



Reopening America to International Students

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

While the global pandemic has transformed lives and upturned economies, policymakers have failed to address the impacts of COVID-19 on the higher education sector. By the end of April, college-bound students will make critical decisions for their educational futures. But current government restrictions cloud the prospects of U.S.-bound international students, who are an integral part of American higher education.

It cannot be overstated how comprehensively international students contribute to the higher education sector and the American economy more broadly. More than *one million* international students were enrolled at U.S. colleges and universities in the 2019-20 academic year. They contributed \$38.7 billion and supported more than 400,000 jobs to the United States. The influx of international students has also contributed to America's status as the largest service exporter in the world, with higher education considered the country's sixth largest service export—larger than America's exports in telecommunications, plastics, and meat and poultry.

While international students contribute to the financial health of America's most well-known universities, they also contribute greatly to a wide range of institutions that may not garner as much attention. For example, enrollments have increased dramatically across community colleges, where the relatively cheaper tuition, more open admissions processes, and transfer options to four-year institutions are attractive to international students. International students also play a significant role at Historically Black Colleges and Universities. While many HBCUs are seeing declining student enrollment, institutions that have welcomed international students have seen healthy enrollment growth. Two-year and four-year colleges, regional schools, liberal arts colleges, and research universities alike benefit tremendously from international students.

Beyond their economic contributions, international students serve as ambassadors of America's soft power. They study in the United States and then return to their home countries with the benefits of an American education and a renewed appreciation for democracy, free speech, and the rule of law. They also bring with them their unique cultures and perspectives to the United States that provide invaluable learning opportunities for American students, who must themselves prepare for the challenges and opportunities of globalization.

But over the last four years, a rise in xenophobic rhetoric, a disproportionate focus on anti-China, and corresponding legislation have hurt international student enrollments in the United States. And under the auspices of the pandemic, the Trump administration imposed aggressive executive orders and proclamations that exacerbated enrollment declines brought on by the pandemic. In short, while the pandemic may have prevented many international students from coming to the United States, the Trump administration created harsh travel bans and visa restrictions that further damage the higher education sector and the American economy at large.

Current government restrictions also impact the overall perception of the United States and its openness to international students. Colleges and universities have had to take on the burden of changing these perceptions while these restrictions are in place. And if these restrictions are not relieved, international students will simply go elsewhere and the United States will quickly lose its place as the world leader in international education. In fact, the United States has already lost 5 percent of world share of international students over the last two decades even as the number of globally mobile students more than doubled.

Other countries have already announced their intention to bring back international students for the fall 2021 semester. The UK government recently announced that international students will be allowed entry and will also be eligible for COVID-19 vaccine distribution. The Canadian government also updated its requirements to allow in international students pending testing and quarantine requirements.

The Biden administration's continued inaction regarding international students will mean that they will simply choose alternative countries to the United States, leading to another "lost year" of international student enrollment across U.S. colleges and universities. However, the Biden administration can enact both immediate and longer-term solutions to the problem:

Immediate Action Needed: Issue an executive order instructing agencies (State Department, Department of Homeland Security, Department of Education, Department of Commerce) to develop procedures to ensure that every bona fide and qualified international student who wishes to study in the United States in the fall of 2021 semester can do so. This would include:

- Waiver of the visa interview for individuals who have ever had a student visa and seek to return on a student visa.
- Creation of in-person visa appointment capacity in countries where students can travel to if the consulate in their country is closed.
- Use of video conference appointments where possible.
- The removal of travel bans and visa restrictions for students from countries with travel bans and visa restrictions
- Coordination with colleges and universities to develop quarantine locations for non-vaccinated international students when they first arrive in the United States.
- Coordination with colleges and universities to provide COVID-19 vaccines for international students, if those vaccines become available.

Longer-Term Recommendations:

At the executive level, the Biden administration must restore perceptions of the United States as a welcoming destination for international students. This could include high profile speeches by President Biden and administration officials that recognize the contributions of international students to the United States, as well as outreach efforts via diplomatic channels and EducationUSA networks.

The Biden administration should also develop a national strategy to increase the number of international students across U.S. colleges and universities and expand the country's world share of international students.

Legislative opportunities include expediting student visa services, including eliminating the visa interview for qualified students and making the visa processing more efficient (vis-à-vis comprehensive immigration reform). There should also be a strategy to preserve post-graduation work opportunities for international students, such as the Optional Practical Training program.

