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# Survey report

Experiences applying for a short-term visa to visit the United States for professional activities

Survey commissioned by the U.S.  
National Academies' Board on  
International Scientific Organizations  
(BISO)  
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Report submitted by **Annette Hager**  
**Senior Consultant**  
[annette.hager@kwglobal.com](mailto:annette.hager@kwglobal.com)

## Contents

<b>INTRODUCTION</b> .....	<b>3</b>
<b>EXECUTIVE SUMMARY</b> .....	<b>4</b>
<b>OBSERVATIONS</b> .....	<b>5</b>
INTERNATIONAL ENGAGEMENT .....	6
OBTAINING A VISA TO VISIT THE UNITED STATES.....	11
<i>U.S. Visa Waiver Program, Canada</i> .....	19
PERCEPTIONS OF THE US VISA APPLICATION SYSTEM.....	19
<b>APPENDICES</b> .....	<b>23</b>
DEMOGRAPHICS.....	23
<i>Country of residence</i> .....	23
<i>Country of citizenship</i> .....	23
<i>Second country of citizenship</i> .....	24
<i>Country of birth</i> .....	24
<i>Age</i> .....	25
<i>Gender</i> .....	25
<i>Race and ethnicity</i> .....	26
<i>Work sector</i> .....	26
<i>Position</i> .....	26
<i>Field of expertise</i> .....	27
METHODS .....	28
<i>Questionnaire design</i> .....	28
<i>Population frame</i> .....	28
<i>Survey deployment and distribution</i> .....	29
<i>Analysis</i> .....	29
<i>Limitations</i> .....	29
VISA TYPES.....	29

## Introduction

The National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine (NASEM) Board on International Scientific Organizations (BISO) and International Visitors Office (IVO) are deeply invested in strengthening science, engineering, and medicine for the benefit of scientists, engineers, medical professionals, the United States (U.S.), and the global community. Free movement of scientists, engineers, and medical professionals is fundamental to the global scientific/engineering/medical enterprise, fueling innovation, accelerating progress, and fostering international collaborations. Many international scientists, engineers, and medical professionals face increasing challenges to obtain travel visas<sup>1</sup> needed to visit the United States for collaborations and participation in other professional activities<sup>2</sup>. To begin informing solutions to these challenges, BISO and IVO partnered with KGL Consulting to gather information via an online survey.

Survey objectives were defined as follows:

- To understand the processes international scientists, engineers, and medical professionals undertake to obtain a visa and specific pain points encountered.
- To better understand the extent and type of difficulty international scientists, engineers, and medical professionals face in obtaining visas to travel to the United States to attend professional activities.
- Identify and collect additional information potentially useful to United States government officials; the scientist/engineering/medical community; and other decision makers who are impacted by the difficulties that international scientists, engineers, and medical professionals face in obtaining a short-term visa to visit the United States.

This report focuses on how the visa application process has affected professionals' decisions whether to seek a visa and their success in getting visas. It does not attempt to examine the impact on scientific conferences or on research more broadly when researchers have difficulty in attending professional activities in the United States.

The survey was constructed to gather information and provide insights; it was not designed to establish statistically significant correlations or causations. Consequently, it should be viewed as an exploratory tool to better understand the challenges faced by professionals applying for a short-term visa to visit the United States. This survey utilized a network sampling method, relying on participants to recruit others within their networks. While this approach is effective for reaching specific groups, it may introduce bias and limit the diversity of the sample, reducing the generalizability of the findings.

KGL Consulting extends sincere thanks to the BISO and NASEM stakeholders whose invaluable contributions were instrumental in shaping and conducting the study.

This report begins with an Executive Summary section that provides an overview of participants and highlights key observations. The remainder of the report offers a comprehensive breakdown of results by question, with segmenting where appropriate.

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<sup>1</sup> See the [Visa types](#) appendix for a description of the visas discussed in this report.

<sup>2</sup> For the purposes of this study, "professional activities" could include conferences, meetings, professional education courses, workshops, board meetings, or short-term collaborations.

## Executive Summary

A total of 1,465 professionals initiated participation in the survey. Of those respondents, 192 either did not agree to the initial consent statement or reported they had not applied for a visa to attend a professional activity in the last 10 years, leaving 1,273 who were considered eligible. Some respondents live in countries that participate in the Visa Waiver Program and shared their perceptions of the waiver process or their experience applying for a visa, if they did not qualify for a waiver. Respondents were not required to answer every question, and some questions were not applicable based on previous responses.

The largest proportion of survey respondents who shared their citizenship reported being citizens of China (15%) or India (14%), with 93 other countries represented. Most respondents work in academia (82%), with 7% in industry, and 10% in government/nonprofit/private sector positions. Physics (33%) and biology (24%) were the most common fields of expertise represented.

### **Respondents overwhelmingly acknowledged the importance of attending U.S.-based professional activities for career development, networking, and research dissemination, highlighting the United States' historical role as a leader in global scientific exchange.**

Nearly all respondents reported actively participating in professional activities, either virtually or in person, in their own country or abroad. Essentially all (95%) consider in-person attendance at professional activities in the United States critical to their careers, and 76% indicated that they had attended at least one such activity in the past decade.

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*"I had a paper accepted for publication but based on my previous experience of getting a US visa to attend a scientific conference I decided to withdraw it. I published the same paper at a conference in Europe, which won the "Best Paper" award. However, I still believe if I had published the paper at the US conference it would have reached a wider audience." (Pakistan; computer science, aeronautical engineering; B-1/B-2)*

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### **Visa challenges hinder professional mobility and collaboration for many.**

Nearly 40% of the respondents reported that visa-related issues prevented them from participating in at least some professional activities in the United States, while a similar percentage (34%) indicated they faced no visa-related challenges. The U.S. Visa Waiver Program (WVP) allows citizens or nationals of certain countries to travel to the U.S. for 90 days or less without obtaining a visa, with some exclusions. Notably, 19% of 148 respondents from Canada and countries participating in the U.S. Visa Waiver Program (VWP) reported that visa-related issues still prevented them from participating in professional activities, and 64% experienced no challenges. In contrast, of the respondents who reported their citizenship, 54% of those from non-VWP countries reported that visa-related issues prevented them from participating in professional activities in the United States, and 28% reported that they encountered no challenges.

The interview process was the most cited obstacle: 38% of all respondents experienced difficulty scheduling interviews and 12% were unable to secure an interview before the travel date, effectively ending their application process. Administrative delays extending beyond travel dates (22%) and visas arriving after the planned event (8%) also led to missed professional opportunities.

Some respondents who experienced difficulty expressed a perception of bias based on their ethnicity or country of residence or citizenship. A selection of comments from these respondents follows:

- *If the sort of treatment I received was meted out to people of "mainstream" ethnic background (e.g., ethnic Europeans) then I doubt the US would have any international collaborators. (United Kingdom; mathematics, physics; J-1)*
- *Even having a passport [from an EU country<sup>3</sup>], being born in [a country of particular concern as designated by the Secretary of State]; and having official affiliation with [institution], USA, I am limited in continuing my ongoing collaborative work... (EU country; biomedical, chemical engineering, education & pedagogy; B-1/B-2)*

**Visa difficulties have led some to shift their focus to professional opportunities outside the U.S., suggesting perhaps a gradual shift in global collaboration patterns or redistribution of scientific influence and activity to other regions.**

Although most respondents (70%) have not been deterred, survey data reveals a reluctance among a portion of respondents (30%) to apply for a U.S. visa, electing instead to participate in professional activities in Europe or in other countries. More than a quarter of respondents (27%) reported that they have stopped or avoid collaborating with partners based in the United States because of visa challenges.

Respondents’ advice to prospective U.S. visa applicants highlights common frustrations with the current process. Many emphasized the importance of starting visa applications well in advance—often months or even years before the intended travel date—to mitigate potential delays. While some respondents recommended avoiding U.S. visa applications altogether due to the burdensome nature of the process, others advised potential applicants to prepare carefully and secure institutional support to improve the likelihood of success.

**The U.S. visa process is perceived to present significant barriers compared with those of other countries. This could deter first-time applicants and professionals who are unfamiliar with the system or lack institutional support.**

Half of survey participants felt their experience applying for a visa to visit the United States was more difficult than their experience applying for similar visas for other countries (Figure 1). Critiques of the U.S. visa system mentioned lack of transparency, inefficiency, and greater documentation demands compared with other countries. Respondents who had attended prior U.S. professional activities were more likely to receive their visas on time than those attempting to attend for the first time.

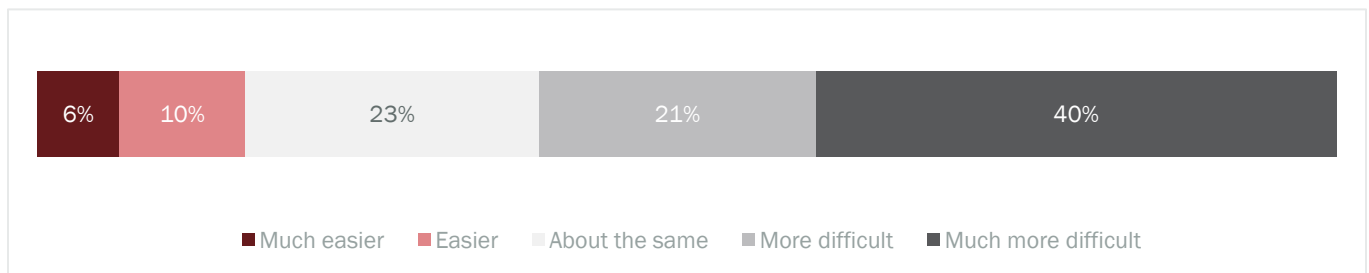


Figure 1. Was your experience applying for a United States short-term visa easier or more difficult than your experience applying for similar visas for other countries? (n=756)

**Observations**

More than a quarter of respondents who shared their citizenship were citizens of China (15%) and India (14%). As such, the experiences of individuals from these two countries might possibly have a

<sup>3</sup> Country and institution omitted to protect privacy of respondent.

disproportionate effect on the overall data. It is therefore important to further explore and understand the experiences of respondents from all other countries to ensure a comprehensive analysis. Throughout the findings section of this report, responses from all participants are presented, followed by or alongside data that excludes responses from citizens of China and India. Notable differences in findings are highlighted throughout this report. Relevant cross tabs and cohort comparisons are also included.

## International engagement

Nearly all survey respondents (95%) indicated that attending professional activities in the United States in person is important for their careers (Figure 2). Compared with respondents who attended fewer activities, those who attended six or more in-person activities in the United States were somewhat more likely to feel that attending these events in person is important to their career.

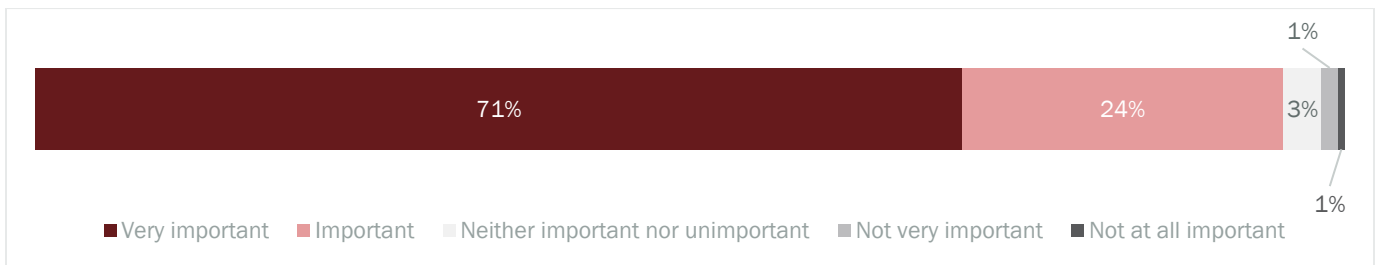


Figure 2. How important is it for your career to attend professional activities in the United States in person? All survey responses (number of responses = 1,398)

Identical results are noted when data from citizens of China and India is excluded (Figure 3).



Figure 3. How important is it for your career to attend professional activities in the United States in person? Excluding respondents from China, India (number of responses = 1,189)

Most respondents reported they attend professional activities in the United States in person to build professional contacts and networks, to share their research, and to stay informed about recent developments in the field. Similar responses are noted when respondents from China and India are excluded (Figure 4).

