

Trends & Insights

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International Student Recruitment and the Perception of U.S. Gun Violence

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In the United States, recruitment and admissions professionals must continually strategize ways to accomplish their university's international recruitment goals. Whether it is a push to increase the number of exchange students, degree-seeking students, or enrollees in English language programs, administrators and international educators understand the value in creating a diverse environment by integrating more international students into the campus community. However, there is an overshadowing concern that plagues the minds of many parents and prospective international students who are looking to attend U.S. institutions of higher education, and a reality that recruitment officers must accept: the perception of gun violence in the United States. Since this perception may influence prospective students' decisions to attend U.S. institutions, it is important for student recruitment officials and their senior international officers (SIOs) to consider actions that may mitigate this obstacle.

GLOBAL MEDIA AND U.S. GUN VIOLENCE

Media outlets throughout the world follow incidents of U.S. gun violence closely. Recent international publications have conferred headlines such as:

- [“China Embassy Warns Tourist of U.S. Gun Violence and Health Care Costs”](#);
- [“Many Indian Immigrants Killed by Gun Violence in the US Come from the Same State”](#);
- [“Body of Indian Student Killed in Kansas Arrives in Hyderabad, Taken to Native Place”](#);
- [“Pakistan: Student Sabika Sheikh Killed in Texas School Shooting.”](#)

These headlines indicate that media outlets worldwide are bringing news of U.S. gun violence to international audiences. I argue that as a result of this international media attention, prospective international students are becoming increasingly fearful of gun violence in

the United States and that this perception will have a detrimental effect on university administrators' efforts to recruit and enroll international students, globalize campuses, create more diverse student bodies, and enrich overall student experiences.

In 2017, the number of international students enrolled in colleges and universities across the U.S. **declined** from the previous year. International enrollments at the undergraduate level fell by 2.2 percent, while enrollments at the graduate level fell by **5.5 percent**. Recent data on student mobility published by the [National Science Foundation](#) indicate that while the number of international students at U.S. universities declined in 2016, Canadian and Australian institutions saw noticeable increases in enrollment. During the 2016–17 academic year, Canada saw an increase in international enrollment of **20 percent**.

Such data, in conjunction with the media trends discussed above, suggest the importance of acknowledging the reality that global perceptions

of safety within U.S. borders may be working against universities' strategic international recruitment and enrollment plans, as well as the overall competitiveness of U.S. higher education. After years of steady growth, U.S. institutions wrestle with the various reasons behind the lower enrollment numbers. As higher education stakeholders trying to enhance their recruitment practices sift through causes for the decline—ranging from the current political climate, more restrictive immigration policies, high tuition costs, competition for postgraduate employment, and a perceived decreased competitive edge—concerns about international student safety in the United States cannot be overlooked. Stakeholders including recruiters and SIOs, need to pay attention to this potential factor and consider best practices for addressing it.

ADDRESSING CONCERNS IN RECRUITMENT EFFORTS

Most importantly, recruitment officials must maintain transparency about violence in the United States and on campus throughout their efforts. Recruiters should frequently communicate with prospective students and foreign universities about federal statutes, such as the Clery Act or the Campus Security Act of 1990, which provide a level of transparency pertaining to on-campus crime. These measures serve not only as resources, but also provide levels of reassurance that institutional efforts to promote safety are wide-reaching and include government-backed initiatives to help protect students. I also argue that it is just as beneficial to discuss safety measures during the recruitment process as it is during the orientation period. Keeping students safe has always been a top priority of the academy; however, this may not be communicated through media outlets. With students' 24/7 access to social media, international broadcasting's portrayal of gun violence in the United States, and parents' security concerns, it may be time for university administrators to be frank about student safety measures in place on campus, and make them a straightforward aspect of public relation campaigns during international recruitment season.

Most of the time, violence in the United States is not the primary factor in an international student's decision to study abroad in a country other than the United States. However, it might very well play a role. As recently as last year, two states [passed legislation](#) that permits students and faculty to carry guns on

college campuses. Recruiters and other international education professionals should begin to note the number of conversations that they have regarding prospective international students' and parents' concerns around violence in the United States. Such data will be helpful in communicating to upper management the importance of campus safety in recruitment efforts, preparing for future instances, and garnering support from SIOs. In addition to the suggested actions already discussed, professionals who have international recruitment as a component of their job duties might consider a combination of the following measures:

1. Promote transparency and ensure that recruiters are well-informed of campus safety initiatives.
2. Include university information on safety measures that have been enacted in response to gun violence in recruitment marketing materials.
3. Devise protocols to address concerns from prospective students and parents on safety from gun violence in the United States.
4. Introduce international students who express interest in U.S. gun culture to official [university clubs or other organizations](#) that focus on the proper use and sporting nature of firearms.
5. Consider matching international students who have expressed concerns about U.S. gun culture with U.S. peers who can responsibly acclimate them.

CONCLUSION

In light of the variety of experiences international students have with gun culture in the United States, it is necessary for universities to develop thoughtful, constructive understandings around this culture, the role the international perception plays, and protocols for addressing concerns. Universities may wish to expand international students' understanding of the U.S. gun culture during recruitment and orientation events, and include discussions on gun safety, gun laws, and active shooter situations. Professionals on U.S. campuses may not be able to prevent every tragedy. However, understanding the international perception of U.S. violence, and strategically marketing and educating international students on the efforts U.S. institutions are taking to protect their health and safety, may be a step in the right direction.

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