

Statement of Marlene M. Johnson
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Before the Subcommittee on International Organizations, Human Rights, and
Oversight, Committee on Foreign Affairs, and the Subcommittee on Higher
Education, Lifelong Learning, and Competitiveness, Committee on Education and
Labor
United States House of Representatives
“International Students and Visiting Scholars: Trends, Barriers, and Implications
for American Universities and Foreign Policy”
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Thank you very much for the invitation to testify before these subcommittees today on this very important topic.

My name is Marlene Johnson and I am the executive director and CEO of NAFSA: Association of International Educators. NAFSA is the world’s largest professional association dedicated to the promotion and advancement of international education and exchange. Our nearly 10,000 members serve primarily as foreign student and study abroad advisers at some 3,500 colleges and universities here in the United States and abroad. Our mission is to promote and advance international education and exchange and to support public policies that expand international education and exchange programs between the United States and other nations.

My remarks today will focus on the benefits of international educational exchange, the trends in international student and scholar exchange, the barriers that continue to hamper our nation’s ability to compete effectively for the world’s best and brightest students and scholars, and the steps we must take to regain our standing as the preeminent destination for the world’s international students and scholars.

The Benefits of International Educational Exchange

The more than half a million international students and scholars present on campuses nationwide offer tremendous foreign policy, national security, educational and economic benefits. Over the past half-century, America’s leaders have recognized the power of educational exchanges as a critical public diplomacy tool; both Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and Under Secretary for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs Karen Hughes have remarked publicly that people-to-people exchange is “our most valuable foreign policy asset” and “one of the most effective things we can do to build better relationships around the world.” It is not a coincidence that many world leaders who are our closest allies are also graduates of U.S. higher education institutions. Educational exchange enhances our nation’s security, for the more friends and allies we generate through these kinds of exchanges, the fewer sources of conflict we have. An investment in educational exchange now is an investment in our future national security.

International students and scholars are essential for our global competitiveness, as they make significant contributions to our country's economic growth and innovation. Recent data from the National Science Board indicate that nearly half of all graduate enrollments at U.S. institutions in the science and engineering fields are international students, many of whom will go on to positively impact future research and technology output in this country. While we support recent efforts to focus attention and resources on building up America's own supply of science and technology talent, it is equally important to ensure that we continue to actively attract international talent to our shores to retain our innovative edge in these fields.

International students and scholars also contribute significantly to U.S. higher education through their presence on U.S. campuses, with students interacting with their American counterparts, many of whom have never encountered a person from another country before, and with scholars contributing to classroom instruction and groundbreaking laboratory research. Lastly, international students and their dependents generate a significant economic benefit to the country. NAFSA estimates that international students and their dependents contributed nearly \$13.5 billion to the nation's economy during the 2005-2006 academic year. This makes international education the nation's fifth largest service sector export, according to the U.S. Department of Commerce.

Trends in International Student and Scholar Participation

According to the latest UNESCO statistics, as of 2004, 2.5 million international students were studying outside their home countries, up from 1.68 million in 1999, and some have projected this number to climb to 7.2 million by 2025. For decades, the United States reigned as the preferred destination for international students and scholars, a fact not so surprising considering that this country possesses 17 of the 20 top universities in the world. Overall, as reported by the Institute of International Education, the United States hosts the largest number of international students of any country in the world—564,766 in the 2005-2006 academic year, the most recent year of available data. Until the early part of this decade, this overall enrollment figure had been growing rather steadily. However, what this figure does not show is that over the past 20 years, our share of the overall international student market has been in a steady decline, a decline further exacerbated by the many visa and entry policy changes put in place in response to the events of September 11, 2001. Simply put, we are not getting our share of the growth in the international student market.

This steady decline in market share has happened for several reasons. First, our traditional competitor countries, such as the United Kingdom and Australia, have adopted and implemented strategies for capturing a greater share of the market. For example, in 1999, UK Prime Minister Tony Blair announced a national strategy for boosting international student recruitment, which resulted in an enrollment increase of 118,000—more than twice the U.S. increase over the same period, on a smaller base. As a result of this success, Prime Minister Blair announced a new initiative in April of last year to increase international enrollments by another 100,000 over the next five years.

