

C For the Betterment of All

CONGRESS IS DEBATING IMMIGRATION LEGISLATION that will shape the future of the United States in the twenty-first century and will define the face we present to the world for generations to come. International higher education has a huge stake in the outcome. As international educators, we know learning and scholarship happens best when bright, motivated people come together from around the globe to share knowledge and explore ideas.

NAFSA comes to the issue of immigration reform because we have a unique understanding of the role our immigration policies play in international higher education. As the leading organization of educators working with student and scholar mobility, we know firsthand and it is reinforced time and time again by experience how our dysfunctional immigration laws undermine the positive first impression we want to give people who come to the United States to study or teach. We see too how the restrictions we impose send a negative, isolationist message to U.S. students who should be placing a premium on learning from other cultures.

We have all heard the countless stories of how the broken immigration system stymies education and

innovation: it's the world-renowned scholar who can't return to his laboratory in the United States because of a security mix-up, or the pioneering scientist who can't present her research here because of a visa paperwork backlog, the accomplished spouse of a foreign student who can't continue his career in the United States for however many years his wife is here pursuing her PhD, or the entrepreneurial international graduate who can't pursue a business venture because there is no visa category that fits. Each of these is a lost opportunity for innovation and job creation, a subtraction from the knowledge capital that makes our institutions of higher learning world-class and our nation great.

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Americans are an altruistic people. We believe in the inherent goodness of the United States. We see ourselves as a model of democracy and open society. Yet to the rest of the world, the message our immigration policy sends is one of restriction and arbitrarily closed doors. It's confusing and risks serious misunderstanding about our values. Instead of throwing up barriers, we should be welcoming the world, and not just the best and brightest.

Let us remember; this nation has always welcomed the tired, the poor, the weary; and for generations, immigrants have been coming to America to take full advantage of the land of opportunity. Immigration makes the United States stronger.

We are very fortunate to have Alfredo Quiñones-Hinojosa, MD, as a plenary speaker at our 2013 Annual Conference & Expo in St Louis. In his recent autobiography, *Becoming Dr. Q*, Dr. "Q" tells his incredible life story of coming to the United States from Mexico as a homeless migrant farm worker at the age of 14. Through hard work in the fields and rail yards of California, he won legal status under the 1986 immigration reform law signed by President Ronald Reagan. He made his way through community college and eventually to medical school.

Today, Quiñones-Hinojosa is a top brain surgeon and researcher at Johns Hopkins University where he does 300 surgeries a year and is pursuing a cure for brain cancer, which afflicts 35,000 Americans annually. He could make a lot more money at a private institution, but he stays in academic medicine because he wants to make a difference. Asked why in an interview on CSPAN, Quiñones-Hinojosa said: "I want to be part of history. I want to help people. I want to continue to live the American dream. I am thankful for the things that this country has given me."

What the United States gave a younger Quiñones-Hinojosa, who attended his first college classes wearing steel-toed boots and work jeans that smelled like industrial sulfur, was access to an education. That's why Congress should follow the lead of Texas and now Maryland by passing the DREAM Act giving aspiring Americans cost-effective

access to college as part of broad immigration reform. And it's why we should provide more green cards for graduates, not just in the STEM fields, but also in the arts and humanities.

NAFSA's leadership has long recognized that we need to have a seat at the table when decisions are made on immigration reform. It would be tempting to advocate for a piecemeal approach to creating a modernized immigration process. But what we and other groups have learned over the last several years is that if we don't work together, nothing will get done. The political reality—and we believe the right thing to do—demands that we work in common cause with other groups for an immigration policy that functions effectively for all.

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It appears we now have a historic opportunity to overhaul our outdated immigration laws for the first time in almost 30 years. The 2012 election created new political momentum in Washington. President Barack Obama has made immigration reform a top legislative priority for his second term, and there is a strong bipartisan effort underway in Congress to seize this opportunity.

"Our economy is stronger when we harness the talents and ingenuity of striving, hopeful immigrants. And right now, leaders from the business, labor, law enforcement, and faith communities all agree that the time has come to pass comprehensive immigration reform," President Obama said in his February 12, 2013, State of the Union address to Congress.

Key Republicans in Congress have returned to a constructive dialogue with a new willingness to find legislative answers. In the Senate, a "Gang of Eight" from both parties has been working on legislation. This bipartisanship is essential. Any overhaul of the nation's immigration laws must pass the Republican-controlled House if it is to become law.

Notably, Republican Senators John McCain and Jeff Flake of Arizona, Lindsey Graham of South Carolina, and Marco Rubio of Florida are showing real leadership by stepping forward to work with Democrat colleagues Senators Dick Durbin of Illinois, Robert Menendez of New Jersey, Chuck Schumer of New York, and Michael Bennet of Colorado.

They are working in the best tradition of the late Senator Ted Kennedy, a master orator and liberal legislator who time and again found ways to work across the aisle with his Republican colleagues in the best interest of the nation. Immigration reform demands that kind of leadership. It also requires political will and this is where we come in.

We need to do everything we can, as an association of educators with a real interest in the outcome of the legislation, to encourage our national leaders to fix the whole system now. Higher education is one of the most important investments we make as a society. It is critically important to the economic future and well-being of our nation. We must build a new immigration system that recognizes the value of both international students and the new American immigrants who are contributing to our colleges and universities. Their future is our future. **IE**

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