

Trends & Insights

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Responding to International Graduate Student Enrollment Trends: Lessons for the Future

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Higher education leaders in the United States continue to grapple with several enrollment challenges. These challenges include the “demographic cliff” (Grawe 2018), COVID-19’s influence on the growth of online programming (Ferguson 2021), and questions about the value of an undergraduate degree (Finley et al. 2021). Without doubt, higher education professionals and allies must continue to provide access to quality education and offer evidence to show higher education’s contribution to society.

Despite the clear challenges related to enrollment, institutions have a great opportunity to amplify discussions about the graduate level. In particular, now is the time to re-engage campus internationalization efforts with a focus on impact rather than simple economics. With international graduate student enrollments as one of the bright spots for many U.S. institutions, we are presented with an opportunity to right some of the wrongs of recent memory, including pushing back against the “cash cow” rhetoric we have seen in the last two decades (Choudaha 2017). Now is the time to re-examine our approach to international graduate student recruitment and enrollments with an eye towards equity strategy and measuring the impact these students bring to institutions, communities, and nations.

LESSONS FROM THE PAST

Over the past couple decades, we have learned the importance of framing discussions around enrollment management in relation to international students. Since the early 1990s, state governments have slashed budgets, leaving institutions to rely on international students to fill in the gaps (George Mwangi 2013). As part of this effort, institutions engaged in recruitment efforts around the world, partnered with organizations that promised to bring in more revenue (often with a commission attached), and international student enrollments rose to keep institutions afloat.

Some institutions used a combination of higher international student tuition rates and fees (often not covered by students’ financial aid packages). These additional costs can amount to several thousands of dollars for tuition and several hundred dollars in fees per year per student with the justification being that it costs more to educate and serve an international student than a domestic student. However, there is no evidence that all of the revenue from these fees actually goes towards academic support and compliance related to international students (Redden 2015).

Another lesson learned as the United States emerged from the Great Recession with a divided government was how possible cuts to grant funding agencies can in turn affect funding packages for international graduate students. These funders (i.e., the National Institutes of Health, the National Science Foundation, and the United States Department of Energy’s Office of Science) provide significant funding for research assistantships for graduate students and such cuts can lower the number of opportunities available to bring students to the United States. With the prospect of budget battles in the 118th U.S. Congress, higher education institutions should not be caught unaware as they try to navigate a potentially difficult research funding environment. The country’s research infrastructure, and our many international graduate students that do the work, cannot be casualties of political battles.

CURRENT ENROLLMENT TRENDS

Data from the Council of Graduate Schools and the Institute of International Education show a continued increase in admissions and enrollments across graduate education, with international graduate students—particularly Indian master’s and certificate students—driving much of the increase after a drop in Fall 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic (Institute of International Education 2023; Zhou 2022). This increase is consistent across doctoral, master’s, and certificate programs and all major fields of study. Interest in U.S. graduate programs remains high despite increasing competition from countries that have created more accessible pathways to the workforce after graduation for highly skilled graduates (OECD 2022).

Several countries, including Canada, China, India, Saudi Arabia, and South Korea, are leading the charge when it comes to U.S. graduate enrollments, but these same countries saw a marked drop in mobility abroad compared with prepandemic years (Zhou et al. 2020). Countries with demographic growth and a growing middle class offer opportunities for U.S. institutions to diversify their enrollments with students desiring a U.S. graduate degree to bring back human capital to their countries. While no one can anticipate the next global pandemic or other event that impacts global mobility, institutions should proactively anticipate potential barriers that can slow enrollments and diversify their international student population. If a college or university is overly reliant on students from a specific country or countries, it can cause major financial issues, particularly for tuition-dependent institutions.

Another trend that potentially impacts international graduate enrollments is the rise in online graduate programs. Wallenstein (2022) reported that online graduate programs grew by 63 percent from 2019 to 2020. As prospective students acclimated to distance learning and technologies during the pandemic, online programs became more appealing to institutions, particularly nonflagship universities far from major metropolitan areas. But fully online or hybrid programs can cause challenges for international graduate student enrollment. For example, U.S. immigration regulations restrict F-1 students to only one fully online course (or three credit hours) per term and China bans online-only degree programs from other countries. Program planners must therefore exhibit due diligence when setting their enrollment management strategy as an online program may inhibit growth from international students. Restrictive policies from other countries could spur a rush back to campuses in the United States (Sharma 2023) and institutions can be ready for a

possible influx of students. Although overall enrollment numbers may be trending the same way, campuses should be aware of the breakdown between in-person and completely online so that campus policies do not inhibit enrollment growth and the educational experience.

