



Critical Schools Data for Consular Officials

Where to find more information before issuing a student visa

By David North

This *Backgrounder* is for U.S. consular officials who make decisions on the issuance of visas to would-be foreign students; it shows ways to obtain information on troubled U.S. schools that may not be available through official State Department channels.

It pays particular attention to educational institutions that, while certified by the Department of Homeland Security to issue the Form I-20 for foreign student visas, have *not* been accredited by an accreditation entity recognized by the U.S. Department of Education. That such a loophole exists is both unfortunate and the result of what might be regarded as congressional negligence.

There are two kinds of these visas, the more numerous F-1 is for academic studies; there is also the M-1 for vocational studies. Often would-be illegal aliens use student visas to come to the United States and then do not, in fact, attend school.

Sometimes it is not just one student, or a dozen of them, violating the visa terms. Rather it is an organization — an “I-20 mill,” as it were — designed to make money from massive admissions of students who will receive no education at all, but simply become illegal alien workers. One such entity, Tri-Valley University in Pleasanton, Calif., according to Indian publication [The Hindu](#), caused the illegal admission of some 1,500 alien “students” and created a \$5.9 million profit for the school’s owner. Tri-Valley has since been closed in an unusual burst of regulatory activity.

Unfortunately, key information on educational institutions is not routinely furnished to Foreign Service officers making visa decisions, and minor and sometimes questionable institutions are quietly given the same right to issue the I-20 as the Stanfords and Harvards.

To remedy that fault, CIS has published this informal guidance to consular officers.

David North, a Senior Fellow at the Center for Immigration Studies, has long studied the interaction between immigration and education policies (for the Sloan Foundation, for example). He is grateful to Grace McCrocklin, a Center intern, for her research assistance.

To: Those making decisions regarding F-1 and M-1 visas

From: David North, Center for Immigration Studies, Washington, D.C.

Re: Government data on troubled and/or unaccredited educational institutions

Unfortunately many visa applicants come to you with I-20s from places that you have never heard of; meaning that you have to, despite the lack of time, evaluate the unknown institutions as well as the would-be student and his or her finances. Our understanding is that even government-generated negative information on some post-secondary educational institutions is not readily available to you. The following annotated checklist may prove helpful (A one-page summary of this material, for handy reference, is available [here](#).)

Step 1. Check the latest version of the certified list of schools provided by the Student and Exchange Visitor Program (SEVP), a wing of the Department of Homeland Security. This is a list of institutions that SEVP has decided are eligible to issue the I-20 form. Only entities on this list can issue that form.

Regrettably, however, being on the SEVP list does not guarantee that the alien will get a useful educational experience by attending a listed entity; there are no quality controls in this listing, it simply means that the place has filled out some forms in a manner acceptable to SEVP.

It is, in short, easy to get on the list, and very, very few institutions are ever barred from it.

The I-20 list can be accessed [here](#).

The list is searchable and the entire list can be downloaded and examined; it is arrayed in alphabetical order by the name of the school. It is said to be updated every Wednesday.

It provides no information other than the school's name, a mailing address, a physical address, and an indication of which visa (F or M) it uses.

Warning: The search tool often does not work; use of the full list is better.

Step 2. A more nuanced list, the Department of Education's Database of Accredited Post Secondary Institutions and Programs can be accessed [here](#).

This list is an excellent one, but it needs to be used with care. Generally, it sorts out the good and the mediocre from the really dismal. Positive marks should go to visa applications that relate to the accredited schools, all else being equal. Or, better, caution should be used before issuing visas to those who plan to attend non-accredited organizations.

On the other hand, while it does indicate some quality control on the part of the accreditation agency (they vary in their levels of scrutiny), it does *not* mean that a listed institution is either first-rate or has clean hands. For example, Micropower Career Institute in New York City, which has been raided by ICE and whose five principal officers are all out on bail while facing trial in federal court for mishandling foreign students' attendance records, *is* listed as accredited. For more on that institution, [see here](#).

Further, it is useful in some cases to read the whole listing. An institution may remain on the list, but if you read all the data on it you will find that it no longer exists. The University of Northern Virginia, for example, which has been closed by Virginia authorities *and* decertified by SEVP, remains on the accredited list, but is only noted as terminated in the small print.

Meanwhile, there is another factor. Some perfectly respectable institutions are *not* on the accredited list; this includes many K-12 school systems and many theological seminaries; accreditation is not expected in these cases. And as far as some religious organizations are concerned, they have theological arguments against the very idea that some government-affiliated entity should evaluate them.

Still others, such as the five horseshoeing schools listed by SEVP, may not be in a field where accreditation exists. (I would have questions about why one would cross an international border to study horseshoeing, a genuine skill, but that's another matter.)

