

INTERNATIONAL EXCHANGE PROGRAMS:

A Proven Investment in America



Policy Priority Recommendations for the Incoming Trump Administration

November 2024

International educational and cultural exchange programs are a proven investment in America – an investment in our economy, in our people, and in our foreign policy influence and interests.

The Alliance for International Exchange, an association representing the U.S. international educational and cultural exchange community, congratulates President-Elect Trump and Vice President-Elect Vance on their election and looks forward to working together to support and grow international exchange programs, which are essential to the prosperity of American businesses, families, and communities.

The Alliance applauds the nomination of Senator Marco Rubio as Secretary of State. We are deeply appreciative of Senator Rubio's longstanding and strong commitment to international exchange programs as key tools of U.S. public diplomacy and foreign policy. Throughout his tenure on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and State-Foreign Operations Appropriations Subcommittee, Senator Rubio has emphasized the role of soft power, including the use of public diplomacy tools like people-to-people exchange programs. He has recognized that exchange programs help to build relationships with other countries based on mutual interest. The Senator has long said he sees these efforts as crucial in promoting U.S. values and interests while addressing geopolitical challenges. We agree with the Senator's view that diplomatic and public diplomacy strategies should align with U.S. national interests while fostering international alliances and countering authoritarian regimes. International exchange programs do just that, and we look forward to working with Senator Rubio in his role as Secretary of State to ensure exchanges continue to flourish as an important diplomatic and economic tool.

The Department of State's Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs (ECA) facilitates a wide variety of exchange programs, both federally and privately funded, that send Americans abroad and bring international students and professionals to the United States. **Department of State exchange programs have a direct and significant impact on our economy, our communities,**

and our people, making ECA the most domestically focused of all State Department bureaus. Indeed, exchange programs are international in nature, but distinctly American in impact.

The Alliance recommends that international exchange programs be an essential part of the Trump Administration's policy priorities because they drive the U.S. economy, advance American foreign policy interests, and support American businesses, families, and communities.

This paper provides background on Department of State international exchange programs and outlines the Alliance's policy recommendations for strengthening and growing international exchanges, which will in turn strengthen our country and help the Trump Administration achieve its domestic and foreign policy goals.

BACKGROUND

The Department of State's Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs (ECA) facilitates an array of international exchange programs for more than 350,000 American and international students, professionals, and other participants every year:

- Department of State funded exchange programs reach more than 50,000 participants every year through academic, professional, youth, sports, music, and other cultural exchange programs.
- Department of State BridgeUSA private sector exchange programs bring more than 300,000 international students and professionals to the U.S. every year at no cost to the U.S. taxpayer. These exchanges include a wide array of limited-term opportunities for study, training, interning, teaching, work, research, and more.

Department of State exchanges are non-immigrant J-1 visa programs; international participants are required to return to their home countries upon completion of their programs.

In addition, the Department of State helps foster the mobility of more than one million international students who study at U.S. colleges and universities every year on F-1 visas.

International exchange programs are an economic and diplomatic engine for our country, essential to the U.S. for four principal reasons:

Driving America's Economy

An investment in international exchange programs is an investment in the U.S. economy.

- International university students contributed **\$43.8 billion** to the U.S. economy and created **378,175 jobs** in 2023-24.¹
- International education is one of America's top exports, adding **\$37.68 billion** to the nation's economy in 2021-22.²
- BridgeUSA exchange participants traveling to the U.S. contributed at least **\$811.2 million** to the U.S. economy³ and paid **\$277 million** in federal taxes to the U.S. in 2023.⁴
- Roughly **90%, or ~\$660 million**, of the Department of State exchange program budget is spent on Americans traveling abroad or by international participants while in America. This is one of the best returns on investment across the entire federal government.⁵

Advancing American Interests and Values

Exchanges create political and business networks around the world – networks that cement diplomatic relationships, strengthen national security, and bolster the economy.

