



February 8, 2019

Dear Assistant Secretary Royce,

Thank you for your February 4, 2019, letter noting that the U.S. Department of State is planning to scale up efforts to recruit international students. NAFSA's Board of Directors has asked me to respond on behalf of the association. We are delighted that the State Department is recommitting to promoting U.S. higher education as a top priority and are eager to offer our expertise to assist with these efforts.

We strongly agree that attracting international students (and scholars) to U.S. campuses is key to our national security, economic prosperity, and research and innovation. NAFSA's recently launched "Welcome To Succeed" campaign is focused on educating policymakers on the value of international students and scholars, for we must welcome a diversity of international talent for the United States to succeed in the world. We invite higher education institutions, businesses, and government to join us in promoting the value of international education and ensuring that our policies and messages create a welcoming environment for the world's best talent. International students and scholars create jobs, drive innovation, enrich our classrooms, strengthen national security and become America's best advocates and allies.

We also share your concern about the downward trend in new international student enrollments that began in the 2016-2017 academic year (down 3.3%) and further declined 6.6% in 2017-2018. NAFSA's advocacy for the U.S. government to have a comprehensive approach to competing in the global marketplace for international students dates back to 1999 and resulted in the first-ever U.S. International Education Policy memorandum in 2000. Over the years, we have worked with multiple administrations to focus attention on the importance of having a U.S. marketing and recruitment strategy, removing unnecessary immigration and visa policy barriers that make the United States less attractive to international students and scholars, and funding programs that increase our competitiveness, including funding science and innovation research. State's renewed focus on international education will be helpful; increased marketing efforts by EducationUSA could help raise the visibility of lesser known schools and destinations in the United States. We welcome the opportunity to work with you to strengthen the position of U.S. higher education institutions in the global competition for talented students and scholars.

However, helping U.S. institutions to compete cannot be solely addressed by "utilizing best practices, emphasizing the unrivaled quality of an American degree, and reiterating that the U.S. is welcoming and safe for international students." Data show that students are concerned about the unwelcoming rhetoric and policies espoused by the top levels of government and are increasingly unwilling to risk investing so much in their education in what they perceive as an uncertain environment.

NAFSA: ASSOCIATION OF INTERNATIONAL EDUCATORS

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According to the [Fall International Student Enrollment Snapshot Survey](#) conducted by the Institute of International Education in November 2018 in partnership with NAFSA and other organizations, “A significant proportion of institutions report that the U.S. social and political environment (60 percent) and feeling unwelcome in the United States (48.9 percent) are factors contributing to new international student declines. Colleges and universities also cite a significant increase (+11 percentage points) in concerns about physical safety in the United States to include gun violence and civil unrest (43.6 percent). Institutions continue to report that prospective international students and their families are concerned about the rhetoric surrounding the policies and ensuing public debates on immigration, along with apprehensions of personal safety and tense race relations.” Also, a survey conducted by Study Portals in November 2016 found that 87% of all international respondents indicated the main reason their decreased desire to study in the U.S. is that they perceive the U.S. to be less welcoming towards international students, and a majority of international respondents are concerned about possible changes to post-study work opportunities like the Optional Training Program (OPT).

For example, students currently studying in the U.S. and those considering studying here are anxious about whether the Optional Training Program on which they rely for experiential learning is in jeopardy. The State Department could take a leadership role working with the Department of Homeland Security to keep OPT intact. Safeguarding OPT would make a major difference in the ability of schools to compete globally for students. A complete list of policy recommendations that would help U.S. institutions compete can be found at www.nafsa.org/welcometosucceed.

We are delighted that the State Department is recommitting to promoting U.S. higher education as a top priority. Attracting international students and scholars to the United States is a great benefit to the country. NAFSA also remains committed to continuing our work to support international education professionals with best practices, networking with peers to solve real-time problems, and keeping our members informed about regulatory changes and critical trends in the field. We will also continue to advocate to protect international education. NAFSA looks forward to working with you, higher education institutions, other associations, businesses, and others to advance international education.

Sincerely,



Esther D. Brimmer, DPhil
Executive Director and CEO

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