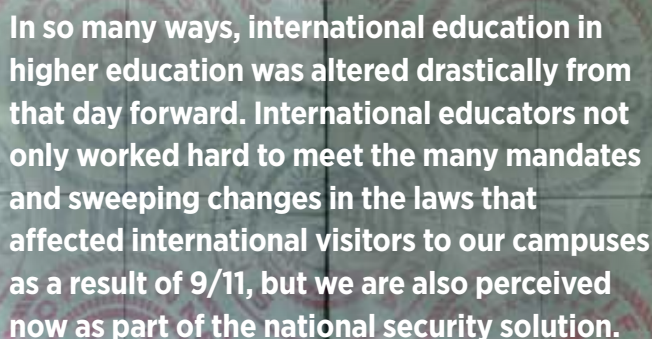


## What a Difference a Decade Makes

**WILL NEVER FORGET** where I was standing and what my immediate reaction was a decade ago the moment I heard about the grave attacks in New York City on September 11, 2001. As the day progressed and the news continued to unfold tragedies in other parts of the country, I recall having to continue managing the daily duties of life, despite the shock and disbelief that haunted my thoughts and heart. I imagine others who are old enough to remember the tragedies of a decade ago, can identify in their own way. The world we all knew personally, and as international educators in particular, was altered drastically.



**In so many ways, international education in higher education was altered drastically from that day forward. International educators not only worked hard to meet the many mandates and sweeping changes in the laws that affected international visitors to our campuses as a result of 9/11, but we are also perceived now as part of the national security solution.**

I noted above those of us “who are old enough to remember” as context to the fact that most of our current undergraduates were between seven and twelve years old a decade ago. Although they may have memory of the tragic 9/11 events, they have grown up in a world of tight airport screenings and other highly visible security measures. The “new normal,” as a result of the changes triggered by the consequences of 9/11 is the only life our younger students have ever known.

As I look back on immigration advising at my institution in the last few years, I recall often clarifying “that was before 9/11” or “since 9/11” when talking to many university internationals, faculty, and administrators about visa delays and the governmental requirements that bogged down the regular academic and research business. In so many ways, international

education in higher education was altered drastically from that day forward. International educators not only worked hard to meet the many mandates and sweeping changes in the laws that affected international visitors to our campuses as a result of 9/11, but we are also perceived now as part of the national security solution. The costs to U.S. colleges and universities have been great, financially and academically, but I think generally, most international educators believe our pursuit to create balanced laws is on the right path.

International educators and other leaders in higher education now have the opportunity to reassess the positive impact of how international students and scholars, who are coming to the United States to study and conduct research, benefit our campuses and communities. Soon after 9/11, we lost some market-share of the students around the world studying abroad. Through strategic efforts, we have spent years trying to restore our global attractiveness through legislative avenues, advocacy, recruitment, advertising, creating flexible educational models, joining efforts with commerce, and other means. Recently, I heard that life rarely restores to us that which we have lost and previously taken for granted. However, the United States has been given a fresh start, and we must be diligent not to return to the days when international education was just a limited cultural experience that was taken for granted because it brought in higher tuition, serving mainly as financial income to our schools.

We have been given a new opportunity to reflect on the importance of global competitiveness for a holistic college experience. A viable resource is at our front door—having our U.S. students in the classrooms with overseas students to partake in the rich transnational

perspectives that intercultural opportunities bring. Additionally, we can make the most of research collaboration potential through international education exchange between the United States and countries beyond our borders. We do not want to ever again risk losing the possibility of building international bridges through shared academic experiences as was threatened a decade ago.

## How Did We Get to Where We Are?

Soon after 9/11, international students and scholars on U.S. college campuses became the focus of the government's response to squelching potential risks to U.S. national security. In the first three to four years, visa delays that often took many months and became rampant—not to mention the high level of visa denials being issued. Invitations to our students from certain countries to meet with the FBI became commonplace. New regulations that deterred international students' options for travel mounted. International students and scholars who were already in the United States resisted visiting their home country for a short vacation, as they feared they would be denied a reentry visa to complete their studies. Oftentimes project research was halted because key researchers' visa applications were denied. International visitors were, at times, stay for days and weeks in immigration detention centers for questioning. Unfortunately, international administrators had to become proficient in advising family members and friends of the detainees, on how they might locate and attempt to communicate with their loved ones.

Worrisome news of prejudice and negative treatment for many international visitors traveled quickly. The United States no longer could take for granted its special place as the top destination for international education exchange, as potential students became wary of the scrutiny and difficult visa process involved in U.S. study abroad. Other nations around the globe stepped up to attract the talented students and scholars to their colleges and universities. The most well-known alternate countries for study became Canada, Britain, Australia, and Germany. However, many other countries in

Asia, Europe, and South America also began to develop and disseminate detailed education policies with funding, aimed primarily to attract foreign students to their schools.