Second, new competitors have entered the market. Primary among them is the European Higher Education Area, a group currently numbering 46 European nations that has pledged under the “Bologna Process” to create a seamless higher education system by the year 2010 and to actively promote European higher education to the rest of the world. And with English becoming a common language of instruction, it is now possible to study for a degree in English in many non-Anglophone European countries. Additionally, other centers of instruction have emerged to serve regional markets, such as in Dubai and Singapore.

Third, traditional “sending” countries are building up their own higher education capacities in order to entice their students to stay home for their education, so as not to lose them to the United States. Both China and India, the two largest “sending” countries, are investing heavily in their own higher education structures to meet the educational needs their fast-growing populations, as well as to enhance their own economic development.

As a result of these developments, international students are increasingly savvy in their choices, factoring cost and convenience, as well as reputation, into their decision-making process. Add to this the numerous visa and entry policy changes that were put into effect following the events of September 11, 2001—making it exponentially harder for both students and scholars to get into the United States—and we had the makings of a perfect storm.

The market responded quite clearly over the ensuing years. According to the Institute of International Education, in the 2002-2003 academic year—the first full year after 9/11—the United States experienced only a 0.6 percent increase in international student enrollment, following several years of increases in the 5 to 6 percent range. This was followed by successive declines in international student enrollments over the next three academic years: Enrollments were down 2.4 percent in 2003-2004, 1.3 percent in 2004-2005, and 0.05 percent in 2005-2006, which is essentially flat. Such a prolonged decline is unprecedented as long as data have been kept.

Official data for 2006-2007 will not be released until November. A spot survey conducted by NAFSA, IIE, and several higher education associations last fall suggests that we will see a slight uptick in international student enrollments for the academic year that just ended. Yet overall international student enrollment remains 20,000 below the all-time high achieved in 2002-2003. Additionally, during the time we have been in decline, from 2003-2006, enrollments have increased by more than 80,000 in the United Kingdom, more than 50,000 in Australia and France, and more than 20,000 in Germany and Japan. These data, along with a projection showing what overall enrollment figures might look like now, had the tragic events of September 11 not happened and had everything remained unchanged, are displayed in the two charts appended to my statement. Had our steady growth rate continued unabated, it is quite possible that we would be looking at enrollment figures reaching above 700,000 today.

One little-discussed, but no less important, factor exacerbating these trends is the significant decline in enrollment in U.S. intensive English programs. These programs often serve as a gateway for international students interested in pursuing a U.S. degree program and who need to improve their English language ability prior to commencing their studies. Since 2000, enrollments in U.S. intensive English language programs have fallen by nearly 50 percent, forcing many programs to shut down their operations. This decline is due primarily to the increased difficulty of obtaining a visa for the specific purpose of studying English in the United States. One would be hard pressed to think of another major power in the world that discourages the study of its language.

The State Department has testified that it issued a record number of student visas in FY2006—591,060, to be exact. As numbers often are, that number is correct but misleading. First, it is important to keep in mind that higher visa issuance does not necessarily translate into higher enrollment figures, for as I described earlier, international students today have more higher education opportunities available to them than ever before. Therefore we must use the overall enrollment data as a more exact measure of our progress in this area. Second, in order to be able to make this statement, the State Department has combined student (F) visas and exchange visitor (J) visas under the term “student visas.” This means that the department’s total student visa issuance number includes issuance of visas to individuals who are not coming here for study or research at a U.S. university. The exchange visitor visa includes not only university students, but also scholars, high school exchange students, teachers, camp counselors, trainees, summer work/travel participants and au pairs. When broken out by visa category, the data show that the lion’s share of the increase in FY2006 occurred in the J visa category, which reached an all-time high of 309,953, whereas F visa issuance was at 273,870, nearly 20,000 below the amount issued in FY2001.

I do not say this to pick a fight with the State Department, only to clarify the record. In fact, I believe that the department—particularly the Bureau of Consular Affairs—deserves a great deal of credit for undertaking a tremendous effort over the past three years to adjust the visa policies that created many of the problems encountered in the post-9/11 period. We also appreciate the public support from the Secretary of State and the Under Secretary of Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs on behalf of international educational exchange. However, there is much more work to do here; we will not win back our share of the market by just fixing the visa system, or through a public relations campaign. Restoring U.S. competitiveness will require a concerted strategy, involving many government agencies as well as higher education itself, to make the United States a more attractive destination for international students and scholars both in word and deed.

