Sustain International Student Enrollment at U.S. Colleges and Universities Impacted by COVID-19

Ask: NAFSA urges Congress to support policy changes in the next stimulus package that sustain international student enrollment at U.S. colleges and universities impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic.

International student enrollment is critical to U.S. higher education institutions’ financial well-being. Many international students pay full tuition, providing a key revenue stream ($38.7 billion and nearly 416,000 jobs during the 2019-2020 academic year) that supports operating expenses, including financial aid programs for many U.S. students. New international student enrollment was in decline before the coronavirus pandemic, and it has certainly been exacerbated. A recent snapshot survey on Fall 2020 enrollment indicates overall international student enrollment declined by 16%, and new enrollment fell by 43%. International student enrollment is also critical to the vibrancy of local economies and jobs. If U.S. higher education institutions are forced to downsize or close due to enrollment declines, there will be a major job-loss multiplier effect as many of these institutions serve as key economic engines and job-creators in their communities.

Beyond the economic impact, international student enrollment is a vital component of U.S. higher education. Attracting the best and the brightest from throughout the world contributes immeasurably to the country’s preeminence in academic research and scientific innovation. The post COVID-19 environment will be a critical turning point for international education and the global engagement of U.S. colleges and universities. Immigration, visa, and Student and Exchange Visitor Information System (SEVIS) policies need to be well-crafted and implemented in order to attract international students. Meanwhile, other countries are actively competing for – and winning – talented international students with policies that reflect the value these students bring not only to colleges and universities, but to job creation, research, and innovation.

Congress must ensure that international students and scholars are able to return to U.S. institutions of higher education when it is safe to do so and help mitigate continued decline in international student enrollment in the following ways:

- Direct the U.S. Department of State’s (DOS) Bureau of Consular Affairs to institute transparent, easy-to-understand processes and timely processing for visa renewals and issuance by:
  - Waiving the in-person interview requirement for visa applicants to the fullest extent allowable by law;
  - Maintaining priority appointments for international student and exchange visitor visa applicants; and
  - Ensuring timely visa issuance and renewal for professors, researchers, scientists, and others who do not fall into the category of F and M students or J exchange visitors but are needed on U.S. campuses.

- Direct the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) to maintain the “duration of status” (D/S) policy for international students (F status) and exchange visitors (J
status) as international students and exchange visitors are already tracked by DHS and monitored by institutions of higher education or research organizations.

- Direct DHS to protect the immigration status and SEVIS status of any international student otherwise admissible or admitted in F-1 or M-1 status who takes some or all classes via online or electronic means during the 2020-2021 academic year as a personal, institutional, or logistical response to COVID-19.

- Direct DHS, DOS, and other agencies and their component bureaus and offices to coordinate all aspects of the immigration benefits and programs they manage in order to reduce confusion and to provide confidence to international students and scholars that one agency’s policy will align with other agencies’ policies.

The requested policy changes detailed above will save jobs and ensure that the world’s best and the brightest continue to contribute to America’s classrooms and competitiveness.

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November 2020