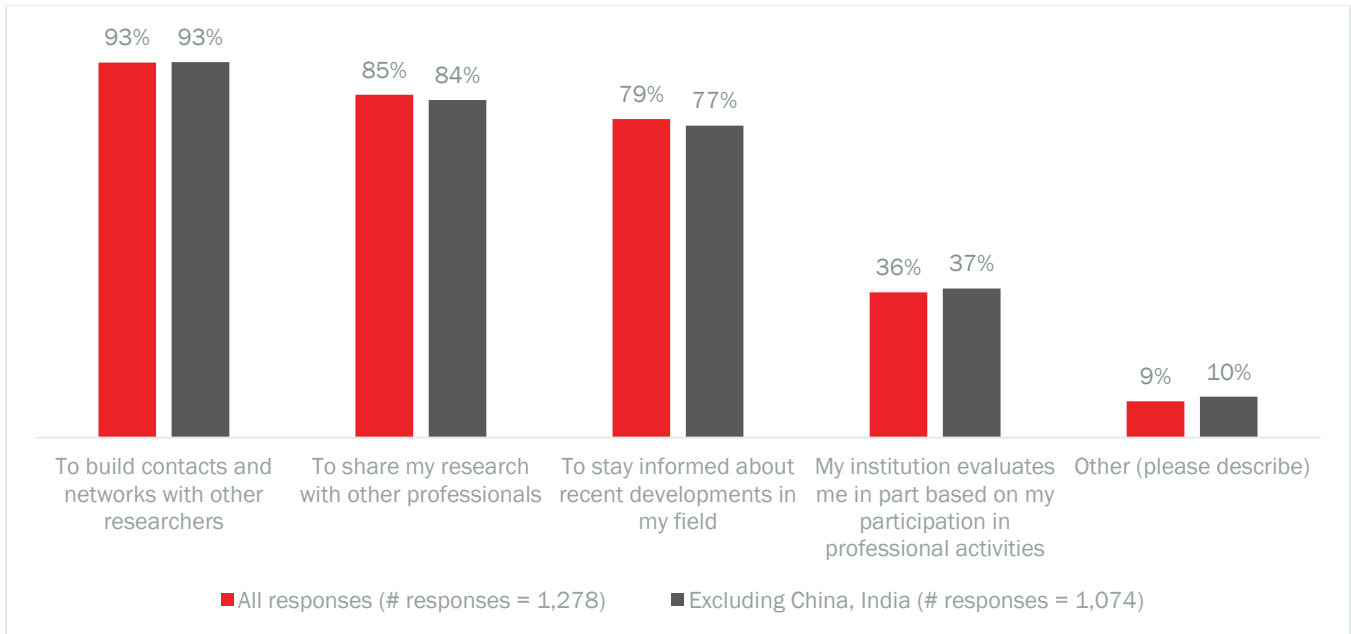


Figure 4. Why is it important for you to attend professional activities in the United States in person? Select all that apply.

Nine percent (9%) of respondents wrote in reasons why it is important for them to attend professional activities in the United States in person. Most comments referenced collaboration opportunities, access to resources and facilities only available in the United States, furthering science globally, attending or participating in scientific meetings, and advancing their careers. A selection of verbatim comments is below.

- *To have the opportunity to discuss, exchange ideas, and speak personally with my colleagues. It is a very enriching activity...* (Argentina; earth & environmental sciences; B-1/B-2)
- *My area of sciences was in its infancy when I returned over 12 years ago to my home country, making it all the more imperative that I attend meetings in US (where it maximally happened then).* (India; biology, chemistry, space sciences; B-1/B-2)

Responses from some respondents suggested that it was not important for them to attend professional activities in the United States in person. See Table 1 for details. Note that the networking method used to select the sample may have resulted in overrepresentation of those who are most interested in and likely to attend activities in the U.S., so these data may not be representative of the full population of researchers and related professionals. Respondents could select more than one answer option in Table 1, so percentages add up to more than 100%.

Table 1. Why is it not important for you to attend professional activities in the United States in person? Select all that apply.

Answer Choices	All responses		Excluding China, India	
	%	#	%	#
The cost or difficulty of traveling and attending meetings or collaborations in the United States outweighs the benefits.	60%	35	60%	32
Virtual attendance at United States meetings provides all the benefits I need.	34%	20	34%	18

Answer Choices	All responses		Excluding China, India	
	%	#	%	#
I prefer to collaborate with professionals within my own region or country or other regions outside the United States.	17%	10	13%	7
Other (please describe)	21%	12	23%	12
<b>Total responses</b>	<b>58</b>		<b>53</b>	

Almost a third of respondents (32%) have attended more than 20 professional activities in their country of residence over the past 10 years. Twenty percent (20%) of all respondents have attended more than 20 professional activities in person in another country over the past 10 years. See Figure 5.

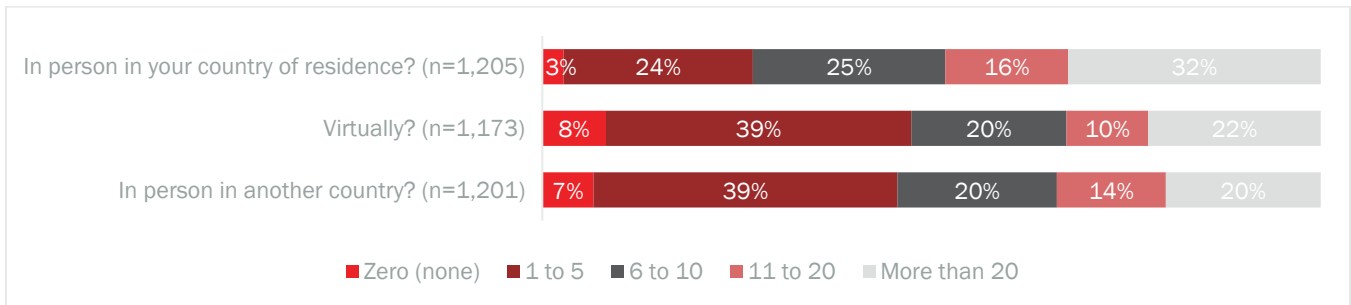


Figure 5. Please estimate the number of professional activities you have attended over the past 10 years in each category. All responses.

Results that exclude respondents from India and China are similar to those noted above (Figure 6).

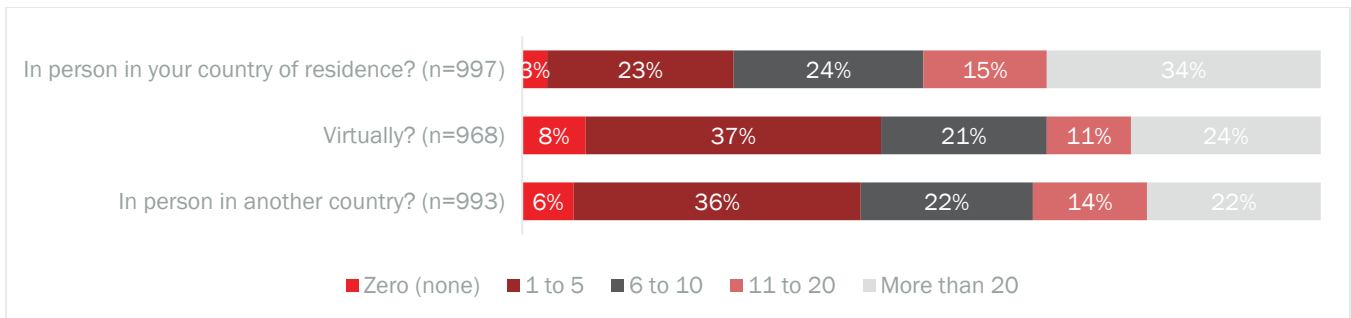


Figure 6. Please estimate the number of professional activities you have attended over the past 10 years in each category. Excluding respondents from China, India.

About 40% of respondents who attended 11 or more professional activities also reported that they attended six or more professional activities in the United States in the past 10 years. Eighteen percent (18%) of respondents who attended 11 or more professional activities said they had not attended a professional activity in person in the United States in the past 10 years.

Most respondents who attended professional activities in their country, another country, or virtually had an active role, most commonly presenting a paper or poster (Figure 7). Respondents who attended more than 10 in-person activities were more likely to have been active participants than respondents who attended fewer of these activities. Results excluding China and India respondents are largely similar to overall survey results.



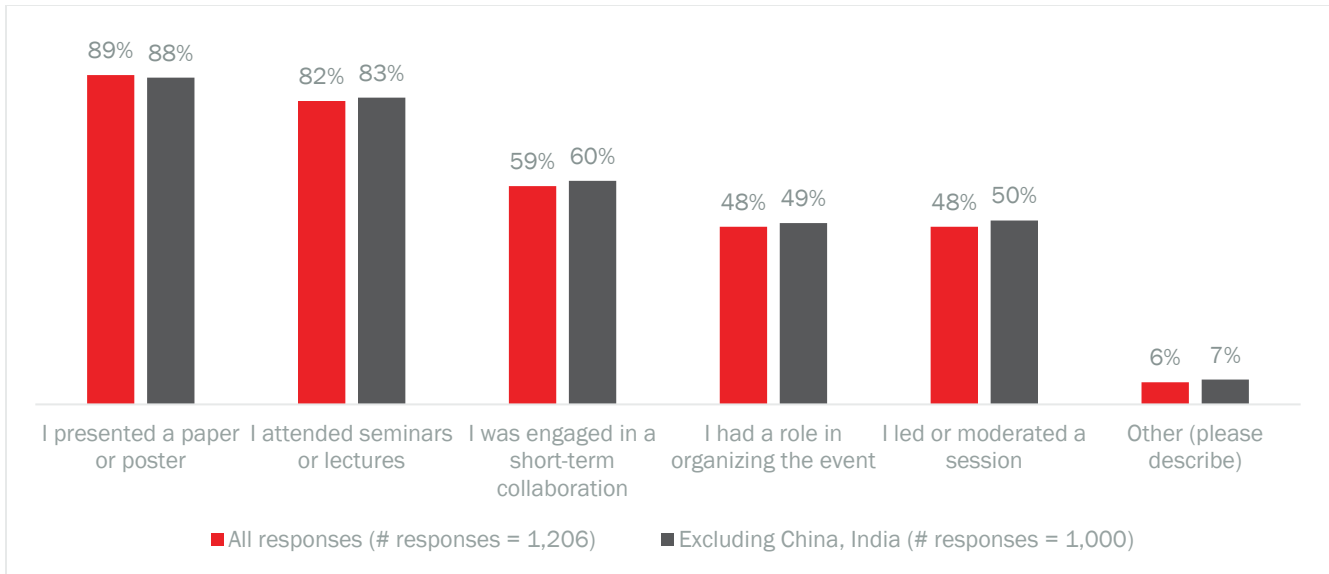


Figure 7. Did your participation in these activities include any of the following? Select all that apply.

Over 70 respondents wrote in “other” responses, most of which could be sorted into the broad categories summarized in Figure 8.

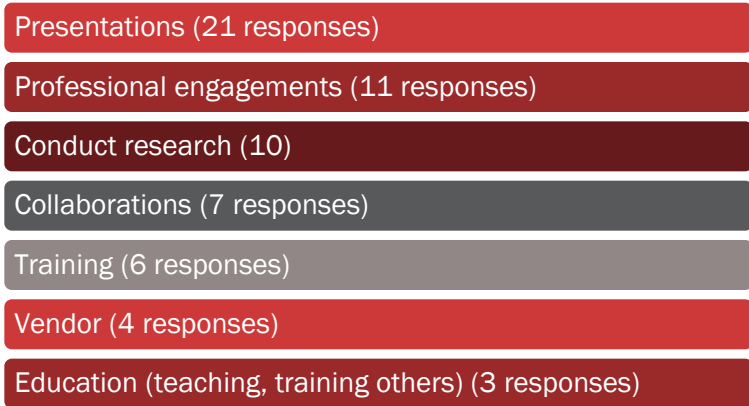


Figure 8. "Other" activities at professional activities

About 28% of all respondents reported that they have attended six or more professional activities in the United States in person in the past 10 years. Almost a quarter have not attended any (Figure 9). Citizens of countries that participate in the U.S. Visa Waiver Program are more likely to have attended 6 or more professional activities in person in the United States (44%) than the respondents overall (28%).

