



Countering the Forces of Change

Graduate schools are repositioning their programs and partnerships to counter anticipated declines in international student enrollment.

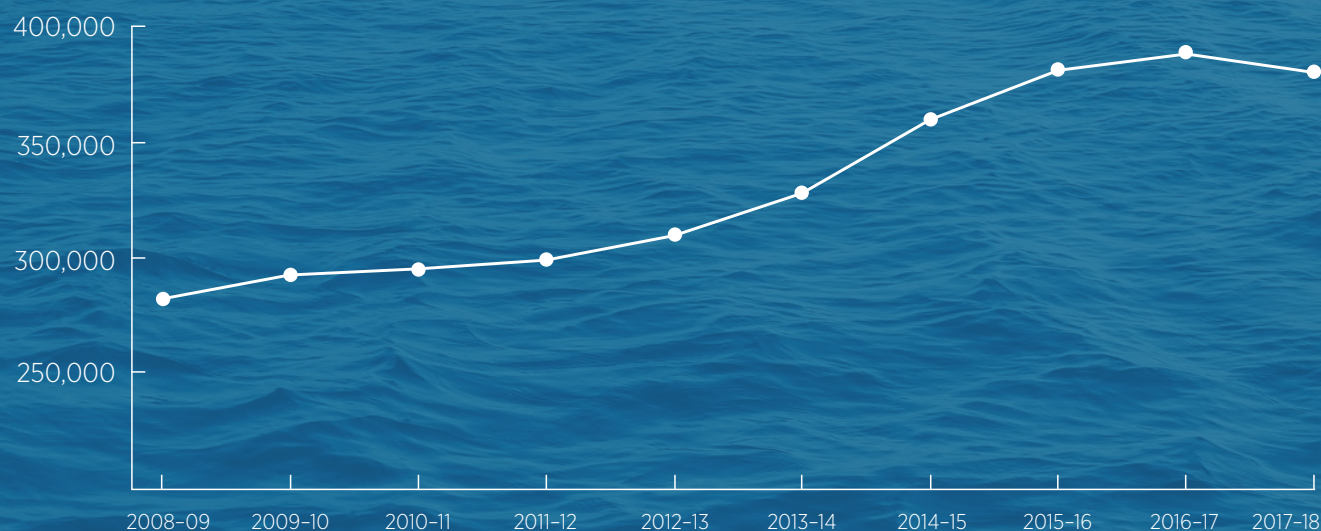
BY PHIL MANZANO



In early 2019, Curt Rom and Karl Anderson from the University of Arkansas (UA) traveled from Fayetteville to Banda Aceh, a city on the northern tip of Indonesia's Sumatra Island. Despite the cultural differences between small-town Arkansas and a city whose main landmark is the seven-domed Baiturrahman Grand Mosque, Rom and Anderson—associate dean for international education and international graduate student recruiter, respectively—were in Banda Aceh to refresh a long-standing relationship that had waned, due in part to recent changes in the geopolitical landscape.

"We think very highly of the University of Arkansas," Rom recalls hearing from an Indonesian government official who controls doctoral fellowships. "You came in with the tsunami rescue and the Fulbright program, you hosted almost 50 of our students and you essentially rescued them after massive destruction, but now they're not welcome anymore in the United States."

International Students Enrolled in the United States at the Graduate Level *Master's, doctoral, and professional degrees*



Source: IIE Open Doors data

The incident typifies one of several headwinds U.S. colleges and universities are pushing against in maintaining, or growing, their international graduate student enrollment numbers. The smooth sailing conditions that U.S. institutions once enjoyed show signs of slowing when buffeted by an increasingly negative impression abroad of studying in the United States, unpredictable and onerous visa processes, and competition from other countries' higher education systems—all of which are often interrelated.

"It's really a perfect storm of different things that are contributing to a decrease in the student numbers that we're seeing," says Anderson.

In the face of those challenges, universities are adapting by focusing on their institutional strengths, exploring new digital and online social tools, and evaluating and creating new programs, partnerships, and strategies for reaching out to and retaining international graduate students.

Behind the Decline

After more than a decade of consistent increases, the troubling clouds of slowed growth and slight decline have formed on the international student enrollment horizon. The most recent data from the Council of Graduate Schools (CGS) show 2 consecutive years of decline in international student applications and enrollment, while the Institute of International

Education's data indicate stalled growth and, most recently, a dip in graduate enrollments.