Ultimately, the Biden administration must ensure that the United States continues to be a welcoming place for international students and remains the world leader in international education.

INTRODUCTION

When an international student from India met another international student from Jamaica at UC Berkeley in the 1960s, the two probably had little inkling that they were about to shape American history. The young Ms. Gopalan and Mr. Harris—Kamala Harris’s parents—departed hundreds and thousands of miles from their home countries and eventually met on their shared campus. While the Vice President is well known as an alumna of a Historically Black University, often overlooked is the fact that she is also a product of international education. Her origin story is a remarkable example of how our country’s welcoming embrace of the world’s best and brightest is intimately part of the American Dream.

As of the 2019-20 academic year, there were over 1 million international students enrolled across thousands of U.S. colleges and universities in states both red and blue.¹ From former heads of state Shinzo Abe and Pierre Trudeau to innovators like Moderna founder Noubar Afeyan, these bright and eager students set foot on American campuses to pursue an opportunity that the United States is uniquely positioned to offer them.

But their ability to do so today is gravely under threat. Travel bans, visa restrictions, and other harmful measures prevent international students from pursuing an American education. The short-term consequences have been devastating: new international student enrollment in the United States plunged by a breathtaking 43 percent in the fall 2020 semester.² The long-term consequences are much more dire, as the higher education sector loses students, the economy loses money and jobs, and the United States ceases to be the world leader in international education.

This report provides an analysis of international students in favor of removing harmful government restrictions that limit their ability to pursue higher education in the United States. It details how international students have become an integral part of the American higher education sector in the last decade, untangles the web of government restrictions that prevent international students from coming, and outlines the financial implications and political ramifications of current policies. It also acknowledges the complexities of this issue amid a global pandemic and concerns over national security.

While this report lays bare the case for pursuing policies that will encourage greater access for international students, it is important to note that at the time of this publication, the world is still grappling with the wide-ranging effects of COVID-19. This report promotes principled alternatives to the extreme views on both ends of the issue, seeking smart and reasonable policy solutions that eliminate outright travel bans while also promoting public health. Most urgently, the report provides actionable items for policymakers with which to respond to this issue within a critical window.

THE POST-RECESSION SHIFT IN AMERICAN HIGHER EDUCATION

It’s no secret that international students are a financial boon to the American higher education sector and beyond. International students contributed \$38.7 billion and supported 415,996 jobs last year alone.³ Their contribution was greatest in California, the state that hosts the most international students, with an addition of \$6.6 billion to the California economy. But across all parts of the United States, international students contribute greatly. In the Great Lakes states of Michigan, Ohio, and Illinois, for example, international students contribute over a billion dollars annually to *each of those* state economies. Notably, international students contribute far more dollars to the Republican stronghold state of Kentucky than they do to the New England states of Vermont, New Hampshire, and Maine *combined*.

Table 1: Top 10 States with the Most International Students⁴

	State	Number of Students	Financial Contribution	Jobs Supported
1	California	160,592	\$6.6 billion	69,154
2	New York	126,911	\$5.3 billion	55,383
3	Texas	77,097	\$2.0 billion	22,157
4	Massachusetts	73,695	\$3.2 billion	36,076
5	Illinois	51,966	\$1.7 billion	21,598
6	Pennsylvania	50,070	\$2.0 billion	25,115
7	Florida	46,221	\$1.5 billion	15,165
8	Ohio	35,508	\$1.2 billion	12,646
9	Michigan	31,408	\$1.1 billion	12,281
10	Indiana	28,136	\$920.7 million	10,084

So how did we get here? The shift began with the 2008 financial crisis. Prior to that, colleges and universities approached international students mostly as high skilled talent to augment their research capacity and institutional prestige. Research universities in particular enticed international students with scholarships in their bid to attract overseas talent, especially within STEM programs. Though there was a slight dip in international student enrollment for a brief period in the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, overall, the decades prior to the financial crisis saw steady enrollment increases of international students.

But everything changed when the financial crisis unfolded. Like many industries, the American higher education sector faced extreme financial instability. This rupture marks the point at which international students became a much more central part of student recruitment strategy for very different reasons. Colleges and universities began to approach international students less as a source of high skilled talent and more as a source of revenue as they encountered shortfalls in other revenue sources as a fallout from the financial crisis. Enrollment growth from international undergraduate students, most of whom are self-funded, outpaced enrollment growth from international graduate students until undergraduate students outnumbered graduate students beginning in 2011.⁵

Meanwhile, middle-class families from across the world, especially in many parts of Asia, have looked to a degree from a U.S. college or university as a ticket to socioeconomic success and invested considerable resources into sending their children to the United States. Additionally, students from certain sending countries, such as Saudi Arabia, benefitted from

generous government scholarships from their home countries that fund their overseas study in the United States. The hopes and aspirations of students who come from all over the world as they seek out an American education have become part and parcel of higher education operations in the United States.

