



Tuesday, July 14, 2020

The Honorable Chad Wolf
Acting Secretary
U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS)

Dear Acting Secretary Wolf,

On Monday, July 6th, 2020, the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) announced via [guidance](#) (No. 2007-01) that international students on F-1 and M-1 visas will not be permitted to take their coursework fully online for the Fall 2020 semester and remain in the United States. Per the guidance, international students whose school/program is operating exclusively online will either need to transfer to another institution that is not operating exclusively online, else they face the risk of being deported. The guidance also states that international students who are intending to begin their program of study in Fall 2020 will not be allowed into the country if they are planning to take all of their coursework online. As more and more universities announce their plans for the upcoming Fall Semester, the number of students potentially affected by this decision grows.

We, Student Advocates for Higher Education (SAGE), the Council of Graduate Schools (CGS), and the National Association of Graduate-Professional Students (NAGPS), oppose this decision in the strongest possible terms and ask that it be reversed immediately. We also request that international students be provided temporary flexibility allowing them to participate in the range of in-person, online, and hybrid instruction that institutions are implementing in light of the pandemic and their local conditions.

The decision not only ignores the present realities of operating a university during a global pandemic, a situation that calls for social distancing measures such as moving to online instruction, but also puts the U.S. at risk of losing its status as the premier destination for international education by exacerbating a chilling effect.

This decision will force universities to weigh their options to protect health and safety, as determined by the science of public health and infectious disease immunology. This policy calls for students to “depart the country or take other measures, such as transferring to a school with in-person instruction to remain in lawful status” if their



university is forced to switch to all online classes during the semester because of COVID-19.

However, as we learned from our experiences during the Spring Semester, universities may have to adjust plans for instruction mid-semester in light of prevailing conditions. It would be extremely impractical for an international student, or any student, to transfer programs mid-semester. Many of our international graduate-professional students have families for which they are responsible. It would be harmful, impractical, and prohibitively expensive for students to be pulled out of school at a moment's notice and arrange travel out of the country. Forcing international students and, in many cases, their families to leave the country before the semester or mid semester puts their health and well-being at risk.

This policy also damages the reputation of higher education in the United States as a destination that is welcoming and nurturing to the best and brightest from around the world, and a place where students can pursue and realize their American dream. The attainability of that dream has been fading in recent years as international student enrollment has been decreasing in large part due to policies such as this most recent rule that are unwelcoming to international students. As a result of this rule, academic, and research productivity will suffer. The economy will also suffer as international students contribute more than \$41 billion¹ and support nearly a half million jobs annually. This rule will have real and lasting consequences on not only academia and institutions of higher education, but for all Americans.

We respectfully request the immediate reversal of this decision in the interest of protecting students and their families, of maintaining the standards of American higher education, and of ensuring America's position as a global leader. We also request that international students on F-1 and M-1 visas be granted a temporary waiver to allow them to begin or continue their program of study should the student need to take their coursework in-part or fully online, even if institutions need to pivot to remote instruction later on in the year. This order stands at odds with our greatest ideals, antithetical to the ideology we claim to promote, that of equality and opportunity for all. As long as this order stands, we stand in failure of these aspirations.

¹ NAFSA: Association of International Educators. NAFSA International Student Economic Tool: <https://www.nafsa.org/policy-and-advocacy/policy-resources/nafsa-international-student-economic-value-tool-v2>.



Sincerely,

Bradley J. Sommer

Suzanne T. Ortega

Abbie Shew

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Bradley J. Sommer".

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Suzanne T. Ortega".

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Abbie Shew".

President & CEO
NAGPS

President
Council of Graduate Schools

Chair
SAGE Coalition

CC:

Kenneth T. Cuccinelli, Senior Official Performing the Duties of the Director, U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services

Matthew T. Albence, Deputy Director, and Senior Official Performing the Duties of the Director, U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement

Derek N. Benner, Executive Associate Director for Homeland Security Investigations and Senior Official Performing the Duties of the Deputy Director, U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement

Michael A. Dougherty, Ombudsman, U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services

Rachel Canty, Director, Student and Exchange Visitor Program, Department of Homeland Security