



In America's Interest:

Welcoming International Students

Report of the Strategic Task Force on International Student Access

January 2003

NAFSA

Association of
International Educators



Message from William J. Perry Honorary Chair, Strategic Task Force on International Student Access

“In America’s Interest: Welcoming International Students makes a compelling case for the importance of continued — indeed, enhanced — U.S. openness to international students as integral to America’s security in today’s world.

Central to the framework of the report is the conviction that educating the world’s future leaders is part of the solution to terrorism, not part of the problem. Educational exchanges are part of what Harvard scholar Joseph Nye has called “soft power.” They depend on an openness to the world that may seem at first glance to be incompatible with today’s security imperatives. But in fact, openness to these students is as much of a necessity for our safety as is greater scrutiny to identify those few who harbor harmful intentions. Welcoming international students to our nation constitutes a crucial long-term investment in American leadership and security. Such openness has long been a bulwark of U.S. foreign policy and is a proven means to fight against the uninformed stereotypes, fear, and ignorance that are at the heart of the crisis we face today.

I highly commend the report’s recommendations and urge the U.S. government, higher education, and the business communities to take the necessary steps to enhance U.S. openness to international students.”

— William J. Perry
Former U.S. Secretary of Defense

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

At a time when efforts to counter the global threat of terrorism have highlighted the importance of building ties and friendships around the world, the United States needs a comprehensive strategy to enhance the ability of legitimate international students to pursue educational opportunities here. Such is the conclusion of a task force established by NAFSA: Association of International Educators to examine the issue of international student access to higher education in the United States.

In its report, “In America’s Interest: Welcoming International Students,” the Strategic Task Force on International Student Access identifies the major barriers to the ability of prospective international students to access U.S. higher education, and sets forth a strategic plan to address each of them.

The Continuing Importance of International Students

The task force report affirms that openness to international students serves long-standing and important U.S. foreign policy, educational, and economic interests. The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, presented new challenges for screening visa applicants more carefully to keep out those who wish us harm. At the same time, the terrorist threat also highlights the importance of building friends and allies across the world to better counter such global threats. The task force report therefore restates the case for encouraging and enabling legitimate international students to study in the United States. The task force believes strongly that international education is part of the solution to terrorism, not part of the problem.

Barriers to International Student Access

The U.S. position as the leading destination for international students has been eroding for years in the absence of a comprehensive national strategy for promoting international student access to U.S. higher education. In this strategic vacuum, four barriers, which impede access, remain unaddressed. The principal barriers are (1) the failure of the relevant U.S. government agencies to make international student recruitment a priority and to coordinate their recruitment efforts, and (2) burdensome U.S. government visa and student-tracking regulations. Lesser barriers are (3) the cost of U.S. higher education, and (4) the complexity of the U.S. higher education system.

A Strategic Approach to Promoting International Student Access

The task force recommends that the U.S. government, in consultation with the higher education community and other concerned constituencies, develop a strategic plan for promoting U.S. higher education to international students, based on a national policy that articulates why international student access is important to the national interest. In the context of such a strategic plan, the task force makes the following recommendations for addressing each of the four barriers to international student access cited above.

A Comprehensive Recruitment Strategy

A recruitment strategy must be developed that specifies the roles of the three federal agencies that share responsibility for international student recruitment—the Departments of State, Commerce, and Education—and provides for coordination of their efforts. Such a strategy must rationalize and create an effective mandate for the State Department’s overseas educational advising centers, resolve issues of responsibility and coordination in the Commerce Department, and provide a clear mandate for the Department of Education.

Removing Excessive Governmentally Imposed Barriers

Three broad actions are required to remove governmentally imposed barriers that unnecessarily impede international student access to U.S. higher education. First, immigration laws affecting international students must be updated to reflect twenty-first century realities, particularly by replacing the unworkable “intending immigrant” test set forth in section 214(b) of the Immigration and Nationality Act with a standard that focuses on whether or not the applicant is a legitimate student. Second, a visa-screening system is needed which permits necessary scrutiny of visa applicants leading to decisions within reasonable and predictable periods of time. Third, the administration must strive to implement the congressionally-mandated student monitoring system in a way that maintains the attractiveness of the United States as a destination for international students without sacrificing national security.

Addressing Issues of Cost

Issues of cost must be addressed through innovative and expanded loan, tuition exchange, and scholarship programs for international students. Scholarship assistance, through the Agency for International Development, should be directed at countries or regions—such as Africa—where the United States has a strong foreign policy interest in providing higher education opportunities but where the cost of a U.S. higher education is an insurmountable barrier. A financial aid information clearinghouse should be developed to help international students understand the options available to them.

Addressing Complexity With a Marketing Plan

A marketing plan should be developed that sends a clear, consistent message about U.S. higher education and that transforms the complexity of the U.S. higher education system from a liability to an asset. A user-friendly, comprehensive, sophisticated, Web-based information resource is needed, through which international students will be able to understand the multiple higher education options available to them in the United States.

Conclusion

Rather than retreating from our support for international student exchange—and forgoing its contribution to our national strength and well being—we must redouble our efforts to provide foreign student access to U.S. higher education while maintaining security. The task force calls on the U.S. government, academe, the business community, and all who care about our nation’s future to step up to the task of ensuring that we continue to renew the priceless resource of international educational exchange.

IN AMERICA'S INTEREST: WELCOMING INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

Report of the Strategic Task Force on International Student Access NAFSA: Association of International Educators¹

January 2003

“We have entered the third millennium through a gate of fire. If today, after the horror of September 11, we see better, and we see further, we will realize that humanity is indivisible. New threats make no distinction between races, nations, or regions. A new insecurity has entered every mind, regardless of wealth or status. A deeper awareness of the bonds that bind us all—in pain as in prosperity—has gripped young and old.... In the early beginnings of the twenty-first century...this new reality can no longer be ignored. It must be confronted

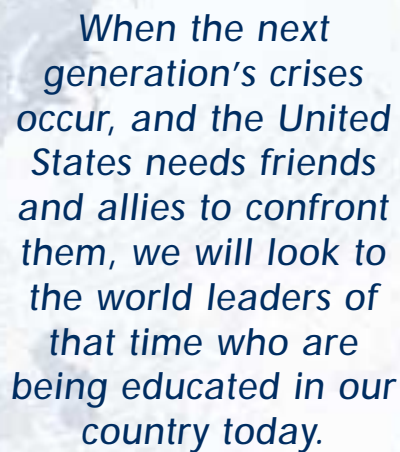
Today, ...even amidst continuing ethnic conflict around the world, there is a growing understanding that human diversity is both the reality that makes dialogue necessary, and the very basis for that dialogue.... We recognize that we are the products of many cultures, traditions, and memories; that mutual respect allows us to study and learn from other countries; and that we gain strength by combining the foreign with the familiar.”