What Must Be Done

The single most important action the United States government must undertake is to do what our competitors are doing: establish a proactive policy that articulates the national interest in attracting international students and scholars to the United States, and sets out a comprehensive national strategy for doing so. Such a strategy must be overseen by a senior White House official who is responsible to the president for its result.

My association has long advocated for such a strategy, beginning with our white paper entitled “Toward an International Education Policy,” co-authored with the Alliance for International Educational and Cultural Exchange and first released in 1999. We developed the strategy further in our 2003 report, *In America’s Interest: Welcoming International Students* (<http://www.nafsa.org/inamericasinterest>), and in our 2006 follow-up report, *Restoring U.S. Competitiveness for International Students and Scholars* (<http://www.nafsa.org/competereport>). I have submitted these reports for the record and have made them available to the members of the subcommittees. I will summarize their key points here:

Develop a coordinated recruitment strategy

First, we need to develop a coordinated recruitment and outreach strategy. We can no longer reasonably assume that just because the majority of international students and scholars are choosing to study or conduct research in this country today, they will continue to do so tomorrow—the global trends and enrollment data I have just shared with you bear this out. Such a strategy must be a collaborative effort between the U.S. government and U.S. higher education, and it must seek to bring together all the federal agencies that share responsibility, both directly and indirectly, for international student recruitment in order to better coordinate their respective efforts, both internally and with respect to each other. To draw a football analogy here, if the team isn’t working off the same playbook, it’s not likely to get the ball into the end zone and score.

Recently, we have begun to see some improved interagency coordination, beginning with the University Presidents Summit on International Education co-hosted by the Departments of State and Education early last year. The State Department’s overseas advising center and the Department of Commerce’s U.S. Commercial Service staffs have started working together, and last November, Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings and Assistant Secretary of State for Education and Cultural Affairs Dina Powell led a U.S. higher education recruitment trip to Japan, Korea, and China.

This is gratifying to see, but this effort is still not the comprehensive effort it needs to be. A successful recruitment strategy not only involves developing a coordinated message to prospective international students on the whys and hows of studying in the United States, but also ensuring that all the relevant federal agencies do not act in ways that make traveling to and studying in the United States a less than positive experience. There have been too many instances where positive rhetoric by high-level government officials has been cancelled out by federal policies and regulations that are imposed without consideration of their impact. A comprehensive recruitment strategy ensures that all agencies are working in concert with one another.

For example, the Department of Homeland Security significantly impacts the U.S. position in the competition for international students and scholars. Three of its bureaus are directly responsible for the admission, monitoring, and services related to international students and scholars, but DHS is equipped neither by mandate nor by

organization and structure to advance a competitiveness agenda—let alone achieve synergy with other agencies, such as the State Department, regarding visa policy. While the State Department makes the individual visa decisions, DHS controls visa policy. Yet without a proactive policy for attracting international students and scholars, visa policy decisions become, in effect, the lowest common denominator of whatever the two agencies can agree on.

A comprehensive strategy must provide effective mandates for the Departments of State, Commerce, and Education in this area; at present, coordination among these agencies is ad hoc at best. Additionally, the strategy must provide not only effective coordination among these agencies, but also among the other federal agencies that have an impact on our nation's attractiveness, including the Social Security Administration and Internal Revenue Service. When these two agencies changed their respective policies for issuing social security and tax identification numbers to international students and scholars, they inadvertently made it much harder to acquire these essential identification numbers. Many students and scholars found it difficult to rent an apartment, or open bank and utility accounts. So as long as we continue to lack a coordinating structure and a mandate to work together in support of educational exchanges, various other elements of our government will continue, however unintentionally, to work at cross-purposes.

Remove excessive governmentally-imposed barriers to international students and scholars

As I stated earlier, the State Department's Bureau of Consular Affairs, under the leadership of Assistant Secretary Maura Harty, has done a tremendous job over the past three years fixing many of the serious problems related to visa issuance for international students and scholars, specifically with visa interview wait times and security clearance backlogs. However, despite this progress, there remain significant problems in the visa and border entry process, impeding the flow of international students and scholars into the United States. There are still far too many cases of students and of well-known scientists and scholars who are subjected to unexplained visa delays and denials, and this continues to harm our reputation as a place that welcomes the world's talent. In an effort to keep out the people we don't want in this country, the system all too often fails to welcome the people we do want.