The focus on international students as a source of additional revenue happened quite dramatically across public institutions when state appropriations to higher education suddenly diminished. In California, for example, the University of California lost over \$813 million in state funding in a single year following the financial crisis.⁶ Accordingly, UC campuses began to accept more international students, who pay a significantly higher tuition than that of California residents, as a way to make up for draconian budget cuts. At UCLA, international students accounted for only 3 percent of incoming freshman students in 2009, but that proportion then jumped *sixfold* to 18 percent by 2012.⁷ Recent research reveals that, in general, each 10 percent decline in state appropriations leads to a 4.6 percent increase in nonresident freshman enrollment at public research universities.⁸ And former UC President Janet Napolitano has stated many times that accepting more international students in the UC system actually increases the ability to accept more in-state students because the higher tuition that international students pay subsidizes the tuition of California residents.⁹

Table 2: Top 10 Sending Countries of International Students¹⁰

	Country	Number of Students
1	China	372,532
2	India	193,124
3	South Korea	49,809
4	Saudi Arabia	30,957
5	Canada	25,992
6	Vietnam	23,777
7	Taiwan	23,724
8	Japan	17,554
9	Brazil	16,671
10	Mexico	14,348

Looking beyond flagship state universities, international student enrollment also increased dramatically at community colleges, where the relatively cheaper tuition, more open admissions processes, and transfer options to four-year institutions are attractive to international students.¹¹ The Houston Community College System and Lone Star College System, which together include fourteen community colleges across the Greater Houston area in Texas, enroll the largest numbers of international students today. Community colleges throughout California, Maryland, Virginia, Florida, and Washington also enroll large numbers of international students.

Table 3: Top 10 Community Colleges with the Most Number of International Students¹²

	Institution Name	Location	Number of Students
1	Houston Community College System	Greater Houston, Texas	4,723
2	Lone Star College System	Greater Houston, Texas	3,097
3	Santa Monica College	Santa Monica, California	2,714
4	De Anza College	Cupertino, California	2,352
5	Montgomery College	Montgomery County, Maryland	1,759
6	Valencia College	Orlando, Florida	1,667
7	Northern Virginia Community College	Northern Virginia area, Virginia	1,457
8	Orange Coast College	Costa Mesa, California	1,400
9	Green River College	Auburn, Washington	1,295
10	Miami-Dade College	Miami-Dade County, Florida	1,260

Even at private institutions that are not affected by fluctuations in state funding, international student enrollment increased dramatically following the financial crisis. At Northeastern University in Boston, Massachusetts, for example, the number of international students more than doubled over the last decade, making the university one of the most popular destinations for international students today.¹³ Smaller private colleges and universities also rely heavily on international students as they face declining domestic student populations and because their smaller size makes them more sensitive to enrollment fluctuations. At the University of the Ozarks, for example, a private university in Clarkesville, Arkansas with around 900 students, international students make up a whopping 28 percent of the total student body.¹⁴

International students also play a significant role at Historically Black Colleges and Universities. While many HBCUs are facing declining student numbers, enrollment at schools like North Carolina A&T State University has steadily grown because the university has welcomed international students to its campus.¹⁵ International students who study at HBCUs have become an important part of the financial viability and cultural diversity at these campuses. Morgan State University, for example, partners with the Saudi Arabian Cultural Mission to bring Saudi students to its campus and hosts meetups and social events for Saudi students throughout the DC-Baltimore region.¹⁶

Today, international students are an integral part of how colleges and universities operate and have even become baked into strategic planning. They make up for revenue shortfalls as institutions face shrinking budgets and declining domestic student populations. The additional revenue that international students bring subsidizes the tuition of in-state residents at public schools and offsets tuition discounts for many other students at private schools. Put another way, international students and their families are essentially investing into the United States by putting their dollars to work at colleges and universities that largely benefit American students.

