

## **Immigration Reform Needed to Maximize Benefits of International Education**

As the new Congress prepares to consider immigration proposals this year, one issue must take center stage: What must be done to ensure that our immigration system keeps pace with the global economy? The answer lies in enhancing the United States' ability to attract "the best and brightest" from around the world. International students and scholars are an essential part of the pipeline of skilled talent from outside our borders needed to ensure our ability to innovate. It would be folly to allow ourselves to be faced with a false choice between boosting our economy and welcoming this international talent; in reality, our ability to lead in the global economy depends on our ability to benefit from the best and brightest around the world.

But that resource is at risk. Today, prospective international students and scholars have myriad opportunities for study, employment, and life in countries across the globe. Many countries are aggressively recruiting them and are adjusting their immigration and work laws to create additional incentives for them. People are crossing borders with unprecedented freedom and flexibility. To succeed in attracting knowledge, innovation, and skills from around the world, we must, through our immigration laws and visa policy, create and support a climate that encourages the contributions of foreign talent.

When Congress next takes up immigration reform, the following issues need to be addressed if we are to ensure our global competitiveness:

- ***Persistent visa issuance problems for international students and scholars.***  
Despite significant improvements made by the State Department, problems with visa issuance persist, largely as a result of delays in the inter-agency clearance process. This weakens our competitiveness as the premier destination in the world for international students and scholars. Congress should work with the Obama Administration to increase certainty and transparency in this process. And to avoid wasting government resources with duplicative screening, a "Trusted Traveler" program should be created to allow expedited visa reviews for frequent, low-risk visitors and for international students and scholars who have left the United States temporarily and are seeking a renewal to resume their programs. This will allow government resources to be spent where they are most needed: keeping out those who would wish us harm and allowing in those who would benefit our nation.
- ***Green card backlogs, and concerns about maintaining nonimmigrant work visas.***  
Colleges and universities routinely hire highly qualified international scholars and researchers for permanent positions on campus. Often both are eager to immediately begin the green card process, but because of the complexity of the system and backlogs, they are unable to do so. As a result, they must often rely on nonimmigrant visas (like the H-1B). In the long run, the solution to this problem lies in streamlining the green card process. At the same time, there will continue to be a need for internationals who do not seek permanent residency to fill critical employment needs at universities. Nonimmigrant visa categories like the H-1B will thus continue to be necessary and should be available, while ensuring that there are laws in place to protect both American workers and nonimmigrants.
- ***The nonimmigrant intent requirement for degree-seeking international students.***  
This requirement is out-of-date in an economy in which global mobility is routine and when the United States in fact seeks international talent to help build our economy and benefits greatly from international graduates of U.S. colleges and universities who choose to stay here for a short

while or longer. Congress should consider revising this requirement to keep pace with today's reality.

Additional solutions that would facilitate attracting and retaining promising international students are to:

- Ensure that the various immigration-related databases are interoperable and integrated.
- Amend the Real ID requirements so legitimate international students and exchange visitors do not face undue restrictions in obtaining driver's licenses.
- Allow international students to enter the United States on tourist visas (B visa) to study in short term programs (less than 90 days).

NAFSA will continue to work with Congress and the administration to advance our conviction that welcoming international students and scholars is central to our ability to lead in today's world. International educational exchanges build connections of friendship and collaboration for the United States and attract the best in talent from around the world to support our economic vitality and competitiveness in the 21st century.