

# Symposium Reflection #1

Trends in International Student Mobility Pre- & Post Pandemic



**MICHIGAN  
LANGUAGE  
ASSESSMENT**



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On October 12, 2021, representatives of the U.S. Department of Commerce, U.S. Department of State, NAFSA, and The Chronicle of Higher Education kicked-off a two-day [virtual symposium](#) with a conversation about current and future trends in international student mobility after the pandemic. The audience included 270 higher education professionals from colleges and universities from around the country. Here are some of the key themes that emerged from this panel.

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## Featured Speakers



Gabriela Zelaya,  
Global Education Team  
Leader, *U.S. Commercial  
Service, International  
Trade Administration, U.S.  
Department of Commerce*



Ana Villavicencio, Regional  
Educational Advising  
Coordinator, *EducationUSA,  
U.S. Department of State*



Joann Ng Hartmann, Senior  
Director, IEM-ISS Services  
and Volunteer Engagement,  
*NAFSA: Association of  
International Educators*



Karin Fischer,  
International Reporter, *The  
Chronicle of Higher Education*

## A New Playing Field

**D**espite the challenges stemming from the pandemic, the United States remains a top, preferred destination of study for international students. More than ever, it has been critical for higher education institutions to evolve, adapting to the changing landscape of international student mobility. The players and the field itself have changed. The wants and needs of international students have shifted. Recruitment efforts have been supported by educational technology, education agents, and external collaborations. Higher education institutions have embraced technologies not only to continue delivering academic programs but also to recruit, accept, and provide continuous support to international students.

### Students Desire the Added Value that U.S. Education Can Provide

Historically, higher education institutions in the U.S. have viewed and defined international students mainly by mobility. Administrators, educators, and students aren't the same people they were 20 months ago. This is especially true for international students, who enrich campus life by sharing their culture and new perspectives. COVID changed their physical presence but not their impact. Like all of us, international students have also changed. They are savvier and bolder. They are even more connected to their peers and the world now. They care about social and environmental issues. The pandemic has shown that education can continue without being physically present in the U.S. This shift in priorities begs the question of whether or not the definition of international students needs to be revised.

Career outcomes are extremely important for international students. Therefore, they are looking for more than just an education when deciding whether and where to study abroad.

Optional practical training, work experience, internships, and research opportunities are highly sought after by international students. There's increased interest in cost-saving models like 2+2 programs, where students start their education in their home country and finish their degree at another institution.

It is up to each college and university to evaluate their practices and decide how well they have accommodated these changes, needs, and expectations. For example, how have their advising, career, and student support services evolved so that they can provide the experience and outcomes that match what international students are looking for now?

### Recent Developments in Federal and State Policies

In early 2020, federal immigration policies seemed to change by the hour. Travel restrictions, the temporary suspension of visa issuance, and health and safety concerns presented higher education institutions with one challenge after another. The U.S. Department of State and Department of Education recently renewed their commitment to international education. NAFSA continues with its advocacy work. However, state and federal regulations continue to change. An example affecting international recruitment policies, the THRIVE Act included a provision banning incentive-based compensation for higher education institutions that rely on international agents for recruitment purposes; NAFSA and other organizations are advocating for the addition of a technical correction to the Act.

With this changing landscape, it is important for higher education institutions to follow and understand these evolving regulations, policies, and agency guidelines, to set and communicate realistic expectations for their international students.

## Moving Forward With Our New Normal

The pandemic proved virtual learning is possible, showing that education can continue without being physically present in the classroom. As travel restrictions loosen, campuses open for face-to-face classes, and students return to campus, some international students still prefer the safety and convenience of online and hybrid programs. In terms of international recruitment practices, online recruitment will continue for a while yet still. Students enjoy the flexibility that virtual communications and services offer, and higher education institutions benefit from the diversity it brings to recruitment. Virtual fairs, video conference calls, and online webinars allow recruiters to reach students in new parts of the world at a time that is convenient to students.

While the abruptness of the pandemic caused its fair share of challenges, it also accelerated the need for U.S. higher education institutions to address the drop in international student enrollment that existed prior to COVID. The industry has shown a tremendous amount of resolve and capability as it continues to adapt to the rapidly changing global landscape. These new initiatives and services will be equally important in the months to come.

Reflecting on the new reality, understanding the new expectations and needs, and adapting programs and services will allow higher education institutions to better support their international students, become more attractive to future international candidates, and provide outcomes that match what international students are looking for in an education and their career goals.

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The content discussed during Michigan Language Assessment's symposium was compiled into a series of reflections. This is the first of several we'll be publishing in the coming weeks. Check back regularly for updates or watch the [recording of this panel here](#).

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