For U.S. foreign policy to be successful, the U.S. must communicate and create relationships directly with the people of other countries, not just with other governments. An investment in international exchange programs allows the U.S. to assert this public diplomacy obligation and further American foreign policy priorities.

In this way, exchange programs have immeasurable national defense and security benefits, provide unique value for our nation, and advance American interests around the world. International exchanges are one of our oldest forms of diplomacy and are a key instrument of U.S. foreign policy, essential to strengthening U.S. global leadership and keeping our country safe. Exchanges help us promote American values worldwide and create international partnerships based on shared interests that ultimately save lives and build nations.

¹ NAFSA, *International Student Economic Value Tool*, 2023-24

² U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of Economic Analysis, 2021-22

³ Alliance for International Exchange, *BridgeUSA Impact Report*, forthcoming in 2025

⁴ Sprintax, *BridgeUSA Economic Impact Report*, 2023

⁵ U.S. Department of State, *ECA Domestic Impact Fact Sheet*, 2021

International exchanges advance U.S. interests by allowing us to build networks with more than 155 countries and territories. Exchange programs can help the U.S. to address foreign policy priorities including but not limited to:

- Engaging with Chinese students, professionals, and diplomats to seek mutual collaboration and to counter China's growing influence, including in regions like Sub-Saharan Africa and South America. China's investment in public diplomacy and exchange programs significantly surpasses that of the U.S., and their cumulative soft power spending has grown to include \$1.44 billion annually.⁶ In comparison, the U.S. spent only \$741 million on Department of State exchanges in FY24. The U.S. must correct this disparity with more aggressive and robust investments in exchange programs and other public diplomacy activities.
- Growing our influence in South America and counter the influence of Venezuela and China via direct exchange engagement with countries like Brazil, Peru, Argentina, Colombia, and more.
- Building a more united and economically prosperous Western Hemisphere through direct exchange engagement with Canada, Mexico, and Central American and Caribbean nations like the Dominican Republic, Costa Rica, El Salvador, and more.

Creating Future American Leaders

International exchanges equip American leaders for success on the world stage.

- More than **31 million** job openings require skills in communication, leadership, and problem-solving – all skill sets shaped through international exchange experiences.⁷
- Studying and traveling abroad helps to build careers, and young Americans know it. Nearly **9 out of 10** youth surveyed say they believe travel experiences increase employability.⁸
- **73% of employers** agree that increased international mobility encourages economic growth and makes Americans and the U.S. more globally competitive.⁹

⁶ The Lowy Institute

⁷ NAFSA, *Developing a Globally Competitive Workforce through Study Abroad*, 2020

⁸ StudentUniverse, *The State of Student & Youth Travel in 2024*

⁹ Society of Human Resource Management (SHRM), *Workplace Mobility: Employers See It as Key to Growth and U.S. Competitiveness*, 2023

Telling America's Story

Exchange programs show the world what America is really like, building familiarity, kinship, and trust.

- **4 out of 5** Americans feel international exchange programs enhance the image of their community as a good place to live.¹⁰
- Exchanges are global programs with a significant local impact. Exchange participants experience and impact every piece of American community life: schools, families, workplaces and businesses, government, and more. All 50 states host exchange participants, all of whom support the local economy during their temporary stay.
- **94% of exchange students** from Muslim-majority countries reported that they have a **deeper, more favorable view of American culture** after their year in the United States.¹¹
 - After completing their six-week professional experience at U.S. institutions, **98% of 2024 Mandela Washington Fellows reported an increased understanding of U.S. culture and values.**¹²

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The Alliance recommends that the Trump Administration nominate and work with the Senate to confirm a strong Assistant Secretary of State for Educational and Cultural Affairs as quickly as possible, in order to provide immediate and necessary leadership to further international exchange program priorities.

Additionally, the Alliance recommends that the Trump Administration support the below policy priorities, in collaboration with Congress and the international exchange community, to continue to strengthen exchange programs as investments in the U.S. economy and vital tools to advance American interests around the world.

