

RECRUITMENT OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS AT U.S. COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES IN TRANSITION

Nader H. Shooshtari, The University of Montana
nader.shooshtari@umontana.edu

ABSTRACT

U.S. colleges and universities have traditionally attracted the largest number of international students compared to any other country. This influx brought opportunities for international students while providing U.S. higher education institutions additional revenue and a diverse student body. Beginning with the Trump Administration's inward tilt, the welcome mat for international students was removed and the COVID pandemic added to the uncertainty and difficulty of accepting international students to U.S. and indeed much of the western countries that traditionally served as destinations for international students. Post-pandemic international student enrollment is on the increase with significant decline in the number of Chinese students coupled with a marked surge in the number of international students from India. Meanwhile, other countries like the U.K., Australia, and Canada have increased their international student enrollment. This paper explores the path forward to attracting international students to U.S. colleges and universities.

Keywords: International Education, College Recruiting, International Student Recruitment

INTRODUCTION

According to the *2019 Open Doors Report on International Educational Exchange* (Institute for International Education), the number of international students set an all-time high in 2018-2019 academic year, the fourth consecutive year with more than one million international students. The international students accounted for 5.5 percent of the total U.S. higher education population and contributed \$44.7 billion to the U.S. economy in 2018 (Institute of International Education, 2019). The U.S. has been the destination of choice for international students. China was the largest source of international students in the U.S. with some 370,000 students followed by India, South Korea, Saudi Arabia and Canada topping off the top five. Most of the international students opted for STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) fields of study with engineering and computer science being the two most popular fields of study among international students.

Despite the increase in total numbers in major part because of the Optional Practical Training program that allows international students to stay in the U.S. to work for up to three years after graduating while staying on their student visas; from 2016 on, the number of enrolled international students declined - 2.4 percent decline at the undergraduate, 1.3 percent at the graduate, and 5 percent for nondegree students (Redden, 2019).

The combination of the Trump Administration's policies toward allowing international students into the U.S., especially those from China and the shut down due to COVID led to the significant decline of the international student numbers attending U.S. higher education institutions. According to a *Forbes* report by Anderson (2019), even before the pandemic, new international student enrollment in the U.S. fell by 10% between 2015-2016 and 2018-2019 academic years during the Trump Administration even before the pandemic. This was followed by a sharp increase in enrollment of international students in other countries, particularly Australia and Canada. According to a survey of 500 universities by Institute for International Education (2019), the decline of new enrollment of international students was likely to continue. The Trump Administration imposed restrictions on visa issuance, curtailed Optional Practical Training, denied H-1B visa petitions at a historically high rate and imposed a rule, barring international students who unknowingly violated their immigration status for 10 years from the U.S.

The negative impact of COVID on international travel has certainly impacted international student attendance. However, the policies that were instituted during the Trump Administration encouraged many international students to seek other destinations for their higher education, such as Canada and Australia which saw significant increases in international student enrollment. Furthermore, as higher education matures in countries such as China, there is less incentive for students to study abroad, and we should continue to see increased enrollment in other European countries such as France, Germany and Netherlands.

The Biden Administration is hoping to attract tens of thousands of international students who stayed away from U.S. campuses during the Trump Administration and the pandemic. The foreign enrollment declines cost U.S. some \$10 billion in lost revenue last year (Fischer & Aslanian, 2021). Under the current Administration, the U.S. government announced a "renewed commitment" to promote the United States as a study destination for international students as well as the benefits of global academic engagement. The joint statement of Departments of State and Education tried to address a decrease in international student interest to study in the U.S. due mostly to policies considered unwelcoming under the previous administration (Esaki-Smith, 2021).

INTERNATIONAL STUDENT RECRUITMENT IN TRANSITION

The benefits of recruiting international students to the U.S. are many. First, it provides an opportunity to expose future leaders in business and government in foreign countries to the U.S. system of government and the democratic way of life positively influencing the educated class of these countries. Second, those international students who remain in the U.S. and become part of the workforce contribute significantly to the U.S. economy. It is no secret that many of the successful high tech and entrepreneurial businesses and start-ups were created by immigrants, most of whom initially came to the United States as international students. Indeed, many western countries have created fast track opportunities for educated and talented international students to gain residency and immigrate to these countries helping create a competitive advantage for these economies (Esaki-Smith, 2021). For U.S. colleges and universities, international students contribute not just intellectually to higher education but are a significant source of revenue for them, often paying full fare and giving an economic boost to the communities where they attend

school. At some U.S. universities, international students account for upward of 15% of enrollment—and an even higher share of tuition revenue (Korn, 2020).