But the greatest contribution that international students make is a much more human one. These students choose to pursue their studies in the United States over any other country, making the United States the uncontested world leader in international education. Over seventy percent of these students come from Asia, with the largest numbers coming from China, India, and South Korea.¹⁷ They strengthen America’s diversity and bring with them their unique cultures and perspectives that provide invaluable learning opportunities for American students, who must themselves prepare for the

challenges and opportunities of globalization. International education is not just about money. It's about transforming hearts and minds and fostering people to people connections in an increasingly interconnected and complex world.

UNTANGLING THE WEB OF GOVERNMENT RESTRICTIONS ON INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

Some of the most harmful outcomes of the Trump administration are the executive orders and legislative efforts that block international students. They severely damaged international student enrollment this past academic year, and they will continue to hurt enrollment for the upcoming academic year if immediate action is not taken. Meanwhile, other major host countries have taken more creative and thoughtful approaches to striking a balance between providing international students the clarity they need to accept their enrollment and clear public health concerns associated with opening their borders to international students. The divergence in both policy and approach forces U.S.-bound students to look to those alternative study destinations as they provide not only the clarity students need but also the perception of being more welcoming.

The following executive actions, federal agency regulations, and operational mandates prohibit international students from coming to or staying in the United States and must immediately be rescinded:

Travel Bans and Consular Restrictions

The most pressing impediment to international students coming to the United States—and the most easily remediable—are the ongoing travel restrictions that block entry for individuals arriving from China, Brazil, South Africa, Iran, the United Kingdom, Ireland, and the European Schengen area.¹⁸ Individuals who are physically present in these countries for a fourteen-day period preceding their attempted entry into the United States are not allowed in.

What began as a public health measure actually has the deleterious outcome of preventing international students from coming to the United States without any coherency or consistency. For example, students from China are not able to enter the United States directly even as the Center for Disease Control designates China as the lowest risk level for COVID-19 (Level 1).¹⁹ Meanwhile, students from the UK, Ireland, and the European Schengen area can apply for a special exemption even as the CDC designates these areas as the highest risk level (Level 4).²⁰

Equally as harmful are the consular closures and appointment cancellations for international students, who have reported being unable to secure necessary visa interviews in order to obtain a student visa.²¹ Across numerous countries, but especially in China, tens of thousands of international students still need consular appointments even as U.S. consulates remain closed. These students will be unable to study in the United States if proper accommodations are not made immediately.

Actions by Immigration and Customs Enforcement

Current guidance by Immigration and Customs Enforcement also prevents international students from obtaining a student visa. ICE updated its guidelines so that new international students beginning a degree program after March 2020 cannot obtain a student visa if enrolled in primarily online classes.²²

This particular restriction stems from a prior executive order that wreaked havoc across the higher education sector. In July 2020, ICE modified the temporary exemption that had allowed international students to take online classes during the pandemic.²³ This executive order, known as the “student ban,” rendered it illegal for international students to stay in the United States while enrolled in primarily online classes in the fall 2020 semester. With only weeks remaining before the start of the term, those students were forced to leave the country during a public health crisis or face deportation. When the higher education sector mobilized to challenge this executive order, ICE rescinded it and came up with its new guidelines.

However, the updated guidelines continue to prevent tens of thousands of new student visas from being issued. The State Department reports that the number of F visas (student visas) issued dropped by nearly 70 percent in 2020.²⁴ Higher education experts have dubbed the updated guidelines as the “student ban lite.”²⁵

Threats to Optional Practical Training

The Trump administration made numerous threats to scale back the Optional Practical Training program. The OPT program permits international students who graduate from a U.S. degree program to remain in the country to work for one year as practical training that complements their education. STEM graduates are also eligible for a two-year OPT extension.

A series of announcements by Immigration and Customs Enforcement made tangible the Trump administration’s threats. The first announcement, made in October 2020, detailed a law enforcement operation targeting international students who fraudulently use the OPT visa to remain in the United States.²⁶ A second announcement, made alongside the first, detailed a separate project by the Department of Homeland Security that would sanction designated higher education employees if students are found not to be in compliance with OPT visa requirements.²⁷ A third announcement was made and then rescinded in January 2021, which would have established a new unit within ICE to enforce compliance of OPT visa requirements.²⁸

Today’s international students do not just want a degree from a U.S. college or university; they also want valuable work experience in the United States that will give them a competitive edge in the job market upon return to their home countries. Recent research reveals that scaling back the OPT program would lead to a 60 percent decline in OPT participation and a 35 percent decline in student visas.²⁹ These worrying figures indicate that threats to the OPT program will lead to international students choosing alternative study destinations over the United States.