— *United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan, Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech, December 10, 2001*

¹NAFSA gratefully acknowledges the support of the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs, U.S. Department of State, for a concept paper on international student access by Dr. Thomas R. Wolanin of the Institute for Higher Education Policy. With that paper as a guide, the task force met December 11–12, 2001, and October 30–31, 2002, to consider its recommendations.

INTRODUCTION: THE AFTERMATH OF SEPTEMBER 11

The increased awareness of international issues to which the secretary-general referred in his Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech has placed special emphasis on the work of this task force, which was formed before September 11, 2001. Our mandate is to identify barriers to international student access to U.S. higher education and to recommend measures to address those barriers.



When the next generation's crises occur, and the United States needs friends and allies to confront them, we will look to the world leaders of that time who are being educated in our country today.

For at least the second half of the twentieth century, it was an unquestioned verity of U.S. foreign policy that programs to promote international understanding advanced the national interest. It was almost universally accepted that educating successive generations of world leaders in the United States constituted an indispensable investment in America's international leadership.

After September 11, 2001, these assumptions are being questioned to an unprecedented degree. Those who have recently argued against international exchange programs seem to see today's United States of America as a country so vulnerable in the face of the terrorist threat that it has no option but to close its borders. They have portrayed the U.S. consular officer corps as an inadequately trained group that unselectively hands out visas as a way to curry favor with foreign governments. From their perspective, programs that have for generations educated the people who now lead many countries of the world are suddenly nothing more than avenues for fraudulent entry into the United States. Their views, asserted persistently since September 11, seek to persuade Americans to lead from their insecurities and fears, rather than from their strengths and hopes. This is not the America we see. Nor, in our opinion, is it the nation that most Americans know.

Without question, September 11 was a wake-up call that changed many of the security imperatives of our country. Like all Americans, we and our colleagues in higher education mourn the thousands of lives lost on that terrible day, grieve for their families, and are determined that it shall not happen again. But in our horror of those tragic events, it is important not to draw self-defeating lessons. The United States had a strategic need to act to enhance international student access to U.S. higher education before September 11. The need is only stronger now.

We cannot know what the future holds, but we do know one thing: There will be other crises. When the next generation's crises occur, and the United States needs friends and allies to confront them, we will look to the world leaders of that time who are being educated in our country today. If we act out of fear and insecurity, rather than confidence and strength, we risk making the future worse, not better, for our country and our world.

Continued—indeed, enhanced—U.S. openness to international students is integral to America's security in today's world. International student exchanges are part of the solution to terrorism, not part of the problem. In the pages that follow, we propose bold initiatives to increase international student access to U.S. higher education. We commend our recommendations to all who are not content to lead from fear, and who dare to hope for a better, more secure future.

THE CONTINUING CALL FOR INTERNATIONAL STUDENT EXCHANGE

Forward-looking leaders have called time and again for continued international educational exchange as an important part of a strong response to terrorism. Nine weeks after September 11, 2001, President George W. Bush said:

"The relationships that are formed between individuals from different countries, as part of international education programs and exchanges, can also foster goodwill that develops into vibrant, mutually beneficial partnerships among nations."

—President George W. Bush

...We must also reaffirm our commitment to promote educational opportunities that enable American students to study abroad, and to encourage international students to take part in our educational system. By studying foreign cultures and languages and living abroad, we gain a better understanding of the many similarities that we share, and learn to respect our differences. The relationships that are formed between individuals from different countries, as part of international education programs and exchanges, can also foster goodwill that develops into vibrant, mutually beneficial partnerships among nations.

America's leadership and national security rest on our commitment to educate and prepare our youth for active engagement in the international community....

On February 27, 2002, Secretary of State Colin Powell reaffirmed the State Department's support for foreign students:

The Department's policy on student visas is based on the democratic values of an open society and the perception that foreign students make an important contribution to our nation's intellectual and academic climate, as well as to our nation's economy. We must continue to nurture these vital relationships even as we improve the security of our borders.

... American values, including democracy, economic freedom, and individual rights, draw students from many nations. As these students and scholars from other countries gain from our society and academic institutions, they also serve as resources for our campuses and communities, helping our citizens to develop the international understanding needed to strengthen our long-term national security and enhance our economic competitiveness. The professional partnerships and lifelong friendships that are created through international education are important for a secure, prosperous future, not only for our own country but also for the world as a whole.

The *New York Times*, in a September 24, 2002, editorial, suggested that our efforts to spread our influence and understanding of our culture should be stepped up, not abandoned. Cautioning that government policies must not impede legitimate exchange, the editorial said, "Higher education is one of the best methods we have of spreading the word about who we are and of exposing our citizens to non-Americans. Bringing foreign students onto our campuses is among the best favors we can do ourselves."

"The professional partnerships and lifelong friendships that are created through international education are important for a secure, prosperous future, not only for our own country but also for the world as a whole."

—U.S. Secretary of State
Colin L. Powell

This task force enthusiastically agrees that we must engage this world without walls, this indivisible humanity. We must learn to understand our similarities and respect our differences. We must continue to nurture our greatest foreign policy asset: the friendship of those who know our country because we have welcomed them as students. That is the counsel of strength and hope, which we believe Americans, with their innate common sense, understand intuitively.

BENEFITS THAT FAR OUTWEIGH THE RISKS

Why do we care if international students choose U.S. colleges and universities to pursue their education and to improve their English language skills? The case has been articulated many times, but September 11 made us forget it. It is, therefore, worth restating the ways in which openness to international students continues to serve the fundamental interests of U.S. foreign policy, our economy, and our educational system—even more so in an age of global terrorism.