In combination, the effect of the previous administration's unfriendly policies toward welcoming international students, the COVID pandemic and greater competition for international students from other countries have served to slow the influx of students to the United States from other countries. Nietzel (2022a) reports that the Biden administration is making a series of policy changes aimed at easing the path for foreign students and professionals in the fields of science, technology, engineering and math to remain in the U.S. on a long-term basis. The changes will expand the number of disciplines that international students can study to qualify to work in the U.S. on their student visas. Students in those disciplines will be permitted to work in the U.S. for three years after graduation, rather than the one year offered to all international students. The Department of Homeland Security is planning to add 22 new eligible degree fields, including data science and financial analytics.

Despite the attempts to address some of the hostile policies of the previous U.S. administration, a recent report by Fischer and Bauman (2022) shows the number of new Chinese students at U.S. colleges and universities plummeted, with visa issuances falling by 45 percent May through August as compared to the same period in 2019. In contrast, 84,000 student visas were issued to Indian students over the summer, a whopping 148 percent increase compared to summer of 2019. Overall, the increase in the number of Indian students more than makes up for the decline in the number of Chinese students for the same period. In another report supporting this trend, the number of U.S. student visas issued to Chinese students declined more than 50% in the first half of 2022 compared to pre-Covid levels. Chinese students are looking elsewhere because of doubts about if they would be welcome in the U.S. and the emergence of more domestic and international alternatives, including the U.K. and Canada. Also, Chinese students have grown pickier about whether to study abroad at all, as Chinese universities have risen in rankings and are viewed more favorably by employers (Hua et al., 2022).

U.S. colleges and universities should consider a number of options in their tool kit for recruiting of international students. According to a recent report by the American Council on Education (ACE) titled "Toward Greater Inclusion and Success: A New Compact for International Students," in fall 2020 total international student enrollment fell by 16% and new international student enrollment dropped by a whopping 43% (Glass et al., 2021). According to the report, safety, program quality, affordability, country reputation, and employment and internship opportunities were the major deciding factors for international students in choosing which school to attend. Unfortunately, the U.S. is considered less safe in comparison to other western countries such as the U.K., Canada, Australia and New Zealand. With regard to program quality, other countries have improved their academic standing and the quality of their programs creating more attractive options for international students compared to the United States. It is imperative that universities and colleges focus more on what matters to international students in their choice of schools (Ammigan, 2019).

With regard to affordability, it is more common for international students nowadays to come from a more diverse socioeconomic background and not from the top echelon of the society in those countries. The implications are obvious. We need to put less emphasis on international students as

cash cows to help solve budget shortfall or financial problems of our colleges and universities. Instead, more emphasis should be placed on providing affordable quality education for international students who contribute to the intellectual rigor and diversity of our higher education institutions providing everyone with a richer academic experience.

The COVID pandemic significantly impacted student mobility across the world, interrupted traditional classroom teaching and learning and diminished the role of a physical campus setting for students. It did, however, by necessity open up new educational opportunities via online, remote and hybrid formats some of which will have a lasting effect and endure post pandemic. Indeed, these formats have now become a part of the mainstream in higher education and how people interact, meet and come together. U.S. colleges and universities can use these new formats in combination with traditional learning formats to offer international students greater flexibility, lower cost and greater access.

If students can complete some or the bulk of their education while staying in their own country, many of the issues with student mobility, entry visas and the living expenses associated with attending school abroad will no longer be obstacles. The affordability of a western education becomes less of a deterrent. However, higher education institutions must rethink what goes into the cost of earning a degree since remote students do not utilize many of the amenities that a brick-and-mortar university offers. The cost of education for international students earning a degree and how to justify those costs becomes more important to how colleges and universities market their programs in light of greater competition from other institutions who are willing to adjust tuition and fees to reflect the new realities. Moreover, the quality of education and the attractiveness of attending a college or university will be judged differently when it is detached from the physical campus setting and the community or country where it is located. In that sense, educational programs have to stand on their own in attracting international students (McGregor, 2021).