"While we think it's too soon to consider this a trend, it is troubling," says CGS President Suzanne Ortega.

Virginia Tech is one of many institutions that have seen a decline in their international graduate student population that corresponds with the turbulence in the current geopolitical environment. At Virginia Tech, enrollment was at an all-time high at 2,159 international students in 2016, but numbers have since dropped to 1,959 in 2018. In fall 2018, about 25 students did not receive their visas in time to begin classes, so the school extended admissions to the spring.

"Beside some of the messages potential students are getting from the United States, I think Canada seems to be sending different messages, [as well as] the United Kingdom, Australia, even some in Europe," says Karen P. DePauw, vice president and dean of graduate education at Virginia Tech.

"Grad students have the ability to go multiple places," she says. "And where the United States was [once] *the* primary destination, I think [it has to] become a primary destination they will look to."

Katherine Beczak agrees. Beczak is the marketing chair for NAGAP, the Association for Graduate Enrollment Management, and assistant director for graduate enrollment services at Rochester Institute of Technology (RIT). "We've

seen similar declines in the past, and we can, and have in the past, recovered,” she says.

“Do they have more options and do we have more competition? Yes. But I believe the United States still stands out as the leader in global education,” she says.

RIT hasn’t seen a decrease in its graduate enrollments thus far, says Beczak, but they are prepared to change gears if necessary.

“I’ve seen a decline in interest in some key areas, like engineering,” she says. “If the trend continues and enrollment drastically declines, some programs may be affected and we may have to revise our marketing.”

Against the backdrop of increasing competition from other countries, parents and prospective students are also asking questions about safety, whether they will find community, and costs, Anderson says. For students in Asia, choosing an institution in Australia, Canada, China, or New Zealand may seem like a better option.

“There was a period when the United States had it relatively easy, where international competition was not nearly as strong as it is now, where governmental processes were working relatively smoothly,” says Bruce Farnsworth, vice president at the American Council on Education (ACE)’s Center for Internationalization and Global Engagement. “There was an unusually positive period, a confluence of really fortunate events.”

“Do they have more options and do we have more competition? Yes. But I believe the United States still stands out as the leader in global education.”

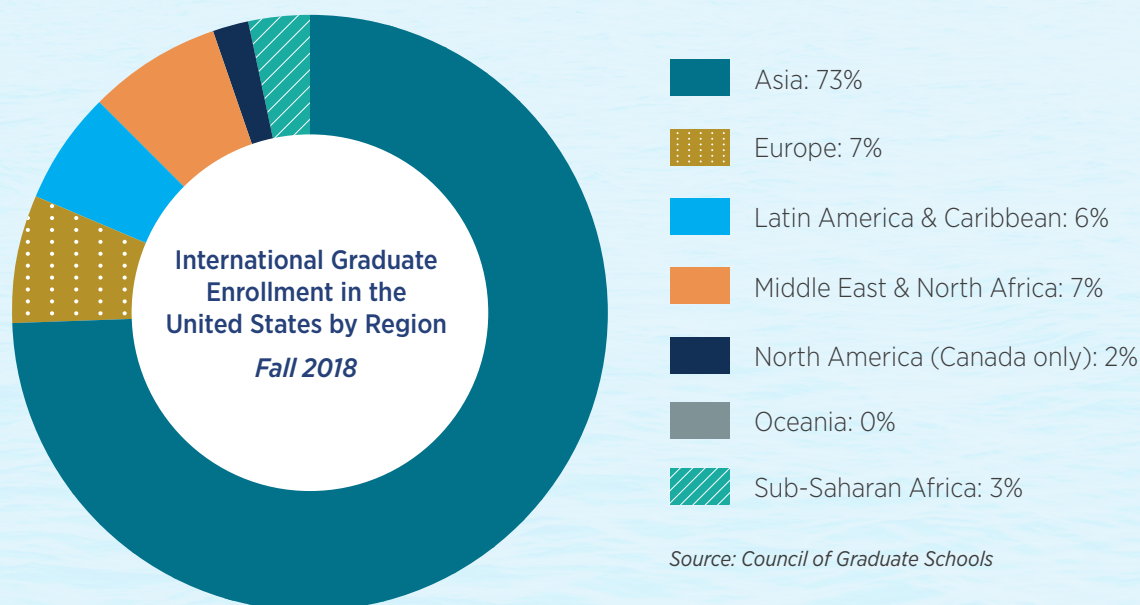
—KATHERINE BECZAK

“You can’t expect an environment like that to last forever,” he says. “Eventually you’re going to have more competition. Eventually you’re going to have government regulation that frustrates you, and you’re going to have to find a way to cope with it if you want to stay in business.”