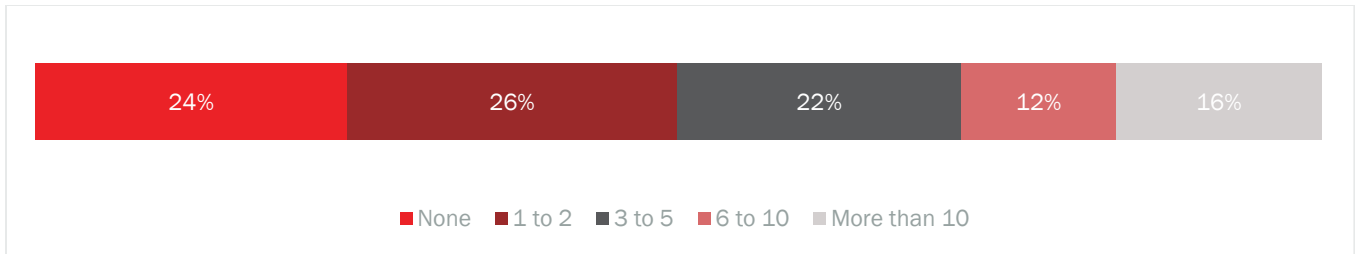


Figure 9. In the past 10 years, how many professional activities have you attended in person in the United States? All responses (number of responses = 1,184)

Similar results are noted when respondents from China and India are removed from survey results (Figure 10).

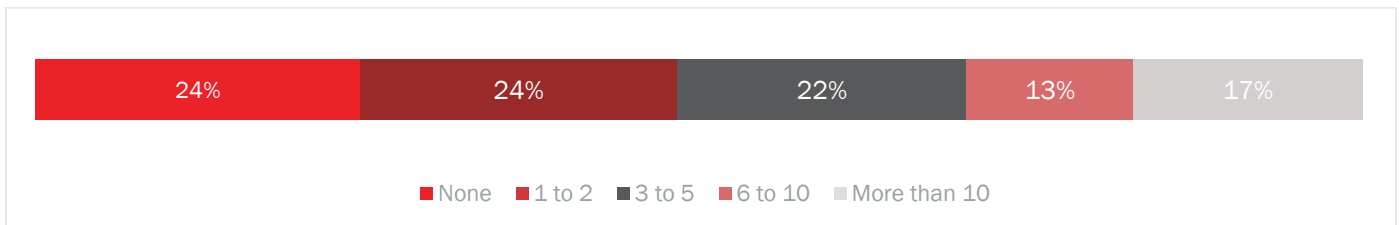


Figure 10. In the past 10 years, how many professional activities have you attended in person in the United States? Excluding respondents from China, India (number of responses = 975)

Almost 40% of all respondents were unable to attend a professional activity in person in the United States in the past decade because of visa-related issues (Figure 11). By contrast, only 19% of respondents who are citizens of countries that participate in the U.S. Visa Waiver Program reported they were unable to attend an in-person professional activity in the United States because of visa-related issues.

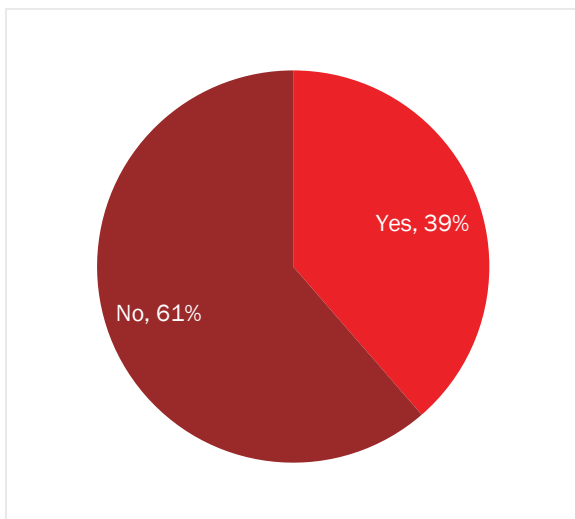


Figure 11. In the past 10 years, have you attempted to attend in person a professional activity in the United States, but were unable to because of visa-related issues? All responses (number of responses = 1,183)

Similar results are noted when respondents from China and India are excluded from the analysis (Figure 12).

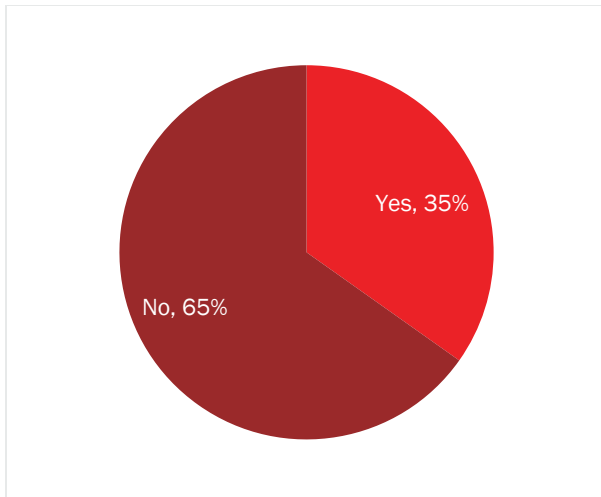


Figure 12. In the past 10 years, have you attempted to attend in person a professional activity in the United States, but were unable to because of visa-related issues? Excluding respondents from China, India (number of responses = 974)

### Obtaining a visa to visit the United States

Of the respondents who completed in the survey up to this question, 90% have at some point in time applied for a visa for a short-term collaboration with a US entity or to attend a scientific, educational, professional, or business convention, conference, or seminar (Table 2). Respondents who selected any of the other options to this question were disqualified from the remainder of the survey and thanked for their participation. Respondents could select more than one answer option, so percentages in Table 2 add up to more than 100.

When respondents from China and India are excluded from the dataset, it is noted that a smaller percentage of respondents applied for a visa to attend a professional activity (66%), and a greater percentage reported they had not applied for a short-term visa in the past 10 years (20%).

Table 2. For what purposes have you applied for a short-term visa to visit the United States in the past 10 years?

Answer Choices	All responses		Excluding China, India	
	%	#	%	#
I applied for a visa to attend a scientific, educational, professional, or business convention, conference, or seminar in the United States.	71%	820	66%	622
I applied for a visa for a short-term (less than 6 months) collaboration with a US entity.	19%	222	19%	174
I applied for a student visa to study in the United States.	8%	92	7%	68
Unsure	1%	15	1%	14
I have not applied for a short-term visa to visit the United States in the past ten (10) years.	16%	189	20%	189
Other (please describe)	10%	111	12%	109
<b>Total responses</b>	<b>1147</b>		<b>938</b>	

About 4% of respondents who wrote in comments reported they were able to use the ESTA to enter the U.S. under the U.S. Visa Waiver Program. Other respondents applied for a short-term visa for personal visits, graduate or postgraduate studies, or for work or diplomatic purposes.

Most respondents (87%) applied for a short-term visa most recently to attend a scientific, educational, professional or business convention, conference, or seminar (Table 3). Respondents were able to select more than one answer option, so percentages in Table 3 add up to more than 100.

Table 3. For which professional activities did you **most recently** apply for a short-term visa to visit the United States? Please select all that apply

Answer Choices	All responses		Excluding China, India	
	%	#	%	#
I applied for a visa to attend a scientific, educational, professional, or business convention, conference, or seminar in the United States.	87%	765	86%	577
I applied for a visa for a short-term (less than 6 months) collaboration with a US entity.	18%	157	19%	125
Unsure	2%	17	2%	13
Other (please describe)	5%	44	6%	40
<b>Total responses</b>		<b>880</b>		<b>671</b>

Most survey respondents applied for a short-term visa in 2021, 2022, 2023, or 2024 (Figure 13). Results are similar when respondents from China and India are excluded from the dataset.

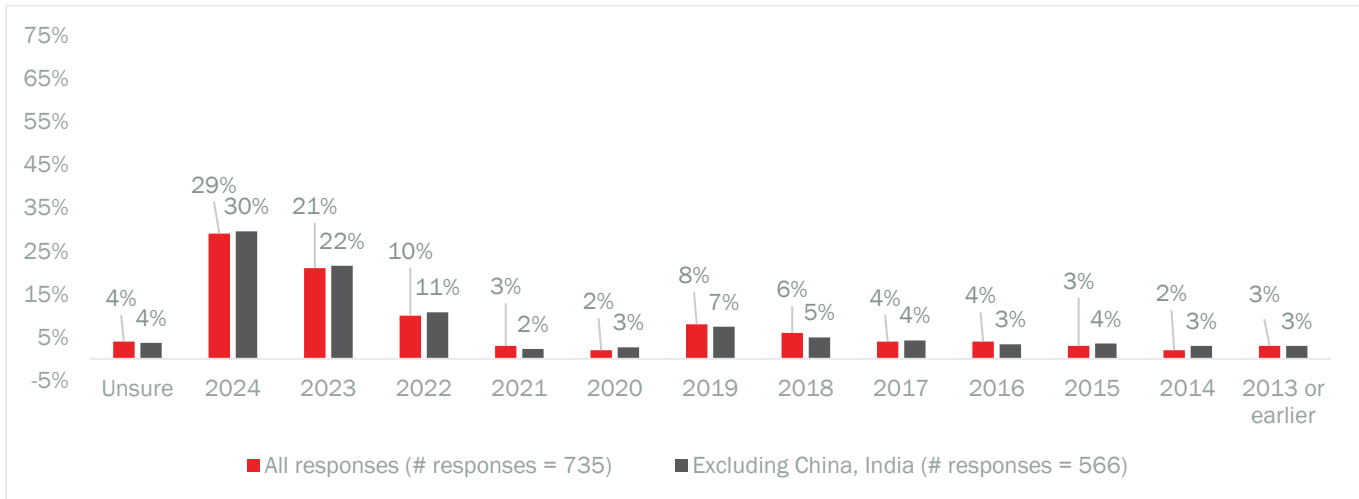


Figure 13. In which year did you apply for the above visa?

Most respondents most recently applied for either a B1/B2 or J1 visa. See Figure 14.

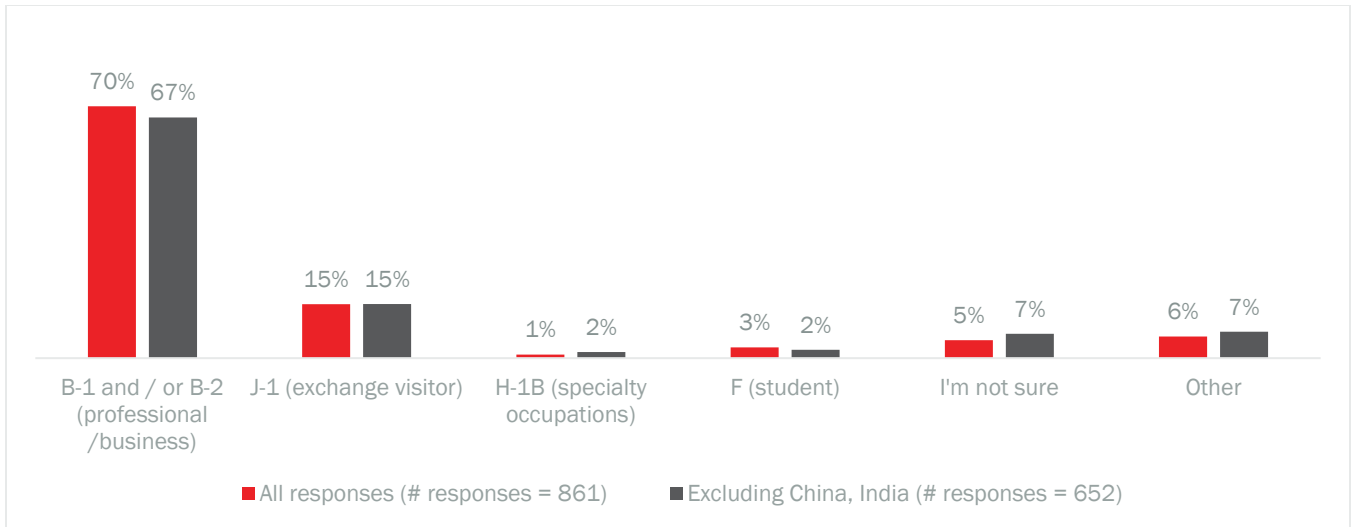


Figure 14. What visa type did you apply for the most recent time you applied to be able to attend a professional activity in the United States?

More than two-thirds of respondents (72%) submitted their visa application four months or less before their anticipated trip (Figure 15). Similar results are noted when respondents from China and India are excluded from consideration.