For example, in January of this year, the University of Kansas reported a serious visa delay case involving an international student from Saudi Arabia, the first Saudi student ever accepted to the university's law school. The student began his studies in the fall of 2006 in the field of constitutional law, knowledge he hoped to use upon his return to Saudi Arabia to help establish a Western alternative to Islamic law. In December 2006, like many of his fellow students, he traveled home to visit his family during the winter break between semesters. He knew he needed to renew his visa before returning for the spring semester, but as he had been issued his initial visa only six months earlier, he hoped the process would be fairly smooth. But it was anything but smooth. The clearance took five months. He missed the entire spring semester, and in fact may need to miss the rest of this year due to the law program's course sequencing. Such cases are

all too common. They continue to hamper our efforts to attract international students and scholars.

We need a clear, operational visa policy that realizes the “Secure Borders, Open Doors” vision in its truest sense – that both secure borders and open doors are essential to our national security. Earlier this year, NAFSA, along with the National Foreign Trade Council, the Heritage Foundation, the Alliance for International Educational and Cultural Exchange, and the Coalition for Employment Through Exports, released a set of common visa recommendations entitled “Realizing the Rice-Chertoff Vision” (<http://www.nafsa.org/visarecs>), a document that outlines specific actions that both Congress and the federal government should take to improve visa policy and processing. I have submitted this document for the record and have made it available to the members of the subcommittees, along with the other reports I referenced earlier. Two of its recommendations bear special mention here.

First, Congress must restore to the Secretary of State the authority to allow U.S. consulates discretion to waive the personal interview requirement based on risk assessment. In 2004, Congress—unwisely in my opinion—wrote into law temporary State Department guidance that consular officers must scrutinize virtually every nonimmigrant visa applicant and treat everyone as a security risk. This change has not enhanced our security in any meaningful way; it only has overburdened consular resources, especially at high-volume consulates located in India, China, Brazil and Mexico, where interview wait times are lengthy and applicants in many cases must travel hundreds of miles only to have 3-4 minutes with a consular officer to review their application. Try to imagine a similar scenario for an American wishing to travel overseas, and you start to understand how burdensome this process can be. We fully agree that all visa applicants wishing to enter the United States should be subject to an appropriate level of screening, but the screening should be applied in a manner that focuses more attention on those applicants with serious security concerns, and less on those with no concerns at all. We also ask Congress to exercise vigorous oversight of the federal agencies charged with implementing the Rice-Chertoff vision, “Secure Borders, Open Doors”, as first announced in January 2006, and hearings such as this one are a good start.

We also must reform our immigration system in order to create and support a climate that encourages the contributions of foreign talent, one that better reflects this current era of globalization. We must ensure that any immigration reforms result in policies that enhance the ability of the United States to compete for the best and brightest international students and researchers and provide the flexibility required by a globally mobile workforce. It is a reality of our time that, at the high-skill level, the temporary immigration system has become a conveyor belt of talent into the permanent immigration system. Many foreign students do want to go home after graduation, but some of them want to stay here to use the knowledge they have acquired at our universities. Therefore, to better reflect current realities, the requirement that applicants for student visas demonstrate intent not to immigrate to the United States should be eliminated.

Another primary concern in this area is the removal or adjustment of unrealistic caps on employment-based visa categories. Businesses often look to higher education institutions when they recruit new employees. High-tech businesses, especially, rely on foreign students to fill gaps left by the shortage of qualified American graduates. One of the best things Congress can do to enhance our nation's ability to attract the world's best international students and scholars is to pass comprehensive immigration reform legislation with strong provisions that address these issues.

Address the cost of higher education in the United States

The high cost of U.S. higher education is a competitive fact of life for our country. Even American students and their parents are struggling to afford the current tuition rates. However, although American students have access to many financial aid resources, foreign undergraduate students are not so fortunate. Members who were in Congress during the Cold War will recall a very different time, when scholarships for international students were plentiful and politically popular, because the competition for international students was part of our competition with the Soviet Union. Those days are gone. Today, it is simply not realistic to expect the American people to support large-scale financial aid for international students at a time when they are challenged by the cost of educating their own children. However, there are things that can and should be done.

