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Office of Policy and Strategy
U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services
U.S. Department of Homeland Security
5900 Capital Gateway Drive
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RE: Docket Number USCIS-2021-0004, “Identifying Barriers Across U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) Benefits and Services”

The American Society for Biochemistry and Molecular Biology is an international nonprofit scientific and educational organization that represents more than 11,000 students, researchers, educators and industry professionals. The ASBMB strongly advocates for strengthening the science, technology, engineering and mathematics workforce, protecting international scientific collaboration and sustaining the American research enterprise.

The ASBMB has identified two significant barriers that prevent international students and scholars from accessing immigration benefits and prevent them from studying in the U.S. or contributing to the American research enterprise. These two barriers are (1) visa-processing delays and (2) difficulty acquiring work visas after advanced-degree completion.

Without international students, scholars and other immigrants, the U.S. bioeconomy would face a [severe shortage of STEM workers](#). International students drive economic growth in the U.S. by attending American institutions of higher education and by participating in the American research enterprise. For example, international students studying in the U.S. contributed [\\$41 billion to the U.S. economy and supported more than 458,000 U.S. jobs](#) in the 2018–2019 academic year. Of the approximately 80,000 postdoctoral candidates in the U.S., [two-thirds are international scholars](#), and immigrants make up [50% of the doctoral-level science workforce](#) nationwide.

USCIS must remove barriers that prevent immigrants from studying and working in the American research enterprise.

Barrier 1: Visa-processing delays interrupt educational timelines.

According to a [report by NAFSA: Association of International Educators](#), the burdensome and lengthy visa-application process is one of the top reasons for declining international student enrollment in the U.S. Administrative processing delays on student visa applications [force students and faculty members](#) to miss or defer entire academic semesters. In [some cases](#), international students experience delays as long as six to eight weeks to get their F-1 student visas. Visa delays reduce class enrollment sizes and lengthen time to degree, both of which affect colleges’ and universities’ bottom lines.

In addition, some visa applications are referred for additional background checks without explanation or guidance on how long the extra processing might take. Extreme vetting, such as [requiring visa applicants to submit their social media usernames](#), previous email addresses and past phone numbers, are additional applicant burdens and lengthen the decision-making process.

We urge the agency to reduce these burdens on visa applicants and eliminate visa delays.

Barrier 2: The visa process makes it difficult for foreign grads to stay in the U.S. to work.

International graduates of U.S. institutions who wish to remain in the U.S. to work have two paths: The first is to apply for an optional practical training (OPT) visa, and the second is to apply for an H-1B visa, a nonimmigration classification for those who wish to perform services in a specialty occupation.

Students in the U.S. on an [F1 visa may apply for an optional practical training visa](#) after they have secured a job offer. But many students who chose to do so are [face months-long processing delays](#) for the OPT visas, causing them to lose their job offers, legal immigration status and their health insurance. Processing delays for OPT applications have increased from a [previous maximum of 90 days in 2016 to more than five months today](#).

The H-1B visa program has an [annual cap of 85,000 approvals](#) (20,000 approvals are specifically set aside for foreign professionals who graduate with master's degrees or doctorates from a U.S. institution of higher education). In recent years, [this cap has been reached](#) only a few days after the petition-submission period has begun, signifying a desperate need to increase the number allowed. Opponents of the H-1B visa program claim that this program pits American workers against their foreign-born colleagues, but [numerous studies have shown](#) that foreign STEM workers in the U.S. increase wages for American college-educated STEM workers and spur economic growth by increasing productivity. This must be remedied.

We urge USCIS to address the significant processing delays for OPT applications and to increase the number of H-1B visas granted annually to encourage and stimulate research and development in the American research enterprise that could not be done without attracting foreign talent.