

INTERNATIONAL

International Enrollments Remain Flat, Raising Concerns About America's Continuing Appeal

By Karin Fischer | NOVEMBER 18, 2019

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International enrollment in American colleges and universities stagnated in fall 2018, according to the “Open Doors” report released today by the Institute of International Education and the State Department. The 0.05-percent increase in total enrollment is the smallest in the 70 years the data have been tracked, except for a couple of years of outright declines following the attacks of September 11, 2001.

The number of new international students fell for the third year in a row, although that 1-percent decline was not as steep as the nearly 7-percent drop the previous year.

Fewer New Students From Abroad

The number of new international students arriving on American campuses fell for the third year in a row. New international enrollments have tumbled more than 10 percent since the fall of 2015.

Fall 2013	270,128
Fall 2014	293,766
Fall 2015	300,743
Fall 2016	290,836
Fall 2017	271,738
Fall 2018	269,383

Multiple factors are probably behind these results, including the high cost of an American degree, the scaling back of government scholarship programs in countries like Saudi Arabia, and families' concerns about safety in the United States.

Still, many educators remain especially concerned about the impact of the Trump administration's anti-foreigner rhetoric and the increased scrutiny of students at the border. This fall students from China, Iran, and the Palestinian territories had their visas revoked at the last minute.

Such actions tarnish the United States' image abroad, says Rachel Banks, director of public policy at NAFSA: Association of International Educators. "International students become America's greatest foreign policy asset. That's what's at risk."

Here are key takeaways from the report:

New international enrollments are down more than 10 percent from their highest mark. In fall 2015, American colleges enrolled more than 300,000 first-time students from overseas. Three years later, that number is just 269,000. Although the total number of international students is now holding steady, three years' worth of smaller incoming classes could affect overall enrollments in the future, said Mirka Martel, head of research, evaluation, and learning at the Institute of International Education.

In a call with reporters, Caroline Casagrande, deputy assistant secretary of state for academic programs, sought to downplay any "Trump effect" on international enrollments, noting that the decline in new students actually began before President Trump took office.

The administration, she said, wants to send a message that the United States remains welcoming to international students. She pointed out a recent op-ed essay by Terry Branstad, U.S. ambassador to China, published in *China Youth Daily*.

Despite falling first-time enrollments, more than one million students from overseas study at American colleges, double that of the United States' closest competitor, Britain. International students contribute \$41 billion to the American economy, according to a NAFSA analysis.

Enrollment trends are not created equal. Half of colleges that responded to a snapshot survey said new international enrollments have declined again this fall. But 41 percent of colleges reported an uptick in first-time foreign students. Meanwhile, 11 universities enroll more than 10,000 international students, according to the “Open Doors” report. The top institution, New York University, has nearly 20,000 students from abroad.

One in five student-visa holders is working, not studying. The number of students on American campuses actually fell in 2018, by 2 percent. But the total number of international students increased slightly, because that figure includes recent graduates in Optional Practical Training, a program that allows international students to work in the United States for at least one year after they earn a degree. The number of students participating in OPT, as the program is known, has nearly doubled over the past five years, in part because of changes under the Obama administration to allow students in certain science, technology, engineering, and math fields to stay for as long as 36 months.

The growth in OPT reflects the value that international students place on gaining work experience in addition to their degree, says Eddie West, assistant dean of international strategy and programs in the College of Extended Studies at San Diego State University. Colleges should do more to find work opportunities for international students and to highlight those opportunities in overseas recruitment, he says.

Still, OPT faces an uncertain future. A group of tech workers is suing to end the program, arguing that it takes jobs from Americans. And backlogs at the federal agency that processes work authorizations means that some students have missed their start dates and lost out on jobs.