Responses to Changing Winds

While changes in international student admissions have been seen across the U.S. higher education landscape, the extent to which each institution feels the effects, and how it responds, varies.

“To put it bluntly,” says Rossitza Wooster, dean of the graduate school at Portland State University (PSU) in Oregon, “if you have a Research 1 institution that has a history of attracting international students, most of them go there regardless of what the [political] climate is because they have a very good support network and so forth.”



Source: Council of Graduate Schools

For Research 1 institutions, “Their programs are well known,” she adds. “They have very robust recruitment and alumni networks, and their graduate students very often are coming directly through established pipelines.”

Institutions like PSU, a Research 2 institution situated near Oregon’s high-tech Silicon Forest, face competition from those institutions with deep networks, both at home and abroad. Most of PSU’s graduate international students are in the engineering college and computer sciences—programs that, like at many other institutions, are experiencing dwindling enrollment.

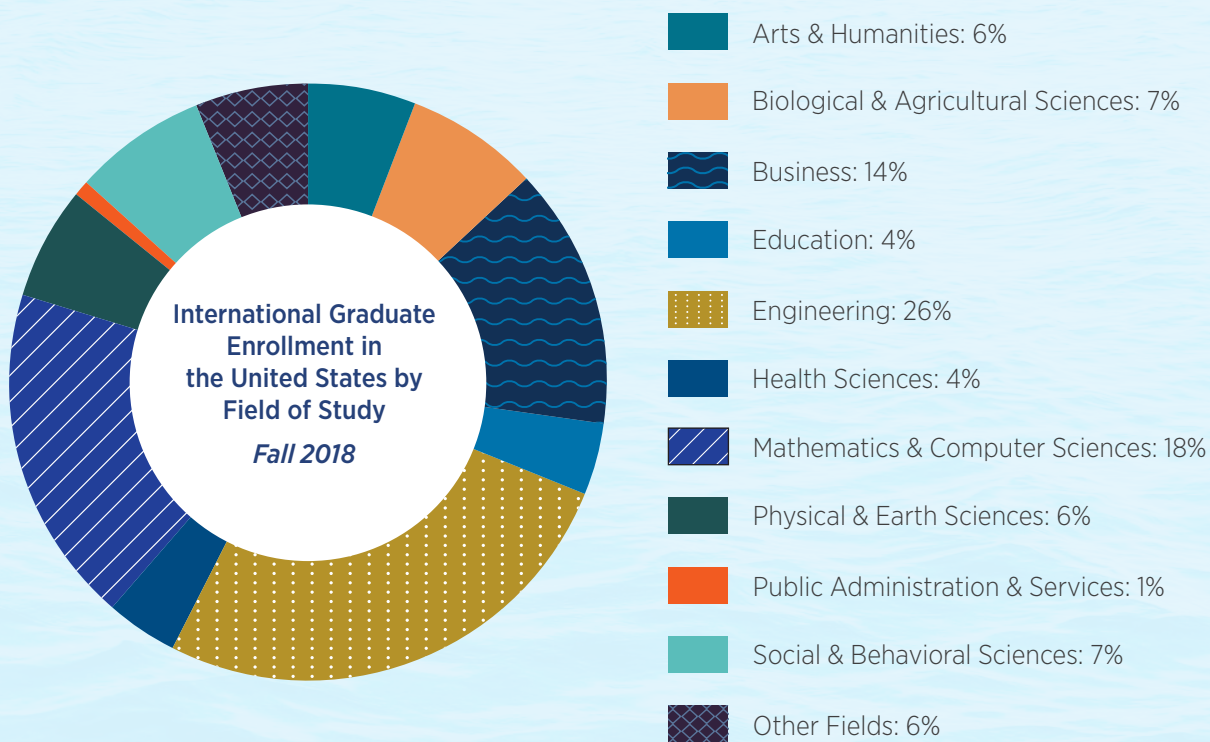
“This is catching up with us in a significant way,” says Samuel Dunlop, PSU director of admissions, international recruitment, and outreach. “It’s causing us to have some really good, candid conversations about how we can streamline, be more strategic, and collaborate.”