Proposed Rule to Eliminate Duration of Status

The Department of Homeland Security proposed eliminating the duration of status for international students in September 2020.³⁰ Duration of status means that international students, as well as their dependents, can legally stay in the United States for the duration of their degree. Under the proposed rule, however, international students would be subject to a fixed term of four years maximum to complete their degree. Any extension of stay would be subject to review and must be accompanied by documentation detailing compelling medical or academic reasons.

This proposed rule would be detrimental to international students because they would have no guarantee that they could successfully complete their degree in the United States. Most undergraduate students take over four years to complete

a bachelor's degree, with only 41 percent of them graduating in four years,³¹ and most graduate students take over eight years to complete a doctorate degree.³² Furthermore, the proposed rule threatens international students' ability to participate in the OPT program because OPT students must also remain within the fixed period of stay unless an extension of stay is granted. Over 200 Democrat and Republican lawmakers,³³ and the higher education sector at large,³⁴ have voiced strong opposition to this proposed rule.

Blocking Student and Scholar Visas from China

Several legislative efforts selectively target students and scholars from China and block them from entering the United States. In June 2018, the Trump administration rolled back an Obama-era policy that had allowed Chinese students to secure five-year student visas³⁵ and began restricting visas for Chinese graduate students in certain STEM fields to one year.³⁶ Then, in May 2020, the Trump administration announced Proclamation 10043, which suspends entry of Chinese nationals to study or conduct research in the United States if they have any affiliation with China's military.³⁷ The State Department announced that more than 1,000 visas of Chinese nationals have been revoked under this executive order as of September 2020.³⁸

While concerns over national security are indeed important and valid, the restrictions and proclamations use broad and sweeping criteria to block visas. In fact, media reports indicate that there was no evidence of wrongdoing among the students and scholars whose visas were revoked under Proclamation 10043 and that these students and scholars were targeted primarily because of the institutions that they had attended as undergraduate students in China.³⁹ Furthermore, research conducted on this issue estimates that Proclamation 10043 could block more than one-fifth of new enrollment of Chinese graduate students in STEM programs because of its vague and ambiguous criteria.⁴⁰

Such actions have also emboldened Trump loyalists to advance legislation that targets Chinese nationals in an ongoing attempt to delegitimize their presence in American higher education. Legislators put forth the Secure Campus Act, a bill first introduced in the House in May 2020⁴¹ and then in the Senate in June 2020,⁴² that calls for the prohibition of *all* Chinese nationals who want to pursue graduate study or research in STEM fields. While the stated intent is to protect national security, the Secure Campus Act relies on blanket assumptions that individuals are engaging in research espionage by virtue of their nationality or ethnicity. Moreover, the bill contributes to a dangerous climate of anti-Asian racism in the United States, as warned by numerous lawmakers and civil rights organizations.

Suspension of Work Visas

President Trump signed a series of proclamations in April, June, and December of 2020 that halted the issuance of all immigrant and nonimmigrant visas.⁴³ This was by far the most sweeping executive action taken against immigration.

In February 2021, President Biden revoked the Trump proclamations and resumed the issuance of immigrant visas.⁴⁴ However, the issuance of nonimmigrant visas, including the H-1B work visa that allows highly skilled immigrants to work in specialty professions in the United States, is still suspended.

While continued suspension of nonimmigrant visas does not apply directly to international students, it does block international students from obtaining the H-1B work visa should they wish to work in the United States upon graduating.

Recent research reveals that highly skilled and trained graduates in the STEM fields often seek out an H-1B work visa as a first step to legal employment and residency in the United States,⁴⁵ and metropolitan areas with the highest ratio of H-1B visa approvals as a proportion of the labor force tend to be college towns.⁴⁶ However, this pathway that previously allowed STEM doctorate holders to join the American workforce is now under threat.

ECONOMIC CONSEQUENCES OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENT ENROLLMENT DROPS

Already, new international student enrollment has dropped at an alarming rate. As of the fall 2020 semester, new enrollment is estimated to have fallen by 43 percent.⁴⁷

Enrollment drops affect a range of colleges and universities that took varying approaches to reopening this past academic year. Campuses that operated mostly or entirely online felt the harshest sting, as expected, but even those that reopened experienced tremendous losses. Purdue University in West Lafayette, Indiana lost 37 percent of new international student enrollment in 2020,⁴⁸ even as the campus initially held mostly in-person classes.