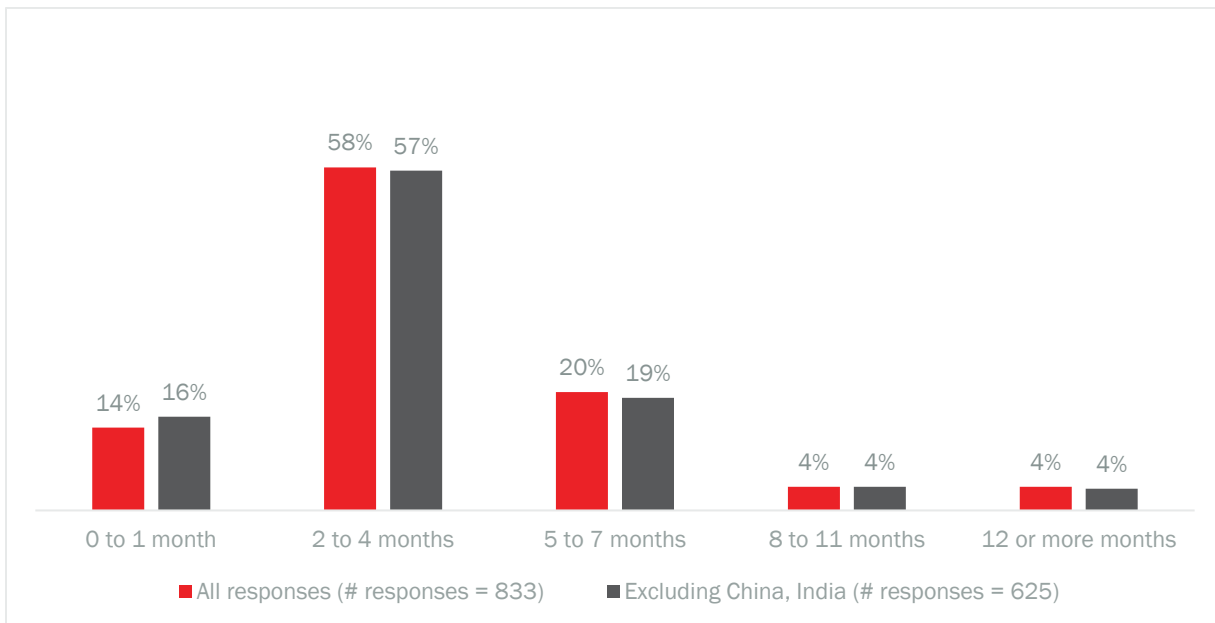


Figure 15. Approximately how many months before your anticipated trip did you submit your visa application?

More than half of all survey respondents reported their visa was issued in time to attend the professional activity (Figure 16). Notably, citizens of China, Cuba, Egypt, India, Iran, Pakistan, and Russia were more likely to report visa denials than respondents from other countries.

Only 8% of respondents who had not previously attended an in-person activity in the U.S. reported that their most recent visa was issued in time to attend a professional event. In contrast, about 70% of respondents

who had previously attended in-person activities in the U.S. reported receiving their most recent visa in time for the desired event.

Respondents who applied for a J-1 visa were more likely to report their visa was issued in time to attend the professional activity (63%) than respondents who applied for a B-1/B-2 visa (51%).

Over a third (39%) of the 98 respondents whose visa was issued too late to attend their activity reported they submitted their visa application five or more months prior to the anticipated trip.

Respondents who are citizens of countries that participate in the U.S. Visa Waiver Program were more likely to report their visa (or, presumably, waiver) was issued in time to attend the professional activity (84%) than the overall respondent pool (56%).

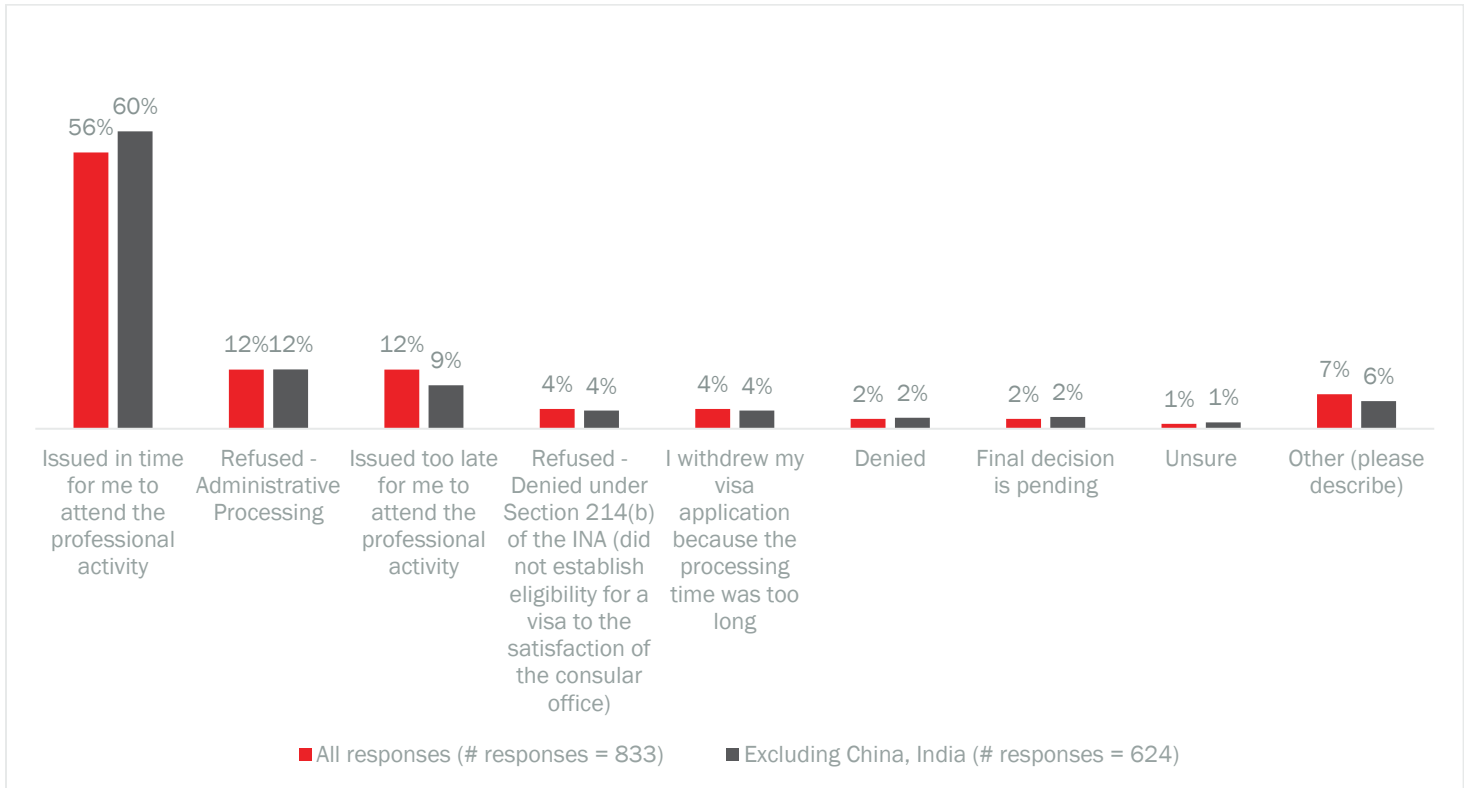


Figure 16. What was the final decision on your most recent visa application?

Common themes were noted in freeform comments provided by respondents, as summarized in Figure 17.

**Unable to schedule, waiting for interview (16 comments)**

- *Couldn't even get a slot for interview from India within 400 days (India, biology, B-1/B-2).*
- *Far date. Conference was ... September 2024 but visa interview dates for ... December 2025. (Nigeria, earth/environmental physics, physics, applied geophysics, B-1/B-2).*

**Issued too late to attend activity (7 comments)**

- *I attended an appointment in the US embassy in London, I was instructed to supply more materials to an email address, which I did, then the processing time stretched beyond my conference by 3 months, hence I did not attend the conference. (China, biomedical engineering, electrical engineering, medicine, B-1/B-2).*

**Visa issued late but still attended (6 comments)**

- *Even though the visa application process started early, I had to delay the trip because the DS-2019 was not issued until one month before the departure (Spain, physics, J-1).*

**Denied (5 comments)**

- *I was made to pay the VISA fees but was found ineligible at the time due to attestation on a previous visa (India; earth/environmental sciences, mechanical engineering, physics; B-1/B-2).*

**Did not need visa / ESTA (4 comments)**

- *Used the ESTA visa system available to Australians (Australia, biology, ESTA).*

**Other (23 comments)**

- *The decision is pending even though the event has past. These actually happened twice for me... both times it were top-level conferences/schools and I had invitations letter, etc. (Russia, biology, computer science, B-1/B-2).*

Figure 17. What was the final decision on your most recent visa application? Sample freeform comments<sup>4</sup>.

Fifty-six percent (56%) of all respondents reported it took less than three months to receive a final decision on their visa application (Figure 18). Similar results were noted when respondents from China and India were removed from consideration. The majority (82%) of the 112 respondents who applied for a visa 1 month or less before their trip received it in time for their professional activity. This contrasts with 47% of those who applied 5-7 months in advance, 35% of those who applied 8-11 months prior, and 44% of those who applied 12 months or more before their trip.

<sup>4</sup> DS-2019: [Certificate of Eligibility for Exchange Visitor Status](#). ESTA: [Electronic System for Travel Authorization](#)

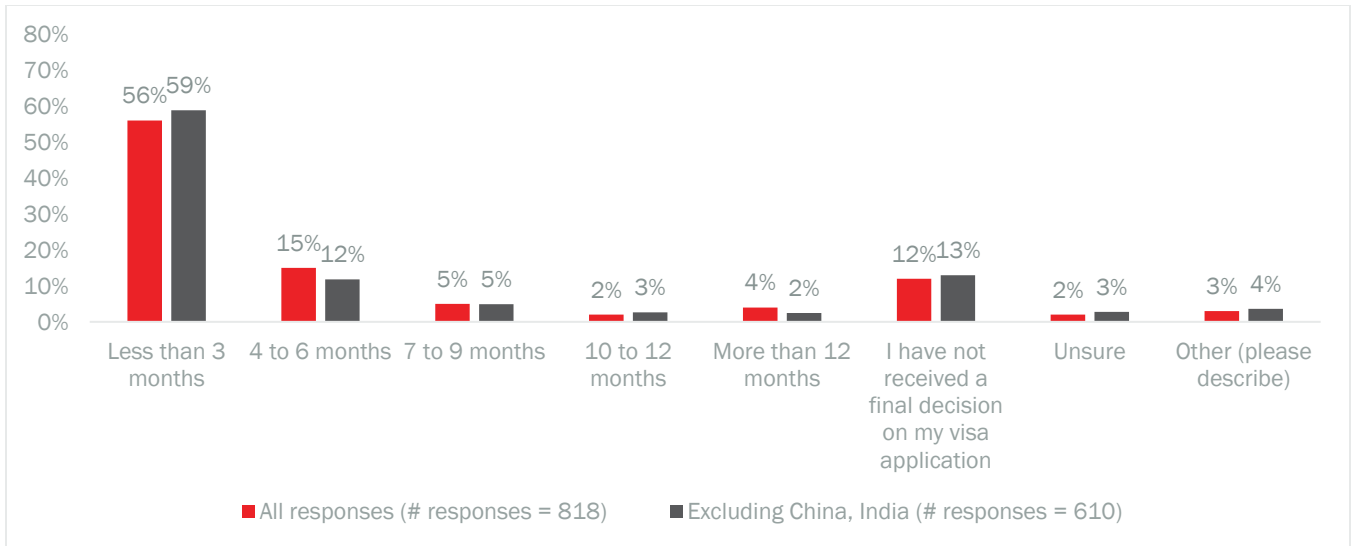


Figure 18. How many months did it take from the time you submitted your application until you received a final decision on your visa application?

A few respondents who wrote in responses reported they received a visa within days of application (9 comments) or within three to four months (5 comments). Eight respondents wrote that they were not able to secure an interview within the required timeframe.

A third of all respondents reported no challenges during their most recent visa application, while 38% cited difficulty scheduling an interview (see Table 4, in which respondents were able to select more than one answer choice, so percentages add up to more than 100).

Citizens of countries that participate in the U.S. Visa Waiver Program were more likely to report they did not experience any challenges (68%) than the overall cohort of survey respondents (34%). Applicants for a J-1 visa were more likely to report they did not experience any challenges (38%) than applicants for a B-1/B-2 visa (29%).

When respondents from China and India were excluded from the dataset, the percentage of respondents reporting no challenges increased, while those reporting difficulty scheduling an interview decreased. This suggests that respondents from China and India were more likely to face challenges, particularly with scheduling interviews, compared with the overall survey cohort.

Table 4. During your most recent visa application, did you experience any of the following? Select all that apply.