PSU is starting to work with agent networks in other countries to broaden its recruitment reach, a growing practice among U.S. institutions. A

PSU staff member works exclusively with third-party partners to build in safeguards to ensure quality control over the students the partner sends. This practice marks an effort “to be a little bit more measured about this,” says Dunlop. “It is an important way to find students, and it needs to be done responsibly.”

Wooster says they are also creating pathways from institutions abroad to PSU, such as a bachelor’s plus master’s in economics partnership with a Turkish university. PSU is exploring similar agreements with some Israeli institutions, where students would complete a portion of their coursework in their home country, then come to PSU’s campus to finish their bachelor’s degree and move into a master’s program.

“This kind of pathway, once established, bypasses the fluff in the political atmosphere because there is an established route,” Wooster says. “They’re basically following a pathway, where there’s someone on one end sending them off, and someone on the other end receiving them.”



Source: Council of Graduate Schools

A New Course Forward

One innovation some U.S. institutions are attempting with success is creating degree programs that incorporate several areas of study—a natural fit for developing partnerships within and across institutions.

“We are re-envisioning [the answers to:] ‘What does it mean to obtain an education, and what does an education look like?’” says Wooster. “I think it’s really exciting. But graduate students coming from abroad are not oblivious to that. As we create more and more of these transdisciplinary degrees, I hope we will see more interest, because they will find that here [in the United States] and nowhere else.”

The traditional singular degree track is no longer as appealing to today’s students. “More and more, the kinds of challenges we face today are transdisciplinary challenges,” she says. “Things like homelessness, global warming, or climate change are not challenges that can be solved by one particular discipline or one particular field.”

Institutions across the United States are establishing new programming to prepare students to meet those cross-national challenges affecting the present and future. At UA, international graduate enrollment was on a 15-year climb until this year, when it registered a 4 percent decrease. Applications are up, but they were trending down the previous 2 years. To attract more students, UA developed an interdisciplinary degree in environmental dynamics that features faculty from multiple departments exploring the interaction of environment, society, and economy.

“We have huge capacity in this area,” Rom says. “It’s a new field, and one of the reasons we went to Indonesia and Southeast Asia is these fields are very relevant to those countries. They’re very interested in how to be resilient—whether it be from a tsunami, or how they plan for sustainability with rising oceans.”

This summer, Rom and five of the university’s interdisciplinary graduate program directors in fields ranging from environmental dynamics and cell and molecular biology to big data analytics and space and planetary studies made a recruitment trip to Washington, D.C. There, they visited foreign embassies and education ministries, Fulbright sponsoring agencies, and global nongovernmental organizations to discuss how the school’s interdisciplinary programs might be relevant to a country’s work and strategic needs.

The Power of Place

Another tactic that some institutions are using to appeal to more international graduate students is leveraging the



Deeper Engagement

At the University of Arkansas (UA), the resounding message across all platforms is: “One, you’re welcome here. Two, you’ll succeed here,” says Curt Rom, associate dean for international education.

➔ Using its customer relationship management (CRM) tool and social media, UA has shared this promise and furthered the university’s recruiting efforts. (Read more about getting the most from CRMs on page 42.)

➔ Yet, word-of-mouth endorsement is still powerful. Rom says the university has begun developing resources for graduate faculty and reaching out to international alumni. “We’re asking them to be our ambassadors and deputizing them in our recruitment efforts,” says Rom. “The idea is, we’ve looked them in the eyes and said, ‘You came to our university, you’ve had an experience and got a degree here, you’re now successful.’ That’s the best story that could be told.”

➔ There is also a concerted effort to engage faculty because much of graduate enrollment, especially at the doctoral level, hinges on program reputation and faculty relationships and partnerships. UA faculty members have to register when they travel abroad, and the form they complete asks if they are willing to recruit on behalf of the university and program during their trip. In addition, faculty can apply for supplemental travel funding when they participate in recruitment activities.

advantages of their location. Virginia Tech has long been an attractive option to students from countries such as China and India, as its graduate programs are heavily focused on engineering, technology, and science.

“Our name lends people to think that we are only that, while obviously we are a much more comprehensive institution,” says DePauw. “But we are on the radar screen of a lot of the international students for the degrees they are looking for.”

