

ISSUE BRIEF:
Immigration Reform



Goal: NAFSA supports immigration reform that allows the United States to maximize the benefits it gains from international education.

There is near universal agreement that the U.S. immigration system is broken. As our nation searches for a way to fix it, Congress must understand the pivotal role international education plays in U.S. higher education to ensure that immigration reform improves the ability of the United States to attract and retain highly educated and talented international students, professors, scientists, and researchers. Positive economic growth depends on an immigration system that maximizes the benefits from international education.

The U.S. higher education system is the envy of the world. The success of our system has been, in large part, driven by the ability of colleges and universities to attract top-notch professors, scientists, and researchers to fulfill two roles: 1) provide excellent educational opportunities for students, and 2) excel in their chosen fields, be it by developing innovative technologies, advancing scientific knowledge, or participating in cutting edge research. The ability to bring together these talented professionals, including those who come from other countries, with a diverse student body is a critical component of maintaining the level of excellence found in U.S. higher education. It is also at the core of international education.

Like other highly-skilled segments of our society, international education in U.S. higher education is at the mercy of immigration law as the ultimate control on who may enter the United States and what they can do while they are here. Too often, the broken U.S. immigration system hampers international education by making it difficult for foreign talent to contribute to our campuses and integrate into our communities. And the damage done by the broken system is not limited to our campuses. Foreign talent is also an essential part of the pipeline of skilled individuals needed to fuel innovation and scientific advancements outside of academia, the main drivers of economic growth and job creation. Too often the immigration debate presents the 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. At a time when other countries have recognized the benefit of international students, scholars, scientists, and researchers and have updated their immigration laws to attract and retain them, we can no longer afford a broken system.

International education is integral to the success of the U.S. higher education system and to our economic growth. We urge Congress to support immigration reform that expands and enhances international education by making the following reforms to immigration law:

- Address the visa and immigration challenges international students face in coming to study in the United States.
- Provide short- and long-term options for international students to work after they graduate from our colleges and universities, including a direct path to green card status for sought-after graduates.
- Increase the number of employment-based green cards available annually so that our talented faculty, researchers, and scientists are no longer trapped with long delays and unnecessary periods in short-term immigration statuses.