Foreign Policy Benefits


Secretary Powell has spoken eloquently of the foreign policy benefits that accrue to the United States from being the destination of choice for the world's internationally mobile students and, especially, from educating

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successive generations of world leaders. By hosting international students, we generate an appreciation of American political values and institutions, and we lay the foundation for constructive relations based on mutual understanding and goodwill. The ties formed at school between future American and future foreign leaders have facilitated innumerable foreign policy relationships. The millions of people who have studied in the United States over the years constitute a remarkable reservoir of goodwill for our country, perhaps our most undervalued foreign policy asset.

Is there a danger that terrorists will gain access to the United States by posing as students? Of course there is; that danger exists with respect to all nonimmigrant visitors, of which students constitute only a minuscule two percent. All countries must confront a central question of our age, which is how to reconcile global mobility with global terrorism. Openness to mobility carries dangers; higher education wants to be a part of the greater attention to these dangers that is now necessary, and of the more robust enforcement measures that are now required.

In this context, the task force fully supports appropriate screening and monitoring measures. Schools are collectively spending millions of dollars and countless hours to implement the international student tracking system that became a federal priority on September 11. They are working with the Department of State to protect the integrity of student visas and to prevent their fraudulent use by those who seek access to the United States for illegitimate reasons. Research institutions are wrestling with questions of access to sensitive scientific information and are doing their best to strike the appropriate balance. In these and other ways, higher education is doing its part to help protect our country.



For many American students, college or university life provides their first close and extensive contacts with foreigners.

But to unduly restrict the access of future leaders—and, indeed, the youth of the world—to this country is to court a greater danger, which is to nurture the isolationism, fundamentalism, and bigoted caricatures that drive anti-Western terrorism. After September 11, it seems clear that the more people who can experience this country first-hand, breaking down the stereotypes they grow up with and opening their minds to a world beyond their borders, the better it is for U.S. security.

Economic Benefits

International students are good for the U.S. economy, as well. This, while not in the task force's judgment the most important reason for reaching out to such students, is nevertheless the basic driving force leading competitor countries to adopt proactive strategies for attracting them. NAFSA estimates that international students and their dependents spent nearly \$12 billion in the U.S. economy in the last academic year, which makes international education a significant U.S. service-sector export. This economic benefit is shared by schools, communities, states, and the U.S. economy as a whole. According to the Institute of International Education, more than 70 percent of undergraduate international students pay full tuition and receive no financial aid, thus allowing schools to offer more financial assistance to American students. In addition, U.S.-educated students take home preferences for American products, and business students in particular take home an education in U.S. business practices.

Educational Benefits

International students enrich American higher education and culture. For many American students, college or university life provides their first close and extensive contacts with foreigners. These contacts begin the process of preparing these students to be effective global citizens. Foreign graduate students make important contributions to teaching and research, particularly in the scientific fields, and their enrollment in under-enrolled science courses often makes the difference for a school's ability to offer those courses. Indeed, graduate education as we know it could not function without international students.

Immigration opponents argue that international students compete with Americans for slots in the U.S. higher education system and the U.S. economy, as though international education were a zero-sum game and any slot a foreigner gets is one an American does not get. The task force is unaware of anything but anecdotal evidence to support the thesis that international students take spots in universities that Americans would otherwise occupy. There is, however, ample evidence for a contrary proposition: International student enrollments and international teaching assistants enable universities to offer classes to American students that would not otherwise be available.

On the job front, it is worth remembering that laws and regulations provide for visitors to adjust their status to remain in the United States and work precisely so that people with needed skills can work in the U.S. economy. The fact is that, although most students return home and contribute to their countries after studying in the United States, some remain legally in the United States and contribute to the U.S. economy. And increasingly, in this age of global mobility, some do both—effectively becoming citizens of two countries, moving back and forth, and contributing to both. In any of those cases, they contribute to long-term U.S. interests.

As former Secretary of Defense William Perry noted in an address to the 1998 USIA-ETS conference, “Attracting foreign students to study in the U.S. is a win-win-win situation: it’s a win for our economy; it’s a win for our foreign policy; and it’s a win for our educational programs”—and all the more so since September 11. Without question, September 11 gave us a new appreciation of the importance of identifying and screening out international visitors of any kind—students or otherwise—who would do us harm. We consider it equally without question, however, that openness to international students is overwhelmingly a net asset for the United States.

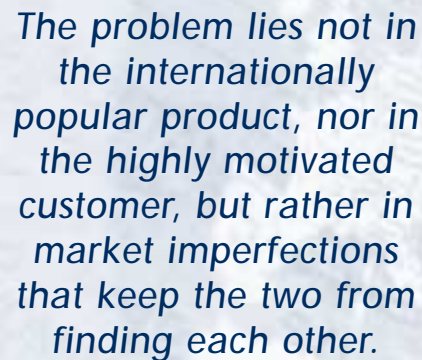
THREATS TO U.S. LEADERSHIP IN INTERNATIONAL EDUCATION

Thanks in part to the broad support it continues to receive, educational exchange to the United States is still going strong. The Institute of International Education reports that the number of international students in U.S. higher education institutions has increased in most years since 1955. According to IIE’s *Open Doors 2002*, the authoritative source of data on international student enrollment for academic year 2001–2002, “This year’s 6.4 percent increase in international student enrollment in U.S. colleges and universities equals last year’s increase, which was the largest increase in the past 20 years. This continues a trend of substantial growth in foreign student enrollments that began in 1997, after a four-year period of minimal growth.”

What’s wrong with this picture? At first glance, nothing. But although the absolute numbers are increasing, U.S. market share is going in the opposite direction. According to IIE, the U.S. share of internationally mobile students—the proportion of all international students who select the United States for study—declined by almost ten percent from 1982 to 1995, the last year that IIE did the calculation (39.2 to 30.2 percent).

In itself, that is not an alarming statistic. U.S. market share is still healthy, and the argument could be made that our nearly 40 percent market share was unsustainable. It is what lies behind that statistic that is alarming.

Declining U.S. market share is not simply a function of the free market. It is due to at least two factors. First, it reflects aggressive recruitment efforts by our competitors—the United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand, Canada, and others—who have determined that they want to reap more of the foreign policy, economic, and educational benefits that international students bring. Conversely, it reflects the absence of such a conclusion on the part of the United States, which apparently assumes that international students will always come because they always have. In sum, the international student market has become highly competitive, but the market leader is not competing. Such complacency risks the loss of our country's leadership in international education, with the accompanying negative ramifications for our security, foreign policy, and economy.



The problem lies not in the internationally popular product, nor in the highly motivated customer, but rather in market imperfections that keep the two from finding each other.

