

NEW STATE DEPARTMENT RULES PUTS STUDENT EXCHANGE PROGRAM BACK ON ITS CORE CULTURAL PURPOSE



The State Department has made its most wide-ranging changes to its largest cultural exchange program following allegations made by foreign students, that in a plant in Pennsylvania, that packs Hershey's chocolates, they were made to do hazardous jobs for which they were not suited. The jobs included, lifting heavy boxes, working in night shifts and working in isolation from American workers. Moreover, the students alleged, after pay check deductions, they were paid so little they could not travel in the United States, as the exchange program had so enticingly promised. The Summer Work Travel Program, now in existence for more than half a century, brings more than 100,000 foreign university students, from across the world, every year to work for up to three months and then enjoy a holiday in US for a month. Robin Lerner, deputy assistant secretary of state for private sector exchange, said that the changes were made to enable the department to attain its mission "to bring the program back to its core cultural purposes." The program is specifically aimed at providing students from not very wealthy backgrounds an opportunity to experience the US. The student travel on a visa known as J-1 and local US sponsoring agencies arrange for their accommodation and find suitable jobs for them. The department said that the changes were made to address concerns raised by the student-workers at the Hershey's packing plant. The department said "the work component" of the program "has too often overshadowed the core cultural component", which is not what the Congress intended the program to be. The department said that the allegations were serious enough to merit strong action to prevent future occurrence. Moreover, it was felt that the basic purpose of the program was also derailed. The students were "concentrated in single locations for long hours in jobs that provided little or no opportunity to interact with U.S. citizens." They were "exposed to workplace and safety hazards" and "subjected to predatory practices through wage deductions" for housing, which goes against the basic purpose of the exchange program. The new rules, expected to take effect next week will prevent employers from asking students to do work that the department has designated as "hazardous to youth." Students will no longer be allowed to work in warehouses or packing jobs or on night shifts, neither can they be placed in jobs involving gambling, traveling fairs, massage or tattooing. Moreover, after the first of November students will not be allowed in most factory jobs, including manufacturing and food processing. They will be strictly barred from mining, oil exploration and most construction jobs. The new rules specify that sponsors must compulsorily inform students about specific cultural activities in which they can participate and to review for themselves, if the job offered to the students is appropriate. The rules specify that job placements "must provide opportunities for participants to interact regularly with U.S. citizens and experience U.S. culture during the work portion of their programs." Jobs that students under the program, have done and that are more suited to them are jobs in resorts, hotels, restaurants, as waiters, desk clerks, lifeguards and maintenance staff members. Some of the students worked in the national parks. Not all rule changes were made to favor the foreign students. Sponsors were also asked to verify and confirm that no American students were displaced by the foreign students and employers who had laid off workers in the previous four months would be debarred from hiring foreign students. National Guestworker Alliance, the group that had helped organize the students working in Hershey plant said that their complaints were justified. Saket Soni, the executive director of the Alliance said, "These rules are a clear vindication by Secretary Clinton of the students' claims." "They were right, and Hershey was wrong."