To address affordability, length of stay and mobility issues many colleges and universities are forming joint and dual degree program agreements and partnerships with universities abroad. The international students remain and study in their home institution for the first two or three years of their baccalaureate education and then attend partner universities abroad to complete their education. This offers the students the opportunity to interact and live in the host country and earn a degree from their chosen institution abroad. It also gives them the opportunity to take advantage of employment and internship opportunities post-graduation offered by the western universities. An added benefit of such partnership is that the student benefits from college education experiences both at home and abroad. Moreover, many home institutions like to claim these students as their own, since enrollment and student numbers are important considerations for them as well. Many of these partnerships allow the students to earn two degrees, one from the home institution and the other from the college or university abroad where students attend as upper division students. Another major advantage of dual degree programs is alleviating accreditation concerns for the host institutions. For example, AACSB-accredited schools have specific requirements regarding the qualifications of faculty who teach at accredited schools. The dual degree arrangements are considered student transfers whereas joint degrees require that faculty in the home institution meet similar requirements which is often difficult to do.

Post-pandemic, most U.S. institutions are reporting an increase in international student applications - 65% this year compared to 43% last year. Renewed emphasis on in-person recruiting after a couple of years of relying on social media and online recruitment. Also, in-person classes have resumed, with 55% reporting that all their international students attended classes in person in spring 2022, compared to 8% a year ago. Emphasis is on their international students' health, safety and wellbeing (Nietzel, 2022a). The personal approach to recruiting makes sense especially for smaller and medium-sized private and state institutions with limited resources. Such institutions lack the name and recognition to draw a large number of foreign student applicants and need to use personal relations, contacts, alumni networks and agents to help promote to these specific target markets. In a virtual forum sponsored by the *Chronicle of Higher Education* (October 14, 2022), the panelists recommended that colleges get serious about diversifying the international-enrollment pipeline. Half of the international students on American campuses come from China and India, and this overreliance on two countries is a liability for American colleges. Africa should be an important focus, given its explosive growth and significant future potential.

CONCLUSIONS

The policies of the previous U.S. administration put a significant damper on international student enrollments in the United States that persists today. Higher education in the U.S. remains attractive to many international students because of the perceived quality of U.S. colleges and universities. However, the policy changes have taken away the luster and many students have chosen to pursue their education in other countries or forego studying abroad altogether. Currently, the U.S. ranks second after the United Kingdom as the country that is drawing the largest number of students from abroad, a position that would have been unthinkable just a few years ago. Enticing the international students back to U.S. colleges and universities will take time and require serious and sustained effort in earning their trust that they are indeed welcome back and not just paying lip service to the idea. The U.S. has to compete against other western countries who are offering more attractive options with internships, employment opportunities as well as being less costly and considered safer countries. Furthermore, many international students are opting to enroll in colleges at home instead of going abroad. For example, Chinese students have grown pickier about whether to study abroad at all, as Chinese universities have risen in rankings and are viewed more favorably by employers (Hua et al., 2022).

Nietzel (2022b) suggests that U.S. universities face four headwinds in recruiting international students. First, the competition of international students continues to heat up. Second, studying in the United States is expensive, which is important considering many international students nowadays come from a more diverse socioeconomic background and not from the top echelon of the society in those countries. Third, the one-time dependence on Chinese students is difficult to replace for U.S. colleges and universities and replacing them with students from India poses the same danger of overreliance on one or two countries. Lastly, Americans appear to lose some faith in the value of a college education and international skepticism about the quality of American colleges might be one very unfortunate side-effect that will negatively impact international student recruitment.

