

Universities and International Students May Still Benefit Amid Uncertain Immigration Future

Labor & Employment Law Update

By Jacqueline Lentini McCullough on February 2, 2018

After a decade of rapid growth which saw the international student population increase 85 percent to over a million students, the number of newly arriving international students fell 3 percent in the 2016-2017 academic year.

President Trump's campaign rhetoric and subsequent action as President have contributed to substantial declines in international student enrollment for the current academic year. Across the country the number of new international students declined an average of 7 percent according to a study of about 500 campuses by the Institute of International Education, with 45 percent of campuses reporting at least some decrease.

I encourage education and university clients, and any employer hiring international students to be calm and take a breath. One thing I have noticed about President Trump's actions is that they have been very consistent with his campaign promises: border enforcement and bans. He wants to move to a merit-based immigration system similar to Canada and Australia.

If the U.S. does move to a merit-based immigration system, international students may gain an advantage. A merit-based system is point-based and prizes highly educated immigrants. Who would be better positioned than those who gained a U.S. college education?

In fact, Sen. Orrin Hatch and Sen. Jeff Flake introduced a bill in the U.S. Senate last week, the Immigration Innovation (I-Squared) Act of 2018, to allow as many as 195,000 H-1B visas. The proposal would increase the number of H-1B visas by 110,000 (from 85,000), while awarding U.S. advanced degree-holders expanded priority in the selection process.

As colleges regroup to recruit internationally in this context, it is recommended that they approach prospects with an eye toward the H-1B visa that international students will ultimately want to apply for. These are students who:

- **Intend on a STEM major:** Engineering majors are the safest bet.

- **Plan to work in a STEM field or true specialty occupation:** Qualifying occupations include doctors, lawyers, teachers and engineers.

Unfortunately, unless a student wants to teach a foreign language, liberal arts students are unlikely to qualify for an H-1B visa.

Colleges may even want to use the possible advantage of U.S. college education in a merit-based immigration system as a recruiting point.

U.S. colleges, universities and employers can weather this intense immigration storm by staying calm and focusing their recruitment on the areas most likely to succeed with visas.

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