

Supporting International Students for Fall 2021 • Coordinating Across Campus

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The COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting United States policies related to travel and immigration restrictions continue to severely restrict the flow of international students to the U.S. While universities have rapidly adapted to ensure safe instruction for domestic students, many international students are unable to enter the country to begin or resume their studies. The consequences of these barriers – for both U.S. universities and the international students they serve – are significant and far-reaching.¹

International students are experiencing a number of barriers as they plan for the Fall 2021 semester. To respond, offices across college and university campuses are going to need to work together. This will not be an effort that can be done by an international student office alone, and international students will be best served by institutions that incorporate international student issues into their comprehensive planning for Fall 2021.

Immigration response teams or task forces based within specific higher education institutions are well-positioned to help institutions with this work, as they are often already working to help institutions understand federal regulations and policy, advocate for necessary changes, and adapt institutional policies when necessary. They will also help position institutions to consider international student issues on an ongoing basis.

Items to Consider

To assist international students, institutions will need to consider both items that are within the institution's control (such as creating flexibility within the institution's policies) and items reliant on actions by the federal government (such as the availability of visa appointments). These include:

Federal concerns

- Travel restrictions (by region, visa type, country of citizenship, or other)
- Visa application processes
- ICE guidance regarding F-1 regulations
- COVID-related requirements (testing, quarantine, vaccination)

Institutional policies

- Course availability and mode of instruction
- Policies, procedures, and schedules that keep in mind the additional requirements for international students
- Welcoming approach, good communication
- It will also be important to keep in mind that the policies may have distinct impacts for differently situated groups of students (initial students, transfer, continuing, etc.)

1. Presidents' Alliance on Higher Education. (2021). Reopening the United States to international students. Retrieved from highereducationimmigrationportal.org/policy/reopening-the-united-states-to-international-students.

Actions to Take

Creating/Strengthening Partnerships

It will be necessary for international student offices to build partnerships on campus and beyond campus. This will help ensure decision makers know to consider the impacts on international students before they make big decisions or announcements to the campus community. These relationships will be strongest if you share information on an ongoing and regular basis instead of waiting for specific moments of crisis.

On campus

Establish institution-wide collaborations and partnerships. These efforts require collaboration among all of the units/departments on campus that play a role both in the welcoming of new students and ensuring the ongoing success of continuing students. Some of the groups include:

- Institutional leadership
- University governmental relations office
- Admissions
- Orientation
- Academic units
- Undergraduate education
- Graduate education
- Professional schools
- Academic advisers
- Directors of graduate study
- Housing
- Health center

Beyond campus

Community leaders will be helpful allies, so it will be important to draw the attention of your surrounding community to the concerns of international students. In building these, reach out to:

- Your congressional delegation (and their constituent relations staff)
- Other educational institutions in your state/area
- Local immigration attorney networks
- Other groups that may have an interest in international student success, such as your state government or local community organizations
- Reporters or the editorial team for your local newspaper (Alternately, you should consider whether a faculty member or other campus leader would be interested in writing an op-ed for submission to a local paper. They could highlight the importance of international students, and the challenges they're currently facing.)

Adapting University Policies and Advocating for Federal Action

- Use data (like the [Higher Ed Immigration Portal](#) and internal institutional data) to determine how your institution is impacted
- Think about what international students need; some examples summarized by the [American Council on Education \(ACE\)](#) include:
 - ◇ Online classes
 - ◇ ICE guidance/flexibility
 - ◇ Clear health guidelines (quarantine, testing, vaccine access)
 - ◇ Visa appointments
 - ◇ COVID-related flexibility in regulatory interpretation (such as allowing for grace period after OPT unemployment period)
- Consider if there are other groups of students that will benefit from the flexibility being considered for international students (out-of-state students, individuals with underlying health conditions)
- Consider the lessons you learned over the last year and ways to apply them going forward. You should ask yourself and international students, "What has gone well, and what hasn't for international students?"

Communicating with Students

- Survey current international students to find out which campus policies are causing challenges and/or concern for them
- Work with student groups that are connected with international students to find out concerns and communicate updates
- Work with the communicators on campus to ensure that international students are one of the audiences being considered when campus-wide communications are drafted

Talking Points

For those who work closely with international student issues on an ongoing basis, it can be easy to assume that everyone shares your understanding of complexities of the international student experience. Here are recommendations for items to discuss with decision makers and others.

- ▶ There is a lot that is unknown at this point. There are many factors complicating Fall 2021 planning for international students. While some of these matters are within the university's control, others are not.
- ▶ During the pandemic, the federal government has granted flexibility for international students around issues such as online course credits. It isn't known, currently, whether this will continue or if visa regulations will return to the previous interpretation and requirements. We also do not know when the rules for the fall will be announced.
- ▶ It is necessary for schools to plan for multiple contingencies. It will be both helpful and reassuring for international students to be given multiple options whenever possible.
- ▶ Not all international students will be excited about a return to in-person learning. Universities may wish to consider taking different approaches for initial students than for continuing students with regard to some of these issues.
- ▶ For new students or students who have been studying in their home country, they may have difficulty getting a visa or plane tickets to travel to the U.S.
- ▶ Depending on the situation in their country of residence, they may have a variety of COVID-related concerns.
- ▶ They or their family may be worried about the chances of COVID exposure if rates are higher in your local area than at home.
- ▶ They may come from a country where vaccines are not readily available, and they may have concerns about their eligibility for vaccination in the U.S.
- ▶ Given the uncertainty of the last year, their family may have concerns about them being far away in the event of another surge or other negative COVID-related developments
- ▶ So far during the pandemic, there has been a feeling of collective momentum around the need to offer courses online. With the arrival of the vaccine, many schools wish to return to in-person instruction. While international students are not the only group that will have challenges due to this, departments may feel they are being asked to make special exceptions and use limited resources for international students. It is important to remember that all students deserve to be able to make academic progress. The solutions will likely vary by department and college.
- ▶ There are things that can be done at a national level to ease the pressure on universities to make all of these accommodations on their own. Universities can play a role in sharing this information and asking for policies that will help international students.