

THE UNITED STATES NEEDS A COORDINATED NATIONAL STRATEGY FOR INTERNATIONAL EDUCATION

International education is essential to U.S. success in today’s global economy and geopolitical climate. The United States must increase its efforts to attract and retain the world’s best and brightest and ensure domestic students have access to opportunities that keep them competitive and equipped to collaborate across borders. The effect will be of vital importance to American foreign policy, diplomacy, innovation, national security, economic growth, and global competitiveness.

Despite an unrivaled higher education system, the U.S. is losing its market share of global talent (down 13% since 2000) while other countries are gaining ground through their proactive policies. U.S. efforts to attract and retain international students are stymied by an outdated immigration system and onerous restrictions, compounded by a lack of coordination among relevant federal agencies. While new international student enrollment in the U.S. shot up 80 percent following the lifting of COVID-19 related travel restrictions, annual totals still lag below their pre-pandemic peak.

The U.S. cannot afford to fall behind in the global competition for talent. Job vacancies in STEM, health, and business management fields have nearly tripled over the past decade. Consider a 2022 study by the National Foundation for American Policy that found that one quarter of all U.S. unicorns—start-ups valued at \$1 billion or more—were founded by individuals who first came to the U.S. as international students. Alternatively, international students who study in the U.S. and then return home to contribute, become America’s best ambassadors and allies abroad.

U.S. international engagement also depends on American students having the knowledge, skills, intercultural competencies, and experiences—often gleaned from study, research and work abroad as well as foreign language instruction—necessary to compete and collaborate in a global economy. Even before the pandemic, only 10 percent of U.S. students studied abroad prior to graduation and only 7.5 percent enrolled in foreign language courses. Students’ access to the career-enhancing and intercultural benefits of study abroad remains limited by the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic: in a survey only 65 percent U.S. higher education institutions reported offering in-person study abroad programming for Fall 2022.

A coordinated federal commitment to international education will ensure the United States has the talent pool necessary to innovate and engage with the world.

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, promote effective administrative structures, 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.

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. As the nation confronts critical global challenges, such as pandemics, climate change, and countries in crisis, 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, as well as other agencies. 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 Diverse International Talent

The United States needs to shift into a proactive posture to show that the nation is committed to attracting talented individuals to study, conduct research, and teach at our institutions of higher education.

The United States educates nearly one million students from around the world. Yet international student enrollment is largely driven by a handful of countries (more than 50 percent come 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. As a result, we are increasingly educating a less diverse pool of international students. By allowing external factors to determine who ultimately studies in the United States, we fail to educate students from a wide variety of cultures, backgrounds, and perspectives. This puts 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, international exchange organizations, and the business sector.
- 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; and
 - 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 2022, according to U.S. Department of Homeland Security's Student and Exchange Visitor Program (SEVP), 65 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.

Other 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 permits 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 established an international education strategy in 2019 with a goal of enrolling 600,000 international students by 2030. It also reinstated a two-year post-study work visa for graduates, at the start of the 2020–21 academic year, and announced a new, fast-track visa program to attract the world's top scientists, researchers, and mathematicians. The approach has yielded eye-popping results: despite the effects of Brexit and the COVID pandemic, UK colleges and universities hit their international student enrollment target nearly 10 years early, enrolling over 600,000 international students in the 2020/2021 academic year. Growth continued apace in the 2021/2022 academic year, reaching nearly 680,000 international students. Additionally, countries that historically sent students abroad have now become so-called “receiving countries” with their own strategies for recruiting international students because they see the benefits to global engagement and addressing social and economic interests.

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

Any approach to enhancing access to international education must 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, and study abroad participation should mirror the demographics of the undergraduate population in terms of gender, ethnicity, students with disabilities, income level, and field of study. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, 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. study abroad participation, which declined by 53 percent during the 2019-2020 academic year, and a further 91 percent during the 2020-2021 academic year, essentially turning it into “the year without study abroad.” Post-pandemic, participation numbers are growing, but remain below peak levels. 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 national strategy would help restore study abroad programming at U.S. colleges and universities. It should seek to increase funding for established federal programs like Fulbright and Gilman and for newer programs such as the Increasing and Diversifying Education Abroad for U.S. Students (IDEAS) 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 administration should endorse passage of the Senator Paul Simon Study Abroad Program Act, which seeks to build off the success of the IDEAS program and 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 2020-21 academic year, 68 percent of U.S. students who studied abroad were white and 66 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; the pandemic has certainly demonstrated the value of creativity when the standard tools of global academic mobility are unavailable or challenged.

A government-led 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 student and faculty mobility at U.S. colleges and universities. 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 provides infrastructure critical to maintaining international and foreign language learning. This also includes supporting policies and resources that ensure our unrivaled higher education institutions continue to attract and prepare those who will create the innovations of today and tomorrow.