Generally, then, if the would-be foreign student is seeking a non-religious college degree, or some post-secondary career training, intending to go to an accredited institution is a positive, but not a conclusive, sign. This listing, unlike SEVP's list, is arrayed by the ID number of the institution and those numbers seem to be organized by state.

Both of these lists need to be approached with total accuracy; if you have the name of the institution not exactly correct, you may miss it. The Excel search tool for SEVP's list will not produce the school you are checking if you mishandle a period, a hyphen, or an ampersand or if you leave out "the", but if you plug in the word "[horseshoeing](#)", for example, it will lead you, in this case, to the five schools. The Excel search tool for the Department of Education list is similarly demanding for total accuracy in names.

Step 3. This relates only to aliens applying to institutions offering flight training. Such entities are not routinely listed in the Department of Education's accredited list. Check the Federal Aviation Administration's [list of accredited schools](#) instead.

Step 4. The U.S. Department of Education has begun to crack down on some for-profit schools, largely supported by Pell Grants and Veterans' Administration funding, that have apparently produced minimal results for many of those attending them. Some of these schools probably will be closed and it is perfectly possible that they will issue I-20s before that happens, and of course, those I-20s should not be honored.

One of the holding companies in trouble on this count is Corinthian Colleges. It does not have any schools under that name on the SEVP list, but other properties with names such as Everest, WyoTech, and Heald, are on the list and are in danger of being sold and/or closed, according to this [report](#) in the July 8, 2014, *Washington Post*.

Should you encounter an I-20 from one of the listed career colleges, a closer look would be appropriate. Bear in mind that it is extremely unusual for the government to close a major for-profit organization like the Corinthian schools, so discretion would be in order regarding the issuance of visas for aliens to study at the remnants of such an organization.

An Internet search would help follow developments in this fast-moving field.

Step 5. For the most marginal of institutions, it's helpful to review the first page or two of the institution's website for errors, as hard as that may be to believe. This would suggest caution before issuing any visas.

We at CIS encountered two such examples, one of which was the [error-studded description](#) of a graduation ceremony at Herguan University: "Herguan University held its Graduate Ceremony Celetrate for its Establishment for 5 years."

There were numerous obvious mistakes of fact and grammar in the text. The institution, which still issues I-20s despite the pending federal trial of its owner and president, deleted that segment of its webpage after CIS published the reference.

We found a somewhat similar mangling of the language on the [webpage](#) of another SEVP-certified school, American Purlinton University.

Both entities are in California.

Step 6. There are several other educational institutions that have had serious, documented run-ins with federal agencies, but each is still nominally eligible to participate in federal activities. Seven of the nine institutions have not been mentioned earlier in this *Background*. CIS has pulled together what we call a "Think-Thrice List" of these entities.

Five on the list have tangled with the feds on F-1 visas and three others have had, or are having, disputes with the government over the use of the H-1B program for hiring alien teachers (essentially involving charges of exploiting their foreign teachers financially). The ninth has received a published failing grade from the Department of Education's Pell Grant program. In addition, the Prince George's (Md.) County Public School System, just outside Washington, D.C., has been debarred from the H-1B program, while Tri-Valley University, in Pleasanton, Calif., and the University of Northern Virginia, in Annandale, Va., have been delisted for F-1 purposes by the Department of Homeland Security in recent years.

Think-Thrice List of U.S. Schools in Conflict with Federal Agencies

School and Location	Program at Issue	Nature of Dispute and Source of More Information
Herguan University, Sunnyvale, Calif.	Student visas	Raided by ICE, I-20 power suspended and restored, owner on trial in federal court. See this CIS blog .
The Institute for Health Education, Jersey City, N.J. (IHE)	Student visas	Five officials on trial. See press release of U.S. Attorney for SDNY.
Micropower Career Institute, New York, N.Y.	Student visas	As above; it is an affiliate of IHE.
Micropower Computer Institute, Linden, N.J.	Student visas	As above, it is an affiliate of IHE.
International Institute of Health, Beauty and Technology, Lauderhill, Fla.	Student visas	Again, an affiliate of IHE.
Dayton Public Schools, Dayton, Ohio	Hiring H-1B teachers	Debarred by U.S. Department of Labor in 2007, but no longer; no additional information is available.
East Baton Rouge Parish Public Schools, La.	Hiring H-1B teachers	The schools' recruitment contractor was sued successfully in federal court. See this <i>Boston Globe</i> article .
Garland Independent School District, Texas	Hiring H-1B teachers	Federal agencies are investigating the apparent mis-use of the H-1B program. See this <i>Wall Street Journal</i> article .
New Age Training, New York, N.Y.	Pell Grants	This appears to be the only I-20 institution on the DoE Official Cohort Default Rate List .

Source: Center for Immigration Studies, Washington, D.C., July 2014.

Note: These agencies, as of July 18, 2014, were not debarred from the foreign student or H-1B programs.