International students spend a great deal of time and precious financial resources and make sacrifices to study abroad in order to secure more attractive career opportunities and a better life ahead. They should not be pawns in the political gamesmanship between governments. Neither should these students be considered desirable mainly because of the financial benefits to the institutions and treated as cash cows. Their admission to U.S. colleges should be considered based on their individual qualifications and merits. Policies of national governments of their home countries may not be representative of the beliefs and sentiments of these students and they should not be penalized because of it. To do otherwise is unfair and makes winning back international students to U.S. colleges and universities more difficult and uncertain.

REFERENCES

- Academic Assembly & International Education Advantage. (2017). Global alumni management for U.S. institutions: The State of the Field in 2017: Realizing the Potential for Recruitment, Brand Awareness, and More. *Academic Assembly and International Education Advantage*. <https://academicassembly.com/wp-content/uploads/Global-Alumni-Management-White-Paper-2017.pdf>.
- ACE. (2020, November 16). *Statement by ACE President Ted Mitchell on the Institute of International Education's 2020 Fall International Enrollment Survey*. American Council on Education. <https://www.acenet.edu/News-Room/Pages/Statement-by-ACE-President-Ted-Mitchell-on-the-Institute-of-International-Educations-2020-Fall-International-Enrollment.aspx>.
- ACE. (2021). *Comprehensive Internationalization Framework*. American Council on Education <https://www.acenet.edu/Research-Insights/Pages/Internationalization/CIGE-Model-for-Comprehensive-Internationalization.aspx>
- Adrian, T., Shelley R., Noels, K. A., & Kurt T. (2007). Conflict between international graduate students and faculty supervisors: Toward effective conflict prevention and management strategies. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 11(1), 90–117. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1028315306286313>
- Altbach, P. G., & Hans D. W. (2017, September 15). The New Nationalism and Internationalisation of HE. *University World News*. http://www.bc.edu/content/dam/files/research_sites/cihe/pdf/UWN_Phil_Nationalism.pdf.
- Altbach, P. G., & Knight, J. (2007). The internationalization of higher education: Motivations and realities. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 11(3–4), 290–305. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1028315307303542>
- Ammigan, R. (2019). Institutional satisfaction and recommendation: What really matters to international students? *Journal of International Students*, 9(1), 262–281. <https://doi.org/10.32674/jis.v9i1.260>
- Anderson, S. (2019, November 19). New international student enrollment in U.S. has fallen 10% since 2015. *Forbes*.
- Arthur, N. (2017). supporting international students through strengthening their social resources. *Studies in Higher Education*, 42(5), 887–894. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2017.1293876>

- Esaki-Smith, A. (2021, July 26). US renews commitment to international students and presence on “world stage.” *Forbes*.
- Fischer, K., & Bauman D. (2022, October 14). Number of Chinese students at U.S. colleges plummeted this fall, visa data show. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 69(4).
- Fischer, K., & Aslanian, S. (2021). The US attracts fewer international students, loses billions in revenue. Here’s why. *NPR*.
- Glass, C. R., Godwin, K. A., & Matross Helms, R. (2021). Toward greater inclusion and success: A new compact for international students. *American Council on Education*.
- Hua, S., Hao, K., & Korn, M. (2022, August 11). Chinese student visas to U.S. tumble from prepandemic levels; Global competition, strained political ties lead to drop that hits revenue at big and small colleges and universities. *Wall Street Journal*.
- Institute for International Education. (2019, November 18). *Number of international students in the United States hits all-time high*.
- Korn, M. (2020, July 07). Colleges brace for sharp drop in foreign students, especially from China; New guidance from ICE could prove to be a hurdle for students. *Wall Street Journal*.
- McGregor, G. (2021, August 16). U.S. universities face another school year of too few Chinese students. *Fortune*.
- Nietzel, M. T. (2022a, June 23). Foreign applications to U.S. Colleges and study abroad by Americans rebound, new report shows. *Forbes.com*
- Nietzel, M. T. (2022b, August 13). U.S. universities face headwinds in recruiting international students. *Forbes*.
- Redden, E. (2021, March 30). Another uncertain admissions cycle for international students. *Inside Higher Ed*.
- Redden, E. (2019, November 18). Number of Enrolled International Students Drops. *Inside Higher Ed*.



Published By:

University of Tennessee at Martin and the International Academy of Business Disciplines
All rights reserved