

Ten Years of NAFSA Advocacy: Promoting U.S. Soft Power Through Student and Scholar Exchange

AS WE CONVENE IN WASHINGTON, D.C., for NAFSA's sixtieth annual conference, we celebrate an anniversary within the anniversary. The year 1998 marked the origin of NAFSA's public policy department as we know it today. Ten years ago, we set out to be what we have now become: a major, recognized player in the public policy debate as it relates to our issues. Now it's time to take stock—to understand why we have been successful and how we have fallen short, and to begin to map a vision for the future to ensure that 10 years from now, we will be as different from today as we are today from 10 years ago.

Living on the Edge

At NAFSA, we strive to be cutting-edge, be ahead of where others are prepared to go, being aggressive, force the agenda. We recognized early on that international educators have a huge stake in immigration policy and, specifically, in the outcome of the national debate on comprehensive immigration reform. This is controversial territory, and our proactive engagement in this debate has drawn criticism within the higher education community.

NAFSA was the first association in our field to publicly propose amending section 214(b) of the Immigration and Nationality Act to delete the requirement that applicants for student visas not be intending immigrants. We were the first to propose a comprehensive visa reform agenda after the events of September 11, 2001. We were the first to propose what is now called "SEVIS II"—i.e., to advance the idea that SEVIS's problems could not be cured with temporary fixes and workarounds and that SEVIS needed to be recreated as a more functional system. We were the first within our community to propose a direct path to green cards for international students, and the first to propose two years of Optional Practical Training as a way of attracting international

students and retaining talent. We have found allies in Congress who are willing to get out in front on these issues, and we have supported them in advancing our mutual agenda.

Many of these proposals were controversial at the time that we made them, but by now people have gotten comfortable with them. Some of our colleague associations are making similar proposals, and some of the proposals are being implemented—and everyone has forgotten that they got them from us.

In the education abroad area, we were the first to propose what is now called the Senator Paul Simon Study Abroad Foundation—a lean, innovative, entrepreneurial public foundation to administer a national education abroad program. At this writing, legislation embodying this proposal is nearing passage in Congress.

In the public policy department, we love to be plagiarized—to have others adopt our proposals as their own. The more people who are singing our tune, the more steam we have behind our public policy agenda. We are not interested in fighting over turf. When others are prepared to own issues that we have initiated, we can turn our attention to the next generation of cutting-edge issues.

Some NAFSA Public Policy Successes

1998–2008

Starting Public Policy Conversations

Ten years ago, the idea that this little association could start national public policy conversations would have been startling. Yet that is what we do. Let me give you an example, based on events that you will remember all too well.

On 9/11, the public perception changed overnight from international students as an asset for our country to international students as a threat. This was due mainly to overblown congressional rhetoric and inaccurate reporting in the press, which made it seem that many of the 9/11 terrorists had entered the country on student visas. That was not the case—in fact, only one did—but the misperception persists to this day. In response to public and congressional pressure, visa restrictions and other measures were put in place that made it much more difficult for international students to get into this country, and that made the United States seem like a much-less-attractive destination for them.

We knew that we had to turn this conversation around. So we set ourselves the task of reminding the country of what it had once known but the trauma of 9/11 had made it forget: that international students are good for this country—that rather than being part of the problem of terrorism, international students are part of the solution. We published reports. We wrote op-eds. We had conversations with the press. We organized events at which foreign policy and academic experts could make the case. And gradually, over the next few years, the conversation shifted to the point where today the benefits of international students are widely acknowledged and some of the restrictions are being eased.

When we set out to start that national conversation shortly after 9/11, we were challenging the dominant national security precepts of the time. We knew that many agreed with us, but few considered it prudent to be vocal at a time of high emotion when it was easy to be accused of giving comfort to terrorism. Again, we drew criticism from the community. But we knew

that if we could help get the conversation started, sooner or later the country would end up in the right place.

In the life of this department, three task forces that we created have produced three reports that have facilitated national conversations: a task force on international education policy, which produced our white paper, *Toward an International Education Policy for the United States*; a task force on international student access, which produced *In America's Interest: Welcoming International Students*; and a task force on education abroad, which produced: *Securing America's Future: Global Education for a Global Age*. At the time that we released them, these were pioneering documents. Today, many of their recommendations are under active consideration in the policy arena.

- Wrote the community's first international education policy statement, which produced congressional resolutions and President Clinton's historic Presidential Memorandum on international education (with the Alliance for International Educational and Cultural Exchange).
- Defeated the proposed rule requiring schools to collect and remit the student-monitoring (CIPRIS) fee (with the American Council on Education).
- Secured higher education exemption from H-1B visa cap (with CUPA-HR).
- Led the community's response to post-9/11 attacks on international students, eventually shifting the public conversation back to a recognition that foreign students are part of the solution to our national security challenges.
- Led the community's post-9/11 visa reform agenda, working closely with the State Department's Bureau of Consular Affairs, which resulted in improvements in visa processing for international students and scholars.
- Lead role in the Senator Paul Simon Study Abroad Foundation Act, the most significant study abroad legislation to come before Congress since the Fulbright Act (with the National Association of State Universities and Land Grant Colleges).
- Created a new visa category for part-time commuter students from contiguous countries.
- Lead partner with INS/DHS on SEVIS implementation.
- Lead partner with the Departments of Education and State in establishing International Education Week.
- Drafted the international education-related provisions of the Secure Borders Open Doors Advisory Committee report.
- Secured inclusion of international education provisions in draft comprehensive immigration reform legislation.
- Lead role in legislation that would restore and enhance U.S. competitiveness for international students, scholars, scientists, and business travelers.