MEASURING IMPACT

As institutions continue to navigate the challenges of enrollment and public trust, it is incumbent upon higher education leaders and scholars to provide empirical evidence of higher education’s impact. Walter McMahon’s *Higher Learning, Greater Good* (2009) provides one of the best analyses of the private and social benefits of U.S. higher education. In particular, McMahon notes the increases in tax revenues, democratic outcomes, human rights, and lower crime that are attributable to higher education. Moreover, graduate education and university research have been linked to social, economic, and business advancements, including advances in agricultural technology, language training for future diplomats, and a deeper appreciation of classic and modern art (McMahon 2009). Given the important role that international graduate students play in university research, measuring and sharing this impact will make the case to policymakers for continued support of higher education and welcoming international students to our institutions.

One of the best examples of gathering such data comes from NAFSA’s annual **International Student Economic Value Tool**. This tool measures economic impact via the number of dollars added to the U.S. economy and the number of jobs created directly and indirectly from international student enrollments. The data is also disaggregated at the state and congressional district levels to speak to policymakers who have a hand in determining funding allocations for public higher education institutions.

But quantitative data only tells part of the story. We need to hear the stories from the international students who not only have gone on to win Nobel Prizes but also the international students who volunteer in their local community, advocate for labor rights on campus, or start a business. International graduate students help promote intercultural understanding at a time when many countries (including the United States) are experiencing a rising tide of nationalism and xenophobia of individuals from other countries. The rise of anti-Asian, anti-Black, and anti-Semitic sentiments across the United States represent a disturbing trend. Furthermore, international graduate

students' contributions to research and creative activity span from posing different questions, challenging dominant assumptions and paradigms, and establishing collaborations across borders that do not end with graduation. Colleges and universities should work across silos—including international offices, graduate colleges, public relations, community engagement offices, and innovation centers—to highlight the contributions of their graduate students (and alumni) for our campuses, taxpayers, and the local community.

CONTINUING CHALLENGES AHEAD

Even with increased enrollments and positive contributions of international graduate students, the road ahead will continue to present challenges to higher education leaders. First, we must avoid the temptation to look at international students as a panacea to the institutional priorities at the time, lest we fall into old habits as had been done during the Great Recession. The danger today is looking solely to international students to meet the calls for diversifying our institutions. While international students do contribute to the diversity of our institutions, this effort cannot be done at the expense of domestic enrollments of Black, Indigenous, Hispanic, first-generation, rural, and low-income graduate students who continually remain underrepresented in graduate education.

Second, the regulatory environment continues to present challenges for international students in the United States. Challenges related to F-1 OPT rules and the H-1B cap continue to hamper career pathways postgraduation, particularly in areas related to visa issuance, delays due to administrative processing, and entrepreneurship opportunities. And as programs consider partial or fully online options, regulations may forestall any growth from students from abroad.

Third, financial challenges will always remain. In this age of college closures and mergers, institutions have real enrollment challenges and international graduate students can be part of the solution. But rather than viewing international students as “cash cows,” there is an opportunity to recruit and enroll international students for the primary purpose of internationalizing our institutions. The Minnesota State Colleges and University system experimented with charging international students the in-state tuition rate starting in 2008 with marketable success, as institutions increased their international student populations without a change in domestic student enrollment over the next decade. The policy generated additional revenue without a loss elsewhere while

internationalizing their campuses (Ngo and Cho 2022). Such innovative strategies can serve as a model for a better approach to international graduate student recruitment.

Fourth, managing the mental health of all students remains a challenge, with unique barriers and hurdles for international graduate students. Issues of language, sense of belonging, and cultural misunderstandings occur across many student populations. These challenges can be exacerbated in international graduate programs as internships, social isolation, and cultural norms in the workplace more commonly fall on a student's plate. International office staff should work with counseling services to support students, and be cognizant of stressors more specific to this student population (Lee 2021).

CONCLUSION

Many international higher education practitioners enter the profession for the intrinsic benefit of working in a global environment. Many who have weathered challenges in the last few decades know that the field is resilient and that talented graduate students will continue to come to the United States to study at our colleges and universities. International graduate students will continue to be the backbone of academic institutions, contributing in the lab, studio, stage, classrooms, and the community. As we emerge from the COVID-19 pandemic, we can look to past times of crises to find a better way forward for our students and our institutions. The result can be a more equitable approach to our incoming international graduate students to realize our vision of truly global campuses in the twenty-first century.

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