Policy Priority #1

Support a robust appropriation for Department of State international exchange programs

We recommend that the Trump Administration prioritize robust funding for Department of State international exchange programs, which are, quite simply, one of the best returns on investment in the federal budget. **Funding for ECA exchange programs grew by 17% during the**

¹⁰ Global Ties U.S., *Community Impact Study*, 2024

¹¹ U.S. Department of State

¹² Mandela Washington Fellowship, IREX

first Trump Administration, and we hope the second Trump Administration will continue this trend.

At \$741 million in FY24, funding for exchanges is only 0.0006% of the federal budget. **And 90% of this funding, or ~\$660 million, is spent domestically – either on Americans to travel abroad or by international participants while in the U.S.**

The exchanges appropriation leverages millions of additional dollars in private and international government contributions. For example, the Global Ties U.S. network of 90+ community-based nonprofits in all 50 states that implement the International Visitor Leadership Program (IVLP) sees an 11:1 return on federal investment – for every federal dollar spent on their programs conducted in the United States, these organizations generate \$11 more. Also, the Fulbright Program is one of the most highly leveraged federal programs, as over 100 partner governments currently contribute over \$100 million annually, with 30 foreign governments matching or exceeding the U.S. government’s annual contribution.

The Alliance will release its FY26 funding request for Department of State Educational and Cultural Exchanges (ECE) in early 2025. We look forward to coordinating with the Administration to ensure that funding continues to increase, as it did during the first Trump Administration.

Policy Priority #2

Support and expand Department of State BridgeUSA private sector exchange programs

We recommend that the Trump Administration prioritize the well-being and growth of the State Department’s BridgeUSA private sector exchange programs, also known as “J-1 visa programs.” BridgeUSA programs, all limited-term and non-immigrant, contribute to the success of many aspects of American business, education, and family life. All organizations facilitating BridgeUSA programs must adhere to specific and stringent regulations, as determined and enforced by the Department.

U.S. businesses in seasonal locations across the country are supported by international students on the Summer Work Travel (SWT) program. American families, including military families and first responders, have access to quality, culturally enriching childcare through the Au Pair program. American summer camps can provide campers with life-changing summers through the Camp Counselor program. American schools of all kinds are able to supplement teacher shortages through the Teacher program and provide cultural learning for K-12 students through the High School program. American companies augment their businesses with high-skilled professionals, including in STEM fields, on the Intern, Trainee, and Research Scholar programs.

These participants not only play vital roles in these aspects of American life, but they also pay their own way and receive no funding from the U.S. government. In fact, BridgeUSA programs come **at no cost to the U.S. taxpayer**. In addition, BridgeUSA exchange participants traveling to the U.S. contributed at least **\$811.2 million** to the U.S. economy in 2023 before returning home.

The Alliance will release its BridgeUSA Regulatory Policy Agenda at the start of 2025 and looks forward to coordinating with the Administration to move this agenda forward on specific programmatic interests.

Policy Priority #3

Increase the number of international students studying in the U.S.

We recommend that the Trump Administration prioritize the growth of international college and university students studying in the U.S. **The U.S. hosted 1,126,690 international college/university students in the 2023-24 academic year**¹³ (just 6% of total U.S. enrollment) and welcomes the most international students of any country in the world. However, we have been losing market share to countries like the UK, Canada, Australia, and even China. With some of these countries rolling back their international student recruitment efforts, the U.S. must seize the opportunity to increase our market share.

