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## Latitudes: Foreign enrollments at U.S. colleges hit a new high. It's not due to an influx of new students.

1 message

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# Latitudes

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## International enrollments surpass a pre-Covid high

The number of international students in the United States hit an all-time high in the 2023-24 academic year, but the driver of the growth wasn't new students coming to campus. Instead, the increase was fueled by recent graduates staying in the country to work.

The annual [Open Doors](#) census, released today, tallied 1,126,690 foreign students, driven by a 22-percent surge in participants in optional practical training, or OPT. Enrollments of new students, however, rose just 0.1 percent.

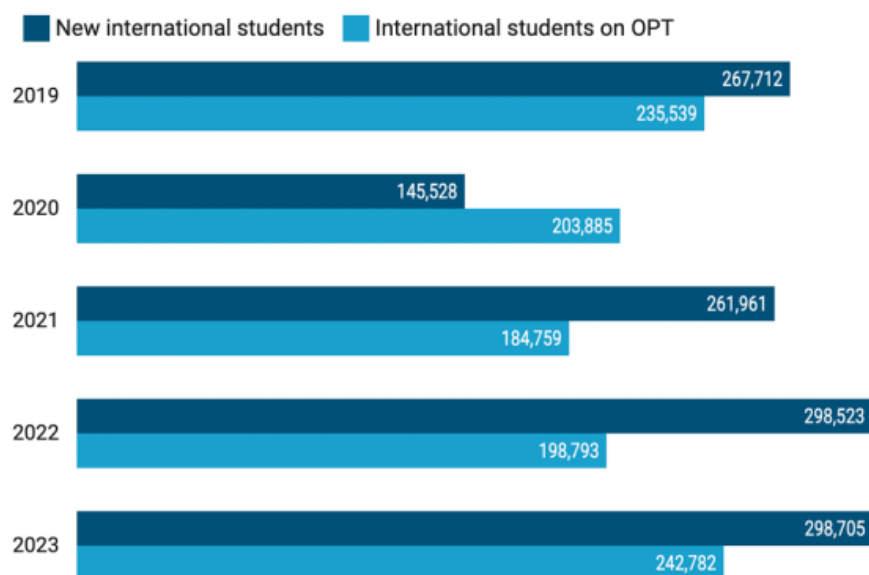
The previous high, 1,095,299, was in 2018-19.

Overall, overseas enrollments climbed by 7 percent, according to the report, which is published by the Institute of International Education and the U.S. Department of State. The number of students on OPT and the number of international graduate students also hit new records.

The two are interrelated, said Mirka Martel, head of research, evaluation, and learning for the institute, which is also known as IIE. The “seismic rise” in graduate study since the pandemic — and specifically in one- to two-year master’s programs — has led to a spike in eligibility for OPT, which allows foreign students to work in the United States for up to three years after they earn their degrees.

Those taking part in OPT count in international-enrollment totals because they remain on student visas and because the work program is “an essential component of their education,” Martel said.

### International Students Participating in Optional Practical Training Soar



Graduate enrollments grew by 8 percent in 2023-24, a more-modest increase than in the two prior years. The number of foreign graduate students soared by 21 percent in [2022-23](#) and 17 percent in [2021-22](#). Moderating growth is commonplace after a wave of new students — what matters is that their numbers stabilize at higher levels, Martel said.

The number of undergraduate students from abroad declined slightly in 2023-24, by about 1 percent. Twelve percent fewer international

students were enrolled in English-language instruction and other nondegree study.

Perhaps more concerning are the anemic gains in new students. First-time enrollments increased 14 percent in 2022-23 and 80 percent in 2021-22, when borders reopened after Covid-related travel restrictions. The recent data may reflect that American colleges may have “finally cycled through” pent-up demand post-pandemic, Martel said.

Allan Goodman, IIE's chief executive, said he was bullish about future enrollments for several reasons. The other three major destinations for international students, Australia, Britain, and Canada, have or are considering [new restrictions](#) on student visas. Countries like India, the top source of foreign students in the United States, don't have enough universities to educate their booming youth populations. And the looming [demographic cliff](#) is spurring American colleges to look for new pockets of students.

The United States uniquely has the capacity to take in larger numbers of foreign students, Goodman said. Here, they are just 6 percent of the total higher-education population, while they account for 27 percent of all students in Britain, 31 percent in Australia, and 38 percent in Canada. Backlash to the growing share of students from abroad, in fact, led to some of the caps in these other countries.

“We've never had this kind of perfect storm,” Goodman said. “There's only one boat — one country — ready to take them on.” The United States has nearly double the number of colleges of the other three countries combined.

Despite Goodman's favorable forecast, this fall's visa data paints a more worrisome picture. A [Chronicle analysis](#) found that 12.5 percent fewer American student visas were issued worldwide during the critical months of May to August. The number of visas awarded to students in India declined by a third.

A snapshot survey of 690 colleges by IIE and 10 other higher-education groups also found a 5-percent drop in new enrollments of international students this fall. (Open Doors, which collects data from nearly 3,000 institutions, reflects the previous year's trends.)

The decrease in visa issuances does not necessarily mean that student interest in studying in the United States has declined — some

college officials told *The Chronicle* that there had been an uptick in visa denials by American consulates.

It's a reminder that multiple factors affect international enrollments. Politics is another variable: There are concerns that the [reelection of Donald J. Trump](#) to the presidency, for instance, could lead to efforts to curtail or eliminate OPT.