Top-level U.S. higher education officials spoke out from our campuses about: (1) the interruption of classes when international faculty were unable to return to the United States, (2) the inability of foreign scholars to travel to professional meetings outside the United States because of the high risk of not being able to reenter, (3) students not being able to begin their studies, and (4) research that had come to a standstill. NAFSA: Association of International Educators developed strategic avenues for educating legislators and key decisionmakers about how colleges and universities' academic pursuits in the United States were being adversely affected as a result of governmental responses. Scores of academic professional organizations partnered with NAFSA to join their advocacy efforts in communicating the harsh unintended consequences that

the United States was facing as a result of the visa barriers. Higher education was unduly singled out as a key source of national security vulnerability, when in reality only a very small percentage of all nonimmigrant visa visitors in the United States were, and are, hosted by colleges and universities. The great majority come on visitor and business visas. And yet, it was U.S. institutions of higher education that spent millions of dollars to build complex tracking and reporting infrastructures within a few short months.

## Are International Educators Better Off Now, a Decade Later?

Although the last 10 years have been stressful there has been some good that has come out of this situation. On the positive side, many international educators have become keenly aware of the importance of an organized advocacy strategy. Many learned how to speak effectively about valuable aspects of international education exchange to nation-

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al and state lawmakers in key positions of influence and decisionmaking. College and university top administrators took notice of their often secluded international offices on their campuses. Many international offices were supported by higher administration with additional resources to meet the short deadlines and expanded responsibilities that the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) mandated for compliance of tracking and reporting international students and scholars on their campuses through the Student and Exchange Visitor Information System (SEVIS).

There is now a general impression that higher education is part of the national security solution because we have a real-time government reporting mechanism for our international visitors on campus. We have become acutely aware of how competitive

the global market is for academic talent, therefore, schools now actively strategize on how to attract and retain the top students and scholars from around the world. Further, institutions of higher education have taken serious notice that our graduates will not be adequately prepared for the current work environment if student academic tenure does not provide international exposure and competency. We have learned how to educate the nation that international students and scholars are an important resource to our communities culturally, educationally, academically, and diplomatically, not to mention financially (bringing in more than \$18 billion to our economy in the 2009–2010 academic year, according to NAFSA estimates).<sup>1</sup>

However, on the other side of the ledger, in the last decade the United States lost momentum for the top global higher education

market. We have regained some ground in the last few years; however, international student and scholar increases to the United States have not returned to the growth rate that it enjoyed 10 years ago. Although the United States no longer takes for granted the importance of international education exchange, it is now well known that we are not the only excellent country of choice for students from around the world. New worldwide education options and models, as well as the formations of strong educational coalitions between countries, have further increased global competition.

The United States is still lacking in necessary foreign language and culture skills. After 9/11 U.S. government agencies struggled to find adequate personnel who could help us work through our problems and negotiations due to lack of the key linguistic and cultural understanding. The United States find itself still dependent upon others' translations in conversations and interpretation of bridging cultural obstacles, as opposed to our own citizens being the bicultural, bilingual leaders. We teach our ways of thinking and language to international students and scholars, but are we still lagging in ensuring U.S. students get the same training, which would help to give us an edge on transnational communication, understanding, and diplomacy.

Further, the regulatory increases through the last decade have saddled students, scholars, and institutions with complex new layers. Frequently, national, state, and local government agencies duplicate efforts in regulating nonimmigrant students and scholars causing confusion and frustration for our international visitors. For example, a nonimmigrant applicant for a state benefit such as a driver's license must generally show proof of valid immigration status to secure the benefit. One's valid immigration status is reflected on the non-immigrant's I-94 card. However, some states require the submission of other documents to prove valid immigration status, which in fact do not reflect immigration status at all. Such measures restrict international students and scholars' ability to drive or conduct regular business. Many international students and scholars have expressed

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weariness of navigating the legal complexities, despite their best efforts to comply, and the schools' attempts to prepare them. There is no coordinated effort or plan to bring into alignment the mandates of the many government agencies on our international academic and research visitors. In addition, in several countries U.S. students studying abroad have been given additional visa obligations, which mirror the challenging visa requirements that visitors to the United States face.

Higher education is a very competitive sector, both domestically and internationally. With other factors challenging us, such as the economic downturn of recent years, academic paradigm shifts such as the Bologna Process, and other countries' international education policies, the United States needs to focus on a strategically mapped, nationally articulated education plan that supports international exchange in a meaningful way. We do not want to miss this window of awareness that the past decade has given us.

As we go through this anniversary year, and keep in mind those who acted so bravely during the horrific assaults of 9/11, we need to remember this landmark decade has become a turning point for international education—nationally and personally. We need to continue to empower international educators and other citizens in an attempt to sustain the positive communication flows we sought to establish with government agencies and with Congress through strategic advocacy efforts. We should never again take for granted the importance of international education exchange for U.S. higher education. In this way, we can maximize the benefits that international friendships bring, as well as honor the efforts of so many colleagues in U.S. higher education who helped us seek the best outcome and future, in light of the tragic events of this decade. **IE**

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**(ENDNOTE)**

<sup>1</sup> NAESA: Association of International Educators, retrieved on July 15, 2011 from [www.nafsa.org/publicpolicy/default.aspx?id=23158](http://www.nafsa.org/publicpolicy/default.aspx?id=23158).


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