

STATEMENT OF  
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BEFORE THE SUBCOMMITTEE ON IMMIGRATION, CITIZENSHIP, AND BORDER  
SAFETY, UNITED STATES SENATE  
STRENGTHENING OUR WORKFORCE AND ECONOMY THROUGH HIGHER  
EDUCATION AND IMMIGRATION

June 13, 2022

Chairman Padilla, Ranking Member Cornyn, and members of the Subcommittee:

Thank you for the opportunity to submit this testimony. I write on behalf of NAFSA: Association of International Educators, the world's largest nonprofit association dedicated to international education and exchange. I wish to express NAFSA's support for the testimony offered by Bernard Burrola, Vice President of the Office of International, Community, and Economic Engagement at the Association of Public and Land-grant Universities (APLU). I also wish to express our thanks to the committee for its focused attention on this important issue.

Serving more than 10,000 members and international educators worldwide NAFSA advocates for public policies that lead to a more globally informed, welcoming, and engaged United States through policies that promote international education as a pillar of U.S. higher education and the adoption of fair and transparent visa and immigration processes. NAFSA members' knowledge and expertise provides a window through which to see the lived experiences that result from U.S. government policies and practices that impact international students, scholars, researchers, exchange visitors, and others who engage in international education.

Providing educational opportunities to successive generations of college and university students from around the world has invaluable advanced U.S. foreign policy, diplomacy, and homeland security goals. One need look no further than the extraordinary research and development success of the highly effective COVID-19 vaccines and treatments to see how valuable it is to create pathways for the world's global talent to work together. Some of the scientists critical to this success began their careers as international students here in the United States, such as the CEO of Moderna, illustrating just how powerful it is to draw from the world's best and brightest.

However, the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, coupled with harmful federal policy changes since 2017, have caused severe damage to this country's reputation as the premier destination for international students and scholars. It is in the U.S. national interest to repair that damage.

## **International Education is Essential to Strengthening the U.S. Economy**

International education is essential to U.S. innovation and economic competitiveness. The United States is in a global competition to create the best possible ecosystem for talented people here and from around the world who will envision, create, and manufacture the innovations of today and tomorrow. To strengthen our workforce and economy, we need robust policies that improve access to international education for American students and that attract and retain international students and scholars who want to contribute their talents and skills to our country. American students must have a better understanding of the world to succeed in an environment where nearly every business is affected by activities beyond our borders. While this means greater access to study abroad opportunities and foreign language training for U.S. students, it also means ensuring international students continue to choose to study in the United States so we have the workforce necessary to innovate and stay ahead of our global competitors.

As international students contribute academically and culturally to our campuses, they also contribute significantly to the U.S. economy. NAFSA conducts an annual analysis of the economic contributions of international students, and our analysis last year showed that the nearly one million international students at U.S. colleges and universities contributed \$24.8 billion to the U.S. economy and supported more than 300,000 jobs during the 2020-2021 school year.<sup>1</sup> However, the number of new international students enrolling in U.S. higher education institutions has been in a steady decline for the past five years, dropping more than 11 percent from fall 2016 through fall 2019 and plummeting a further 46 percent in the fall of 2020, due to the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>2</sup> This decline has serious economic ramifications. Their economic contribution to the U.S. economy declined by more than \$10 billion compared to the previous year—the largest single-year drop since NAFSA began tracking these figures more than 20 years ago.

There are some positive signs that international student enrollment is rebounding as global travel restrictions have lifted and COVID-19 vaccines have become more widely available. A snapshot survey conducted in fall 2021 by the Institute of International Education showed overall international student enrollment at U.S. colleges and universities grew by 4 percent following a 15 percent decrease the prior year.<sup>3</sup> Yet it remains unknown how quickly enrollment will recover. Restoring international education will require a dedicated effort through administrative and legislative action to ensure the right government policies are in place.

