

RESTORE U.S. LEADERSHIP IN ATTRACTING AND RETAINING INTERNATIONAL STUDENT AND SCHOLAR TALENT

Attracting the best and the brightest from around the world contributes immeasurably to U.S. preeminence in academic research and scientific innovation. However, trends indicate our country is losing this valuable resource. New international student enrollments at U.S. colleges and universities declined more than 11 percent since fall 2016 due to increased competition from other countries coupled with U.S. policies that created a sustained belief that international students are not welcome here.¹ The COVID-19 pandemic has greatly accelerated these declines. A fall 2020 enrollment snapshot survey published in November revealed **new international student enrollment fell 43 percent.**²

The drop in enrollments has real consequences. NAFSA's economic analysis of the 2019-2020 academic year showed international students contributed \$38.7 billion to the U.S. economy and supported nearly 416,000 jobs. While the dollar amount is significant, it is \$1.8 billion lower than the previous year and the first time that the dollar amount has declined in the more than 20 years that NAFSA has conducted this analysis. The number of international scholars conducting research in the United States also declined significantly during the 2019-2020 academic year, down 9.6 percent, as the pandemic disrupted academic mobility in the spring of 2020.³

The pandemic, coupled with numerous federal policy changes adopted by the prior administration, has caused severe damage to this country's reputation as the premier destination for international students and scholars. Policies and laws must be changed to restore U.S. leadership.

Congress must restore U.S. leadership in attracting and retaining international student and scholar talent in the following ways:

- **Direct U.S. Department of State to institute transparent, easy-to-understand processes and timely processing for visa issuance and renewals by:**
 - Waiving the in-person interview requirement for visa applicants;
 - Maintaining priority appointments for international student (F and M) and exchange visitor (J) visa applicants; and
 - Ensuring timely visa application adjudication for professors, researchers, scientists, and others applying outside of the F, M, and J visa categories but who are essential to U.S. campuses.

¹ <https://www.nafsa.org/sites/default/files/media/document/nafsa-losing-talent.pdf>

² <https://www.iie.org/Research-and-Insights/Publications/Fall-2020-International-Student-Enrollment-Snapshot>

³ <https://opendoorsdata.org/data/international-scholars/>

- **Update immigration law to attract international student talent.** As the 117th Congress engages in renewed immigration reform discussions, Congress should:
 - **Expand Dual Intent to F-1 Students.** Under current immigration law, applicants for F-1 student visas must demonstrate to the satisfaction of the reviewing U.S. consular officer that they intend to return home after their course of study—i.e., that they do not intend to immigrate to the United States. Yet educated students are exactly the kinds of immigrants we should encourage to stay in the United States. We should not force F-1 students, before they even start their studies, to say that they have no intention of staying and contributing to the United States after they graduate.
 - **Create a Direct Path to Green Card for International Graduates of U.S. Colleges and Universities.** There is broad, bipartisan support for creating a clear path to green card status for certain international students graduating from U.S. colleges and universities. The U.S. Citizenship Act of 2021 (H.R. 1177/S. 348) includes a path to green card status limited only to international STEM Ph.D. graduates of U.S. institutions of higher education. To meet our national needs, however, an achievable path should be extended to include all advanced degree graduates (master’s level and higher) in all fields.