

# How International Students Impact U.S. 'Soft Power'

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Much is made of the **economic benefit of having international students study at colleges and universities in the United States**, but what are the other benefits that international students bring with them, and what do they carry back to their home countries when they leave?

Joseph Nye, former Dean of the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University, is known for having **coined the term “soft power,”** which boils down to the ability to influence others by non-coercive

means—in particular, through attraction. Higher education in the U.S. is exceptionally effective at doing this. Our industry has been attracting some of the best students from every country to come here and learn about our political institutions, culture, and democratic values while being educated in their chosen fields, creating a network of leaders around the world who are favorably disposed toward the United States. This type of goodwill cannot be accomplished as effectively through international commerce or diplomacy alone.

## A 'Brain Gain' Economy

This is not to dismiss the economic benefits contributed by international students. The more than **\$40 billion a year figure published by the Institute of International Education** as the amount contributed yearly to the U.S. economy is now familiar to many of us. The longer-term benefits to the American economy may be even more substantial, thanks to the thousands of former international students who, having gained experience in trade with the U.S., possess a deeper understanding of American business practices, culture, and law.

It is essential to remember that not all international students leave the U.S. upon graduation. Those who are able to remain in the country on professional nonimmigrant employment visas or through other legal means have **founded many of the Fortune 500 companies** whose names we are familiar with. This phenomenon has been described as **brain gain as opposed to brain drain** and doubtless inspires many other would-be international students to apply to higher education institutions in the U.S.

American graduate programs in STEM fields depend on attracting international talent so that we may maintain our position as a leader in global research and innovation. This dependence is not new, and one can point to many examples of how **“imported” scientific talent has shaped the U.S.** and, indeed, the rest of the world since the country's founding. These benefits are not specific to science and engineering, and one can find examples in all fields, ranging from the arts to athletics, of the benefits of welcoming international students to the U.S.

## Hard Attacks on Soft Power

Only the most naive among us would claim that the U.S. has lived up to its democratic values, the ideal of free speech, academic freedom, and devotion to free inquiry and diverse viewpoints. However, it is well established that leaders in the political and private sectors in countless countries are influenced by **exposure to American civil society, political institutions and governance, and human rights**.

It is a cruel irony that the same students who would carry these transformative ideas and knowledge back to their home countries, benefiting the U.S. both economically and politically, are currently being **denied free speech and are being either removed from the U.S. or prevented from pursuing their educational goals** here. The loss of friendly voices who are able to explain the U.S. to their family, friends, and coworkers abroad is both detrimental and unnecessary. Losing the long-term geopolitical benefits deriving from personal connections that provide opportunities for communication between governments is a danger not only to U.S. higher education but to all U.S. citizens.

## Facing An At-Risk Ecosystem

The soft power approach employed by U.S. higher education institutions is in danger of failure, and we have already seen how visa restrictions and revocations impact the mobility of international students. The development of higher education in other countries, largely due to students educated in the U.S., now offers alternatives to studying in the U.S. For students concerned about encountering discrimination, visa difficulties, or cultural insensitivity, the possibility of leaving or never coming is real.

In conclusion, the soft power embodied in international students benefits the United States and creates lasting advantages that all citizens can enjoy. We may not think about it as the primary goal of accepting international students, but the soft power advantages of having international students are critical to more than the nation's colleges and universities, providing benefits to America for decades after the students have returned home or made their homes here.

## What You Can Do

The AACRAO Government Relations team has created specific campaigns in the **Advocacy Center of our website** where you can send a letter to your congressional representatives expressing your concerns. You simply need to press the blue "Take Action" button, input your address, name, and some other basic information, and the system will take care of the rest.

**Take Action to Support International Students and Scholars in the United States:** Send a letter to your Congressional representatives in support of international students and scholars in the United States.

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