

The Globalization of America's Colleges

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While the influx of international students has largely had a positive impact on U.S. higher ed, some are wary of the negative implications.

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American colleges are educating more international students than ever before, according to a new report, “[Open Doors Report on International Educational Exchange](#),” released by the [Institute of International Education](#). The widely anticipated report finds that nearly 1 million international students—many of them from countries such as China, India, Kuwait—were educated in the United States in the 2014-15 school year, up 10 percent from the previous year. These students typically arrive with the means to pay the full price tag for college.

While the 974,926 international students who studied in American colleges last school year accounted for only about 5 percent of the country’s entire higher-education population, their numbers are increasing rapidly with high concentrations in certain states, colleges, and majors. The significant increase in students from overseas highlights the need to understand more about their behavior, income, and impact on higher education—and how the country’s universities should capitalize on the trend without compromising the education of in-state students and residents.

Many of the findings aren’t surprising. International students are concentrated in the states with some of the largest populations or most well-known higher-education institutions: California, New York, Texas, Massachusetts, and Illinois. And the U.S. schools with the highest rates of international enrollment include NYU—which educates a whopping 13,178 students from abroad—the University of Southern California, Columbia, Arizona State, and the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Overall, international

students are attending graduate and undergraduate programs in about equal numbers, with the most popular majors including business and management and the STEM fields.

Most of the international students pay for their American education, which is the [most expensive in the world](#), with personal or family funds. About 20 percent receive funding from their respective American institution, while a smaller percentage receives funding from colleges or governments in their home countries. Chinese students make up a plurality—one third— of all international students in America. Students from India, South Korea, and Saudi Arabia together comprise another 25 percent. Far smaller numbers come from countries like Canada and Brazil.

In an interview, IIE president Allan Goodman explained that the U.S. is seeing more international students because of how many colleges and universities it has: 4,000 schools, more than any other nation. “Capacity matters,” Goodman said. “Other countries can’t accommodate all their students. India and China have trouble finding seats for all their qualified students.” American colleges can absorb this overflow.

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In addition, the booming economies in countries like China and India have created a new middle class that can afford American schools and, according to Goodman, may value education more than the average American. In fact, Goodman suggested that middle-class parents overseas are saving U.S. dollars to send their kids to school in the U.S., treating education—rather than, say, new boats or kitchens—as their big consumer expense: “They aren’t investing in their housing and their consumables because they invest in their next generation’s education.”

Students around the world like the “Made in the U.S.” stamp on their college diplomas, Goodman said, because America is “associated with quality and merit-based admissions.” A handful of colleges—Harvard and Stanford, for example—have long had well-established reputations globally, but now, middle-class parents in countries such as China and Korea are growing more savvy as they explore higher-education options. They are learning about the full range of U.S. schools, from state universities to small liberal-arts colleges, some of which might be a better fit for their kids than the Ivy Leagues. “The world,” Goodman added, “has discovered America.”

Meanwhile, active recruitment by administrators also accounts for some of the growth, Goodman said. Ohio, Illinois, and Indiana universities, for example, have offices in India and China. And university presidents have been known to accompany governors on trade delegations abroad.

The IIE believes that the presence of international students in American schools provides U.S. students with exposure to different cultures and ideas enlivening classroom discussions with their perspectives and experiences. This exposure also has practical value, especially when only a fraction of American college students study abroad; sitting in a classroom with with a Brazilian or a Saudi might be the only exchange that Americans students have with people from other countries and the only opportunity to develop skills critical to a globalized workforce.

According to Goodman, colleges haven’t had to make many programmatic adjustments for these students, because the needs of foreign students are similar to the needs of many American students: Many American students don’t speak English as a first language, for example, while others are first-generation college-goers who require more administrative support. In fact, Goodman said that the maturation of student services in recent years has helped integrate students from diverse communities on college campuses.

However, the inclusion of international students in American colleges hasn’t entirely been without

controversy. Concerns have been raised about the validity of the applications that come from overseas. [CNN](#) and [The Atlantic](#) have reported that fraud in admissions packages from China is a significant concern. According to the *Wall Street Journal*, American [colleges often pay agents to recruit international students](#), creating more opportunities for abuse. [CNBC](#) reported that Chinese parents pay upwards of \$30,000 to get their kids into top-tier American universities.

Abbott said that the fact that one in five students at NYU is from China, India, and elsewhere is part of a concerted effort by the university to become a global force in education. “Under the leadership of our president, John Sexton, NYU has embarked on an ambitious plan to become America’s first truly global university, creating an infrastructure that enables students to experience a global network of campuses and academic centers around the world, without ever leaving NYU,” he said.

But if an American college has more students from Mainland China than it does students from the entire Midwest U.S., it raises serious concerns about the mission of the school. Lots of colleges highlighted in the Open Doors report similarly have high percentages of international students relative to certain American demographics. [University of Southern California](#), ranked No. 2 on IIE’s report, has twice as many international students as African American ones. At Columbia University, No. 3 on the report, 15 percent of [the class of 2019](#) are foreign citizens, while only 9 percent come from the Midwest and 14 percent are African American.

Of the 20 colleges listed by IIE as the top schools for international students, 13 are public colleges, including Arizona State University, the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, and the University of California at Los Angeles. Public schools have traditionally prioritized educating middle-class students from within their states. Many are questioning whether international students are displacing [local students at public colleges and whether state taxpayer money is being used effectively](#).

Abbott denied enrolling international citizens solely based on their ability to pay full price, citing scholarships the university provides to students from overseas. But international students do bring in revenue for a cash-strapped higher-ed economy: International students alone contribute \$30 billion a year to the U.S. economy, according to IIE.

The IIE report found that close to two in three international students use family money to fund their education. And given that one year at NYU for tuition, room and board, and fees costs [\\$66,022](#), it would take the [average Chinese family](#)—with a yearly income of \$2,100—decades to save enough money to afford attendance there. That suggests that many international students at American colleges aren’t exactly middle class by their nations’ standards.

In the past year, several news sources have discussed the wealth of international students, especially those from China. In September, *Foreign Policy* magazine, for example, reported that the [thriving Chinese economy has enabled thousands](#) of second-generation scions from wealthy families, known as the fu-erdai, to study in the U.S., paying full tuition and often forming their own niche communities and living apart from their classmates. Upscale department stores around New York City, for one, sponsor events aimed at these students, and some NYC-based websites and [bloggers](#) trade gossip about wealthy Chinese families buying [luxury apartments](#) for their children near Columbia and NYU.

All in all, these trends raise important questions about the globalization of America’s colleges and universities. While there are obvious benefits to exposing American students to other cultures and perspectives, can an American college, especially one that is funded with taxpayer dollars, have too many international students? Should all American colleges, whether private or public, be spending more resources to recruit first-generation and minority students from the U.S. before bringing in students from overseas? If these students really are as wealthy as some report, does it make it more difficult for lower-

income students to feel at home on a college campus? At what point do the downsides of including international students at American colleges outweigh the benefits? As policymakers, educators, and advocates debate the missions and priorities of American higher education, they must examine the new realities of college-admission practices.