

From: "GSAS Office of the Dean" <gsas-dean@columbia.edu>

Date: 1 February 2016 11:12:15 EST

To:

Subject: Message to GSAS international students

Dear International GSAS Students,

Last spring and fall, I met with a group of students who brought to my attention several concerns related to their status as international graduate students at Columbia. The issues communicated at the meeting were both compelling and significant. I write to you to let you know about how the Graduate School has taken action to address several of the issues that were identified at the time.

1. Last spring, I created the *GSAS Fellowship Fund for International Students* to provide a measure of immediate relief to international graduate students, who are not able to apply for fellowships sponsored by federal or private sources that have as a requirement that the applicant be a US citizen or permanent resident. A competitive application and evaluation process at GSAS awarded 15 supplementary [Summer Language Fellowships for International Students](#) (maximum: \$3,000) that allowed the winners to further their academic agendas and acquire during the summer months the expertise in relevant research languages that they will need to advance successfully toward their degree. This initiative intended to help a small number of students, and is only a beginning in addressing the comprehensive needs of our international students. While I have renewed the commitment to use GSAS funding to support the Summer Fellowships for International Students for the summer of 2016, we have also launched a fundraising campaign with our international alumni with the express purpose of enhancing and expanding this program. Further, we have raised awareness among institutes and departments about the fellowship opportunities that are foreclosed to non-US citizens, and have asked them to factor that reality into their funding allocations.

2. Students newly admitted to doctoral programs in the Arts and Sciences (A&S) receive the standard stipend. However, these stipends are also subject to the individual tax withholding practices established by each student's originating country. To clarify first-year student expectations for the availability of stipend amounts throughout the year, from disbursement to withholding and refund, GSAS has updated the relevant language in all letters of admission to A&S doctoral students. This new text has also been adopted by the Fu Foundation School of Engineering and Applied Science, and is being shared across Columbia so that all doctoral programs may clarify these tax practices at the time of admission.

3. We have been working as well with the International Students and Scholars Office, directed by Associate Provost David Austell, to address some of the concerns raised. First, the ISSO is negotiating with [Sprintax](#) to provide in time for this (2015) tax season a new non-resident tax preparation software for international students at Columbia. Sprintax will not only assist with the preparation of federal tax returns, but also, for the first time, with state tax returns. In addition, to

relieve some of the congestion during peak times at the International House office, the ISSO is acquiring advising space in Kent Hall to provide full ISSO advising services for international students and scholars, with hours of operation of 9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m., Monday through Friday.

4. Last, as you probably know, on January 23, 2016, the District Court granted the [Department of Homeland Security](#)'s motion to extend the stay of proposed changes in the STEM Optional Practice Training (OPT) program until May 10, 2016. Students who graduate with a science, technology, engineering, or math degree are eligible to remain in the United States for an additional 17 months on a STEM OPT extension. Should the need arise as the new deadline approaches, the Graduate School, SEAS, and ISSO will continue to argue against any changes in OPT opportunities as currently defined.

Both [Provost Austell](#) and I are committed to addressing the specific needs of international graduate students. Feel free to write to either of us with your comments and concerns.

Regards,

Carlos J. Alonso, Dean
Graduate School of Arts and Sciences