Second, declining U.S. market share does not appear to reflect any decline in international demand for U.S. higher education. Demand is strong; people still want to study here. The problem is access: How does one get here? How does one understand where one fits in the uniquely complex U.S. higher education system, finance the high cost of a U.S. education, and—above all—surmount the formidable, governmentally imposed barriers to studying here? While competing nations seek to remove disincentives to study in their countries, U.S. policy ignores—and sometimes exacerbates—the disincentives to study here. The problem lies not in the internationally popular product, nor in the highly motivated customer, but rather in market imperfections that keep the two from finding each other. Those imperfections are all subject to our control or influence. If we ignore them, we will continue to lose out in the competition.

Ultimately, what's wrong with this picture is the absence of a strategy to sustain the numbers. For a generation after World War II, the United States had a strategy of promoting international student exchange as a means of waging the Cold War and promoting international peace. But now more than ever, the U.S. government seems to lack overall strategic sense of why exchange is important—and, therefore, of what U.S. interests are at risk by not continuing to foster exchanges. In this strategic vacuum, it is difficult to counter the day-to-day obstacles that students encounter in trying to come here—and that schools encounter in trying to recruit them.

In addressing the need for a comprehensive national initiative to promote international student access to U.S. higher education, therefore, it is as important to understand what the problem is *not* as it is to understand what the problem *is*. At the most basic—and encouraging—level, the problem is not one of weakness. The United States has every resource it needs to be successful in attracting international students—and, indeed, has been successful at it.

The United States has more higher education capacity than our major competitors combined, the high quality of U.S. higher education is universally recognized, and the United States is a magnet for many throughout the world. *The problem is not how to make the United States and its higher education system more attractive, but how to make them more accessible.*

Many colleges and universities are already sophisticated in actively recruiting undergraduate international students, either individually or through consortia. U.S. higher education is highly entrepreneurial and market driven. *The problem is not a lack of competitiveness; but how to harness higher education's competitive energies into a national strategy.*

At the level of the federal government, the Departments of State, Commerce, and Education all have programs that relate to attracting international students. These programs are uncoordinated and seemingly operate in complete isolation from one another. For example, the Commerce Department's "Study USA" program and the State Department's "Education USA" program have nothing to do with each other. Although more resources are needed, it is not clear that more resources for current programs, absent a coordinated strategy, would make a difference. *The problem is not the absence of resources, programs, and dedicated civil servants, but a lack of policy, strategy, and coordination.*

BARRIERS TO INTERNATIONAL STUDENT ACCESS

The task force has identified four barriers to international student access to U.S. higher education. We believe a strategic plan is needed to address them. The principal barriers to access, on which we focus most of this report, are: (1) the absence of a proactive, coordinated effort to recruit international students; and (2) burdensome U.S. government regulations, which often effectively cancel out recruitment efforts. Lesser barriers are (3) the cost of U.S. higher education, and (4) the complexity of our higher education system. To effectively address each of these barriers, the task force recommends that the United States articulate and develop a strategic plan to increase access.

The Need for a Proactive Access Strategy as Part of an International Education Policy for the United States

The U.S. government has not yet made it a strategic objective to increase international student access to the United States and, consequently, lacks a strategic plan for doing so. The time has passed when the United States could idly assume that it will continue to attract the world's best and

brightest without such a plan. As articulated earlier in this report, our nation's foreign policy, economic, and educational interests require such a strategy now more than ever before.

NAFSA, along with numerous other higher education and exchange organizations, has articulated the need for an international access strategy before, as part of a more comprehensive national policy that promotes international education in the broadest sense. In the past two years, a national policy on international education, originally put forth by NAFSA and its colleague association, the Alliance for International Educational and Cultural Exchange, has received strong bipartisan public support. In 2000, the Clinton administration issued a memorandum to federal agencies instructing them to take certain steps to promote and facilitate international education, and Congress has introduced and passed bipartisan resolutions to create a national policy on international education. The task force strongly supports the continuation of these efforts, and in particular, it urges the U.S. government to articulate the need for a national strategy to facilitate access to U.S. higher education and to develop a plan to implement that strategy.

The presence of such an access strategy would provide the policy basis for addressing the following four barriers to international student access.

Uncoordinated Recruitment Efforts

One consequence of the absence of strategy is uncoordinated recruitment efforts on the part of both the U.S. government and higher education. At the government level, there is no lead agency, there is no interagency coordination, and there is no coordination within agencies to ensure that one bureau does not work at cross-purposes with another. At the level of colleges and universities, some are more active—and some more successful—than others in recruiting international students; but, with rare exceptions at the state level, schools do not enter into strategic partnerships for the purpose of increasing recruitment overall.

Burdensome U.S. Government Regulations

Another consequence of the absence of strategy is unnecessarily burdensome government regulations that restrict international student access to the United States.

Uninformed rhetoric since the September 11 tragedy has fostered the impression that student visas are handed out to all comers. The reality is quite different. Student visas are not—and never have been—easy to get. The student visa denial rate was 28 percent in fiscal year 2001; in countries where consular officers suspect that the desire to emigrate to the United States is prevalent, it is significantly higher.

Although data are not yet available, a post-September 11 sea change appears to be occurring in visa processing for male Muslim applicants and for applicants who intend to pursue a science major. Many such applicants were unable to enroll for the fall 2002 semester because their visa applications were sent to Washington where they sat for months, without being decided, until the program start date had passed. This denial through delayed decision making is devastating our exchanges with the Muslim world—at the same time that Congress creates highly touted new Muslim exchange programs. Here is the absence of strategy: foreign policy going in one direction and visa policy in another, with the former pursuing forward-looking public diplomacy objectives while the latter makes the implementation of those objectives impossible.

Here is the absence of strategy: foreign policy going in one direction and visa policy in another, with the former pursuing forward-looking public diplomacy objectives while the latter makes the implementation of those objectives impossible.

It is at the level of visa policy where the primary strategy needs to be directed. Operationally, there are no exchange programs if the participants cannot get visas. Nothing could be more shortsighted than to deny exchange opportunities to people from countries where isolation from the rest of the world is driving terrorism. This will only increase security risks in the long run.

Applicants for visas to the United States need to be subject to appropriate screening. After September 11, increases in such screening—carefully targeted at real risks—may be necessary. Having said that, burdensome laws and regulations, arbitrary decision making, and a severely overburdened consular corps still make it unnecessarily difficult to study in the United States. With effort, this barrier could be significantly reduced.

