

*Twin Cities Campus*

*International Student and Scholar Services  
Global Programs and Strategy Alliance*

*190 Humphrey School  
301 - 19th Avenue South  
Minneapolis, MN 55455  
Office: 612-626-7100  
Email: [iss@umn.edu](mailto:iss@umn.edu)*

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Department of State  
2201 C Street, NW  
Washington, D.C. 20520

**Re:** Proposed Information Collection: Application for nonimmigrant visas ([DOS-2018-0002](#)) and immigrant visas ([DOS-2018-0003](#))

To Whom it May Concern:

As director of the Immigration Response Team at the University of Minnesota-Twin Cities, I am writing in response to the proposed changes to information collection for immigrant and nonimmigrant visa applications, in particular the proposal to require applicants to submit all social media usernames, email addresses and phone numbers used during the previous five years when applying for a visa.

The University of Minnesota is the state's land-grant university and one of the most prestigious public research universities in the nation. Our impact and reach is not just local or national; it is global. We have students from more than 135 nations and faculty from across the globe. Nearly 30 percent of undergraduate students receiving their degree at the University of Minnesota-Twin Cities study abroad. The U.S. has a valid interest in the safety and security of our country. At the same time, academia, higher education and innovation rely on interconnected global collaboration. The international students, researchers, staff and faculty on our campuses bring unique experiences and perspectives to our classrooms, and study abroad allows our students to truly understand what life is like and how cultures and values can be different around the world.

The proposed rules could have a significant negative impact on our university, as well as colleges and universities nationwide. The scope of the proposed rules are unprecedented, affecting the nearly 15 million individuals who apply for immigrant or non-immigrant visas each year to enter the United States. It would require collecting usernames that apply to more than 20 social media platforms, from the behemoth Facebook to regional networks like Weibo in China.

We are deeply concerned that the proposed rules will have a chilling effect on speech, and universities will be especially impacted. Universities are places where students and faculty engage in ongoing debate, questions, criticism and collaboration. This goes to the very core of our mission of education, research and public service.

Since it is unknown how an individual's social media activity could impact their visa application, if these rules are adopted, prospective students, researchers and scholars outside of the United

States will consider constraining their speech online. They will not want to make posts that could be perceived as critical on any number of issues, and this reluctance to share their thoughts may continue once they are on campus. One of the largest benefits higher education institutions gain by having international students and scholars on our campuses is that they bring new ideas and new ways to view the topics we talk about every day; this exchange of information will not be possible if our international visitors feel their thoughts and opinions are unwelcome.

American citizens, including students and faculty, will almost certainly be caught in the information collection. As already noted, 30 percent of our undergraduates study abroad, making friendships and connections with people and institutions outside of the United States. If they are connected on social media platforms with people abroad who then apply for a visa to enter the U.S., U.S. citizens' information will be collected as part of this effort. It is unknown how the government will use this information and how long it will be stored.

Faculty at U.S. academic institutions also are engaged socially and professionally with people around the world. There are many valuable research projects happening at the University of Minnesota that would not be possible without collaboration with international partners. Researchers share information across borders, and there are few areas of academic study and research not engaged globally, to some extent. Under these rules, American faculty who connect with colleagues abroad are also at risk of having their own government collect and store their information for some undisclosed future purpose.

In addition, it is very possible that, after seeing these extreme measures being applied to their citizens, countries around the world may decide to apply these requirements when reviewing visa applications for American citizens, forcing our faculty and staff to submit similar amounts of information to foreign governments.

Already American universities are seeing international students choosing to study elsewhere, viewing the United States as unwelcoming and closed to the world. The proposed rules could further erode interest for international students and scholars in studying, teaching and conducting research in the United States. These students often have offers from colleges around the world, and the best students and scholars will choose institutions in other countries.

These proposed rules are especially disappointing because, while the rules explain how the State Department would collect a massive amount of additional information, it does not explain how that information will be used to improve national security. We already have extreme vetting in the United States, and according to a recent [CATO Institute policy analysis](#): “[V]etting failures are very rare and pose a small risk to the United States.... The government needs to remain on

the lookout for potential threats, but the evidence indicates that its existing processes are already succeeding in weeding out terrorists.”

Already, consular officials have broad discretion when reviewing visa applications, and they make decisions that are essentially unreviewable by the applicants, by attorneys and by the courts. Imposing additional requests for information among applicants will further slow an already protracted and laborious process, without making clear how that information will enable consular officers to make better decisions regarding admissibility to the U.S.

It also means that innocent mistakes or an applicant’s inability to remember all of their social media activity for the past five years may have serious repercussions for individuals who have no intention to deceive or mislead. For students and scholars, this could deny them the ability to pursue academic excellence and groundbreaking research, and it will prevent institutions like the University of Minnesota from seeking the best students and academics necessary to pursue our mission of education, research and public service. It is especially disturbing that incoming freshmen, who are usually 17 or 18 years old, could be required to reveal all their social media activity since they were 12 years old.

As an immigration attorney, I am concerned the proposed rules represent another mechanism by which people’s rights will be weakened in an area where there is already very little public oversight. As a professional working in higher education, I am concerned that these rules will weaken the United States’ position as a leader in research and innovation. As a U.S. citizen, I am concerned that these rules erode basic principles of privacy, without evidence that this practice will be effective or that it is even necessary. For these reasons, I ask the State Department to reject both rules.

Sincerely,



Marissa Hill-Dongre, J.D.  
Director, Immigration Response Team  
University of Minnesota Twin Cities  
1901 University Avenue S.E., Suite 310  
Minneapolis, MN 55455  
612-624-4224  
[immigration@umn.edu](mailto:immigration@umn.edu)