That pull will likely become even stronger in the coming years since Amazon selected Crystal City, Virginia, as the site for a second headquarters. A key factor in Amazon’s decision was that Virginia’s bid included a proposal for Virginia Tech to build an

Innovation Campus nearby. Along with an already robust workforce, the state's pitch emphasized the potential for a steady pipeline of talent—a win-win for both Amazon and students, as postgraduate employment opportunities are often at the top of prospective students' lists when selecting a school.

Similarly, the University of Washington (UW) is taking advantage of businesses headquartered in the Seattle area to entice international graduate students.

About 6 years ago, UW created several new and cutting-edge professional master's programs in the science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) fields, as well as increased its online programming. The programs, which have proven to be popular with international students, tend to be application and career based and leverage UW's proximity to Amazon, Boeing, and Microsoft.

"We have definitely seen that's where our growth is and a lot of it is in the STEM area," says Julia Carlson, director of graduate enrollment management services at UW.

The university's Global Innovation Exchange (GIX) experiential education model is a collaboration between academia and industry, with Microsoft and Tsinghua University as its other founding partners. GIX has an academic network of eight international universities and seven industry consortium members including Nintendo, T-Mobile, and Vulcan.

The exchange offers two interdisciplinary graduate programs: One is a 15-month master's in science

technology innovation that integrates technology, design thinking, and entrepreneurship. The 21-month dual-degree program incorporates a master's of science in engineering and 6 months of study at Tsinghua University in Beijing, China.

"We're essentially bucking that trend [of declining international graduate student enrollment] at UW so far," says John Drew, director of UW's graduate school computing and information resources. "The major element of that is we've seen this very pronounced growth in professional master's enrollment."

Uncharted Territory

Many administrators maintain that understanding the institution's strengths, the region, and which students make a good match can help curb the decline in international graduate students.

"We're not Boston, San Francisco, Los Angeles, [or] Miami," Rom says, though the university is in close proximity to the corporate headquarters for Walmart and Tyson Foods, as well as more than 300 Fortune 500 companies located in northwest Arkansas. "Students who come here are going to get a traditional mid-American college experience. We think that's one of our strengths; we're a small town."

For UA, name-dropping doesn't hurt, either—especially a name that most international students are familiar with. "We're also the town that produced J. William Fulbright," says Rom. "He graduated from University of Arkansas. He was a faculty member, he was the president, [and he] went on to create the Fulbright scholarship program."

Just as the Fulbright program was considered pioneering at its inception, it is crucial for institutions to remain open and willing to create new programs that suit students' evolving needs and expectations.

"Looking in the past is not particularly helpful," says ACE's Farnsworth. "I mean, what we really should be asking ourselves is: What do we do now? And what steps do we advise our institutions to take?"

"What I'm optimistic about is the creativity and the resilience of individual institutions," says Farnsworth. "I think we're going to see some really interesting programs come out of individual institutions



