

Revive and Restore International Education Impacted by COVID-19

Executive Summary

NAFSA urges Congress to provide critical financial resources, oversight, and policy changes in order to revive and restore international student enrollment and study abroad programs at U.S. colleges and universities impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic and the global response to it.

International student enrollment is critical to U.S. higher education institutions' financial well-being. Many international students pay full tuition, providing a key revenue stream (nearly [\\$41 billion and 458,000 jobs during the 2018-2019 academic year](#)) that supports operating expenses, including financial aid programs for many U.S. students. New international student enrollment was already down before the coronavirus pandemic, and it will most certainly be exacerbated now. An estimated 25% decline in international student enrollment for fall 2020 would translate to a loss of approximately \$10 billion and 114,000 jobs to our nation's economy. If U.S. higher education institutions are forced to downsize or close due to enrollment declines, that would have a major multiplier effect as many of these institutions serve as key economic engines and job-creators in their communities.

Study abroad programs run by U.S. college and universities and private-sector providers equip American students with the essential global competencies and experiences needed to succeed in today's global workforce and are important employers in their own right. Already a number of major study abroad providers have had to lay off over 50% of their staff while higher education institutions across the country have reported that they are reducing hours, furloughing employees, and eliminating positions, which will result in thousands of job losses. Without these programs, students are losing a key component of their education and colleges and universities are losing an important source of revenue.

However, 2020 could turn into the year without study abroad, with spring semester study abroad programs cancelled or cut short and the likelihood that all summer programs (and possibly even fall programs) will be cancelled. Absent additional financial support, it could take years for study abroad to recover.

To this end, NAFSA requests that Congress implement the following stimulus and policy changes:

1. Direct emergency aid to support education abroad, specifically supporting virtual exchanges, the Increasing and Diversifying Education Abroad for U.S. Students (IDEAS) Program and the Fund for the Improvement of Post-Secondary Education (FIPSE).
2. Ensure that international students and scholars are able to return to U.S. institutions of higher education when in-person classes resume and mitigate continued decline in international student enrollment by exercising oversight of visa and immigration policies.
3. Direct \$46.6 billion in aid to students and higher education institutions with flexibility to support study abroad and international offices.

4. Make changes to the Small Business Administration's Paycheck Protection Program so that international education providers are eligible and smaller private higher education institutions do not have to include student employees in the total number of employees.

Detailed Recommendations

1. Direct emergency aid to support education abroad, including virtual exchanges.

The field of education abroad is at incredible risk for long-term damage because of COVID-19. Without additional financial relief, it could take years for the field of education abroad to fully recover; leaving U.S. students with fewer international education opportunities, U.S. higher education institutions with fewer international collaborations, and our country less prepared to tackle global challenges or compete in the global marketplace.

With spring study abroad programs cancelled or cut short and the likelihood that all summer programs will be cancelled, 2020 could be the year without study abroad. Unlike restaurants, construction, or manufacturing which should be able to start working again once the threat from the pandemic has been reduced and the stay-at-home orders are lifted, education abroad will not be able to snap back quickly. Most programs are planned out over a year in advance and students would normally be working on and submitting applications for fall programs now. This means it will be incredibly difficult to restart education abroad programs quickly.

We are also aware that a number of major study abroad providers have had to lay off over 50% of their staff. Higher education institutions across the country have reported that they are reducing hours, furloughing employees, and eliminating positions, resulting in thousands of job losses. A significant portion of study abroad programs at U.S. colleges and universities are fee-funded. If there are no students studying abroad, then the operating budgets for those offices are significantly reduced and jobs in the program offices may be eliminated, putting additional people out of work. Restarting programs will be more difficult with fewer staff and less infrastructure to support the students. Funding is necessary in order to maintain American students' access to study abroad to prepare them to tackle global challenges and compete in the global marketplace while protecting American jobs on campuses around the country.