In order to reach farther and deeper into critical areas of the world, there need to be more financial aid opportunities for international undergraduate students, along with an easy mechanism for disseminating information about these options. Creative partnerships among all the stakeholders who have an interest in increasing international student access to the United States—higher education institutions, business, the U.S. government and foreign governments—can maximize our collective strength in this area. For example, we should seek to develop more private loan sources through innovative partnerships between the higher education and business communities, such as CitiBank's CitiAssist Global Loan Program, which offers loan opportunities to international students for up to \$10,000 per year.

We should seek to expand the number of available scholarship opportunities for international students, especially for students in areas of the world where the United States has a clear foreign policy or economic development interest. The Davis United World College Scholars Program, as described by my fellow witness on this panel, is a notable model. Another model to consider involves leveraging support from the U.S. Agency for International Development to provide foreign aid in the form of scholarships. Years ago, AID provided seed money to create scholarship programs for study in the United States where the recipients repay the scholarship through service in their home country. One such successful program was organized through the Academy for Educational Development for students from Botswana, and from 1982-2003, more than 1,500 Botswanans studied at U.S. institutions with its support.

Finally, many U.S. universities have partnerships with foreign universities that support one-for-one tuition exchanges, where international students pay tuition and fees to their

home institutions, so no money changes hands between the two institutions. This set-up not only offers the international student an affordable opportunity to study in the United States, but also encourages U.S. students to study abroad. All of the above opportunities should be actively pursued to ensure we continue to attract international students and scholars from all levels of society.

However, none of these opportunities will be effective if there is not an easy mechanism that can be accessed to learn more about them. Our competitors have aggressively marketed the cost-effectiveness of their programs, yet we have done little to counter these efforts and dispel the notion that a U.S. education is unaffordable. Within the past year or so, a few Web-based resources have been created to provide some financial aid information, specifically the State Department's EducationUSA online financial assistance guide and the Institute of International Education's "Funding for U.S. Study" Web site. This is a good start, but more should be done to develop a comprehensive financial aid clearinghouse so that international students have a one-stop resource for understanding all of the financial assistance options that are currently available to them.

Brand and market U.S. higher education

The United States has the best higher education product in the world, and its vast array of options – the different programs, locations, degree levels, and institution types— is a source of its enormous appeal. There is something here for everyone. But the diversity of options also can act as a deterrent for an international applicant. Therefore, like our competitors, we must not only actively recruit international students to our universities, but also strategically market the value of a U.S. higher education, and "brand" it as both a value and an opportunity. Branding U.S. higher education will allow the pooling of public and private resources for maximum impact and will encourage the best use of marketing dollars. The marketing message also should seek to convey that international students are welcome here.

An essential element of this plan is the creation of a single, user-friendly, Web-based resource through which international students are able to access information about everything from program options to visa requirements to financial aid. This online resource should allow students to rank their personal preferences, such as cost, location, and field of study, and should provide links to institutions that match up with their preferences. Ideally, these links would allow students to apply for admission online directly. Last November, the Departments of Commerce and State, along with private sector funding, developed a multimedia campaign to market U.S. higher education opportunities to potential students in China called the "Electronic Education Fair for China". The campaign included a customized web page for prospective Chinese students, plus a DVD documentary detailing the experiences of Chinese students currently studying at U.S. institutions. We understand that there are plans in the near future for a similar campaign in India. This is good first step, but, as articulated above, more can and should be done to expand on this effort, both in substance and in scope.

A Way Forward

How can we move these eminently sensible measures from talk to action? First, the President must set a strong policy direction by announcing a comprehensive policy to attract international students and scholars to the United States. Second, Congress should establish an International Education Coordination Council in the Executive Office of the President to spearhead the policy's implementation. The council should be chaired by a senior White House official and should coordinate the activities of the U.S. government in order to further the policy's objectives. The council should be composed of the Departments of State, Homeland Security, Education, Commerce, Energy, and Labor, as well as the FBI, the Social Security Administration, and such other agencies as the President may designate.