“The Power of the Small”

Ten years ago, few outside our community had ever heard of NAFSA. Yet we had big ambitions: We knew there was a unique role that only we could play. But how could a small, unknown association be heard?

We pursue a conscious strategy that I call exercising “the power of the small.” The idea is that if we can become known for credibility, reliability, and effectiveness in our domain, then we can go to larger organizations, which have more resources, show them how our issues connect with theirs, and help them set and execute an agenda that furthers our common interests.

We have done this most successfully in the immigration area. Our success several years ago in securing an increase in the H-1B visa cap and an exemption from

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the cap for higher education was an early example of NAFSA collaboration with the business community to achieve the objectives of both. Based on that experience and on the capability and credibility that we have acquired, we have now reconstituted our alliance with the business community around employment-based visa issues. We are the only higher education association that is integral to that coalition. NAFSA has also forged broad coalitions with the immigration community; we are the only higher education association that is an inside player in the immigration reform debate.

In these coalitions, we are almost always—often by far—the smallest partner at the table. It works because we know our agenda, so that we aren't co-opted by our partners, but at the same time we bring value, so our partners know that we can help them. By these means, we are able to play way above our weight, and to help nudge public policy in a direction favorable to educational exchange and indeed, to the national interest.

Coalitions of the Able

In carrying out our public policy agenda, another one of our precepts is: We act alone if we must, but in coalition if we can. When we act alone, it is often because others are not yet prepared to act. In such circumstances, we need to lay the groundwork, legitimize the issue, get the conversation to the point where others think it is safe to join in. But in most cases, we act in coalition. It is rare for us to launch a major initiative without coalition partners. Although the outcomes that I cite as our successes could not, I believe, have occurred without us, in most cases we've had partners who can say the same thing.

But we choose our partners in a very different way than the association was used to prior to 1998. Our job is to accomplish the agenda that the Board of Directors has given us. In furtherance of that, our strategy is: We work with those who can help us—those who bring value to the table.

Our traditional partners in the higher education and exchange community remain important to us. For example, for two

years we have worked on virtually a daily basis with the National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges to pass the Senator Paul Simon Study Abroad Foundation Act, something we would not be able to accomplish without that essential partnership. But our partnerships range far beyond that community, and include business associations and firms, immigration associations, policy organizations and think tanks, ethnic groups, and many others.

The NAFSA Infrastructure

The advocacy style that I've described is, I believe, unique to this association. I cannot imagine pursuing this agenda anywhere else. Certain components of this association make this possible; without any one of them, we would not be where we are today.

It starts with the Board of Directors. If the Board had not decided 10 years ago that NAFSA required a higher public policy profile—if the Board had not given us the visionary public policy agenda that we have—we would not be doing any of this. Every action of major consequence that we have taken has been discussed and approved by the Board. But the day-to-day implementation is performed by the staff. It takes both—bold vision and delegation of authority to the staff—to act. Without that, we would have neither the strategic guidance nor the flexibility, to be agile and nimble and tactically astute, that the agenda I've described requires.

The second essential component is the executive director and CEO. As anyone who follows the presidential election and the congressional debates knows, the game that is played in the policy arena is a contact sport. When you are as out-in-front as we are, you are going to take flak—and when the flak comes, it is directed at her. Any organization that does not have a CEO who can take the heat is not going to be an effective

player in the policy arena. Our CEO wants and expects us to be out front drawing fire. That is a rarity in our community—and it is one of the indispensable components of our success. She does not get enough credit.

Third, I could never have imagined 10 years ago that the public policy department would be blessed with the staff resources that we have now. The Board of Directors and the CEO have understood that to accomplish the association's public policy agenda would require an outstanding professional staff, and they have invested the necessary resources to achieve that. NAFSA doesn't have a PAC; we don't give money to politicians, or buy them dinner, or take them on trips. Besides our broad-based membership, the only resource we have is the skill and competence of the people who work here. Without that, we would not be where we are today.

Fourth, NAFSA's strategic engagement of the press is, I believe, without parallel in the community. We are the only association that I know of where the director of media relations is part of the public policy department; in our case she is a senior member of our public policy team. Our media operation is an integral part of our advocacy; it is an essential component of our ability to begin and conduct national conversations on our issues and to have our views heard by members of Congress and executive branch officials.

Finally, within our community, NAFSA has pioneered the development of a cutting-edge grassroots advocacy capability under a full-time grassroots advocacy professional. This has enabled us to marshal the advocacy resources inherent in our nearly 10,000-person membership in a way we were never able to do before. NAFSA's grassroots operation is now being cited as a model for organizations far beyond our field. Without it, we would be just another Washington association.

We have built a solid foundation for 10 more years of success. I hope all of our members, and our partners in the policy community, join me in looking forward to the journey.

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