Answer Choices	All responses		Excluding China, India	
	%	#	%	#
The process of scheduling an interview was difficult.	38%	292	31%	178
My interview led to administrative processing delays beyond expected travel date.	22%	174	20%	114
My interview led to refusal or request for additional materials.	13%	104	12%	68
I was unable to obtain a visa interview before my expected travel date so I did not complete the visa process.	12%	96	11%	61
I completed the visa process but my visa arrived too late for expected travel date.	8%	63	7%	39



Answer Choices	All responses		Excluding China, India	
	%	#	%	#
I had difficulty getting to a visa office.	7%	56	8%	48
The request for additional materials (i.e., letter from employer, invitation letter from US entity, proof of residency, proof of adequate funds) came too late in process.	6%	48	5%	26
My visa application was denied	6%	48	6%	33
I had difficulty obtaining or was unable to obtain requested materials (i.e., letter from employer, invitation letter from US entity, proof of residency, proof of adequate funds).	2%	19	3%	15
I did not experience any challenges.	34%	267	40%	229
I experienced other challenges (please describe).	15%	119	16%	90
<b>Total responses</b>	<b>775</b>		<b>569</b>	

More than one hundred respondents described other challenges. Most could be ascribed to the answer choices above. A sample of comments is provided below.

- *Because of the long wait time, I had to apply for emergency appointment. I was granted one, but had to fly to a different city, even though there was a US consulate in the city where I live. It resulted in additional expenses, which I could not reimburse from any official sources. I am afraid this kind of hassle will, in future, deter a lot of scientists and professionals from attending academic, scientific and business activities in the US. (India; chemical engineering, chemistry, physics; B-1/B-2)*
- *The officer at the counter was very rude. He shouted over the counter about private questions such as how much you earn per month, and I have to shout back my answer otherwise he can't hear it and everyone waiting in the hall can hear the answer. The officers treated the applicants like criminals. (Malaysia; science policy, technology including information technology; B-1/B-2)*
- *Payment was complicated, no credit card possible. And much information was required... So in terms of hours [spent, the process] was cumbersome. (Germany, mathematics, J-1)*
- *It can be a nightmare. The system used does not provide enough information, the process is not transparent, they provide extremely poor feedback, and it is expensive. (Australia; computer science, mathematics, statistics; B-1/B-2)*
- *Additional screening process for researchers took a very long time. (Ukraine, chemistry, B-1/B-2)*

Of the 145 survey respondents who are citizens of countries participating in the U.S. Visa Waiver Program, 48 experienced challenges with their visa applications. Among these, 15 hold dual citizenship with a country considered “sensitive” by the U.S. government<sup>5</sup>, and two were born in a “sensitive” country but are citizens of a Visa Waiver Program country.

Three-quarters of all respondents (76%) agreed that eligibility requirements for a visa were clear, and 64% reported they were able to track the status of their application through the process. Just over half (56%) agreed that their visa application was processed in a timely manner, and 41% were able to get assistance with their visa application (**Error! Reference source not found.**).

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.state.gov/countries-of-particular-concern-special-watch-list-countries-entities-of-particular-concern/>

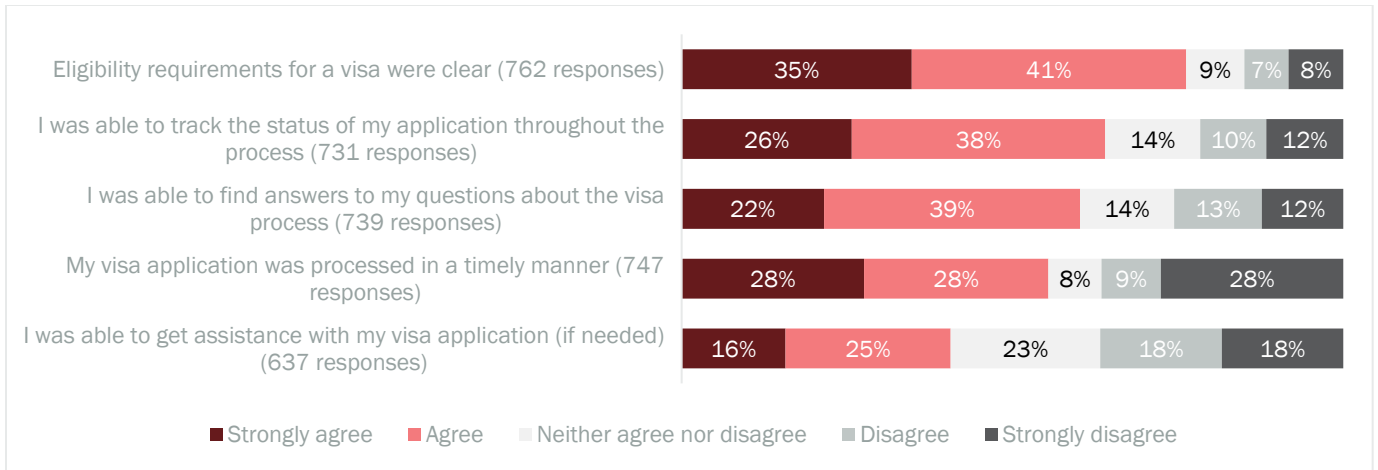


Figure 19. Please rate your agreement with the following statements regarding your most recent experience applying for a visa to visit the United States for a professional activity. All responses (N/A or unsure responses removed)

Similar perceptions are noted when respondents from China and India are excluded from the dataset (Figure 20).

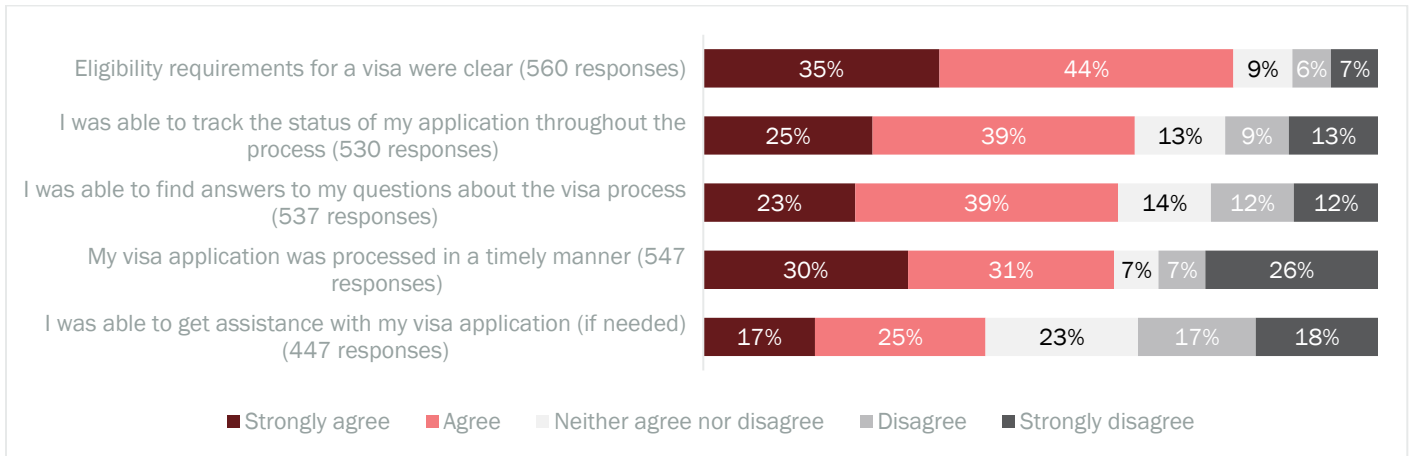


Figure 20. Please rate your agreement with the following statements regarding your most recent experience applying for a visa to visit the United States for a professional activity. Excluding respondents from China, India (N/A or unsure responses removed)

Respondents whose visa applications were denied or pending at the time of the survey were less likely to agree that their visa was processed in a timely manner. However, their perceptions on other aspects of the visa process were generally similar to those of respondents whose visas were issued in time to attend their event.

Survey respondents were invited to share other comments about their most recent visa experience. A sample of comments is provided here.

- *Finding an appointment slot was the most difficult process of the visa process.* (India; chemical engineering, mathematics; B-1/B-2)

- *I had to write to the consular explaining why it was important for me to travel to the USA and was provided an expedited visa review process. However, I think that was luck because some of my colleagues completely failed to obtain visa. (Uganda; biology, economics, science policy; B-1/B-2)*
- *The amount of information requested is unreasonable. I feel uncomfortable with the information I am required to share. (Netherlands, physics, unknown visa type)*
- *I could not understand why a vacation to Cuba of 10 days makes a person who worked in the USA for 10 years not eligible for a short-term business visa (Italy, medicine, B-1/B-2)*
- *I am always worried to be out of time and even be refused in the visa application process. I am so feared that I cannot plan to attend conferences in USA. (China, mathematics, B-1/B-2)*
- *I had to leave my passport in the embassy after the visa interview. It feels like a huge step over the line to ask people to leave highly important documents at another country's embassy. (Germany; physics, space sciences; J-1)*

### U.S. Visa Waiver Program, Canada

To better understand respondents from countries that participate in the U.S. Visa Waiver Program (VWP) and Canada – whose citizens can often travel to the U.S. without a visa – a focused analysis was conducted on these groups. Note that the following statistics represent those people who applied for a visa despite being in countries participating in WWP, and their characteristics and experiences may differ from those who had no need to apply for a visa. However, as survey respondents were not required to disclose their country of citizenship, the data presented may not encompass all individuals from VWP countries or Canada. All respondents studied in Table 5 applied for a short-term visa to visit the U.S. within the past 10 years.

Most respondents from VWP countries with dual citizenship in countries considered “sensitive” were either denied a visa or refused and referred for Administrative Processing (AP). Of the three respondents who reported their applications were eventually approved, all received a visa too late to attend the intended professional activity.

Table 5. Visa acceptance, rejection data for respondents from VWP countries

Citizenship	# in cohort	# accepted visas	# accepted in less than 3 months	# denied, refused (AP), withdrawn visas	# undetermined visa status
Citizens of VWP countries & Canada	148	126	102	16	6
VWP, dual citizenship in “sensitive” country	15	3	0	9	3
Canadian, dual citizenship in “sensitive” country	1	0	0	1	0
Other Canadian citizens	2	1	1	1	0
All Other VWP country citizens	130	122	105	5	3

Other notable differences between overall survey responses and those of respondents who reported being citizens of Canada and VWP countries are called out throughout this report.

### Perceptions of the U.S. visa application system

About a third (30%) of all respondents reported that they have chosen to not apply for a short-term visa to visit the U.S. for professional activities because of the perceived difficulty in obtaining a visa (Figure 21). Note that the study data are limited to people who did apply for a visa within the last 10 years, and these statistics are not necessarily descriptive of those who never applied (e.g., the respondents may be people who may have stopped applying after a previous negative experience, or who applied despite previously

perceiving the process as difficult—perhaps because their opinion on the difficulty of the process changed, a particular opportunity was sufficiently attractive to outweigh the difficulty involved, or different circumstances such as longer lead time improved their chances of getting a visa). Identical results were noted when respondents from China and India were removed from the dataset (70% no, 30% yes).

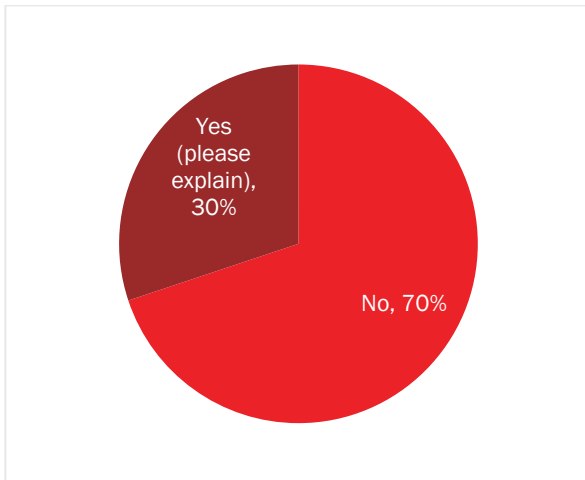


Figure 21. Have you ever chosen to not apply for a short-term visa to enter the United States for a professional activity because the process to obtain a visa seemed too difficult? (number of responses = 757)

Professionals who answered “yes” to the above question wrote in responses explaining why they decided to not apply for a short-term visa. Most comments could be placed into one or more of the following categories. Sample comments are provided for each category.

**Time required; visas often issued too late.** Some respondents who choose not to apply for a visa anticipate challenges such as difficulty scheduling interviews, long processing times, and other delays will prevent them from attending professional activities.

- *Because of constant delays in consideration applications, I had to refuse invitations to give talks. It was very clear that the consideration takes months and, moreover, it is nearly impossible to predict how many months. (Russia, physics, B-1/B-2)*
- *...I applied to B1 visa to attend an important conference, and it has been more than a year and no reply from the embassy. I do not know what I did. This had a huge impact on my career as I has been waiting for U.S. visas for 3 years in Egypt before accepting my current position in Ireland. (Egypt, biology, B-1/B-2)*

**Previous experience.** Many respondents described a prior negative experience with a U.S. visa application which has made them unwilling to apply again.

