Dear Ms. Linda Thomas-Greenfield, Ms. Ur Jaddou, and the Agency Review Teams for the Department of State and the Department of Homeland Security,

The Graduate Student Council (GSC) represents the nearly 7,000 graduate students of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), and the Carnegie Mellon University Graduate Student Assembly (GSA) represents over 7,700 graduate students at Carnegie Mellon University. We support policies that recognize, foster, and support diversity as the foundation of American scientific, educational, economic, and defense excellence. We thank you for your work in preparing to transition the DHS and DOS to a new presidential administration and wish to give voice to the priorities of graduate students. In particular, we strongly support repealing certain harmful immigration executive orders and building a new era of immigration policy that both welcomes globally-diverse talent and provides a direct pathway to citizenship.

Specifically, we ask that:

- The F-1 Five Month Temporary Absence Rule suspension be immediately extended or reinstated, as may be required at the start of the new administration. This suspension allowed international students to remain abroad without losing their student visa status, thereby avoiding unnecessary and risk travel during the pandemic. DHS suspended this rule through the summer of 2020, but at time of writing, has not extended it through the fall semester, potentially forcing international students to return to the U.S. by the start of the spring semester or lose their visas.

- Immigration executive actions (Proclamations 9645, 9945, 9983, 10043, and 10052; Executive Order 13940) be swiftly repealed, as they have directly prevented students from studying in the U.S. and unduly burdened many others, while indirectly promoting a general environment of fear, confusion, and distrust that has created a chilling effect on international enrollment in U.S. institutions (US internal factors causing stagnant enrollment; decreased enrollment statistics). This directly hinders the ability of the U.S. to maintain global scientific, educational, economic, and defense leadership and runs contrary to the long-term defense vision highlighted by the Future of Defense Task Force Report 2020 and the Working Group on Science and Technology in U.S.-China Relations’ Report.

- The Agency Review Teams, and the Biden administration as a whole, prioritize the attraction and retention of global talent by expanding access to work visas and Green Cards for U.S.-educated international students. This issue has a long history of bipartisan support, including H.R.4623/S.1744, H.R.6412, S.328, H.R.2161 and S.3185. It is important to acknowledge the significant contributions international students have made to the United States, ranging from CEOs of technology companies to the parents of VP-elect Kamala Harris.

- The DHS and the State Department take regulatory action to restore the domestic reissuance of visas program that is currently under suspension and expand it to include class F visas. This action was previously recommended by the Departments of State and Homeland Security, Secure Borders and Open Doors Advisory Committee in 2008, co-chaired by then Carnegie Mellon University President Dr. Jared L. Cohon. These actions would eliminate: 1) time wasted traveling to renew student visas (a requirement of the current system) which directly hinders research progress, 2) the unnecessary financial and emotional burden placed on international students to renew their academic student visas, and 3) the barrier to participating in international conferences for students on limited-entry visas.
● The DHS work to instate full advanced parole protections for all undocumented students to allow them to visit their home countries, attend international conferences, and take part in study abroad programs.
● President Biden and the DHS issue guidance to the U.S. Customs and Border Protection officials to stop harassing and intimidating foreign students. The administration must also reconstitute the Homeland Security Academic Advisory Council and include not just university presidents and educational experts, but also current and former international students.

International students are essential to our research ecosystem, and improving our immigration system to ensure these accomplished individuals remain in the United States benefits our national competitiveness and scientific progress.

We would also like to point you to the first-person essay on this issue written by one of the co-authors of this letter. We look forward to working with your team and the incoming administration to improve the immigration system for these students and for the benefit of the country at large. If you would like to know more about the importance of international students to the research workforce and the benefits of an immigration system with a pathway to citizenship for international researchers to our nation’s research enterprise, please reach out to us at gsc-eab-fed@mit.edu.

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