Enrollment drops do not just come from a decrease in new enrollment; they also come from falling retention rates as continuing students do not return the following year. Smith College, a private liberal arts women's college in Northampton, Massachusetts, typically boasts of a first-year retention rate of well over 90 percent. In the 2020-21 academic year, however, only 77 percent of the prior year's freshman students returned.⁴⁹ While this loss includes both domestic and international students, the international students who did not continue their studies were most certainly affected by the inability to do so amid the pandemic and ongoing government restrictions. Incidentally, at Smith College, over 14 percent of all undergraduate students are international.

These enrollment drops affect tuition revenue, of course, but they also affect many other revenue generating operations within colleges and universities that rely on a steady flow of students, including housing and dining, athletics, and facilities management. At the same time, colleges and universities have added expenses in technology, cleaning costs, testing and tracing, and legal liability, to name a few.⁵⁰

Looking beyond the higher education sector, enrollment drops also affect real estate markets. Chinese real estate buyers invest the most money into the American real estate sector among foreign investors, pumping in tens of billions of dollars each year into the United States. But real estate purchases for student use dropped from 10 percent of total purchases in 2019 to 4 percent in 2020 among Chinese buyers.⁵¹

Adopting a more long-term perspective, drops in international student enrollment will certainly affect American innovation. More than half of all international students are enrolled in STEM programs.⁵² They contribute greatly to STEM development across America's research universities. Many international students in STEM programs also pursue legal pathways to work and reside in the United States after completing advanced graduate training, eventually contributing to workforce development and entrepreneurship as highly educated immigrants in the United States. But with enrollment drops not just from the pandemic but from government restrictions on students in STEM programs specifically, America's long-term economic development and global competitiveness will suffer.

On a macro level, the United States is the largest service exporter in the world. The influx of international students most definitely contributes to this, with higher education now considered America’s sixth largest service export.⁵³ Today, the United States hosts 18 percent of world share of international students and is the world leader in international education.⁵⁴ But continued drops in international student enrollment will certainly erode America’s enviable position in the global economy.

A CLOSER LOOK AT CHINESE AND INDIAN STUDENTS

More than half of all international students in the United States come from China and India alone. While full data on enrollment trends for the 2020-21 academic year is not yet available, early estimates indicate that the number of Chinese and Indian students dropped substantially. In light of these serious shifts, enrollment patterns of Chinese and Indian students demand a closer look.

In order to understand enrollment patterns of students from the two largest sending countries, it is important to first understand the range of options that all new international students face as they weigh their study plans that, at the moment, prevent the majority from coming to the United States. Most new international students have the following options:

- **Study online** – International students can study in a U.S.-based program online while remaining in their home country.
- **Defer** – International students can defer their study in the United States to a future semester or academic year.
- **Study in another country** – International students can study at a college or university in another country, such as the United Kingdom or Canada.
- **Study in their home country** – International students can study at a college or university in their home country.

The Council of Graduate Schools released data on first-time international graduate enrollment for the fall 2020 semester.⁵⁵ The report shows that, among those admitted to a graduate program, less than 20 percent enrolled (and presumably began their studies online) and less than 12 percent deferred—meaning that over 68 percent declined their offer to study in the United States.

Table 4: Fall 2020 Graduate Admissions Data from the Council of Graduate Schools⁵⁶

	Master’s & Certificates			Doctorates		
	Offers of Admissions	% Deferred	% Enrolled	Offers of Admissions	% Deferred	% Enrolled
China	92,971	6%	16%	15,605	6%	32%
India	69,904	21%	8%	5,078	12%	31%
TOTAL	220,722	12%	17%	44,005	10%	33%

When taking a closer look at Chinese students, among which over one-third are graduate students, an even smaller percentage enrolled or deferred. In fact, first-time enrollment for graduate students from China fell by 37 percent in the fall 2020 semester.⁵⁷ Notably, the number of graduate applications from Chinese nationals had increased from the prior year, implying that demand is certainly there but that other reasons propelled these individuals to decline their offer to study in the United States.

The reasons for this are most likely the ongoing travel bans and visa restrictions for Chinese students specifically, leaving online education the only option for those who want to study in the United States. Unfortunately, the challenges of studying from China in an online program based in the United States are particularly cumbersome as students must navigate firewall issues and time zone differences. This, as well as the charged political rhetoric towards China, has contributed to Chinese students selecting other options.