- *After my last experience with the visa officer, I have no desire to apply for a U.S. visa. Before this, I have hold U.S. visa for 25 years in a row. I have visited the US about 60 times during those 25 years. (Mexico; chemistry, physics; B-1/B-2)*
- *After my negative experience I decided to stop even trying. (Australia, physics, H-1B)*
- *After struggling unsuccessfully to get an appointment to visit my sister after she had emergency brain surgery, I had a work meeting come up but thought I would have the same challenge, so I didn't try. (Ghana, medicine, B-1/B-2)*

**Perceived complexity, lack of transparency.** Some respondents expressed frustration at the lack of communication and transparency regarding delays or denials.

- *I don't understand why I am denied a visa anytime I apply with valid/genuine supporting documents.* (Ghana; earth/environmental sciences, science policy, technology including information technology; B-1/B-2)
- *It is frustrating to apply, travel to the interview and get a refusal without reason or no info before the expected travel date.* (India, physics, B-1/B-2)
- *It is sometimes just too much hassle.* (Sweden, physics, J-1)

**Cost-benefit analysis.** Some respondents have elected to forego professional opportunities based on their perception of an overly challenging application process.

- *Absolutely, if the event is not important enough, given my past experience of delays as long as years, it is not worth the amount of work and stress it induces to apply.* (Sweden; computer science, mathematics, statistics, artificial intelligence; J-1)
- *It's not worth the hassles, sometimes. It wastes much time that otherwise could be devoted to academics* (India, physics, B-1/B-2)

Most respondents (73%) reported that difficulties in obtaining a short-term visa have not deterred them from collaborating with U.S.-based partners or institutions in their scientific work (Figure 22). Respondents whose visas had been denied or were pending at the time of the survey were more likely to report that visa difficulties had caused them to stop collaborating with partners and institutions based in the United States. Citizens of countries participating in the U.S. Waiver Program were less likely to report that visa difficulties caused them to stop collaborating with U.S. based institutions and partners.

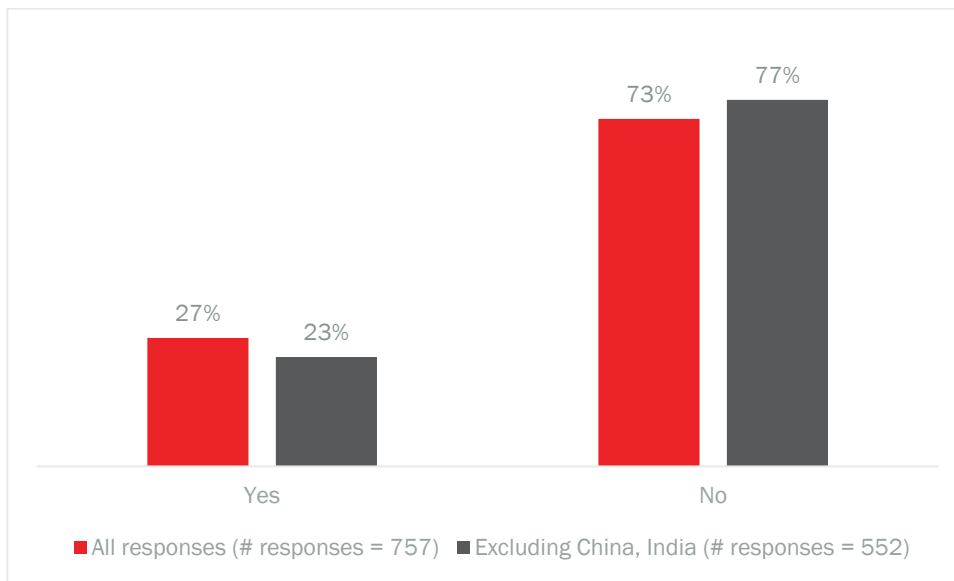


Figure 22. Have difficulties in obtaining a U.S. short-term visa caused you to stop collaborating with, or avoid choosing, collaborators or partner institutes based in the United States for your scientific work?

Those who reported visa difficulties have deterred them from collaborating with U.S.-based institutions outlined issues like those previously noted. Other comments highlighted how visa issues have impacted collaborations with U.S.-based scientists.

- *It is easier to work with researchers in Europe and Africa.* (South Africa; biology, statistics, unclear visa type)

- *It is extremely difficult for me to visit our partners in the U.S., given the difficulty of getting a visa. We are currently opting for collaborations in countries which is easier to collaborate with. (Egypt; electrical engineering, physics, technology including information technology; B-1/B-2)*
- *I have not actively pursued collaborations for the simple reason that I am put through hugggge hurdles to get a visa!!! (India; biology, chemistry; B-1/B-2)*
- *People working in my group have not been issued visas in time, and as a result we ended up not collaborating with the U.S. partner. (Sweden, physics, J-1)*

Only 16% of respondents reported that applying for a U.S. short-term visa was easier than applying for visas to other countries, while 23% said the experience was about the same (Table 6). When respondents from China and India were excluded from the dataset, the percentage of respondents who found the U.S. visa process much more difficult declined slightly.

Respondents who applied for a B-1/B-2 visa were more likely to rate their experience applying for a U.S. short-term visa as more difficult (61% rated their experience as more difficult or much more difficult) than respondents who applied for a J-1 visa (43% rated their experience as more difficult or much more difficult).

Table 6. Was your experience applying for a United States short-term visa easier or more difficult than your experience applying for similar visas for other countries? (N/A, unsure responses removed)

Answer Choices	All responses		Excluding China, India	
	%	#	%	#
Much easier	6%	43	7%	36
Easier	10%	66	12%	56
About the same	23%	154	26%	128
More difficult	21%	145	21%	101
Much more difficult	40%	273	34%	165
<b>Total responses (without N/A, unsure)</b>	<b>681</b>		<b>486</b>	

About a third (31% of 147) of respondents who are citizens of countries that participate in the U.S. Visa Waiver Program rated the U.S. visa process as more difficult or much more difficult than other countries' processes. Of those who rated the U.S. visa process as more difficult, seven hold dual citizenship in a "sensitive" country, and one other was born in a "sensitive" country but is a citizen of a Visa Waiver Program country.

Respondents who shared comments view the U.S. visa process as slow, inefficient, costly, and less straightforward compared with other countries' visa processes. A sample of comments is provided below.

- *I didn't expect to travel to another country to find an interview date before the conference date. The issue is, for many events, submission dates do not precede conference dates more than 6 months, therefore it is not possible to prove planned participation in an event early on. (Turkey, psychology, B-1/B-2)*
- *Getting visa for European countries is much more easier and time to get interview date is also lesser than for U.S. visa. (India, biology, B-1/B-2)*
- *I applied for visas to do short term status in other countries (Japan and UK) and the process and interviewing steps were much simpler (and with a much better treatment) than the U.S. visa (Argentina, biology, B-1/B-2)*
- *A lot of documentation is needed, and the process is complicated. (Poland; biology, chemistry; B-1/B-2)*



- *The whole process is extremely difficult and nothing else is comparable to it. From the unclarity of application process and required documents, to unresponsiveness of the staff, to the difficulty or at times impossibility of scheduling an interview and to finally unreasonable delays in the processing.* (Sweden; computer science, mathematics, statistics, artificial intelligence; J-1)

Almost 500 respondents provided advice for individuals applying for a short-term visa to visit the United States. The most frequently mentioned recommendation was to start the application process well in advance – anywhere from two months to two years before the anticipated travel date. About 10% of respondents advised against applying for a short-term U.S. visa altogether. Other commonly suggested tips included ensuring that all required (and more) documentation is prepared; following instructions carefully; being honest and clear in both the application and interview; and seeking assistance from the inviting institution or agency.

## Appendices

### Demographics

#### Country of residence

The largest share of survey respondents resides in mainland China (11%) and India (10%). Those countries of residence with at least 2% of the respondents are shown in Figure 23. Each of the following countries accounts for 1% of the survey respondents (not shown in Figure 23): Algeria, Argentina, Austria, Bangladesh, Belgium, Cameroon, Colombia, Czech Republic, Egypt, Ethiopia, Finland, Georgia, Ghana, Hong Kong, Indonesia, Ireland, Israel, Kenya, Lithuania, Malaysia, Mexico, Philippines, Poland, South Korea, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Taiwan, Turkey, Uganda, Vietnam, United Arab Emirates.

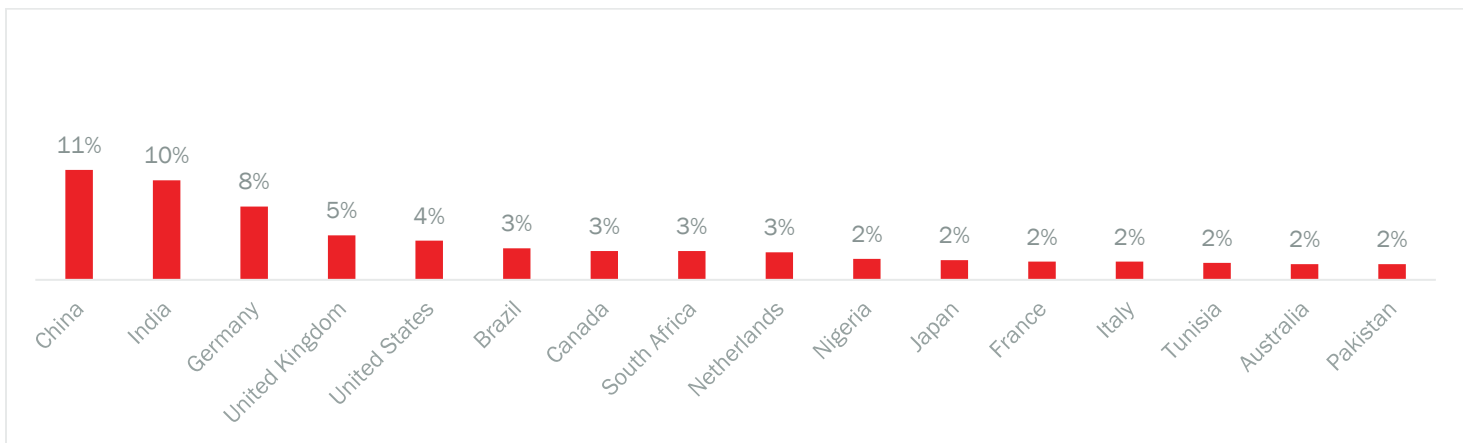


Figure 23. In which country do you currently live? Most common responses (number of responses = 739)

#### Country of citizenship

Like the previous question, the largest share of respondents are citizens of China (15%) or India (14%). Those countries of citizenship with at least 2 percent of the respondents are shown in Figure 24. Respondents from the following countries each represent 1% of the total citizenship distribution: Algeria, Australia, Austria, Bangladesh, Cameroon, Colombia, Cuba, Ethiopia, France, Georgia, Greece, Hong Kong, Indonesia, Japan, Jordan, Kenya, Malawi, Malaysia, Mexico, Netherlands, Philippines, Poland, Spain, Sri Lanka, Sweden, Taiwan, Turkey, Uganda, Ukraine, Venezuela, and Vietnam. Three or fewer respondents are citizens of various other countries.

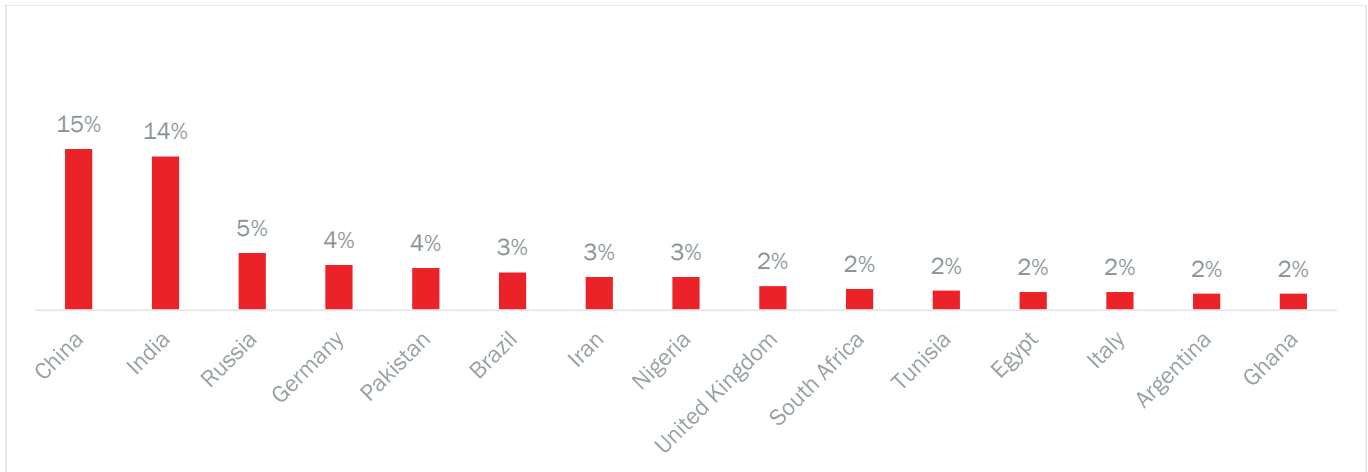


Figure 24. What is your country of citizenship? Most common responses (number of responses = 733)

Approximately 9% of survey respondents identified as citizens of countries that participate in the United States Visa Waiver Program<sup>6</sup>. While this group generally experienced fewer challenges and were more likely to receive their visa waiver on time, their perceptions of the U.S. visa system were largely similar to other respondents. Notable differences between this group and overall survey results are called out throughout the report.