Needed Congressional Action

a) Increase or newly establish funding for virtual exchange programs. Virtual exchange will be a key component of our international education recovery. Increasing funding for virtual exchange would allow institutions to continue to offer intercultural exchange programs for their students and maintain international partnerships and agreements while there may still be travel restrictions or a general hesitancy to travel by students, faculty and staff. The State Department's Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs administers the Stevens Initiative to promote virtual exchange between the United States and the Middle East. Increased funding for this initiative, along with an expansion of its mandate to promote virtual exchange to other parts of the world, or one like it would provide much needed support for institutions to expand or develop new virtual exchange opportunities.

b) Increase funding for the Increasing and Diversifying Education Abroad for U.S. Students (IDEAS) program run by the U.S. State Department's Educational and

Cultural Exchange Bureau's USA Study Abroad Office. In Fiscal Year 2019, the IDEAS Program funded 22 out of 120 grant applications submitted. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, there was considerable interest in increasing capacity for study abroad programming. As U.S. higher education recovers from the pandemic, there will be considerably more need to support study abroad offices on campuses across the country.

c) Establish funding in the U.S. Department of Education's Fund for the Improvement of Post-Secondary Education (FIPSE) to support innovation in study abroad consistent with the Senator Paul Simon Study Abroad Program Act. The Simon program, once enacted, will provide higher education institutions much needed support to develop innovative programs and study abroad models that will allow them to adapt to the changing reality of global mobility in the post-COVID-19 education landscape. The bipartisan Simon Act is based on the recommendations of the congressionally appointed Commission on the Abraham Lincoln Study Abroad Fellowship Program with a goal of significantly increasing study abroad opportunities for all U.S. undergraduates. International education is a key component of a quality education in the 21st century. For higher education to fully recover and be able to serve the needs of its students after this global crisis, new models for study abroad will need to be developed, new partnerships will need to be formed, and new opportunities will need to be created. The Simon program will provide higher education institutions with the support needed to succeed in this new reality.

- 2. Exercise oversight and enact policy changes to ensure that international students and scholars are able to return to U.S. institutions of higher education when in-person classes resume and to mitigate continued decline in international student enrollment.** International student enrollment is a vital component of U.S. higher education. Attracting the best and the brightest from throughout the world contributes significantly to the country's preeminence in academic research and scientific innovation.

The post COVID-19 environment will be a critical turning point for international education and the global engagement of U.S. colleges and universities. Immigration and visa policies need to be well-crafted and implemented during and following the crisis in order to help win back the confidence of international students, confidence that has been lagging as shown by three straight academic years of declining new international student enrollment (nearly 11% since fall 2016.) During the 2018-2019 academic year, international students and their families contributed nearly \$41 billion to the U.S. economy, and helped support over 458,000 jobs nationwide, making international education the nation's fifth largest U.S. services export.

International students and scholars create jobs, drive research, enrich our classrooms, strengthen national security, and become America's greatest foreign policy assets. Rough projections of a 25% decline in international student enrollment for fall 2020 would translate to a loss of approximately \$10 billion to the U.S. economy and 114,000 American jobs. Most international students pay full, out-of-state tuition rates; these losses will impact the budgets of most U.S. higher education institutions, thus impacting domestic students.