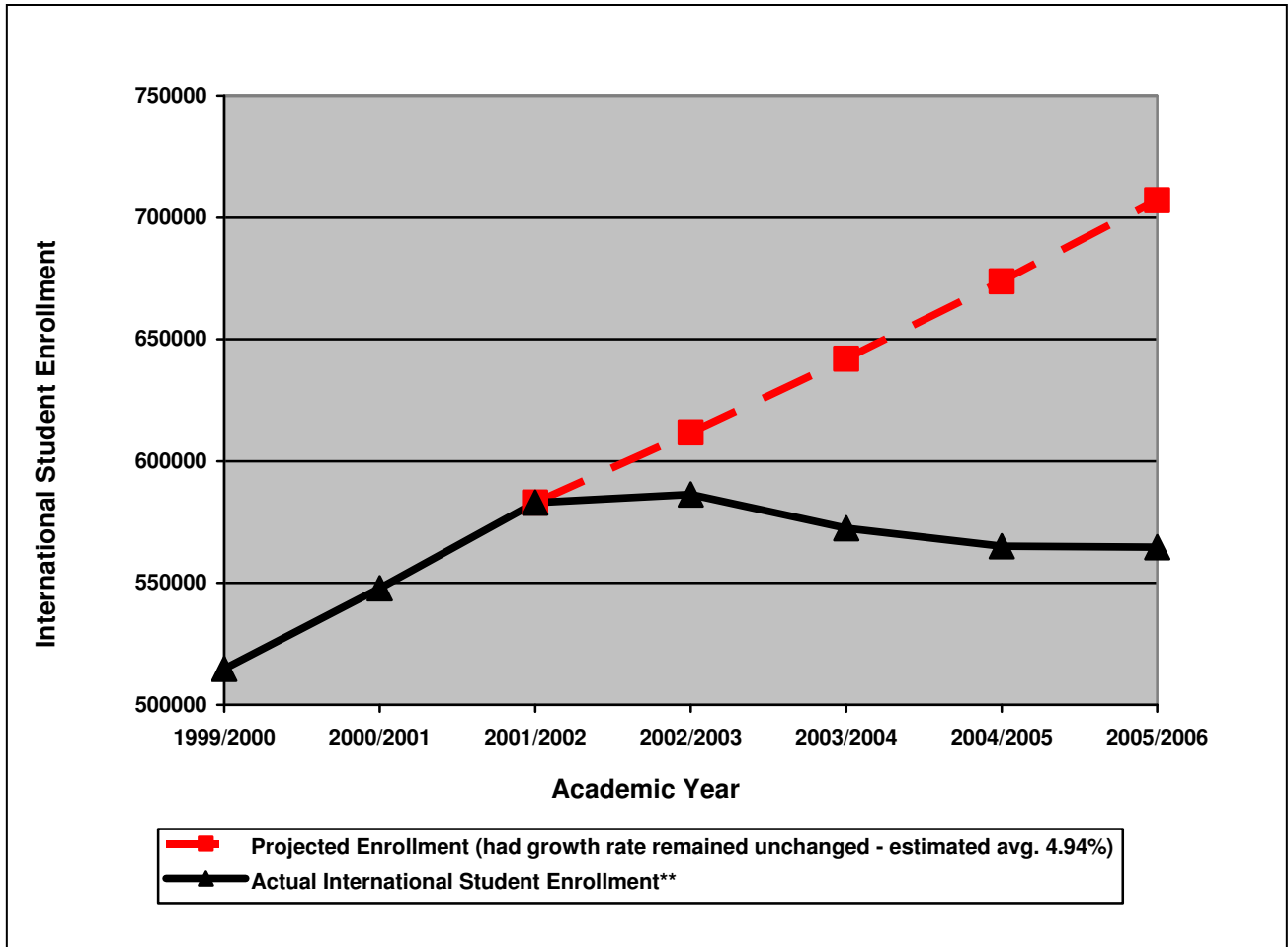
Conclusion

The American way of life owes its success and vitality to our historical ability to harness the best in knowledge and ideas, not only those that are home grown, but also those that come from outside our borders. We must sustain and reinvigorate this tradition to be competitive in today's global market for talent. Other countries are aggressively using international education to advance their economies and foreign policies. The United States has been remarkably complacent in this arena, slow to appreciate the impact of new educational markets around the globe and the ways that today's unprecedented movement of people across borders has fundamentally shifted the playing field in education, business, and scientific and technological discovery. To get back on track, America needs to do better. We call for national leadership to elevate international educational exchange as a national priority and to establish a national strategy to ensure that the United States can attract the best in talent from around the globe.

Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today. I would be delighted to answer any questions.