**Second country of citizenship**

Sixty-seven (67) survey respondents reported having dual citizenship (Figure 25). Each of the following countries has one respondent that reported dual citizenship with that country: Afghanistan, Algeria, Belgium, Benin, Brazil, Cambodia, Canada, China, Croatia, Egypt, Germany, Ghana, India, Indonesia, Kazakhstan, Pakistan, Peru, Poland, South Africa, Sudan, Sweden, Syria, Taiwan, Uganda, Uzbekistan, and Vietnam.

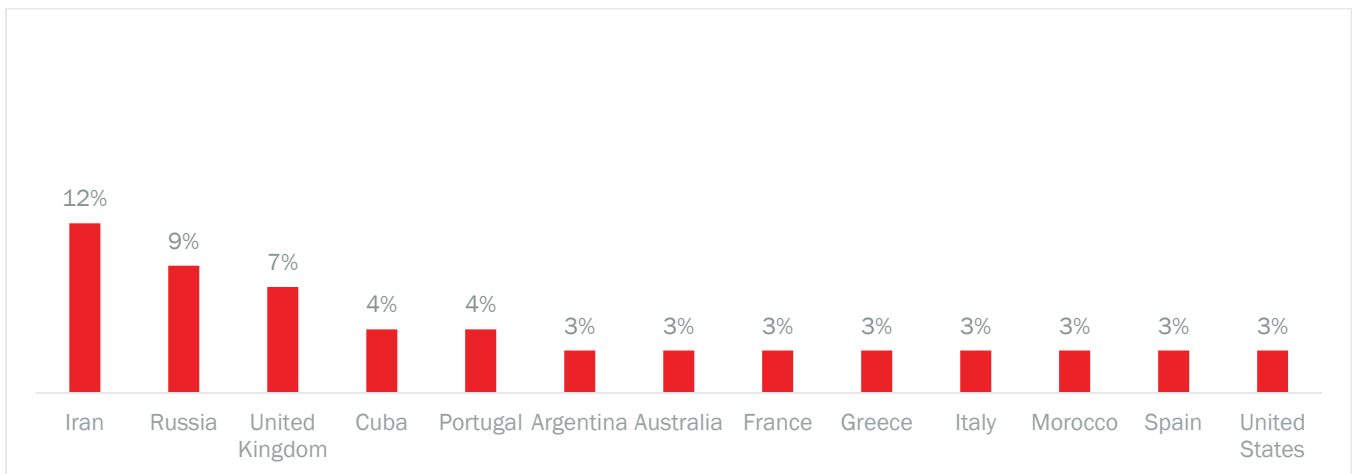


Figure 25. If you have dual citizenship, please enter your second country of citizenship, most common responses (number of responses = 67)

**Country of birth**

Fifteen percent (15%) of respondents were born in China, and 14% were born in India. Other common countries of birth are shown in Figure 26. One percent (1%) of survey respondents were born in each of the

<sup>6</sup> <https://travel.state.gov/content/travel/en/us-visas/tourism-visit/visa-waiver-program.html>



following countries: Bangladesh, Ethiopia, Philippines, Uganda, Cuba, France, Indonesia, Vietnam, Ukraine, Japan, Malaysia, Netherlands, Poland, Spain, Taiwan, Kenya, Mexico, Turkey, Algeria, Cameroon, Colombia, Georgia, Greece, Malawi, Sri Lanka, and Venezuela. See the data files that accompany this report for the full list of respondents' countries of birth.

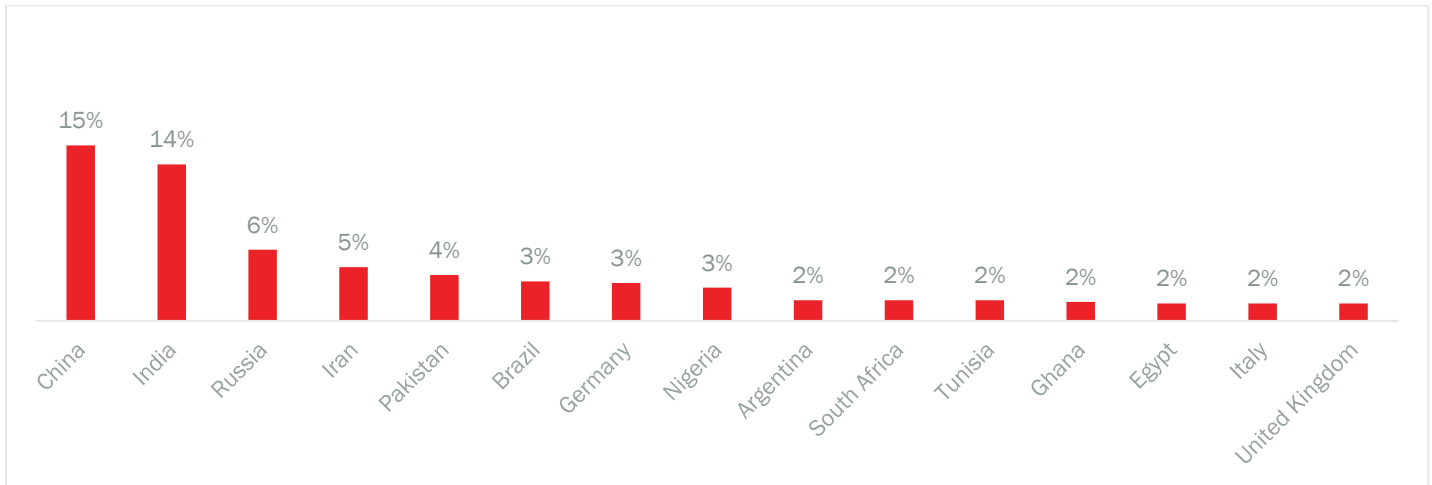


Figure 26. In which country were you born? Most common responses (number of responses =724)

### Age

Over half of survey respondents are between the ages of 30 and 49. Almost a quarter are between the ages of 50 and 69. See Figure 27 for details.

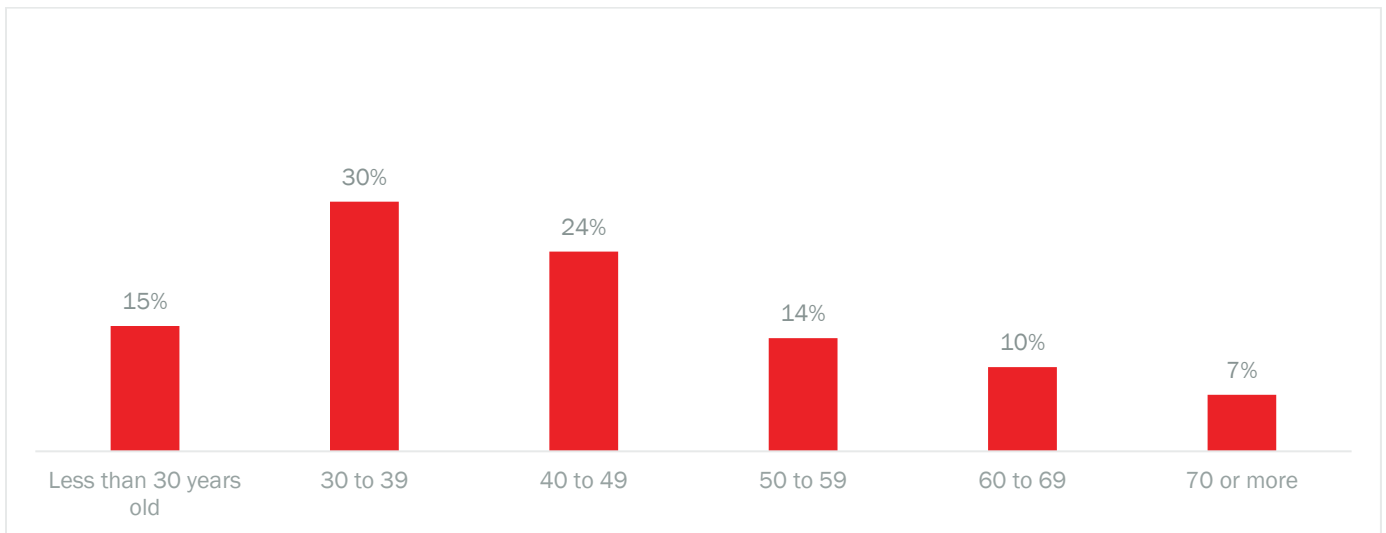


Figure 27. What is your age? (number of responses = 747)

### Gender

Sixty four percent (64%) of respondents describe their gender as man and 34% as woman. Two identified as non-binary; and one described themselves as transgender.

### Race and ethnicity

The highest percentage of respondents are Asian (41%), followed by Caucasian / White (27%) and Black / African (12%). See Figure 28 for details. Thirty (30) respondents chose to self-describe. The most common write-in responses were Persian (5) and Indian (4).

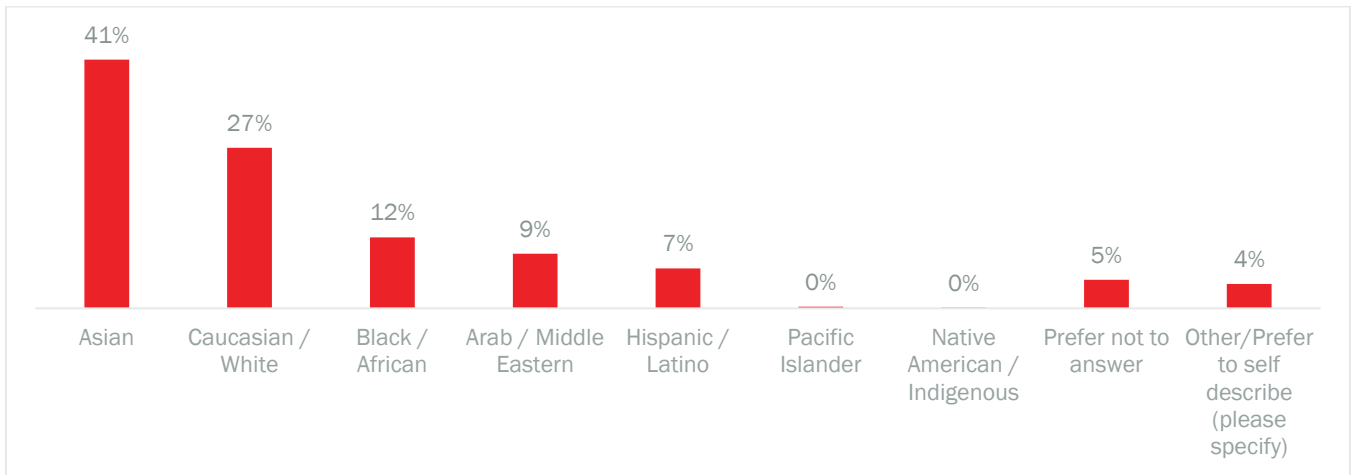


Figure 28. Which of the following best describes your race? (number of responses = 743)

### Work sector

Most survey respondents who answered this question work in academia (Figure 29).