### **Losing International Student Talent to Other Countries**

The United States is uniquely positioned in this global competition for talent because our unrivaled higher education system has attracted and retained international students seeking education and potential career opportunities for generations. However, as other countries have discovered that international students benefit their countries, they have implemented proactive government policies that ease access to study, work, and opportunities so that international talent

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<sup>1</sup> International Student Economic Value Tool, NAFSA: Association of International Educators  
[www.nafsa.org/economicvalue](http://www.nafsa.org/economicvalue)

<sup>2</sup> <https://opendoorsdata.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/Open-Doors-2021-Press-Release.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> Fall 2021 International Student Enrollment Snapshot Survey, Institute of International Education,  
<https://www.iie.org/Research-and-Insights/Open-Doors/Fall-International-Enrollments-Snapshot-Reports>

can become permanent members of their communities. As a result, we have watched our share of the international student market decline eight percent since 2001.<sup>4</sup>

Positive immigration policies related to international students and scholars are key to U.S. competitiveness in ensuring the United States attracts and retains the best and brightest. International students in particular want assurances that if they study in the United States, they will have a fair shot at employment opportunities after graduation and the possibility of permanent residence. Competitor countries like Australia, Canada, and the United Kingdom offer international students such assurances and have seen their enrollments increase significantly because of it.

For example, Canada established an international education strategy in 2014 with a goal of attracting 450,000 international students by 2022.<sup>5</sup> Canadian politicians and university leaders have branded the country as a proudly multicultural, welcoming destination. Canada adopted friendlier international student policies, such as expedited visa processing for certain qualifying students and post-study work visas that are valid for up to three years, along with a path to permanent residency. As a result of these measures, Canada's international student enrollment increased by more than 80 percent in the five years prior to the pandemic, making the country one of the world's fastest-growing study destinations during that period.<sup>6</sup> In 2019, it hosted 642,000 international students, surpassing its enrollment target three years early.<sup>7</sup>

Like Canada, Australia also has an international education strategy and favorable international student policies.<sup>8</sup> International students are permitted to work for up to 18 months after graduation, and graduates of certain high-need occupations can work longer, up to four years. International students also have a pathway to permanent residency.

The United Kingdom has recently stepped up its efforts, establishing an international education strategy in 2019 with a goal of hosting 600,000 international students by the year 2030.<sup>9</sup> To achieve this goal, the UK government moved to reinstate a two-year post study work option for international student graduates and, in January 2020, announced a new, fast-track visa program to attract the world's top scientists, researchers, and mathematicians. Despite the COVID-19 pandemic, just two years later, international student enrollment in the UK hit this target nearly ten years ahead of schedule, clearly demonstrating the impact of these initiatives.<sup>10</sup> In May 2022, the UK announced expanded access to work authorization for graduates from the world's top 50 non-UK universities. Successful applicants with a bachelor's or master's degree will be given a two-year work visa, while PhD-holders can apply for a three-year visa.<sup>11</sup>

These examples clearly show our competitor countries have in place and continue to develop policies that integrate higher education attainment into their immigration systems to enhance

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<sup>4</sup> <https://iie.widen.net/s/g2bqxwkwqv/project-atlas-infographics-2020>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.international.gc.ca/education/report-rapport/strategy-strategie-2014/index.aspx?lang=eng>

<sup>6</sup> <https://monitor.icef.com/2021/03/canadas-foreign-enrolment-fell-nearly-20-in-2020/>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.cicnews.com/2020/02/642000-international-students-canada-now-ranks-3rd-globally-in-foreign-student-attraction-0213763.html>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.dese.gov.au/australian-strategy-international-education-2021-2030>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/international-education-strategy-global-potential-global-growth>

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.ukcisa.org.uk/studentnews/1858/UK-hits-target-early-for-international-student-recruitment-10-years-early>

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-61628740>

their workforce and boost their economy.

## **A National Strategy on International Education**

It is not by accident that these countries are succeeding in attracting international student talent. Unlike many of our competitors, we lack a national, coordinated government strategy on international education. NAFSA has long advocated for a national strategy for international education, one that focuses on proactively recruiting talented students and scholars to U.S. colleges and universities from countries around the world and increasing the number and diversity of U.S. students who study abroad before graduation.<sup>12</sup>

A national strategy would build off of the administration's *Joint Statement of Principles in Support of International Education* released in July last year that renewed focus on the role of international education in improving U.S. diplomacy, global competitiveness, and higher education.<sup>13</sup>

The United States needs a national strategy to prioritize resources and ensure collaboration and compromise within and across key federal agencies. Any robust international student recruitment effort that seeks to grow and diversify enrollment at U.S. colleges and universities must be paired with transparent, efficient, and reliable visa processing and welcoming immigration policies.