Indeed, the year 2020 appears to have bucked all prior trends of enrollment growth from Chinese students. Before the pandemic and subsequent government restrictions on Chinese students, the number of Chinese students had been growing every year without exception for nearly two decades. Indicators for 2020, however, suggest that the number of Chinese students enrolled across a wide swath of U.S. colleges and universities has decreased dramatically. The State Department reports that the number of F visas (student visas) that were issued in 2020 to Chinese nationals decreased by an astonishing 86 percent.⁵⁸

Trends for Indian students tell a somewhat different story. Only a small fraction of those accepted into a graduate program enrolled, but a substantial proportion deferred. In fact, overwhelmingly more Indian students chose to defer than enroll in a master's or certificate program, so much so that first-time enrollment for graduate students from India fell by 66 percent in the fall 2020 semester.⁵⁹

This enrollment drop cannot be attributed entirely to the pandemic. In recent years, the largest growth of Indian students came from those participating in the OPT program. As of the 2019-20 academic year, Indian students on an OPT visa far outnumbered those enrolled in undergraduate degree programs and almost matched those enrolled in graduate degree programs.⁶⁰ But threats to the OPT program, compounded by suspension of the H-1B work visa, have signaled to Indian students that pursuing work opportunities after completing a U.S. degree may no longer be a viable option.

Still, the fact that so many Indian students deferred their admission to a graduate program implies that there is still demand for studying in the United States. Nonetheless, similar to the reduction of student visas for Chinese nationals, the State Department reports that the number of F visas (student visas) issued to Indian nationals in 2020 decreased by 64 percent.⁶¹

GLOBAL PERCEPTIONS OF THE U.S. BRAND

Government restrictions do more than just restrict entry of international students. They harm global perceptions of the U.S. brand and send a message that the United States does not welcome international students. In the last four years, the American higher education sector has had to take on the burden of having to change such perceptions in spite of government restrictions and political rhetoric that signal otherwise.

In fact, even before the pandemic, new international student enrollment had been steadily falling since 2016.⁶² This worrying trend roused colleges and universities into action as they launched social media campaigns, such as #YouAreWelcomeHere, to let international students know that their campuses are still welcoming environments.

But estimated enrollments for this past academic year indicate a significant drop-off that unquestionably surpasses drop-offs in previous years. As stated earlier, preliminary data from the Council of Graduate Schools indicates that over 68 percent of international students admitted to a graduate program in the fall 2020 semester declined their offer to study in the United States⁶³—meaning that they likely chose to study elsewhere. And indeed, other major host countries have adopted a much more open approach to international students as the United States keeps its borders closed.

Table 4: Leading Destinations for International Students⁶⁴

	Country	Share of International Students
1	United States	17.7%
2	United Kingdom	8.1%
3	Australia	8.0%
4	Germany	5.6%
5	Russia	4.7%
6	France	4.1%
7	Canada	4.0%
8	United Arab Emirates	4.0%
9	China	3.6%
10	Japan	3.3%

International students are definitely heading to the United Kingdom, where the UK government announced in February 2021 its intent to allow entry of international students for the fall 2021 semester.⁶⁵ International students in the UK will also be eligible for COVID-19 vaccine distribution.⁶⁶ This will certainly strengthen the UK's position as one of the leading destinations for international students.

In neighboring Canada, the Canadian government also updated its requirements for international students in February 2021 that allows entry pending testing and quarantine requirements.⁶⁷ International students in Canada also have a relatively smooth pathway to obtaining a work visa and permanent residency upon graduating from a degree program, which has contributed to the country's popularity as a study destination in recent years.

Taking an entirely different approach, however, is Australia. The Australian government closed the country’s borders to the vast majority of international students, leaving numerous students stranded or locked out. Accordingly, new enrollment of international students plunged by more than 60 percent, and Australian colleges and universities lost over 17,300 jobs in 2020.⁶⁸

A similar approach was taken in China, which is no longer just a sending country but also a major host country, especially within Asia where students from neighboring countries are increasingly drawn to China. But the Chinese government closed the country’s borders to the vast majority of international students and has not yet made any announcement for 2021 intakes.

Taking stock of these different approaches provides important insight for U.S. policymakers as they weigh the best course of action regarding international students. On the one hand, countries like the United Kingdom and Canada that have taken a more open approach to international students prove that it is possible to balance public health concerns with the needs of the higher education sector and the economy at large. On the other, countries like Australia and China that have taken more draconian actions have faced economic fallout and public outcry as a result of border closures.