Visas are not the only problem. One would never know it from what one reads in the press, but the lives of those students who make it here are in fact controlled by a large body of federal regulation that far exceeds that which applies to any other category of nonimmigrant. Although that is not strictly speaking a barrier to entry, it hardly presents a welcoming image to those contemplating study in the United States—especially since September 11, as each new regulation is trumpeted in a press conference as cracking down on terrorism. Each new layer of regulation increases the resources—time, personnel, and money—that schools must spend to comply, robbing them of those resources for proactive efforts to recruit international students and enhance their integration into campus and community. This is another reflection of the absence of strategy—the imposition of costs without consideration of foregone benefits. Meanwhile, our competitors are asking the strategic question: How can we streamline our regulations to enhance our position in the international student market?

The Cost of U.S. Higher Education

Higher education, already expensive for Americans, looks even more so from abroad. It is a simple competitive fact of life that U.S. higher

education, while of the highest quality, is also the most expensive—a factor that is only exacerbated as more schools add international student processing fees to pay for expensive monitoring systems. Other countries have a cost advantage over us. Because there is no prospect of changing this factor, the task is to find ways to ameliorate it.

The Complexity of U.S. Higher Education

The fourth barrier is the flip side of a strength. The U.S. higher education system is the most complex in the world, and is very difficult for foreign students to decipher. This is not something we should want to change, for the diversity of U.S. higher education is a great strength. In fact, this diversity provides multiple points of access for foreign students to U.S. higher education, which they do not find in any other country. With respect to this barrier, the task is to provide foreign students with the tools to understand and navigate this complexity, thus turning complexity from a liability into an asset.

RECOMMENDATIONS: HOW TO ENHANCE INTERNATIONAL STUDENT ACCESS

The United States requires a strategic plan for enhancing international student access consistent with national and homeland security. At its most elementary level, a strategic plan must provide a coherent government approach to international students, as opposed to an approach where one part of the government cancels out the other. Accordingly, such a plan must: (1) specify the roles, and provide for coordinating the efforts, of the principal agencies that must be involved in a comprehensive effort to recruit international students; and (2) provide guidance for removing unnecessary governmentally imposed barriers to international student access. Those two elements would address the major problems with the U.S. government approach to international students. In addition, the plan should address the issues of (3) the cost and (4) the complexity of U.S. higher education.

The task force makes the following recommendations for implementing a strategy to enhance international student access.

I. Articulate a Policy and Develop a Strategic Plan

The United States government, in consultation with the higher education community and other concerned constituencies, must develop a national policy that articulates why promoting study in the United States to

international students is important to the national interest. Only when that is done will we be able to move to a strategic plan for promoting U.S. higher education abroad.

II. Develop a Recruitment Strategy

The three federal agencies that share responsibility for international student recruitment must have their roles specified and must cease operating in a vacuum, as they do today. Specifically, each agency must be tasked with the following:

The Department of State

The Department of State must rationalize and create an effective mandate for the currently under-resourced State Department overseas educational advising centers. Some 450 advising centers are spread around the world, existing on a shoestring budget of some \$3 million a year. With that meager amount, the advising centers help to leverage \$12 billion of foreign student spending in the U.S. economy by serving as the initial gateway for people inquiring about study in the United States. This is surely one of the most cost-effective government efforts ever recorded. The task force has nothing but admiration for the job that the advising centers do with virtually no resources. Yet they are a shadow of what they could be under a real strategic plan.

More funds are needed—but not yet. First, these centers need to be given a mission—that of promoting U.S. higher education. The mission should anchor a strategic plan—one that specifies how many centers there should be, where they should be located, what they should do, and how they fit into a strategic international student recruitment plan for the United States. The task force believes that Congress will respond to a call by the President to support a strategic effort at a level that it has not been prepared to provide for the existing effort, and that the higher education community will be in the trenches with the administration fighting for that support.

The Department of Commerce

The second task is to rationalize the role of the Department of Commerce in international student recruitment. An industry that generates \$12 billion of spending in the U.S. economy would seem to qualify as a business worthy of Commerce Department support. Yet, the department's effectiveness in promoting this industry is compromised by its organizational structure and the lack of overriding policy or direction.

Responsibility is currently claimed by both the Office of Trade Development, which sees international education as an agenda item in

multilateral trade negotiations, and the U.S. and Foreign Commercial Service, which sees international students as a marketing issue. Each appears to go about its business with nearly complete lack of awareness of the other and therefore lacking a common conception of what each is trying to do. This not only makes it impossible for Commerce to act strategically to promote international education products and services, it also makes it challenging, to say the least, for those who seek to collaborate with Commerce to promote international education.

The Department of Education

The third task is to provide a clear mandate for the Department of Education regarding international student recruitment. Other countries' efforts center on their Ministries of Education. Yet in the United States, the Department of Education presently seems to have no strategic role at all when it comes to international student enrollment in U.S. colleges and universities. The only departmental program that supports international student recruitment is the U.S. Network for Education Information (USNEI), a Web site that provides general information about the U.S. educational system for those from other countries. In addition, the department participates, with the State Department, in International Education Week. The task force was encouraged by the new international education policy priorities recently announced on November 20 by Secretary of Education Rod Paige, particularly the component that supports "U.S. foreign and economic policy by strengthening relationships with other countries and promoting U.S. education." While we commend the department for these activities and initiatives, we believe it has the capacity to play a much greater leadership role in increasing international student enrollments in U.S. higher education. The assistant secretary for post-secondary education should be tasked with providing this leadership and should have the strong support of the secretary.

A Comprehensive Strategy

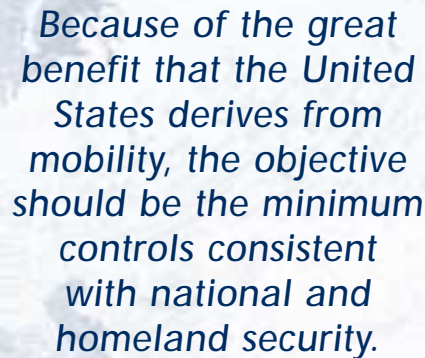
The fourth task is to coordinate all of these efforts and combine them into a coherent, comprehensive strategy to promote international student access. Under that strategy, all of the agencies involved must deploy their resources in complementary ways with the aim of increasing international enrollments in U.S. higher education.