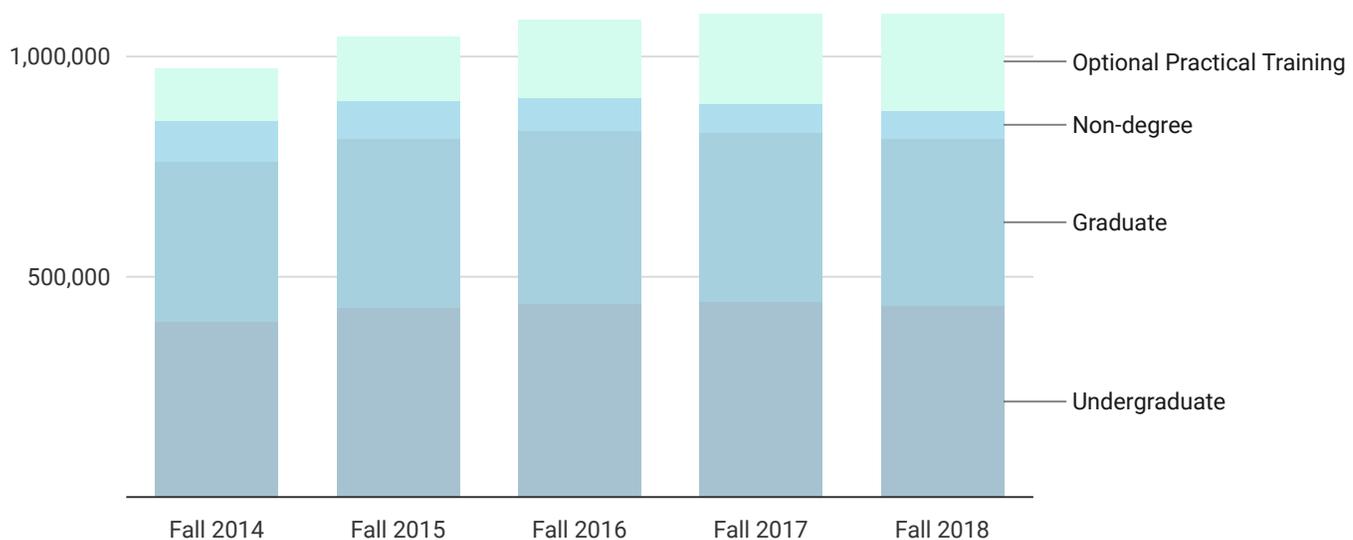
Far fewer students are coming to the United States to study English. Just 22,000 international students were enrolled in university-based intensive-English programs, half the number studying here five years earlier. English-language programs have historically been subject to enrollment swings, but Jane E. Robison, president of EnglishUSA, a membership association, calls the current changes a “paradigm shift” as American colleges face competition from often-cheaper programs abroad, and many students now begin learning English at younger ages.

In response, English-language institutes are offering new short-term and boutique programs. Missouri State University’s institute, where Robison is executive director, runs a specialty English program for musicians, who then typically enroll in a master’s program at the university. “You kind of have to reinvent yourself,” she says.

English programs are not the only area of decline. Business programs and community colleges have also experienced enrollment dips.

Student Work Program's Role in Growth

Optional Practical Training, the work program for recent international graduates of American colleges, is a driver of year-over-year enrollment increases.



Source: Institute of International Education/U.S. Department of State • [Get the data](#) • Created with [Datawrapper](#)

There are shifts in what’s driving growth. For much of the past decade, undergraduates from China were the engine of the international-student boom. While overall enrollments from China, the largest source of international students in the United States,

ticked up slightly in 2018, undergraduate numbers were essentially flat. At the same time, the number of bachelor's-degree students from India climbed 6 percent. That's a change — in the past, most students coming from India have enrolled in graduate programs.

But Rahul Choudaha, a U.S.-based international education expert and blogger, thinks India is poised to follow China's path, as a rising professional class has both the money and the desire to send their children abroad.

Other traditional markets have weakened, most notably Saudi Arabia. The number of Saudi students in the United States tumbled 17 percent, as the government pulled back from a generous scholarship program. But several countries showed promise, including Bangladesh, Brazil, and Nigeria.

Not many Americans study abroad — and when they do, they go to traditional destinations. Less than 2 percent of students enrolled in American higher education go abroad. In 2017 about 342,000 Americans studied overseas, a 3-percent increase over the previous year. (Study-abroad data lag by an additional year because students are counted only after they earn credit and return to the United States.) The top five destination countries were all in Western Europe, although there was a surge of interest in studying in Japan.

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