

Tips for Applying for a Nonimmigrant Visa

TIES TO YOUR HOME COUNTRY. Under U.S. law, all applicants for nonimmigrant visas, such as student 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 United States. Failure to provide strong ties to the home country is the primary reason for visa denial.

"Ties" to your home country are the things that bind you to your home town, 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 about 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.

If you have applied for the U.S. Green Card Lottery, you may be asked if you are intending to immigrate. A simple answer would be that you applied for the lottery since it was available but not with a specific intent to immigrate. If you previously overstayed any authorized period in the U.S. previously, be prepared to explain what happened clearly and concisely, with documentation if available.

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, but do NOT prepare speeches! Think about your responses ahead of time, but let your answers come naturally, and be prepared for follow up questions.

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.

KNOW THE PROGRAM AND HOW IT FITS 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 U.S. relates to your future professional career when you return home.

BE BRIEF AND REMAIN CALM. 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 of the interview. Consequently, what you say first and the initial impression you create are critical to your success. Keep your answers to the officer's questions short and to the point.

MAINTAIN A POSITIVE ATTITUDE. Remain calm and be friendly throughout the process. 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.

EMPLOYMENT. Your main purpose in coming to the United States should be to study, not for the chance to work before or after graduation. Do not focus on any employment benefits during your interview. 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 U.S. If asked, be prepared to address what your spouse intends to do with his or her time while in the U.S. Volunteer work and attending school part-time are permitted activities.

NOT ALL COUNTRIES ARE EQUAL. Applicants from countries suffering economic problems or from countries where many students have remained in the US 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 U.S.

ADDITIONAL DOCUMENTATION. It should be immediately clear to the consular officer what written documents you are presenting and what they signify. Lengthy written explanations cannot be quickly read or evaluated. In general, if you are not asked to take it, you should not bring it. Additional documentation that is not on the list of required materials is unlikely to be reviewed. Remember that you will have 2-3 minutes of interview time, if you're lucky.

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 will need you to remit money from the United States 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.