III. Remove Excessive Governmentally Imposed Barriers

In the new, post-September 11 security environment, everyone accepts that greater scrutiny is necessary to try to keep people from entering the country under false pretenses and to discover them once they are here. Inevitably, this entails greater government controls on mobility. This

applies no less—and no more—to the minuscule proportion of nonimmigrant visitors who are students. Because this population has been especially targeted since September 11, schools have already been called upon to do their part, and they are devoting enormous resources to complying with what is required of them.

But in the emotion of the moment, it is too easy to carry that consensus to its illogical conclusion: The more barriers, the better. U.S. national interest dictates otherwise. Because of the great benefit that the United States derives from mobility, the objective should be the minimum controls consistent with national and homeland security. To achieve this objective for students, updated legislation, improved visa screening, and a rational student monitoring system are required.



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International student mobility has increased more than tenfold since our basic immigration law was written, and other immigrant and nonimmigrant flows have grown concomitantly. U.S. higher education has also been revolutionized during that time—leading, for example, to the far greater prevalence of part-time and continuing education. Demographically, the United States now finds itself with an immigrant-dependent economy. In the face of these massive shifts, U.S. immigration laws, their enforcement, and visa practices are still in the pre-global era. Post-September 11 politics has had the unfortunate effect of reinforcing their outdatedness, as if we could somehow insulate ourselves from danger by moving backwards: making our immigration laws even less reflective of contemporary reality, making each visa decision take longer, and growing the mountains of unanalyzed data on international students ever higher.

Security lies in the opposite direction. We need to update our immigration laws. We need to find ways to make the routine granting of visas to non-threatening populations *easier*, so that consular officials—who will never be able to scrutinize everyone equally—can devote their attention to the problematic cases. We need to collect the information that we really need about foreigners in our midst without diverting scarce resources to expensive systems that produce ever more data but ever less-useful information. If we do all that, we will make access to U.S. higher education easier for bona fide students, even as we increase our security.

An Immigration Law for the Twenty-First Century

The effort to remove unnecessary, governmentally imposed barriers must start at the level of immigration policy. Immigration law (section 214(b) of the Immigration and Nationality Act) requires that applicants for nonimmigrant visas be presumed to have an intent to immigrate to the

United States unless they can demonstrate otherwise to a consular officer—that is, prove a negative. That requirement imposes an unrealistic burden on students, who are typically not yet sufficiently well established in their societies to be able to demonstrate a likelihood of return. It also imposes an unreasonable burden on consular officials, who are in effect required by law to know the unknowable and to determine the intent of the visa applicant in an interview lasting a few minutes. Because the consular decision must necessarily be based on a guess, this requirement too often produces arbitrary and unaccountable consular decision making. This creates great frustration on the part of those who wish to study in the United States and wreaks havoc with college and university enrollments.

If the policy of the United States were, in fact, as articulated by section 214(b), we might just have to live with these problems. But it is not—nor, in this day and age, can it be. As far as students are concerned, the United States does not, in fact, practice the policy that they must return to their home country; in practice, we do—and we should—permit graduates of our educational institutions to adjust their status legally and remain in the United States if they possess skills that we need. Demographic trends dictate this policy because the United States cannot fill all the skilled jobs in its economy from the native-born population.

Current law does not provide sensible, workable, enforceable guidance for a global age and a global job market. A huge barrier to international student access to the United States would be removed, with no ill effects on safety or security, simply by replacing the “intent-to-immigrate” standard with one that is more appropriate for student visas: Does the applicant have a bona fide reason and sufficient financial means to enter the United States as a student? Unlike the question posed by current law, that is an answerable question. What happens if they wish to stay—which some clearly do anyway—is a matter governed by other laws. (Like all other visa applicants, of course, students would still have to undergo applicable security and background checks, including having their names checked against terrorist watch lists.)

Only when our 1950s-vintage immigration law catches up to twenty-first century immigration reality will consular decision making become rational, predictable, and accountable to those wanting to study in the United States and to the institutions that seek to enroll them. This task force proposes that a joint government-higher education task force be formed to devise a new legislative standard for student visas.

Another legal anomaly deserves mention. Every one of our English-speaking competitors in the international student market permits nonimmigrants to pursue short-term study for up to 90 days on tourist visas. This enables international students to take short-term English courses or other short-term summer courses in those countries, return for a week to

defend their dissertations, and engage in all kinds of other short-term educational programs that are common in today's world, for which a student visa is inappropriate. In the United States, this practice is technically illegal, and post-September 11 crackdowns jeopardize these worthy activities. The law needs to be updated to reflect this common practice.

Improved Visa Screening

Notwithstanding an anomalous decline in visa applications in 2002, it is predictable that the volume of visa applicants will only continue to increase over the long term. The State Department's professional consular officers, scurrilous attacks to the contrary notwithstanding, do a responsible job, under adverse conditions, of trying to keep up with the flow. It's an impossible task. As in the classic "I Love Lucy" television show, the conveyor belt is only going to keep moving faster. Legislating that consular officers must give greater scrutiny to every applicant and treat everyone as a security risk is like legislating rain; it just can't happen. Post-September 11, a system is urgently needed that permits necessary scrutiny of visa applicants leading to decisions within reasonable and predictable periods of time.

So that they may devote adequate attention to visa applications with real security implications, consular officers must find ways to devote *less* attention to the rest, *without* any loss of overall effectiveness. The visa decision cannot be delegated; it is an essential government function. Some of what informs the visa decision, however, can be delegated. Through the creative use of partnerships, consular officers can use others to help inform their decisions. The result will be better, safer, more reliable visa decisions.

In the student visa area, we propose two such partnerships: first, a partnership with the higher education community to train new consular officers in the student visa process; and second, a partnership with the department's own overseas educational advising centers, whereby the latter would prescreen student visa applicants. We also propose increased funding for the consular affairs function in the State Department's budget.

First, the State Department should ask higher education to produce and deliver, in partnership with the department, an international student module for use by the Foreign Service Institute in training new consular officers. This module would help new officers understand the foreign policy, educational, and economic roles of international students in our society; the complexity of U.S. higher education and the international student admissions process; the documentation required of such students; the effects on schools when visa decisions are unpredictable; and other relevant factors. The point is not to suggest that any of these factors should drive the visa decision; they should not. The point is to make sure that the decisions are informed and are not made in an information vacuum, as is too often the

case today. The result will be more rational, accountable visa decision making.