### **Congressional Action: Updating Immigration Law and Conducting Oversight**

Strengthening the U.S. workforce and economy through higher education and immigration requires policies that meet the needs of the United States and the aspirations of the students. There are persistent and recurring barriers to attracting and retaining international students throughout the visa and immigration process. Key provisions of U.S. law and policy should be updated and modified to reflect twenty-first century realities, providing the predictability essential to making the United States stronger and more competitive globally. Additionally, congressional oversight is needed to ensure federal agencies are expeditiously implementing policies and procedures to provide this predictability while maximizing the advantages to the United States international students and other immigrants contribute. To that end, the following are the key actions Congress must take:

- **Allow international student visa applicants to express interest in remaining in the United States after graduation.** Immigration law should be modernized to allow international students, when applying for an international student F-1 visa, to express interest in remaining in the United States after earning their degrees. It is in the best interest of the United States for international students after receiving their degrees to entertain the possibility of contributing to U.S. innovation and vitality. The concept of dual intent that is now currently available to other nonimmigrant visa applicants such as specialty workers (H-1B) and intracompany transferees (L-1) should be expanded to include international student F-1 visa applicants.

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<sup>12</sup> <https://www.nafsa.org/establishing-national-strategy-international-education>

<sup>13</sup> <https://educationusa.state.gov/us-higher-education-professionals/us-government-resources-and-guidance/joint-statement>

- **Update immigration law to permit smoother access to work opportunities for skilled post-graduates.** As stated earlier, international students need to know whether they have a fair shot at work opportunities, whether for short or long term, after earning their degrees. There is broad, bipartisan support for “stapling a green card” to the diploma of international students graduating from U.S. colleges and universities. Congress should create a direct path to green cards for international student graduates, eliminate the green card backlogs, and prevent future backlogs.
- **Improve the visa application process.** The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated preexisting challenges in the U.S. visa process. Too often visa appointment availability and processing times are unpredictable, delaying a student’s arrival at the start of the academic term. The lack of predictable timeframes for security clearances and administrative processing negatively impacts scientific endeavors on our campuses when time-sensitive experiments and research are thwarted by delays. As the U.S. State Department continues to increase staffing and address backlogs from pandemic closures, we ask that Congress provide oversight to direct the State Department to provide transparency and predictability in visa processing.
- **Improve U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) processing.** Congress should direct USCIS to prioritize predictable processing times, streamline processes, and implement technological improvements. Reasonable and reliable processing times are critical to accessing work authorization and ensuring maintenance of legal immigration status.
- **Provide limited work authorization for spouses of F-1 students.** Earning a U.S. degree, especially master’s degree or Ph.D., often requires many years of study. International students pursuing graduate-level degrees are often accompanied by spouses. Providing the option of work authorization for spouses of F-1 students will help to attract and retain these talented individuals who contribute to U.S. innovation and competitiveness.
- **Permit limited opportunities for international students to earn money while studying in the United States.** Allowing this option would be an important step toward providing international students with access to resources that could support their enrollment. As we all know, higher education in this country is an expensive undertaking. The current restriction on work makes it harder for economically disadvantaged international students to consider study here. Such a change in policy would open the door to a more diverse pool of students from more countries and income levels around the world.
- **Provide flexibility for U.S. higher education institutions to enroll international students for innovative and evolving educational programs.** Immigration policy should be modernized to keep pace with current education models, including low residency programs, online courses and programs requiring multiple study abroad experiences. Providing this flexibility will allow the United States to stay at the forefront of education and develop a workforce ready to meet the needs of the U.S. economy.

Once again, I thank the committee for holding this hearing to shed light on strengthening the U.S. workforce and economy through higher education and immigration. NAFSA looks forward to continuing to support the work of the committee members and other members of Congress to create a visa and immigration system that meets the needs and aspirations of our nation.