June 13, 2013

The Honorable Lamar Alexander
455 Dirksen Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Senator Alexander,

I’m writing this letter on behalf of the National Association of Graduate-Professional Students (NAGPS) and the more than 600,000 graduate and professional students we represent across the United States at more than 90 institutions. NAGPS has worked to ensure that our nation’s international students and undocumented students earning advanced degrees have the opportunity to remain in the United States to contribute to our national security and economy.

Increasing opportunities for international students with advanced degrees to remain in the United States can provide an important economic benefit for our nation. In recent years, the continued growth of international students coming to the U.S. for higher education has had a significant positive economic impact on the United States. International students contributed nearly $22 billion to the U.S. economy in 2012 and nearly $213 million to the state of Tennessee. We support the measures in the bill to increase the number of green cards and H1B visas available to individuals with advanced degrees. We are also in favor of the shortened time to citizenship for DREAM Act students. However, we believe the bill can be strengthened and have outlined specific requests and proposed amendments to S.744 below.

1) Allow for student visa renewal within the United States

Currently Section 4103 (c)(2) of S.744 allows for the renewal of a number of visas within the United States. Unfortunately, this does not include type F and J student visas. Renewing visas can be extremely costly and time consuming for international students. Currently, they are obligated to travel back to their home countries because there is no option to renew visas within the United States. We are seeking an amendment to the bill that would allow student visa renewals within the United States. This bill could minimize costs associated with visa renewals overseas, and more importantly, allow for more robust security and oversight of visa renewals within the United States. The experience and expertise of domestic State Department and Department of Homeland Security officials provides for greater security throughout the visa revalidation process. Providing F and J visa holders with the option of domestic revalidation also has the potential to drastically reduce the cost and workload on our foreign consulates.

2) Allow international student travel for professional development

In addition to visa renewals, international students face problems with professional development outside the United States during their time of study. They are often unable to attend international conferences because of visa restrictions or fear that they will not be able to re-enter the country. This prevents many talented individuals from presenting the results of their research and improving their professional development. Since many international students will remain in the United States and contribute to our economy, it is in the best interest of our nation to allow them the greatest opportunities to improve their professional experience. Therefore, we urge you to consider an amendment that allows for provisions within a student visa for professional development outside the United States.
3) Utilize a STEM definition that includes the biological sciences
Currently, S. 744 does not include the biological or biomedical sciences within the definition of Sciences, Technology, Engineering and Math (STEM). NAGPS strongly supports a STEM definition in line with the one currently used by The Department of Homeland Security (DHS). In April 2008, foreign students who graduated from a United States institution of higher education with certain STEM degrees became eligible for an extended period of optional practical training. This list of STEM degrees, expanded in 2012, is known as the STEM Designated Degree Program List. The DHS STEM list includes the biological sciences and NAGPS supports using this designation in S. 744.

Thank you again for your continued efforts to move our nation forward with comprehensive immigration reform. While many debates remain, history will show that your bipartisan efforts produced a better immigration policy for our nation. Should you wish to speak with NAGPS further regarding graduate and professional student issues please do not hesitate to contact me.

With sincere thanks,

Meredith Niles
PhD Candidate, University of California, Davis
Director of Legislative Affairs, National Association of Graduate-Professional Students