International students contributed \$43.8 billion to the U.S. economy in the 2023-24 academic year and supported more than 378,000 jobs, according to [estimates](#) by NAFSA: Association of International Educators. This figure, too, is a high-water mark. International-student spending in 12 states was \$1 billion or more.

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### More trends to watch

Here's what else the Open Doors report tells us about international-student trends:

**For the third year in a row, there were more international graduate students in the United States than undergraduates.** The snapshot survey, however, reports a 6-percent growth in undergraduate enrollments, and a 2-percent decline at the graduate level this fall.

**A country in sub-Saharan Africa has cracked the list of the top 10 sending countries.** Nigeria was the seventh largest source of foreign students, with more than 20,000 students at American colleges, a 14-percent increase from the previous year.

**Thirty-eight countries reached all-time highs in student numbers.** They include India, which sent more than 331,600 students, and Papua New Guinea, which sent 109.

**While Indian enrollments increased, the number of Chinese students declined.** Four-percent fewer Chinese students studied at American colleges in 2023-24. But China remains the leading source of undergraduate and nondegree students.

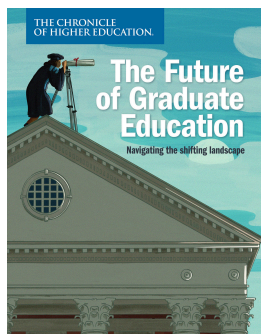
**One in four international students studied math or computer science.** Engineering was the next most popular draw, enrolling 19 percent of all foreign students.

**For the first time, Open Doors collected data about international students enrolled online.** Some 18,100 students studied remotely from abroad. While in-person study is far more popular, the reported figure may be an undercount because students overseas don't require a visa, unlike those who come to the United States.

Open Doors wasn't the only international-student data recently released:

- A [survey](#) of 365 institutions in 66 countries found that many experienced a drop in foreign enrollments this fall. Forty-one percent of institutions reported a decline in graduate enrollments, while 31 percent said undergraduate enrollments were down.
- The number of international students accepted for undergraduate programs at [British universities](#) declined 17 percent between 2020 and 2024.

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Graduate education has enjoyed a jump in enrollment over the past five years, but it faces a host of challenges. [Order this report](#) for insights on the opportunities and pitfalls that graduate-program administrators must navigate.

## For study abroad, a post-Covid resurgence

The new Open Doors report also captured study abroad's emergence from the pandemic.

The number of Americans studying overseas increased 49 percent in the 2022-23 academic year, to more than 280,700. That remains below pre-Covid levels, though. (Because of lags in reporting, 2022-23 is the most recent data available.)

Almost two-thirds of those students went to Europe, with Italy, Britain, Spain, and France the most popular destinations. Over the past decade, more than half of students going abroad studied in Europe, but the especially high share in 2022-23 may have been an aftereffect of Covid, Martel said.

Education-abroad programs in Europe resumed more quickly than in Australia, New Zealand, and many Asian countries, which kept travel restrictions in place longer. "There was pent-up demand," Martel said, "and when Europe opened up, they picked up their suitcases and went."

Health and safety protocols in Europe were also more like those in the United States while a number of other countries required visitors to quarantine. The similarity may have added to parents' comfort levels with allowing their children to travel there, Martel said.

The report also found that a more diverse group of students studied overseas than a decade earlier: The share of underrepresented

students rose from 24 percent in 2012-13 to 34 percent in 2022-23. Still, participation in education abroad lags behind the diversity of American higher education as a whole, where more than half of students identify as members of a racial or ethnic minority group.

## Around the globe

**Eight people were killed** and 17 were injured in a [stabbing attack](#) on a college campus in eastern China. The suspect, who was detained at the scene, is a disgruntled former student.

**A record number of North Korean students are** now studying in [Russia](#), leading to suspicions that student visas may be used as a cover for soldiers deployed to fight in Ukraine.

**Lawmakers in Quebec are** considering [legislation](#) that would give provincial authorities greater oversight of international students.

**Argentina has cut** [research spending](#) by 31 percent since President Javier Milei took office less than a year ago.

**Ukraine could reduce** its number of institutions because of [demographic declines](#).

**Higher-education budgets will** be reduced in Israel so that the government can increase [funding for the military](#).

**Colleges in Lebanon began** the [academic year](#) despite attacks on the country from Israel.

**More private universities in India are** now accepting the [SAT exam](#) in admissions.

**Students at Dongduk Women's University** in South Korea are protesting possible plans to [go co-ed](#).

**An international student writes** that he and his classmates could face "[increasing adversity and hostility](#)" under the Trump administration but that they should not lose hope.

## And finally ...

College students do the darnedest things. In China, that includes [lengthy nighttime bike rides](#) — just for the fun of it. Every night hundreds of students would pedal from Zhengzhou, the capital of Henan Province, to the neighboring city of Kaifeng, a 40-mile trip one way. The craze was facilitated by access to shared bicycles. But Chinese authorities, who are wary of large crowds gathering, recently shut down the mass rides, citing traffic and safety concerns.

*Note: Latitudes will not publish next week because of the Thanksgiving holiday in the United States.*

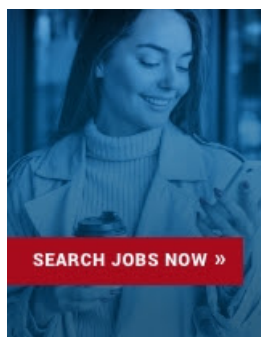
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