

COMING TO AMERICA

One of the most unique aspects of Divine Word College is the culturally diverse student body. This semester, 79 of the 97 full-time students enrolled at the College are international students. Each of them had to complete a long list of requirements in order to study in the United States but their patience and persistence is paying off.



*Len Uhal,
Vice President for
Admissions*

Obtaining Admission

The first step to enroll at any college is to fill out an application – the same is true for students at Divine Word College.

Men who are interested in entering the SVD formation program start by communicating with a vocation director to determine whether the religious order will be a good fit. Potential candidates who live

outside the United States typically spend one to two years in this period of discernment. They email, text and speak via telephone or video chat with a vocation director.

Then, if the candidate is living in Canada or the Caribbean, a member of the vocation team travels to their home country to meet them for an in-person interview. Once they both agree that moving forward is the best option, the young man fills out an application and submits a variety of other required documents to the Admissions Committee.

Non-SVD candidates are typically men or women who are in vowed religious life and are referred to the College by their religious superior or bishop. They submit an application to DWC along with a health report, transcripts, a letter from their superior, a copy of their passport and a letter of suitability.

Divine Word College’s Admissions Committee reviews all applications and decides whether to admit each applicant. International applicants who are approved are issued something called a Form I-20, which is a Certificate of Eligibility for Nonimmigrant Student Status. The staff in

DWC’s Admissions Department enters the new student’s name in a web-based system used by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security called SEVIS (Student and Exchange Visitor Information System). This database helps the government keep track of students while they’re studying in the USA.

Applying for a Visa

Once an individual is offered admission to Divine Word College, it’s time for them to

fill out the F-1 student visa application. They pay a SEVIS fee of \$350, which funds the United States’ Student and Exchange Visitor Program (SEVP). After that, prospective students pay a \$160 interview fee and set up a visa interview at a U.S. Consulate. The amount of time a student has to wait for this interview varies from one country to another and from day to day.

Recently, some consulates closed for a period of time because of the Covid-19 pandemic and others, like the consulate in Haiti, closed due to violence in the area. Unexpected changes like these can make the enrollment process challenging and

unpredictable for students and the admissions team at DWC. Even after a student jumps through all of the required hoops and presents all of the requested documentation, the visa is not a sure thing. DWC student and SVD candidate Long Hai Ngoc Nguyen was denied a student visa the first three times he was interviewed at the U.S. Consulate in Vietnam. Students must pay the \$160 fee for each interview. By then, Long was nervous about whether he’d ever be approved, but he scheduled a fourth interview that fortunately resulted in a



*Long Hai Ngoc
Nguyen*

Did you know?

U.S. schools need to be certified by the Student and Exchange Visitor Program (SEVP) in order to enroll nonimmigrant students on an F-1 or M-1 visa. This program is part of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security. Every two years, Divine Word College and other SEVP-certified schools have to apply for recertification to ensure that school officials are following regulations and requirements to maintain their certification.

positive outcome. He said he thinks he was denied the first three times because the interviewer was unconvinced that he had a genuine religious vocation and perhaps wondered if he would return to Vietnam after completing his studies.

“They just want to know the facts, the truth,” Long said. “What we want to do and why we want to do it.”



Carolyn Waechter

Maintaining documentation

After a student is approved for an F-1 Visa, it’s time to pack their bags and move to the United States. In order to make it to Epworth before the start of a new ESL term, Long had just one week to prepare for his trip to Epworth in January 2020.

“I am really happy to be here,” he said. Long has already completed his ESL program and is now pursuing a bachelor’s degree in philosophy. “I really love this environment and the way the people here work together. I think it’s really good for me.”

For the past 20 years, Carolyn Waechter has served as DWC’s International Student Advisor. She works closely with students to ensure that their visa paperwork is all in order and safely filed. She also makes changes in SEVIS as students progress in their education and change programs.

“Sometimes it’s challenging because students don’t always keep track of their documents,” she said.

Each semester – or term in the case of ESL students – Carolyn registers each international student in the SEVIS system. She records information like the student’s address, verification that they are studying full time and other data that helps the government verify that the student is meeting the criteria necessary to maintain their student visa.

Keeping the faith

The unpredictable state of U.S. Consulates during the Covid-19 pandemic has led to a decrease in enrollment at Divine Word College, but not for a lack of effort from the College’s Admissions team. In August 2021, 37 students were offered admission, but only 13 enrolled. Of the 24 students who did not enter, 17 were international students who were unable to get visas. Despite these difficult moments, Vice President for Admissions Len Uhal said the benefits of educating international students remain worthwhile.

“It’s an opportunity for them to get a solid education but it’s also an opportunity for Divine Word College to have more students at the school, which then makes it viable for our SVD candidates,” he said. “It allows the Divine Word Missionaries to share their charism, ministry, values and missionary vision with a group of people who will return to other countries around the world having St. Arnold’s vision, imprint and charism engrained in them and there’s value to that.”

