediately get the result you desire. You can always try again for another entry date. Best of luck to you.

## TEN POINTS TO REMEMBER

The following ten points are from Gerald A. Wunsch and Martha Wailes and are reprinted from the website of NAFSA: Association of International Educators.

Carefully read all of these points before applying for your student visa.

1. **Ties to home country:** Under U.S. law, all applicants for nonimmigrant visas are viewed as intending immigrants until they can convince the consular officer that they are not. You must therefore be able to show that you have reasons for returning to your home country that are stronger than those for remaining in the USA. Ties to your home country are the things that bind you to your hometown, homeland, or current place of residence: job, family, financial prospects that you own or will inherit, investments, etc. If you are a prospective undergraduate, the interviewing officer may ask your specific intentions or promise of future employment, family or other relationships, educational objectives, grades, long-range plans, and career prospects in your home country. Each person's situation is different, of course, and there is no magic explanation or single document, certificate, or letter, which can guarantee visa issuance.
2. **English:** Anticipate that the interview will be conducted in English and not in your native language. One suggestion is to practice English conversation with a native speaker before the interview.
3. **Speak for yourself:** Do not bring parents or family members with you to the interview. The consular officer wants to interview you, not your family. A negative impression is created if you are not prepared to speak on your own behalf.
4. **Know the program and how it fits into your career plans:** If you are not able to articulate the reasons you will study in a particular program in the United States, you may not succeed in convincing the consular officer that you are indeed planning to study, rather than to immigrate. You should also be able to explain how studying in the USA relates to your future professional career when you return home.
5. **Be concise:** Because of the volume of applications received, all consular officers are under considerable time pressure to conduct a quick and efficient interview. They must make a decision, for the most part, on the impressions they form during the first minute or two of the interview. Consequently, what you say first and the initial impression you create are critical to your success. Keep your answers to the visa officer short and to the point.

6. **Supplemental documentation:** It should be clear at a glance to the consular officer what written documents you are presenting and what they signify. Lengthy written explanations cannot be quickly read or evaluated. Remember that you will have 2–3 minutes of interview time, if you're lucky.
7. **Not all countries are equal:** Applicants from countries suffering economic problems or from countries where many students have remained in the United States as immigrants will have more difficulty getting visas. Statistically, applicants from those countries are more likely to be intending immigrants. They are also more likely to be asked about job opportunities at home after their study in the USA.
8. **Employment:** Your main purpose of coming to the USA should be to study, not for the chance to work before or after graduation. While many students do work off-campus during their studies, such employment is incidental to their main purpose of completing their U.S. education. You must be able to clearly articulate your plan to return home at the end of your program. If your spouse is also applying for an accompanying F-2 visa, be aware that F-2 dependents cannot, under any circumstances, be employed in the United States. If asked, be prepared to address what your spouse intends to do with his or her time while in the United States. Volunteer work and attending school part-time are permitted activities.
9. **Dependents remaining at home:** If your spouse and children are remaining behind in your country, be prepared to address how they will support themselves in your absence. This can be an especially tricky area if you are the primary source of income for your family. If the consular officer gains the impression that your family members will need you to remit money from the USA in order to support themselves, your student visa application will almost certainly be denied. If your family does decide to join you at a later time, it is helpful to have them apply at the same post where you applied for your visa.
10. **Maintain a positive attitude:** Do not engage the consular officer in an argument. If you are denied a student visa, ask the officer for a list of documents he or she would suggest you bring in order to overcome the refusal, and try to get the reason you were denied in writing.

## QUOTES FROM STUDENTS ABOUT THEIR VISA INTERVIEWS

*You should read all of these quotes because their advice is useful for student visa applicants from all countries.*

### **Student quote #1**

Americans are very straightforward people. When you go to the embassy, be simple. Don't try to be too polite. When you greet the visa officer just say, "Hi," and it is good enough. Especially don't try to persuade them about any point (returning to your home country, etc.), because it causes suspicion. Be honest and realistic, as honesty has a great value for them.

There are also a lot of other delicate points. The first time I went for my visa interview, when the officer asked what my plans were for the future, I used the phrase "If I return to Iran, I will..." She finally told me that "if" was a big "IF" and she suspected I might never return, and she rejected my visa. On my second interview I used this phrase instead: "When I return to Iran, I will..." I think it made a whole lot of difference.

### **Student quote #2**

First of all I was well prepared. I brought all the necessary documents and even had all other supporting documents that I thought would be helpful. The admissions office had specified for me most of these documents in the process of applying to the program. When I first met the visa officer, his first question was, "Who will pay for the education?" I replied, "Some portion will be paid through internship and the rest by me." He continued by asking whether I have the money or not. I told him that I have money and he wanted me to show him my bank statement, and I did that.

