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SPECIAL REPORTS

Loss of Global Prestige

The United States' appeal as a study-abroad destination may be waning

By Nell Gluckman | MARCH 04, 2018

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For international students, studying in the United States may be losing some of its luster. While there were more international students here in the 2016-17 academic year than ever before, there are signs that the growth has begun to slow.



Eduardo Luzzatti for The Chronicle

The 2018 Trends Report

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For the first time in years, enrollment of new international undergraduates declined in 2016-17. Applications and first-time enrollments of graduate students also declined, according to data from the fall of 2017. compared with the previous year. President Trump's "America First" mantra has

contributed to the trend, but other factors, such as aggressive recruiting by other countries, the cost of U.S. tuition, and global economic and political turmoil, began affecting international enrollment even before the 2016 election.

College presidents seem to be worried about the reputation of the nation's higher-education system, a recent *Chronicle* survey found. In 2014, some 87 percent of North American university officials surveyed said higher education here was "the best in the world" or "one of the best in the world." In 2017, that figure had dropped to 67 percent.

The Trump administration's policies — such as the travel ban, increased oversight of the federal visa program that allows international students to work in the United States after graduating, and the end of programs that allowed immigrants from Haiti and El Salvador to work here temporarily — have made some international students feel less welcome. A survey conducted last year by Royall & Company showed that about a third of prospective international students had less interest in studying in the United States because of the political climate. Nearly 70 percent of those students cited President Trump as a factor.

TAKEAWAY

International Student Enrollment Is Leveling Off

- Though international-student enrollment in U.S. colleges remains high, the rapid growth of recent years appears to have reached a plateau.
- Last year, for the first time in more than a decade, fewer new foreign students were enrolled than in the previous year. International graduate-student enrollment is also on the decline.
- The anti-immigrant rhetoric and policies of the Trump administration are contributing to this trend.
- Global economic issues are also in play. Saudi Arabia and Brazil recently ended or scaled back scholarship programs for students to study in the United States.
- Rising U.S. tuition rates and recruiting competition from other countries have dissuaded some international students from coming here.

The numbers of international students who enrolled at American institutions last year tell a similar story. Though overall international-student enrollment was up slightly again in the 2016-17 academic year, reaching over one million students for the second year in a row, the number of foreign students who enrolled in a U.S. institution for the first time dropped, according to the Institute of International Education. It was the first time that new-student enrollment had declined compared with the previous year since the institute started recording that data 12 years ago.

"The numbers are definitely flattening," says Rajika Bhandari, the institute's head of research, policy, and practice. "Whether or not institutions see a decline is heavily based also on the type of institution."

The latest figures suggest that while international-student enrollment is still growing, in part because of China's expanding middle class, it may be reaching a turning point. In addition, for the first time in a decade, international graduate-student enrollments and applications — traditionally a reliable source of foreign students — declined last fall when compared with the previous year, according to a recent study by the Council of Graduate Schools.

Rising fees are one of the biggest factors stemming the flow of foreign students to the United States, says Rahul Choudaha, executive vice president of global engagement and research at StudyPortals, a company that recruits international students online.

"The cost of an education for international students is easily 40 percent more today compared to 10 years back," Choudaha says. Though public universities here are under pressure to hold tuition costs down for in-state students, many institutions have raised tuition and other fees for other students.

In addition, Brazil and Saudi Arabia have recently ended or cut back on scholarship programs that allow their students to study in the United States, Choudaha says. Both were among the 10 countries that sent the most students to the United States last year, according to IIE, but their governments have felt the effects of declining oil prices.

The slowing growth in international enrollment is likely to affect institutions unevenly. Top colleges with global name recognition can raise tuition as much as they want, and international students will still enroll, Choudaha says. Second-tier universities that have been recruiting abroad for decades and have large alumni networks in other countries are also unlikely to see an enrollment drop. But colleges that have only recently gotten into the business of recruiting abroad — sometimes in an effort to offset declining state appropriations — may see a decline, Choudaha says. Those institutions compete with each other and may have trouble distinguishing themselves.

At the University of Oregon, the number of international students dropped in 2016 for the first time in a decade. That drop, to 3,013 students, came after a five-year period of steady increases. Abe Schafermeyer, director of international student and scholar services, says rising fees and increased competition from other American institutions were a factor. But he has also seen other countries intensify their efforts to draw more foreign students.

"What I've noticed in the U.K., Australia, New Zealand," he says, "is there's a national push, a national agenda to draw students to any campus." The IIE's Bhandari added Canada and Germany to that list. German institutions have started offering master's-degree programs in English in an attempt to draw

more students, she says. Universities in those countries often work more closely with their governments to attract students from places such as China and India as a way to diversify their student bodies and add skilled workers to their job markets.

"That's quite a different narrative than travel bans," Schafermeyer says.

Most campus administrators cannot control federal policy, tuition hikes, or their competitors' actions, but they can make efforts to improve their international students' experiences. Ensuring that international students who are already enrolled have the services they need and feel welcomed, especially in a time of heightened nationalist political rhetoric, is important for recruitment, he says. The best recruiters? Alumni.

"Word of mouth," he says, "really, really is powerful."

Nell Gluckman writes about faculty issues and other topics in higher education. You can follow her on Twitter @nellgluckman, or email her at nell.gluckman@chronicle.com.

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