AIEA
Leaders in International Higher Education

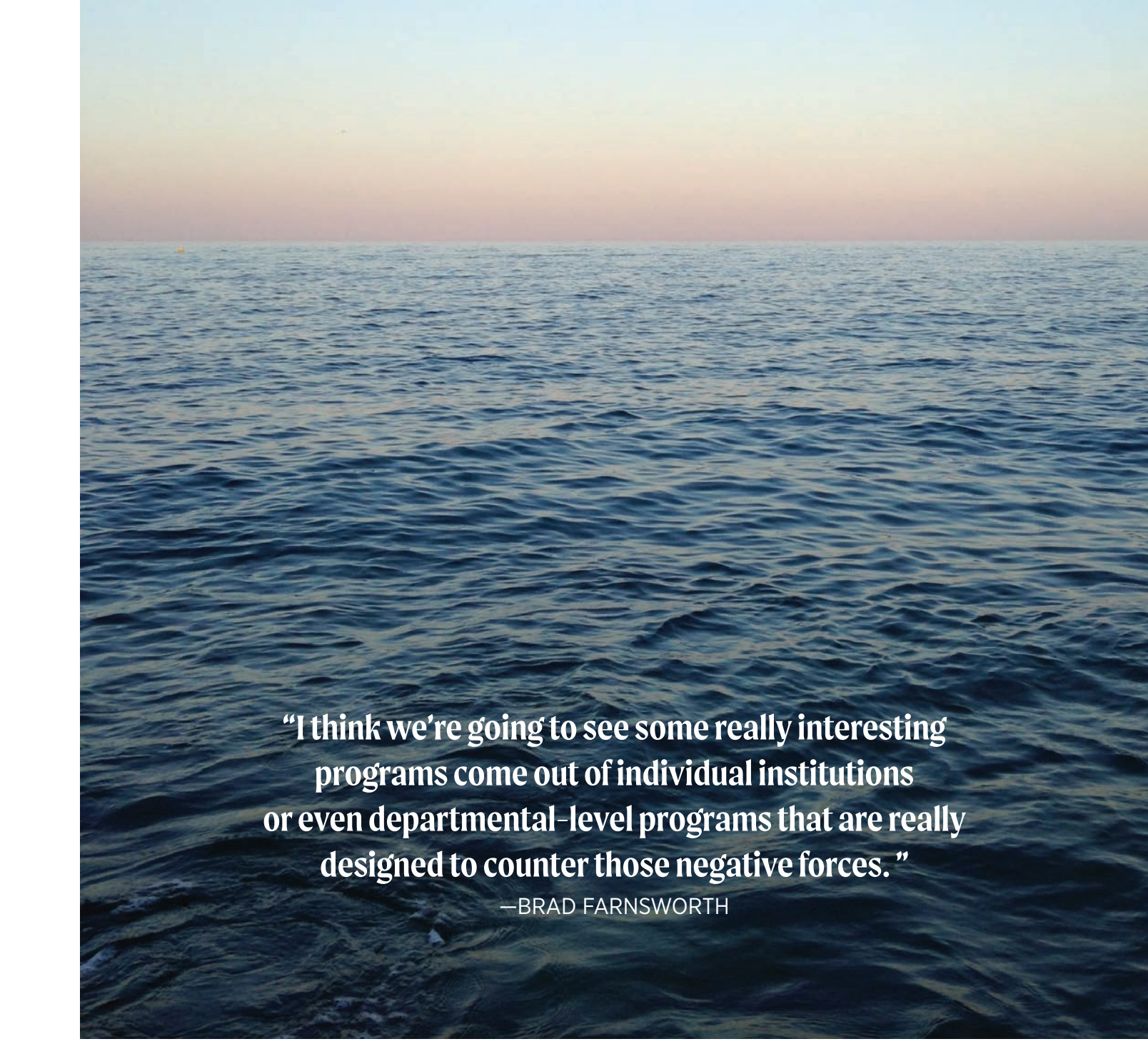
2020
Association of International Education Administrators
Annual Conference

February 16-19, 2020
Washington Marriott Wardman Park
Washington, DC, USA

Rethinking Comprehensive Internationalization
for a Global Generation

Please join us for the 2020 AIEA Annual Conference for senior international education leaders from around the world in Washington, DC at the Washington Marriott Wardman Park. The theme for this year's program is *Rethinking Comprehensive Internationalization for a Global Generation*. We are planning a provocative, relevant, and rewarding conference and look forward to your participation. Pre-conference workshops will take place February 16-17. See you in Washington, DC!

For more information visit
www.aieaworld.org | #AIEA2020
Contact AIEA at info@aieaworld.org for exhibitor and sponsor information.



“I think we’re going to see some really interesting programs come out of individual institutions or even departmental-level programs that are really designed to counter those negative forces.”

—BRAD FARNSWORTH

or even departmental-level programs that are really designed to counter those negative forces. That part I’m optimistic about.”

Beczak, at RIT and in her role at NAGAP, echoes the optimism. “I don’t think I’m being ignorant by being very hopeful about the future of graduate international enrollment,” she says. “The political climate may change, trending programs may change, but the United States will continue to be recognized as an extremely attractive country in which to study, work, and live.” ■

PHIL MANZANO is a freelance writer based in Seattle, Washington.

NAFSA Resources

NAFSA’s Guide to International Student Recruitment, Third Edition: bit.ly/GuideISR

“Graduate Admissions Issues” chapter in *Managing a Successful International Admissions Office*: bit.ly/IntlAdmissionsOffice

Additional Resources

Council of Graduate Schools: cgsnet.org

NAGAP, The Association for Graduate Enrollment Management: nagap.org