

# US colleges fret over fall in Chinese students

By LIA ZHU | China Daily | Updated: 2019-03-06 07:35

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## Decline in new enrollments leads to budget cuts

Nearly 1.1 million international students are studying at universities and colleges in the United States, contributing \$42 billion to the country's economy. For every seven international students enrolled, three US jobs are created and supported through tuition and other expenses.

However, the years of easy growth may be over for many of the schools as new enrollment of international students has declined for a third consecutive year.

New student enrollments fell from the 2016-17 academic year by 6.6 percent for the 2017-18 period, according to a new study.

However, overall — as opposed to new — international enrollments increased by 1.5 percent from 2016-17 to 2017-18, according to a survey last year by the Institute of International Education in New York. It collected data from 2,075 institutions.

The report also found that most of the international students are from China, with more than 363,000 enrolling in the 2017-2018 school year, or about one-third of the total international student population in the US.

Several states, including Arkansas, Montana and Tennessee, saw their international student numbers decline by double digits.

The universities of Illinois, Oregon and Iowa reported enrollment declines among international students for the fall last year, especially from China, the largest contributor to the US.

Rahul Choudaha, research associate at the Center for Studies in Higher Education at the University of California, Berkeley, said the loss of Chinese students, who often pay higher tuition rates, would be financially catastrophic for US universities.

As an example, he cited Michigan State University, which enrolled 486 fewer undergraduate students from China in the fall semester last year.

Based on the university's annual \$40,000 international undergraduate tuition fee, 486 fewer students means a loss of nearly \$20 million in revenue in the first year and \$80 million in four years, Choudaha said.

"Public universities are even more dependent on international students, especially those from China, because of the decline in domestic enrollment and the government's budgetary support," he said.

At UC Berkeley, China provides the largest number of foreign students, accounting for more than 37 percent of the international total. In the fall, the university had 2,448 Chinese students, 169 more than at the same time the previous year, a rise of 7.42 percent. Tuition and fees for international undergraduates are \$46,170 a year, according to the university's international office.

The fall in international enrollments has led to budget cuts at some institutions. Wright State University in Ohio has reduced the number of full-time French horn and tuba professors, and Kansas State University has reduced its Italian classes, according to media reports.

Two colleges at the University of Illinois have insured themselves against a sharp drop in the number of Chinese students, to manage financial risks to their programs.

Jeffrey Brown, dean of the university's business college, came up with the idea in 2015, when international enrollments were high.

In 2017, Brown's college and the engineering college agreed to pay \$424,000 annually for insurance coverage of up to \$60 million — about the combined annual tuition revenue from the 800 Chinese students at the two colleges.

Kevin Pitts, vice-provost for undergraduate education at the university, said about one in seven of its undergraduates are international, out of a student body of about 33,000, and China is the biggest contributor to international enrollments.

He said the direct cause of the fall in international students is unknown, but there are several potential reasons.

"Educators and schools in China could be increasing their capacity to cater to domestic students. Another thing we wonder about in this political climate is the availability of visas," Pitts said.

"Visa application process issues or visa delays/denials" is listed as the top reason for reduced new enrollment in the fall last year, according to the Institute of International Education.

Its Fall 2018 International Student Enrollment Hot Topics Survey found that 83 percent of the respondents attributed the decline in numbers to visa delays and denials, compared with 34 percent in the fall of 2016.

Although the factors causing these declines are likely to be multifaceted, the "Trump effect" stands out clearly, said Choudaha, the research associate at UC Berkeley also executive vice-president at StudyPortals, a company that recruits international students online.

A ban on visitors from some Muslim countries initially put forward by the administration of US President Donald Trump, and a proposed ban on all Chinese students going to the US, which were later dropped, have created perceptions of the country becoming unattractive and unsafe for international students, Choudaha said.

Nicole Shen, from Suzhou, Jiangsu province, said she is considering the University of Toronto in Canada for her daughter, who is attending a high school in Palo Alto, California.

"Canada is more welcoming, and it has better immigration policies. I heard it's easier to get a work visa after graduation. And if you work for three consecutive years, you can get a green card (permanent residency)," she said.

Safety and a perceived anti-immigration climate are her only concerns. "Money is not a worry," Shen said. "We would rather sell property to support our child." The family has a budget of \$50,000 for annual college tuition fees.

According to a survey in 2017 by Studyportals, a company in Boston that offers an online international student recruitment platform, nearly two-thirds of 1,815 prospective students said they would lose interest in studying in the US due to changes that limit work opportunities for students from abroad.

Choudaha said in a report on international student mobility published by UC Berkeley in April that the ability to work while a student, and paths to entering the US job market and possibly becoming a citizen, are also critical factors for many students selecting their foreign study destinations.

Overseas students are experiencing more visa issues in the US when they apply to stay and work.

Min Yuhan, a Chinese student at Foothill College in the Bay Area, California, said: "I know many graduates have been turned down by Silicon Valley companies. Compared with a few years ago, the situation is worse now."

The college Min attends has 1,621 international students. "Every year, we have more than 100 new students from China," he said.

The increasing popularity of community colleges among Chinese students has prompted Min to launch a startup providing a "one-stop" service for such students to study at these institutions in the US.

Min, who has a company in Hangzhou, Zhejiang province, said: "The decisions are mostly made by parents. Aside from the safety issues, visa hassles and slim hopes of landing a job are cooling interest in Chinese sending their children to America."

Elizabeth Venturini, a college admissions consultant in California, said, "With studies for a four-year college degree costing anywhere from \$150,000 to \$260,000, parents cannot afford to make a financial mistake with their child's education."

The main reasons for Chinese families sending their children to the US are to avoid the stress of taking the gaokao — the national college entrance exam — and to learn or improve their English-speaking skills, Venturini said.

An increasing number of options are available to meet such demands. Australia, Canada and the United Kingdom are the biggest competitors to the US, she said.

Some of the world's top international student hosting countries have seen growing enrollment due to official recruitment efforts.

In 2016, Australia launched its National Strategy for International Education 2025 to develop the country's role as a global leader in education and research.

As a result, the number of international students in the country reached a record high in 2017, with more than 690,000 enrolled for the fall semester last year, according to the Australian Department of Education and Training.

Canada has also taken measures to invite international students to the country as part of a government strategy to attract talent for job creation and economic growth. The country's efforts include quickly processing student visas and creating pathways for certain international students to remain in Canada after graduation.

Canada has seen a steady increase in international enrollment since 2014. There were nearly 500,000 international students in the country in 2017, a 17 percent year-on-year increase, according to a report by the Canadian Bureau for International Education in August.

Choudaha said in his report: "American higher education is entering a new era of intensified competition. Institutions must identify ways to reinvest some of the income generated by international student tuition toward proactive outreach strategies and

creative scholarship packages that broaden and diversify the pool of prospective international students."