Second, to reduce the burden on consular officers, the Department should use its own overseas educational advising centers to prescreen student visa applicants. A model for this exists in Malaysia, where the overseas educational advising centers have an agreement with the U.S. consulate that they will prescreen students' visa applications to make sure that all the necessary documents are in order before sending the applications to the consulate. (This is particularly important in view of new, post-September 11 visa requirements, with which students may not be familiar.) Once the consulate approves the visa, the documents are sent back to the advising center for the student to pick up. In denial cases, the consulate returns the documentation to the advising center, which notifies the student. In this way, two purposes are accomplished: The consular officer is relieved of routine document verification and of having to process routine denials based on incomplete documentation; and recruitment is enhanced by driving applicants to the centers, where they can be counseled and provided with information. The British, who have been very effective at streamlining access for international students, have employed this method with good results. This is a case where we would do well to emulate our competitors.

Third, recent congressional attacks on the Bureau of Consular Affairs ring somewhat hollow in view of the fact that Congress has routinely underfunded this bureau, as it has much of the Department. Educators have long advocated greater funding for Consular Affairs. Thankfully, September 11 appears to have induced Congress to recognize the necessity of funding Consular Affairs at a level commensurate with its role as a first line of defense. The task force urges Congress to follow through and sustain necessary funding increases over time. The nation asks much of its consular officers; we will only get it if we pay for it.

A Rational Student Monitoring System

There has been much debate in recent years on the advisability of a nationwide international student monitoring system. That debate ended on September 11, 2001; it is not our intention to restart it. Such monitoring will soon be a reality, with the full support of higher education.

It is important, however, to remain focused on what the monitoring system was intended to accomplish. It was intended to be a tool for enforcing our immigration laws by enabling the government to know if international students were abiding by the terms of their visas and of their admission to the United States. And it was billed by the INS as capable of producing efficiencies for both the INS and academic institutions in the administration of educational exchange. As such, it was unobjectionable. It was not intended to be a barrier to exchange.

Unfortunately, as we lead from fear instead of from confidence, the system threatens to become what it was not intended to be. Many violations of student status are technical and inadvertent, stemming from lack of knowledge or understanding by young people of what are, after all, fairly complex regulations. Others are minor, routine infractions that the INS has considered to be harmless and, as such, are rarely subject to enforcement actions. And indeed, it is not unheard of for students to be deemed, incorrectly, to be out of status because INS officials do not understand their own regulations.

It has been possible, heretofore, for harmless technical violations or misunderstandings to be corrected, once discovered, without the student losing status. The system gave enough discretion to designated school officials to permit a rule of reason to prevail in the overwhelming preponderance of the cases that involved infractions with no national security implications. As we are now only too painfully aware, there were also enough "gaps" in the system to permit violations with profound national security implications to go undetected. The task is now to achieve a new balance, which maintains the attractiveness of the United States as a destination for international students without sacrificing national security.

It is not clear that the international student monitoring system that will go into effect on January 30, 2003, will achieve that necessary balance. The rigidities of the system are so great that inadvertent loss of status threatens to be a common occurrence, and the remedies are so difficult that significant numbers of international students may face significant disruptions in their studies and may even have to leave the country. This is not idle speculation. Reports have surfaced periodically since September 11 of international students being jailed for technical violations with no national security implications, or due to a misunderstanding of the regulations by enforcement officials.

It is certainly necessary to tighten enforcement, increase training for school officials, and do more to help international students understand how to remain in status and the consequences of failing to do so. But it is quite simply impossible for the United States to retain a robust international student industry if students must live in constant fear of making a mistake that costs them their education or even their freedom. Our competitors do not impose such burdens. It is they who will reap the benefits, and the United States that will incur the loss, if we continue down this road.

IV. Address Issues of Cost

Although U.S. education is of the highest quality available worldwide, other countries appear to enjoy a competitive cost advantage over the United States. This primarily reflects the high cost of higher education in the United States for those unable to take advantage of in-state tuition

rates. It also reflects the high cost of living and, for some, the high cost of travel to the United States, and is often exacerbated by a strong dollar on the exchange market.

What we need are more financial aid opportunities for international students and an easy mechanism for accessing information about these options. Through creative partnerships among the stakeholders who have an interest in increasing international student access to the United States—including higher education institutions, the U.S. government, foreign governments, and the business community—the task force proposes that more loans, tuition exchanges, and scholarships be made available to international students.

Loans

More private loans need to be available to foreign students and their families, particularly loans that permit co-signers from abroad. There are several promising models for such loans.

Citi-Assist International Loans and Citi-Assist Global International Loans, both offered by Citibank, have operated successfully for years. Unlike most other loans, which require a U.S. co-signer, these loans simply require that the student be enrolled at a participating school. If the student does not have sufficient individual financial assets, the student must only have a declaration of financial support from a family member.

Another model is the Duke MBA Opportunity Loan. International students attending the Fuqua School of Business may borrow up to \$30,000 per academic year with a 5 percent disbursement fee and an interest rate of prime plus 2 percent. This partnership exemplifies the kind of cooperation that is needed between higher education institutions and the business community—in this case, between Duke's business school, SLM Corporation (Sallie Mae), and HEMAR Insurance Corporation.

In yet another innovative program being considered by First Financial Partners, Inc., families abroad could contribute money toward an investment fund that will safeguard their money in U.S. dollars and would accrue tax-free interest that can be invested in their children's education at U.S. institutions. This type of program is particularly promising for students in countries where their families know early on that they will want to send their children to study in the United States and where depositing money in their own national banks is viewed as high risk for them.

The task force calls upon the higher education and business communities to develop more innovative partnerships like these to make U.S. higher education more accessible to foreign students.

Tuition Exchanges

In what is truly a reciprocal exchange, students from other countries change places with students from the United States. They pay tuition and fees to their home institutions, so no money changes hands between the participating institutions. Because tuition expenses can be significantly lower in other countries, this type of tuition exchange offers foreign students an affordable opportunity to study in the United States, while encouraging U.S. students to study abroad. There are many examples of such partnerships between U.S. and foreign universities, operated successfully at minimal cost to both institutions. Many more such programs are needed.

