NAFSA Immigration Update:
Maneuvering in the Minefield of Comprehensive Immigration Reform

There is no way to predict whether Congress will act this year to address the broken U.S. immigration system, even as public consternation at the inaction continues to mount. Where the procedural path for a bill is clear, the political path for immigration reform looks more like a minefield.

On the Path: The President and Congress
Even though immigration is often thought as a partisan issue, the reality is that no one party can ensure passage of an immigration reform bill. The cross-party nature of the issue requires bipartisan coordination and compromise, buzz words that are often bandied about at election time, but not activities that the U.S. Congress is known to regularly engage in successfully. This is important to understand when thinking about recent activity on Capitol Hill.

The President has expressed on numerous occasions his support for comprehensive immigration reform. On May 25th, the President joined the Senate Republicans for lunch to discuss a number of issues, including how to move immigration reform forward this year. When the President asked for a few Republicans to step forward and work with Democrats to write a comprehensive immigration bill that would have some possibility of success, unfortunately no one stepped forward.

In statements prior to this, Senate Republicans had preconditioned their participation in a comprehensive immigration reform debate on the White House leading the charge for reform. The White House is engaging, but many activists and pundits believe that the effort exerted has not yet matched the magnitude required for such a weighty issue.

In the House, Democratic leaders have made a decision not to move an immigration reform bill until the Senate does. The House leadership has taken the position: Why force a difficult vote on a toxic issue if there is no hope that the bill will become law? This is the lesson learned from the failure of the last immigration reform debate, when the House navigated through the immigration minefield and the Senate refused to enter it. House leaders do not want to go down that path again.

Navigating the Minefield
In this near stalemate on comprehensive reform, it is logical to consider piecemeal reform. This is not yet an option. The fear is that if the more palatable reforms move forward there will be little energy or leverage left to make the hard decisions on the more contentious issues. And choosing which parts of immigration reform to advance pits advocates and Members of Congress against each other.

There are immigration issues that have captured broad attention and support for reform. Effectively managing border security is always at the top of the priority list. Tensions on the
southern border have been high, especially with the passage of the Arizona law making it illegal to be an undocumented immigrant in the state. However, there is also much agreement on the need to attract and retain talented immigrants, with repeated proposals including a direct path to green card for international students who graduate from U.S. higher education institutions with advanced degrees in high demand fields of study. Additionally, eliminating long delays faced by highly skilled immigrants, such as those who are researchers, scholars, and professors on U.S. campuses, is a provision that is widely supported as a competitive and job creation measure.

Packaging a smaller immigration fix would be challenging, but two issues that bubble to the top of these discussions include the DREAM Act and a bill known as Ag Jobs. Both of these bills have a large base of support. The DREAM Act allows children raised in the United States who do not have legal immigration status to gain full legal status after six years. Legal residency status (also referred to as green card status) would be dependent upon completing two years of higher education, proof of good moral character, and other strict criteria. It would make limited financial aid available to these students, and allow states to make in-state residency determinations for tuition purposes. The Ag Jobs bill would address the needs of both workers and growers by providing a path to legalization for long-term workers while creating a path for future workers. It has received the support of both farm workers and growers, which is an almost unprecedented accomplishment.

A DREAM Act/Ag Jobs package would gather a great deal of support, as would a combination of many other component parts of a comprehensive immigration reform bill. However, this piecemeal approach is made more difficult because as these smaller parts are stitched together, people then argue for other parts to be added to it, making a larger package unwieldy. Piecemeal quickly becomes comprehensive.

**Immigration Reform Will NOT Happen Without You**

So where does that leave the hope for comprehensive immigration reform? In your hands! Your Congressional representatives are not going to willingly step into this minefield unless you, as their constituent, tell them why this issue is important to you, your district, and your state. As an international educator, the broken immigration system does ongoing harm to our nation’s standing in the world, making it less and less attractive to international students, scholars, researchers, and others. Our campuses and our country need to create a future that is more prosperous and secure. Comprehensive immigration reform must be accomplished for international education to thrive.

We all must continue to speak out, write our Senators, and share with our colleagues, friends, and family our belief that America can and should create a functioning immigration system. Please go to [Connecting Our World](https://www.connectingourworld.org) to find ways for you to engage with your Members of Congress!