Furthermore, the border closures of other major host countries provide the United States a rare opportunity to attract an even greater world share of international students as those students seek out alternative study arrangements. For example, while international student enrollment plummeted across Chinese colleges and universities, American branch campuses in China like NYU Shanghai actually reported record international applications as a direct result.⁶⁹

This is especially important considering that the United States has lost 5 percent of world share of international students over the last two decades even as the number of globally mobile students more than doubled.⁷⁰ But compared to other major host countries, the United States has a much greater capacity to host even more international students than it currently does. International students constitute only 6 percent of total higher education enrollment in the United States,⁷¹ whereas enrollment capacity is already reaching its limit for countries like the United Kingdom (21 percent), Canada (21 percent), and Australia (28 percent).⁷²

Table 6: United States’ World Share of International Students⁷³

Year	Share of International Students
2018 (most recent year available)	17.7%
2015	18.9%
2010	18.1%
2005	20.9%
2000	22.7%

There is much hope for the future of the United States and its colleges and universities, especially as COVID-19 vaccine distribution ramps up and daily new cases decline in the United States. Already, global perceptions of the U.S. brand have improved following the 2020 presidential election, with over three-quarters of prospective international students expressing a more favorable impression of the United States with a newly elected President Biden.⁷⁴ This timely opportunity cannot go to waste.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Biden administration has already rolled back some of the most harmful executive orders from the previous administration. But it is imperative that the President do more. In the absence of any action, international students will simply choose alternatives to the United States, leading to another “lost year” of international student enrollment across U.S. colleges and universities.

There is a short window to take executive action before international students receive their acceptance letters and make decisions about their study plans for the fall 2021 semester. The following are action items for the Biden administration, Congress, higher education leaders, and supporters of the higher education sector:

Immediate Action Needed

Issue an executive order instructing agencies (State Department, Department of Homeland Security, Department of Education, Department of Commerce) to develop procedures to ensure that every bona fide and qualified international student who wishes to study in the United States in the fall 2021 semester can do so. This would include:

- a) Waiver of the visa interview for individuals who have ever had a student visa and seek to return on a student visa.
- b) Creation of in-person visa appointment capacity in countries where students can travel to if the consulate in their country is closed.
- c) Use of video conference appointments where possible.
- d) Removal of travel bans and visa restrictions for students from countries where there are still travel bans and visa restrictions.
- e) Coordination with colleges and universities to develop quarantine locations for non-vaccinated international students when they first arrive in the United States.
- f) Coordination with colleges and universities to provide COVID-19 vaccines for international students, if those vaccines become available.

Longer-Term Action

Executive

Restore perceptions of the United States as a welcoming destination for international students. This can be achieved through high profile speeches by President Biden and administration officials that recognize the contributions of international students to the United States, as well as through outreach efforts via diplomatic channels and EducationUSA networks.

Develop a national strategy to increase the number of international students across U.S. colleges and universities and expand the country's world share of international students. This commits colleges and universities to work alongside—rather than in discoordination with—government agencies to achieve a clearly defined goal.⁷⁵

Legislative

Through comprehensive immigration reform, expedite student visa services, eliminate the visa interview for qualified students, and make the visa processing more efficient for international students.

Preserve post-graduation work opportunities for international students, such as the Optional Practical Training program. These opportunities allow international students to contribute to the American economy after they have gained valuable knowledge and skills from a U.S. degree program. Just like DACA must be preserved, the time has come to preserve and protect the Optional Practical Training program.

CONCLUSION

Though a global pandemic derailed global student mobility, government restrictions on international students have further upended America's greatest asset: its soft power. But as Samantha Power notes, the "can-do power" of the United States remains strong.⁷⁶ Decisive action is needed not only to heal the wounds of the last four years but to meet today's global challenges in a bold way.

The United States is a world leader for many reasons. The most compelling is that it leads not by brute force or bullying, but by example. That the best and brightest minds are most drawn to this country is proof enough. And eventually, these individuals go on to become scientists and entrepreneurs who contribute to American innovation. Or they return to their home countries and into positions of substantial influence as they bring home with them the benefits of an American education and a renewed appreciation for democracy, free speech, and the rule of law. They even change the course of American history when their studies lead to the election of the first Black, the first Asian American, and the first woman Vice President. Regardless of the path that international students take, their ongoing contributions cannot be counted on a simple ledger sheet. And it is up to the Biden administration to ensure that this can continue.

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