International students contributed \$43.8 billion to the U.S. economy and created 378,175 jobs in the 2023-24 academic year.¹⁴ These students pay full tuition and are an important revenue source to U.S. colleges and universities. **92% of U.S. colleges and universities said that they want to increase international student enrollment over the next five years.** Since 2010, total undergraduate enrollment in the U.S. has decreased by almost two million students, or 10%, and projections anticipate a 15% decline in college enrollment after 2025. U.S. colleges and universities can focus on international students as a pipeline to increase enrollment given this anticipated drop in domestic student numbers.¹⁵

Having a cadre of U.S.-educated political and business leaders around the world forwards U.S. interests. India and China are the top two sending countries of F-1 visa international students to the U.S., allowing us to grow our direct engagement and influence with both countries. Enrollment from students in other key world regions allows the U.S. to advance foreign policy interests and counter threats: Growing enrollment from African (i.e., Nigeria) and Southeast Asian (i.e., Vietnam) countries helps counter Chinese influence in these regions; Growing enrollment from South America (i.e., Brazil) helps to establish a stronger presence in the region

¹³ *Open Doors 2024*, U.S. Department of State and Institute of International Education

¹⁴ NAFSA International Student Economic Value Tool, 2024

¹⁵ Institute of International Education, *Outlook 2030 Brief: The U.S. and International Education*, 2024

and counter Venezuelan influence; and enrollment from the Middle East (i.e., Saudi Arabia) helps counter Iranian influence.

The Alliance is a founding member of the U.S. for Success Coalition, a group of organizations that seek to achieve this policy goal. The Coalition looks forward to working with the Trump Administration to bring more international students to our country for our economic and diplomatic benefit.

Policy Priority #4

Create more access for American students and young professionals to study and work abroad

We recommend that the Trump Administration prioritize creating far more opportunities for American students and young professionals to study and work abroad. **We need more Americans abroad to keep pace and achieve reciprocity with many other countries around the world. Only 280,000 American students studied abroad in 2022-23, while more than 1 million international students came to the U.S.¹⁶ We must right this imbalance.**

Studying, interning, and working abroad should not be viewed as a luxury for young Americans, but rather a necessity. International experience is a crucial component of a 21st century education and vital to building leadership skills. A global economy brings with it a demand for a U.S. workforce that can excel across countries and cultures and can speak languages in addition to English. The ability to work across cultures is essential for young Americans to find a job.

Significant international experience will allow Americans to succeed in the modern marketplace. **Growth potential for U.S. businesses lies in overseas markets: 95% of potential consumers live *outside* the U.S.¹⁷** The U.S. faces ever increasing competition from foreign-owned companies, many of which manufacture products in the U.S. and need employees who can bridge U.S. and international work cultures.

Studying, working, and living abroad play an important role in developing the global mindset needed to balance local and international challenges. Immersion in the local culture and customs of another country opens students' eyes to a new way of thinking about the world, instilling a more informed approach to problem-solving in cross-cultural contexts.

¹⁶ *Open Doors 2024*, U.S. Department of State and Institute of International Education

¹⁷ Institute of International Education, *Outlook 2030 Brief: The U.S. and International Education*, 2024

Policy Priority #5

Ensure effective and secure processing of exchange visitor and international student visas by the Department of State's Bureau of Consular Affairs

In order to safeguard the integrity of our national security, we recommend that the Trump Administration provide sufficient resources to the Department of State's Bureau of Consular Affairs. By doing so, the Administration will ensure U.S. consular officers can continue to provide visas to the qualified and fully vetted applicants who bring so much value to our country.

A well-resourced Consular Affairs Bureau is able to encourage the continued mobility of non-immigrant exchange participants and international students to the U.S., ensuring we continue to benefit from the economic and diplomatic impact of these programs.

The Alliance supports rigorous immigration policies that ensure our country's national security. Such policies should also facilitate a smooth and expedient visa process for all qualified candidates. The vast economic and public diplomacy contributions made by international exchange programs are deeply important to U.S. foreign policy, and essential to U.S. communities across the country. With adequate resources, the Bureau of Consular Affairs has the capacity to implement rigorous immigration policy while also processing the visas of international exchange participants who could one day be critical future allies.

CONCLUSION

The Alliance appreciates the decades of collaboration between the international exchange community and the Department of State in support of international exchange programs and people-to-people diplomacy. We look forward to once again collaborating with the Trump Administration to strengthen the American economy and advance our national security interests through the promotion of international educational and cultural exchange programs.