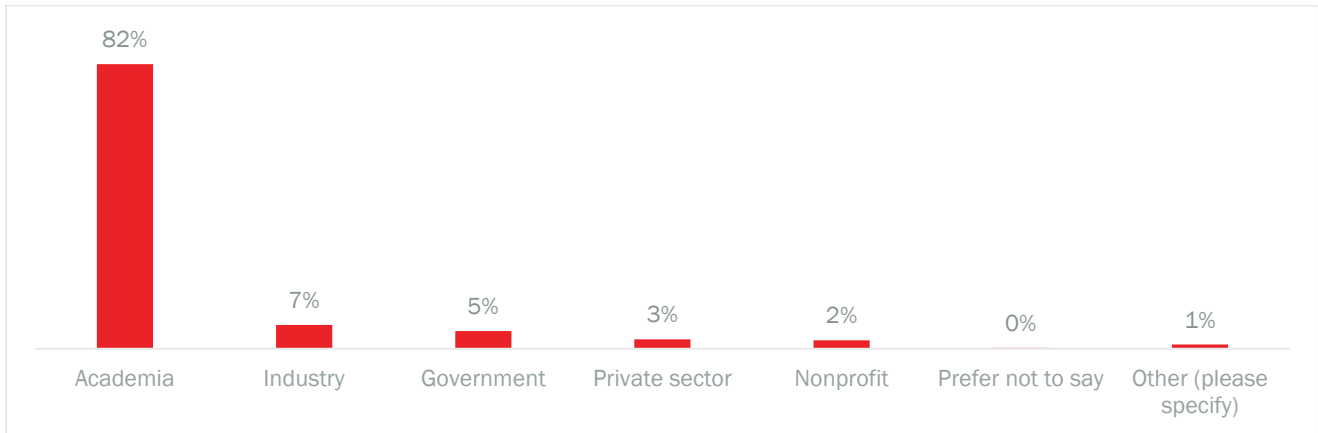


Figure 29. In what sector do you work? (number of responses = 749)

### Position

Almost two thirds of respondents are researchers at an academic institution (63%). Fewer are researchers at a private, government, or industrial institution (11%); students (9%); retired or professor emeritus / emerita (5%); or engineers (3%). See Figure 30 for details. Forty-two (42) respondents wrote in their role, 17 of whom are professors or faculty, eight are executives, two are retired or professor emeriti; and two are students.

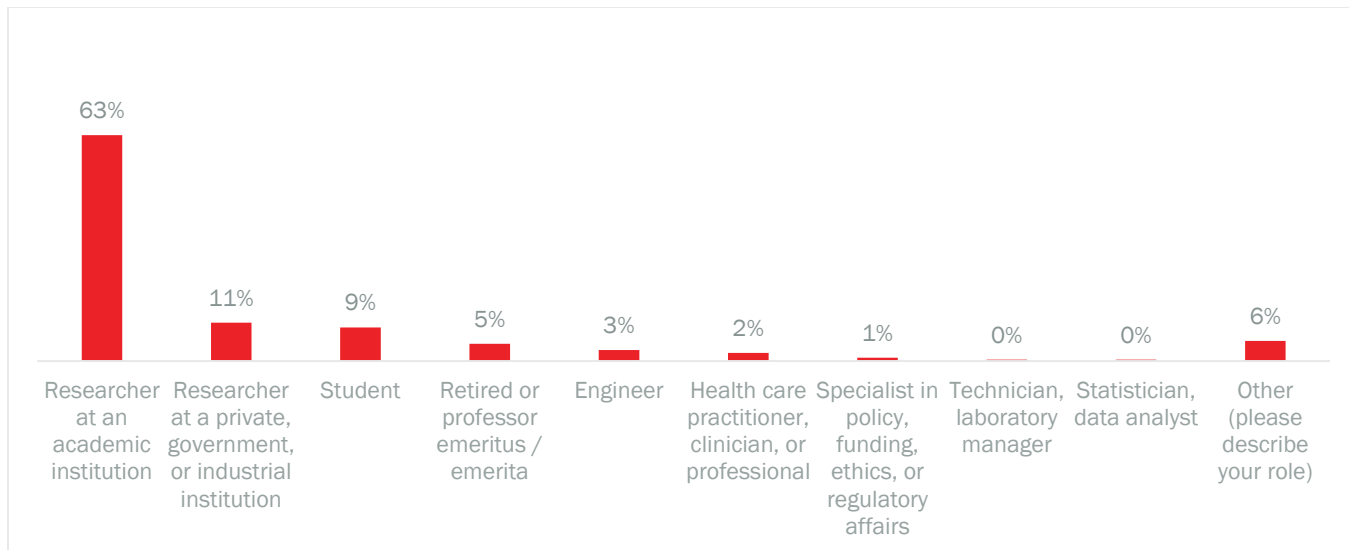


Figure 30. Which of this best describes your position? If more than one applies, please select what you consider to be your primary role (number of responses = 752)

### Field of expertise

A third of respondents (33%) reported physics as their field of expertise, followed by biology (24%) and earth and environmental sciences (15%). See Figure 31 for the most selected fields of expertise. Not shown in Figure 31 are the respondents who work in anthropology, built environment, psychology, and geography (each field is comprised of 1% of all survey respondents). Also not shown in Figure 31 are 73 who wrote in alternative areas of expertise. The most common write-in responses were agriculture/agronomy (13 responses); materials science (7); aerospace, aeronautical engineering (3); food science, food safety (3); paleontology (3); and public health (3). Respondents were able to select more than one response, so totals in Figure 31 add up to more than 100%.

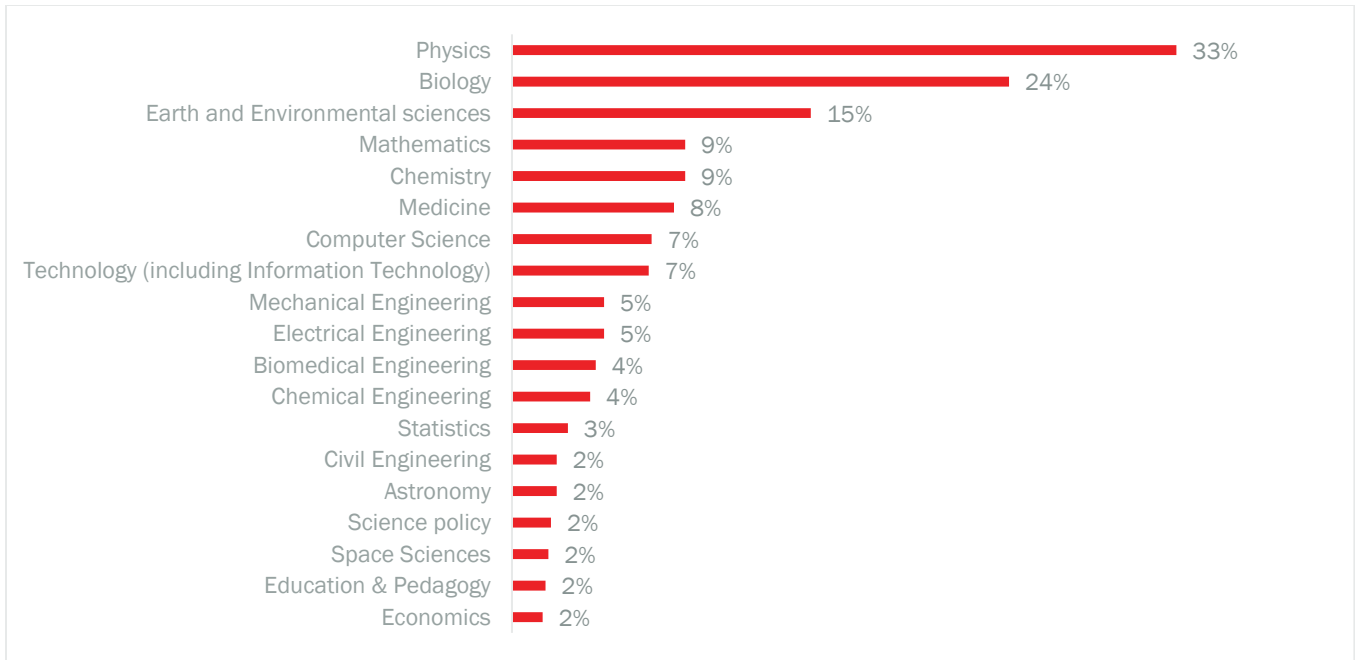


Figure 31. Which of this best describes your field of expertise? Select all that apply (number of responses = 728)

## Methods

### Questionnaire design

In close collaboration with the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine (NASEM) Board on International Scientific Organizations (BISO) and the International Visitors Office (IVO), KGL Consulting prepared the survey instrument and invitations. Each survey question was crafted to align with one or more specific research objectives. Questions were designed with clarity in mind to facilitate ease of understanding for respondents whose first language is not English. The draft questionnaire was assessed by non-native English speakers and those unfamiliar with American culture for clarity, and their feedback was integrated into the final survey instrument. Upon final approval by NASEM and its Institutional Review Board (IRB), the survey instrument was programmed into the SurveyMonkey platform and thoroughly tested.

### Population frame

The target population for this survey was comprised of scientists, engineers, and medical professionals who applied or considered applying for a visa, such as the B-1, F, J-1, or H-1, for a brief visit to the United States. The type of visits for scientific purposes for which feedback was sought, which were usually less than six months, include participation in conferences, meetings, professional education courses, workshops, board meetings, and short-term collaborations.

NASEM collaborates with approximately 150 Academies and 20 Unions around the world as well as many other networks such as professional societies with significant international membership that interact regularly with the population of interest. NASEM also has about 500 international members. KGL Consulting and NASEM worked closely with these contacts to reach professionals who have applied or considered applying for a visa for a brief visit to the United States. KGL crafted an email to NASEM contacts describing the impetus, process, and goals of the survey. The email requested the contacts' assistance in distributing the survey invitation to professionals who meet the survey respondent criteria.

## Survey deployment and distribution

Survey invitations were disseminated September 13, 2024, and deadline for responses was October 31, 2024. A total of 1,465 professionals initiated the survey, holding citizenship in at least 95 different countries. Of those respondents, 192 either did not agree to the initial consent statement or had not applied for a visa to attend a professional activity in the last 10 years, leaving 1,273 whose responses were considered eligible. Respondents were not required to answer every question, and some questions were not applicable based on previous responses.

Professionals accessed the survey questionnaire using links included in invitation emails. Data were collected using the SurveyMonkey platform. No identifying information was collected, and IP address tracking was disabled. The survey was prefaced by a request for consent, which included reassurance that no personally identifiable information would be collected, results would be reported only in aggregate, and individual comments reported would be anonymized and not attributable to any identifiable source. A link to SurveyMonkey's privacy policy was provided. Respondents who agreed to proceed after reading the terms continued into the survey.

## Analysis

Platform limitations resulted in three survey questions that allowed respondents to provide inconsistent answers. To address this, survey responses were reviewed for consistency prior to analysis. In the rare instances where inconsistencies were identified, responses were recoded to ensure coherence. For example, if a respondent indicated they had not applied for a short-term U.S. visa but in the same question selected a purpose for which they applied and also completed the rest of the survey in a way that clearly showed they had applied for a visa, the response indicating they had not applied for a visa was removed. Freeform comments provided by respondents were anonymized by removing specific dates and names of meetings, conferences, and organizations.

## Limitations

The survey employed a network-based sampling method out of necessity, relying on existing NASEM and BISO networks. This approach may have introduced sampling bias with multiple potential implications. To the extent that the survey relied on people in existing networks and often with a connection to the NAS, the results may overstate researcher's interest in collaboration and their success in getting visas. People with the strongest opinions are often the most likely to respond, which can lead to an overrepresentation of individuals who found the U.S. visa application process and conference experience either highly successful or particularly frustrating, while underrepresenting those with more moderate reactions. While the study provides valuable insights, its non-random design necessitates caution in interpretation.

## Visa types

This survey targeted scientists, engineers, and medical professionals who applied or considered applying for a visa, such as the B-1, F, J-1, or H-1, for a brief visit to the United States for scientific purposes. Each type of visa is briefly described below, as outlined by the U.S. Department of State. Visit the [U.S. Department of State website](#) for additional details.

**B-1 (Business):** Nonimmigrant visa to enter the United States temporarily for business, such as consulting with business associates; attending a scientific, educational, professional, or business convention or conference; settling an estate; negotiating a contract.

**F (Student visa):** Visa to travel to the United States to study at an institution or program, including a university or college; high school; elementary school; seminary; conservatory; language training program.

**J-1 (Exchange visa):** Nonimmigrant visa to participate in an exchange visitor program in the United States, including au pair and educare; camp counselor; government visitor; intern; international visitor; physician;

professor and research scholar; short-term scholar; specialist; student (college/university); student (secondary); summer work travel; teacher; trainee.

**H-1 (Temporary worker visa for person in specialty occupation):** Visa to work in a specialty occupation for applicants who have at least a bachelor's degree, or equivalent experience in the specialty occupation, including fashion models, physicians, DOD program participants.