### **Student quote #3**

My visa interview was very brief; it only took about a minute. I think it's not only because the consul had a lot of people to interview that day, but also because I was ready with all the documents that he asked for (I-20, bank statements, employment certificate, etc.). The supporting documents that the admissions office sent me in preparation for my visa interview helped me a lot. All those reminders, sample interview, and checklists contributed much to the success of my visa interview.

One important thing is that one should be honest in what he says, because it would always show in the way he speaks with the consul. Practicing an interview with a friend also helps.

### **Student quote #4**

The thing is you should not care for the interview as your life. You should take it easy and don't be frightened on seeing the Visa Officer. Just talk to him confidently in such a way that you feel that whether or not you get the visa, it doesn't matter. It requires more than confidence. Sometimes the visa officer may put you in a tricky situation. Then you should be able to face it boldly by kicking off the ball.

My strong advice is for Indians to join in U.S. visa groups, which you can find in the Yahoo groups list. Once you join, everyone will be mailing you their interviews and you can go through hundreds of different interviews and can keep track of the situation at the embassy.

### **Student quote #5**

These were the questions asked to me by the Visa Officer at the Consulate:

- "How did you gain admission to the University?"
- "What made you want to study again after taking a break of three years after your last degree?"
- "What was your TOEFL score?"
- "What are your plans after finishing the degree?"
- "Who is your sponsor and what is his occupation?"

Before attending the visa interview I prepared myself in such a way that every answer of mine should be convincing and to the point. I convinced the officer that as soon as I finish my degree I'll return back to my home country. This is the most important point and before giving any reply we should remember this.

### **Student quote #6**

I really don't know what exactly to explain about obtaining my visa, because it was so easy in Bulgaria. The written questions you sent me with all other documents about how to pass the interview were very useful. In Bulgaria I think it is not so difficult to obtain a visa because the people that can't pass the interview are a very small group.

To me, the most important things are:

- 1) Have good English, and don't talk too much. Just speak exactly on the question, and don't try to impress them that you are so smart. These officers are smart enough, and they really can see many things in the one or two sentences that you say.
- 2) Have very clear documents. If you can show everything on the documents it is half of the interview.
- 3) Be prepared. The officer asked me only two or three questions about what my job is, where I have been working, and how I heard about the University. I think what the officer really wanted to know was why I was going to the USA. Was it to improve my knowledge, or just to get inside the country without any specific reason?
- 4) Be confident. Just don't give any sense of doubt. Take it easy and listen to the questions.

### **Student quote #7**

Getting my visa in Bulgaria was really easy. The interview itself was very easy and fast. The officer just asked me a couple of questions. "What are you planning to do after you graduate?" I said, "I will return to my country and will continue to work for my current employer." Then she changed the subject and started to ask me about my family and if I have any relatives in the USA. The whole process was about two or three minutes long.

### **Student quote #8**

My experience was interesting, but I want to tell about it by giving some advice.

- 1) Take a full set of documents, especially documents from the University which describe your payment plan. Obviously, documents about payment require a bank statement.
- 2) Dress neatly and smile.
- 3) You should listen to the interviewer's words carefully, but do not make him feel that you are straining to understand. Usually this is difficult, because of the noisiness of the place where the interview is conducted.
- 4) Be prepared to answer any question about the University, about yourself, relatives, previous job, and education.
- 5) Be extremely prepared to speak about your future plans. This leads to thinking about what you will do after graduation.
- 6) Speak confidently and honestly, because the interviewer's job is to crack your psychic defense. If you are dishonest, they will easily recognize it. Remember a proverb: "The bitter truth is better than a sweet lie."
- 7) Of course, speak no unnecessary words. Just answer on what they ask. Every additional word will hamper the progress.

### **Student quote #9**

We did not have any problem getting a visa from the U.S. embassy in Nepal. In my case, the visa officer did not even check the financial statement, which is normally checked by each visa officer. She just turned the pages quickly and asked whether I had enough money to spend for my education. That's all. I do not think there are any special points to be taken carefully. Only having a genuine attitude is enough. Providing you do not try to use the University's name as a medium to escape from your country, I think getting a visa will not be a difficult job.

### **Student quote #10**

I handed all my documents to the visa officer including the job agreement I have with my boss. After reading it, he asked nothing but why I chose this school and why I chose a program with curricular practical training. I told him my personal plan, and explained that I've compared many universities but no other offered a program that matched both my own needs, and those of my company in China. I explained that this is why my boss has agreed to let me go to study and to re-hire me on my return.

I also told the interviewer about my younger brother who is enrolled in a doctoral program at the University of Florida in Computer Networking.

The interview lasted about ten minutes. I felt from the beginning that he never planned on giving me the visa, but after he listened patiently to me, he finally relented and said, "Good luck." So we can still get visas, even in Beijing, even being refused before.