

A WHITE HOUSE-LED INTERNATIONAL EDUCATION STRATEGY TO RECRUIT GLOBAL TALENT AND STRENGTHEN U.S. COMPETITIVENESS

We find ourselves at a critical juncture for international education. New international student enrollment at U.S. colleges and universities has been in decline, more than 11 percent from Fall 2016 through Fall 2019, while U.S. student participation in credit-bearing study abroad during the 2018-2019 academic year grew only 1.6 percent. The COVID-19 pandemic, which began to impact U.S. higher education institutions starting in March 2020, has exacerbated these trends, sharply reducing new international student enrollment by 46 percent in fall 2020 and grounding U.S. study abroad programming in advance of the 2020-2021 academic year. To restore international education will require a dedicated effort through administrative action.

Ask: NAFSA urges the White House to lead the development of a detailed international education strategy. Building off the [Joint Statement of Principles](#) issued by the U.S. Departments of State and Education, and working in close partnership with key international education stakeholders, the strategy should set targets, support policies, and fund programs to:

- increase the number and diversity of international students at U.S. higher education institutions;
- increase the number and diversity of American students participating in study abroad programs; and
- encourage global higher education institutional partnerships that will facilitate internationalized curricula, foreign language instruction, collaborative research, and faculty mobility.

A White House-led international education strategy that establishes and pursues international recruitment and exchange goals will ensure the United States attracts and retains the best and brightest international students and scholars and that U.S. students are equipped with the skills, knowledge, and experiences that will position them for future success in the global economy. The combined effect will be of vital importance to American foreign policy, diplomacy, innovation, national security, economic growth, and global competitiveness.

On July 26, 2021, the U.S. Departments of State and Education, with support from the Departments of Commerce and Homeland Security, issued a [Joint Statement of Principles](#) in support of international education. NAFSA commends the administration for this important statement, committing the government to a forward-thinking approach to international education. While the joint statement is welcome, a more detailed international education strategy is needed in order to ensure we are able to achieve the many principles outlined.

“Many of our most pressing challenges are inherently global in scope and impact and can only be addressed by nations and individuals working together.”
[Joint Statement of Principles in Support of International Education](#)

NAFSA has long advocated for establishing a coordinated national strategy on international education, one that fosters supportive federal policies and brings to bear critical resources needed for success. In our view, as the nation looks to recover following the devastating global impacts of COVID-19, an international education strategy is more important than ever.

Detailed actions the administration should take include the following:

1) Establish a White House Coordinating Council on International Education

As illustrated by the Joint Statement of Principles, international education policy falls under the jurisdiction of more than one federal agency. A coordinating entity within the White House would ensure collaboration and compromise within and across key federal agencies, resulting in more welcoming visa and immigration policies for international students and scholars, as well as more robust programs and resources to help grow and diversify U.S. study abroad participation and enhance U.S. campus internationalization.

Chaired by a senior White House official and charged with developing a national strategy on international education, a coordinating council would provide strong leadership in helping to restore the United States' attractiveness as a destination for international students and scholars, as well as to increase the global competency of U.S. students. The national strategy must include goals for international student recruitment, increasing the diversity of sending countries, study abroad participation, and increased participation in study abroad from a more diverse group of American students.

“...one of the best ways to showcase the United States’ ingenuity and know-how is to again make its universities the most attractive in the world to foreign talent.” Samantha Power, “The Can-Do Power”, Foreign Affairs, November 19, 2020

The council should be composed of representatives from key federal agencies such as the Departments of State, Education, Commerce, Homeland Security, Energy, and Labor, as well as the FBI, the Social Security Administration, and other agencies as the President may designate. A first action by the council could be to convene a White House summit of college and university presidents, other academic leaders, international education professionals, and NGO and business leaders to map out the specifics of the strategy.

2) Proactively Recruit International Talent

The United States needs to shift into a proactive posture demonstrating that the nation is serious about attracting talented individuals to study or conduct research at our institutions of higher education.

The United States educates nearly one million students from around the world. However, because international student enrollment is largely being driven by a handful of countries (more than 50 percent from just three countries: China, India, and South Korea) and by students and families with the means to pay the comparatively high cost of a U.S. education, particularly at the undergraduate level, we are increasingly educating a less diverse pool of international students. By allowing external factors to determine who studies in the United States, we fail to educate students from a wide variety of cultures, backgrounds, and perspectives, putting our own nation at risk of losing important opportunities to foster an understanding of and connection with parts of the world critical for diplomacy, development, research, commerce, global health, and security.