Scholarships

There are also existing scholarship programs for international students that could serve as models for a broader effort. The approaches fall into two categories: first, at the state level, providing financial aid for international students in exchange for public service commitments by the students to the states; and second, at the national level, providing financial aid for international students to further specific U.S. foreign policy and international development objectives in the students' home countries.

At the state level, colleges and universities (even public ones) can offer tuition scholarships to international students. In a program to encourage public service in exchange for financial aid, the University of Oregon system offered out-of-state tuition remission to international students. In return, the students provided services to the campus and the local community, including providing translation services for local businesses and teaching in elementary schools about their countries and cultures. The program proved so valuable that, when the system lost its ability to offer tuition remission, the chancellor decided to keep it going by offering tuition scholarships financed with university funds.

To this point, our recommendations for addressing the cost of higher education for international students would entail minimal or no cost to the public treasury. This approach is deliberate. However, a strong case can be made for publicly funded scholarship programs targeted at countries or regions where they would serve a strong U.S. foreign policy interest. This applies particularly to areas, such as Africa, whose economic development is important to the United States but that are too poor to afford their people the opportunity for a U.S. education. Where international student access is important to U.S. interests, but cost considerations are an obstacle to such access, appropriate programs are needed to address that problem.

In one model, the U.S. Agency for International Development offers seed money for scholarship programs for study in the United States that require the recipients to repay the scholarship through service in their home country. These partnerships have led to programs like one currently operated by the Academy for Educational Development. The program brings Botswanan students to the United States for their education in exchange for a commitment by the students to spend 2 years in public- or private-sector service in Botswana upon completion of their program. The program, initially funded with AID seed money, is now fully funded by the Botswanan government and is very successful, boasting a 99 percent return rate.

The Vietnam Education Foundation Act, sponsored by Senators John Kerry and John McCain, represents a different approach. The act creates a Vietnam Debt Repayment Fund, into which payments on debts assumed by the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, which were owed to the United States by the former South Vietnamese government, are deposited. The fund will be used to finance higher education in the United States for Vietnamese nationals, as well as service in Vietnam by U.S. citizens. The act provides for matching contributions by U.S. universities. Variants of this model could be used to recycle the debt payments of other countries into activities that support their economic development in furtherance of U.S. foreign policy goals.

What we need are more financial aid opportunities for international students and an easy mechanism for accessing information about these options.

These are examples of highly cost-effective programs that provide international students with opportunities to pursue higher education in the United States and, in the process, enhance the public good in various innovative ways. It should not be difficult to increase significantly the funding available for international students by building on these models. The task force calls for more such programs.

A Financial Aid Information Clearinghouse

Our nation's most important disadvantage pertaining to the cost of education is that other countries are aggressively marketing their advantages over the United States, while we are doing nothing to combat the notion that a U.S. education is unaffordable. As loan, scholarship, and tuition exchange opportunities are expanded, a comprehensive resource must be developed for international students to help them understand the financial options available to them. This needs to be part of the comprehensive information system on U.S. higher education that we propose in the next section.

V. Address Complexity With a Marketing Plan

To arrest the decline in the U.S. share of the international student market, the United States, through the coordinated efforts of the Departments of State and Commerce, must do what its competitors are doing: strategically

market overseas the value of a U.S. education. The marketing strategy must address the problem of the complexity of U.S. higher education by transforming complexity from a liability into an asset. This must be done in two ways: first, through a coherent message that explains to consumers why the product is superior; and second, through an effective information tool that enables consumers to navigate the complexity and locate their needs in relationship to what the product offers.

A Coherent Message

The U.S. government and higher education institutions need to send out a clear, consistent message about U.S. higher education. The message should convey that the United States can provide a high-quality educational opportunity for everyone, even if they have limited financial means. Our higher education system's great diversity can help each individual who seeks an education in the United States to find the right fit. The message should help students understand that a U.S. education, although costly, is the best investment that students can make in their lives, careers, and financial future. It should convey to international students—and their families—that they will be welcomed by the U.S. government, the universities, and the American public and that they will be safe.

Essentially, this is the branding of U.S. higher education as value and opportunity. A brand is a template that both government agencies and schools can use to craft their own messages to ensure that the overall U.S. message is consistent. By producing high-quality materials, which can be modified as necessary and distributed widely by all stakeholders, branding allows the pooling of resources for maximum impact and encourages the best use of marketing dollars.

In crafting this message, the State Department public affairs offices and Commerce Department Foreign Commercial Service offices should share responsibility for overseeing the market research necessary to enhance our understanding of how to appeal to overseas audiences on behalf of U.S. higher education. Admissions professionals in the schools, many of whom possess considerable expertise on marketing to international students, should be enlisted in this effort.

An On-line Resource

If the message is effective in conveying that a U.S. education is a good value, then students will want to know how to access this value. It is essential to develop a user-friendly, comprehensive, sophisticated, Web-based information resource through which international students will be able to understand and assess the higher education options available to them in the United States and identify possible financing options. This online resource should allow students to rank their personal preferences (cost, location, academic program, etc.) and should provide links to institutions that match up with their preferences. Ideally, these links would then allow students to apply for admission online.

CONCLUSION

Rather than retreating from our support for international student exchange—and foregoing its contribution to our national strength and well being—we must redouble our efforts to provide access to foreign students while maintaining security.

The need is clear. Rather than retreating from our support for international student exchange—and foregoing its contribution to our national strength and well being—we must redouble our efforts to provide access to foreign students while maintaining security. We need to develop a strategic plan for promoting study in the United States to international students, rationalize the recruitment effort, remove excessive governmentally imposed barriers to access, and address issues of cost and complexity. The task force calls on the U.S. government, academe, the business community, and all who care about our nation's future to step up to the task of ensuring that we continue to renew the priceless resource of international educational exchange. We pledge our continuing support for the effort.

THE STRATEGIC TASK FORCE ON INTERNATIONAL STUDENT ACCESS

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Task force members were asked to serve as individuals, not as representatives of their institutions. Institutional affiliations are given for identification purposes, but the institutions should not be construed as endorsing this report or any of its recommendations. Although all of the content of this report is derived from task force discussions, and the report is a consensus document, no task force member necessarily endorses every statement in it. Overall responsibility for the report is NAFSA's alone.

We must continue to nurture our greatest foreign policy asset: the friendship of those who know our country because we have welcomed them as students.



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