APPENDIX

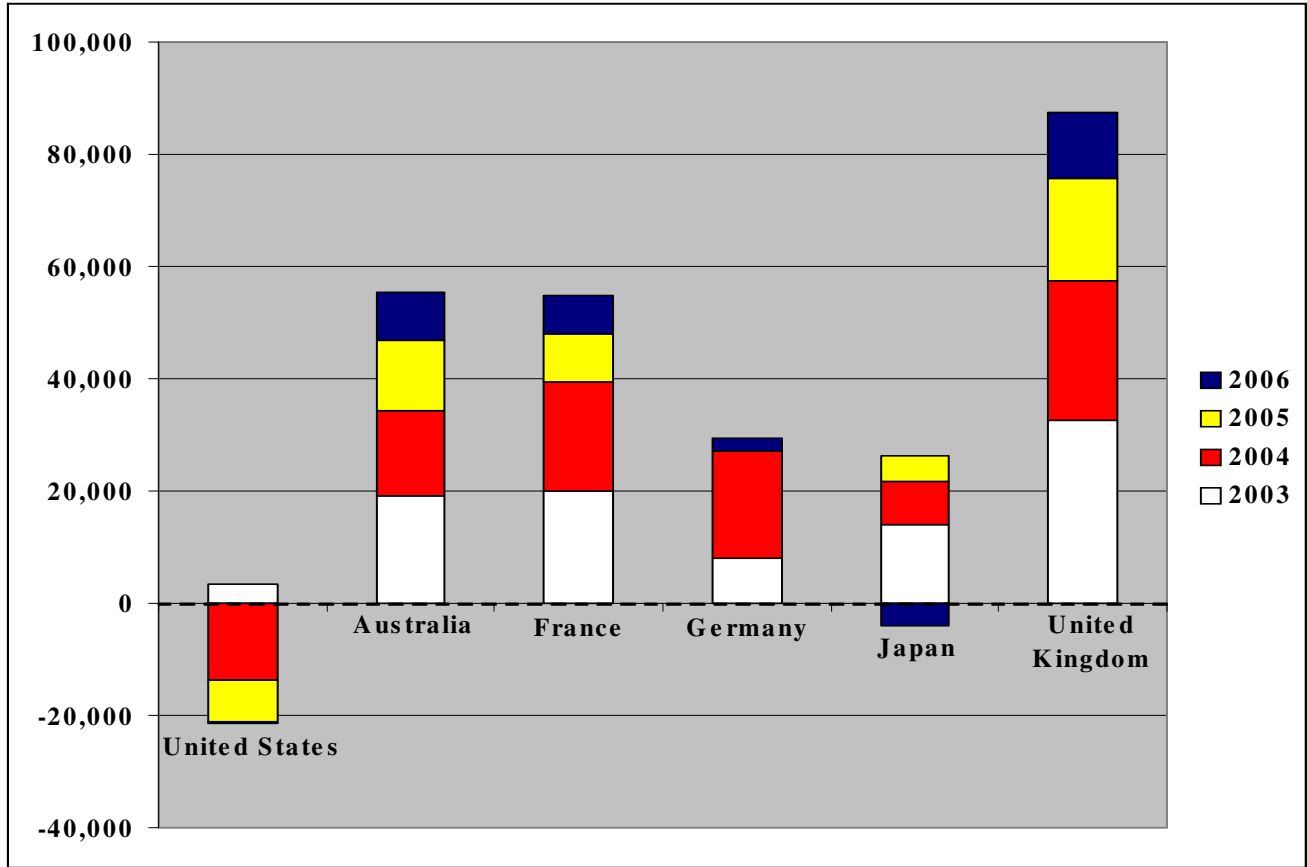
**GRAPH 1: International Student Enrollment in the United States
Academic Years 1999/2000 - 2005/2006**



**Note: This information represents international student enrollment data as reported by the Institute of International Education, *Open Doors 2006*

APPENDIX (cont')

**GRAPH 2: International Student Enrollment – Selected Countries, 2003-2006
 Absolute Change from Previous Year**



**Note: This chart represents international student enrollment data as reported annually by the entities listed below:
 United States: Institute of International Education, *Open Doors 2003, 2004, 2005, 2006*
 Australia: Australian Government-Australian Education International
 France: Ministère de l'Éducation Nationale Enseignement Supérieur Recherche
 Germany: Federal Ministry of Education Research (2003-2004); Federal Statistic Office Germany (2004-2006); 2006 enrollment numbers last updated 10/18/06.