

# A Balancing Act:

## Delayed Visas Impact Institutional Finances

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### Tags

Crisis-Management; Ethics, Equity, and Social Justice; International Enrollment Management; International Student and Scholar Services; Leadership and Strategy; University/Higher Education

### Setting

A small U.S. private institution is looking forward to welcoming its new students for the fall semester. It has admitted approximately 90% U.S. students and 10% international students. Weeks before the start of the semester, new U.S. federal restrictions target several countries, resulting in increased visa denials and prolonged administrative processing delays.

### Case

Arjun, an admitted undergraduate from Nepal, receives a notification that his visa application has been refused under administrative review with no clear timeline. In an email to the admissions office, he writes, "I have done everything required, but I do not know if I will be allowed to come. Should I still prepare to attend?"

Similar messages begin to arrive from other admitted students across affected regions. Some express confusion, others frustration, and many ask whether the institution can intervene. Families reach out seeking clarity, often from across time zones, hoping for reassurance that is difficult to provide.

Meanwhile, institutional operations continue to move forward. Enrollment projections have been finalized. Housing assignments are set. Financial aid has been distributed. Orientation programming is scheduled.

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Faculty anticipate full course rosters. The assumption of student arrival is embedded across multiple institutional systems.

The institution must now respond to a rapidly evolving situation with no clear precedent. What initially appears as an external policy shift quickly becomes an internal institutional challenge with human, operational, and ethical dimensions. At the center of the discussion is a critical decision: whether to hold spaces in courses for admitted students facing visa delays or to fill those spaces with waitlisted domestic applicants in order to stabilize enrollment numbers.

Admissions leadership expresses concern about yield rates and institutional targets. From their perspective, unfilled seats represent both lost revenue and missed enrollment goals. There is pressure to make timely decisions to ensure that the institution is fully enrolled.

International Student Services (ISS), however, advocates for deferral flexibility and continued engagement with affected students. From this perspective, the issue extends beyond enrollment metrics. It reflects the institution's stated commitment to global access and inclusion. During internal discussions, tensions begin to surface more clearly.

Enrollment management raises a direct question: How long can the institution realistically hold spaces without jeopardizing financial stability? Financial aid officers note that reassigning unused funds mid-cycle presents logistical challenges and may impact other students. At the same time, communications staff caution that a lack of public response may be interpreted as indifference, while a strong public stance could carry reputational or political implications.

Senior leadership is faced with competing priorities that do not easily align:

- Maintaining enrollment and revenue stability
- Upholding commitments to equity and global access
- Preserving institutional reputation
- Sustaining trust with admitted students and their families

As these discussions unfold, the human dimension remains present but unevenly centered. Arjun sends a follow-up message asking whether he should defer his admission or risk losing his place entirely. Other students inquire whether the institution will advocate on their behalf or provide alternatives.

The institution must also consider the consequences of its decisions beyond the current cycle. Filling seats with waitlisted applicants may provide immediate stability but risks signaling to international students that their place in the institution is conditional. Holding seats without certainty may strain financial resources and create operational gaps.

There is no clear timeline for resolution of visa delays. Federal policies remain opaque, and institutional influence over visa outcomes is severely limited. The absence of control complicates decision-making and increases pressure to act with incomplete information.

The institution's decision will become a reflection of institutional identity. How the institution responds will communicate whether or not international students are viewed as valued, integral members of the academic community.

In this moment, the institution must decide not only what is feasible, but what is consistent with its stated values.

### **Discussion Questions**

As you consider this case, discuss:

- In this case, what are the various alternatives the institution might consider and what are the implications of each?
- How should institutions balance financial sustainability with commitments to equity in global recruitment?
- How can offices best communicate to admitted students navigating visa uncertainty without offering false reassurance?
- How can admissions, enrollment management, and International Student Services collaborate more effectively in volatile policy environments?
- What role can institutions play in national advocacy when federal policies disrupt international student mobility?