Needed Congressional Action

- a) **Create targeted scholarships for those studying COVID and other pandemic responses and best practices, funded either through existing U.S. State Department programs like the Fulbright Program or a new program.** The need for treatments, vaccines, and cures to global pandemics like COVID-19 is significant; offering financial support to international students studying in fields that contribute to finding shared solutions is a critical investment we can make. Success in discovering a vaccine, treatment, and cure for COVID-19 requires global collaboration and international perspectives.
- b) **Direct the U.S. State Department's Bureau of Consular Affairs to institute transparent, easy-to-understand processes and timely processing for visa renewals and issuance by:**
- i. Waiving the in-person interview requirement for visa applicants to the fullest extent allowable by law;
 - ii. Maintaining priority appointments for international student and exchange visitor visa applicants, to include prioritizing the rescheduling of cancelled appointments in response to the COVID-19 emergency; and
 - iii. Accommodating the need for timely visa issuance and renewal for professors, researchers, scientists, and others who do not fall into the category of F and M students or J exchange visitors but are needed on U.S. campuses for the fall 2020 semester.
- c) **Require the U.S. State Department to report to Congress and the public its plans to process the expected surge of visa requests.** Such a report must address the State Department's contingency plans for visa interviews, emergency and otherwise, at consulates that closed or significantly reduced their capacity.
- d) **Require the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS) to postpone any non-COVID-19 rulemaking that impacts international students, exchange visitors, faculty, and staff for the duration of the pandemic.**
- e) **Direct DHS' U.S. Customs and Border Protection to implement a nimble process at ports of entry,** relying on technological resources (e.g. SEVIS) and higher education stakeholders to provide up-to-date data and information, to ensure the smooth entry of returning, as well as newly-arriving, international students and scholars for the fall.
- f) **Direct DHS' U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services to automatically extend employment authorization documents, extend or pause filing deadlines, and restart premium processing for petitions.** During negotiations on the "Phase III" economic stimulus package, a bill was introduced in the House of Representatives that included language to extend the immigration status or work authorization for nonimmigrants if their status expired within a window of time related to the pandemic. This or similar relief is needed to provide certainty during the crisis and eliminate the need for filings for extensions of status and work authorization when USCIS is unprepared for a new workload and nearly the entire country is advised not to leave their homes.
- g) **Establish a national recruitment strategy to attract and retain international students and scholars.** After the COVID-19 crisis is over, all sectors of the economy

will need to bounce back; this includes international and higher education. The administration and Congress need to make clear that international students and scholars are welcome to study and conduct research here, and U.S. visa and immigration policies must reflect this posture.

3. **Provide \$46.6 billion in aid to students and higher education institutions with flexibility to support study abroad and international offices.** U.S. higher education has been particularly hard hit by the response to the COVID-19 pandemic; conservative estimates of the impact range in the tens of billions of dollars. International offices on U.S. campuses are particularly impacted by the cancellation of programs and the shift to online, distance, or virtual education platforms. Many are fully or primarily fee-funded and have seen their operating budgets significantly reduced or eliminated, especially when spring and summer study abroad programs have been cancelled or cut short. International educators on campuses across the United States are concerned about what this will mean for their jobs and for their ability to provide safe, quality study abroad programs for their students once we are beyond the immediate threat of COVID-19.

As Congress continues to evaluate the need to provide relief for higher education institutions, sufficient funding is necessary to ensure that U.S. colleges and universities will be able to resume normal operations and continue to provide the unparalleled quality education that typifies the American higher education system, including the international education and exchange programs that provide U.S. students with the global skills, knowledge, and experiences that they will need to tackle global challenges in the future.

4. **Make changes to the Small Business Administration's Paycheck Protection Program (PPP)** so that international education providers are eligible and smaller private higher education institutions do not have to include student employees in the total number of employees.

PPP was established by the CARES Act, the economic stimulus package passed by Congress and signed into law on March 27, 2020, in response to the COVID-19 crisis. PPP allows businesses and nonprofits with no more than 500 employees to apply for zero-fee loans that can cover salaries and other business expenses for an eight-week period. These loans can be forgiven for up to the full amount if employers keep employees on payroll.

In the next COVID-19 economic stimulus bill, higher education institutions and international education providers are seeking changes to PPP that may allow them to use this program as short-term assistance.

Needed Congressional Action

- a) **Clarify that smaller, private higher education institutions should not count students participating in work-study programs as "employees";** The Work-Study program is a form of federal financial aid, and not an open market employment opportunity. It is punitive to include these financial aid recipients in the total number of employees because it will disqualify some institutions that may otherwise qualify for PPP loans.

- b) NAFSA requests Congress clarify that international education providers need only count their U.S.-based employees to be eligible for PPP;** some have employees based outside the United States and including them would push them over the 500-employee limit.

The requested resources and policy changes detailed above will save jobs, ensure that the world's best and the brightest continue to contribute to America's classrooms and competitiveness, and preserve vital education abroad programs for U.S. students, programs necessary to tackle the global challenges of the future.

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