A successful recruitment strategy requires:

- Active collaboration between government, higher education institutions, and international exchange organizations
- Identifying barriers and solutions to attracting and retaining international student and scholar talent, including:
 - Specific changes to U.S. visa and immigration policies, such as expanding dual intent for international student visa applicants and creating a path to a green card for international student graduates
 - Additional programs and resources, such as increased funding for the State Department’s EducationUSA advising centers
 - Corrective measures to resolve policy differences between and within key federal agencies, such as database interoperability between the Department of Homeland Security’s Immigration and Customs Enforcement Student and Exchange Visitor Program and U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services
- Setting targets for international student enrollment, with an emphasis on increasing diversity of source countries and of students’ socioeconomic background.
- Engaging a broader number of U.S. higher education institutions in enrolling international students and hosting international scholars. In 2020, according to U.S. Department of Homeland Security’s Student and Exchange Visitor Program (SEVP), 68 percent of SEVP-certified schools hosted 50 or fewer international students, while less than one percent of schools hosted more than 5,000 international students.

Competitor countries have already undertaken similar efforts, and they are yielding the benefits of their investments. Canada, for example has implemented expedited visa processing for certain qualifying students and post-study work visas that are valid for up to three years. As a result of these measures, which make it easier for international students to immigrate, Canada’s international student enrollment increased by more than 80 percent in the five years before the pandemic, making the country one of the world’s fastest-growing study destinations during that period.

The UK government reinstated a two-year post-study work visa for graduates, a change that went into effect at the start of the 2020–21 academic year, and in January 2020, they announced a new, fast-track visa program to attract the world’s top scientists, researchers, and mathematicians. The approach has yielded encouraging results: despite the COVID pandemic, international enrollment at UK universities increased by 12 percent in 2020, and the total number of international students in the country exceeded 500,000 for the first time.

3) Grow and Diversify U.S. Study Abroad Participation

Any approach to enhancing access to international education must also include a strategy to help grow and diversify U.S. college student participation in study abroad. Study abroad is an essential component of a quality U.S. higher education. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, during the 2018-2019 academic year, just over 347,000 U.S. college students studied abroad for credit. This equates to less than two percent of U.S. students enrolled in U.S. higher education. With less than 10 percent ultimately graduating with a study abroad experience on their transcript, that means 90 percent of graduates are entering the workforce without the global skills, knowledge, and experiences that would position them for success in the global economy.

The COVID-19 pandemic dramatically impacted U.S. higher education and international education particularly: study abroad participation declined 53 percent during the 2019-2020 academic year, was down 99 percent in summer 2020, and the academic year 2020-2021 was essentially turned into “the year without study abroad.” Without additional financial and policy support, it could take years for study abroad to fully recover, leaving U.S. students with fewer international education opportunities, U.S. higher education institutions with fewer international collaborations, and our country less prepared to tackle global challenges or compete in the global marketplace.

A coordinated strategy would help revive and restore study abroad programming at U.S. colleges and universities and should increase funding for established federal programs like Fulbright and Gilman and for newer programming such as the Increasing and Diversifying Education Abroad for U.S. Students program and for virtual exchange programs like the Stevens Initiative. However, to grow and diversify U.S. study abroad participation in a meaningful way, the council should endorse passage of the Senator Paul Simon Study Abroad Program Act, which would set a national goal of sending one million U.S. college students on study abroad programs annually for credit and improve diversity in study abroad participation and destinations. For example, during the 2018-19 academic year, 70 percent of U.S. students who studied abroad were white and 58 percent studied in Europe.

4) Foster U.S. Campus Internationalization

As the July 26 statement notes at the outset, “All Americans need to be equipped with global and cultural competencies to navigate the ever-changing landscapes of education, international business, scientific discovery and innovation...” To fulfill this goal, international education must become an integral component of U.S. postsecondary education. The nation must internationalize U.S. campuses using innovative means; certainly, the pandemic has demonstrated the value of creativity when the standard tools of global academic mobility are unavailable or challenged.

An international education strategy must set targets, support policies, and fund programs to encourage global higher education partnerships that will facilitate internationalized curricula, foreign language instruction, collaborative research, and faculty mobility. This includes increased funding for the Department of Education’s Title VI and Fulbright Hays programs, which is the most comprehensive federal program in support of international education and provide infrastructure critical to maintaining international and foreign language learning.