

**Latitudes: Saudi Arabia was once a big deal in international education. Can it be again?**

1 message

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Wed, Dec 18, 2024 at 11:01 AM

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Latitudes

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Americans and Saudis seek to build and expand academic partnerships

The United States and Saudi Arabia are looking to rekindle their academic relationship.

The Saudi Ministry of Education and the U.S. embassy in Riyadh last month hosted a partnership forum in Saudi Arabia to build connections between universities in the two countries.

“What helps political relationships endure and strengthen is that people really know each other,” said Michael Ratney, the American ambassador. Educational exchange, Ratney said in an interview with *The Chronicle*, is “an opportunity to interact with one another as real people.”

Leaders from 40 American colleges traveled to Saudi Arabia to meet with Saudi university and government officials — a first step, both sides hope, toward deeper academic engagement.

Saudi Arabia has previously sent substantial numbers of students to American colleges, most through a [government-funded scholarship program](#). It was started after the 2001 terror attacks as a way to expose young Saudis to the West, combat extremism, and change Americans' perceptions of the oil-rich kingdom and its people.

In the 2015-16 academic year, more than 61,000 Saudi students studied in the United States; the country was behind only China and India as a top source of international students.

Saudi enrollments have declined sharply since that high, as the government restructured the scholarship program to focus on sending smaller numbers of top students abroad to study in a select fields at a handful of prestigious colleges.

Students from the Middle East have also been slower to return to international study after the pandemic than from other regions. Fewer than 15,000 Saudi students studied at American colleges in 2023-24.

Neither side is looking to replicate the largely one-sided and student-centered relationships of the past, however. Instead, they hope to foster more mutual and collaborative ties, including joint research, academic programs, and two-way student and faculty exchange.

This outlook toward academic engagement reflects the major societal and cultural changes within Saudi Arabia, Ratney said. In particular, the Saudi government wants to "transform" its educational system to "further its economic ambitions," which include diversifying the economy and reducing its reliance on oil revenue.

"The country has changed so profoundly," he said, "that they wanted to take another look at their educational relationships."

Amy Conger, vice provost for global engagement at North Carolina State University, said she was struck in meetings and campus visits by how institutional priorities for international engagement mirrored the kingdom's goals. "It was stunning how harmonized they were," she said.

North Carolina State is a land-grant university, so Conger's discussions focused on possible collaborations in agriculture and engineering. As the quality of Saudi universities has improved, there's also interest in building programming and research in areas like early-childhood education, renewable energy, and and tourism and archeology, Ratney said.

North Carolina State already has some small-scale educational and training programs with Saudi institutions, but Conger said that research partnerships would take longer to develop and rely on the

interest of individual faculty members. “We don’t work top-down when it comes to research collaboration,” she said.

Other institutions have are moving faster: [Arizona State University](#) earlier this year signed an agreement with Saudi officials to help start a new college there.

Still, the push to build deeper academic relations between the countries comes as some American colleges are reassessing their international strategies in a political climate where [global engagement](#) can be regarded with skepticism or even hostility. And while the Saudi government has liberalized and relaxed some restrictions, particularly on women, researchers could hesitate to work there because of concerns about limits on academic freedom and possible discrimination.

American government officials see their role as more as a catalyst, leaving it to pairs of institutions to form and shape their own partnerships, Ratney said.

But the Fulbright program, the flagship U.S. academic-exchange program, will begin awarding scholarships for a half-dozen American graduate students to do research at King Abdullah University of Science and Technology, a 15-year-old research university that was started with the help of [American expertise](#).

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U.S. and China renew lapsed science agreement

The United States and China agreed to extend a longstanding [science and technology agreement](#), but it will contain “new guardrails” to protect research security.

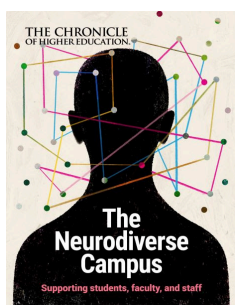
The amended agreement covers only basic research and excludes work on critical and emerging technologies, the U.S. Department of State said. It contains provisions to protect intellectual property and adds “newly established and strengthened provisions on transparency and data reciprocity.”

The 45-year-old agreement lapsed in August 2023 amid bilateral tensions and concerns that China is trying to poach American scientific know-how.

Researchers said the pact was crucial to international academic collaboration. “The U.S. and China are the two leading scientific countries in the world, and our scientists do their best work when they’re able to work together.” Deborah Seligsohn, an assistant professor at Villanova University and an expert on the U.S.-China scientific relationship, told [The Washington Post](#).

But some members of Congress criticized the extension, saying it could “[tie the hands](#)” of the incoming Trump administration.

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University to pay fine in foreign-disclosure case

The University of Delaware will pay more than \$715,000 to resolve civil allegations that it failed to disclose a professor's affiliation with and support from the Chinese government when applying for federal grants.

The settlement is related to a 2020 grant from NASA, according to a [press release](#) from the U.S. attorney for Delaware.

NASA is prohibited from using its funds to collaborate with China or Chinese-owned companies. But the university failed to disclose that a principal investigator on the grant took part in a Chinese-government talent program to recruit overseas researchers, was employed by a Chinese institution, and received a grant from the National Natural Science Foundation of China, the release said.

Science agencies have continued [scrutiny of colleges' international ties](#) in the wake of the China Initiative, the federal investigation of academic and economic espionage. Public officials have also sought to increase disclosure requirements.

Around the globe

International-education groups are applauding a final revised rule for [skilled-worker visas](#) that will help avoid disruptions to international students' employment authorization and could make it easier for top graduates to stay in the United States.

The number of international students applying for [asylum](#) in Canada has soared since the government imposed [new restrictions](#) on student visas.

A record number of recent high-school graduates in [Britain](#) are going on to college this fall, but international enrollments fell.

Male college students in Syria avoided military service under now-deposed President Bashar al-Assad by the "deliberate failing" of their courses and traveling abroad, according to a new [investigation](#).

The UN Educational, Social, and Cultural Organization, or UNESCO, is encouraging greater study of the [history of enslavement and the trans-Atlantic slave trade](#).

I joined the [Keystone Higher Ed Chats podcast](#) to talk about the recent Open Doors report and trends in international education.

And finally ...

One employer is picking up its recruitment on Mexican college campuses, and it isn't an accounting or consulting firm.

Mexican criminal cartels have scouted campuses for promising chemistry students to help [produce fentanyl](#). They're seeking people with advanced chemistry knowledge who can help make the drug stronger and synthesize the chemical compounds used in making it. They currently have to import the compounds from China.

One professor said he believed some of his students enrolled his classes in order to gain skills to make fentanyl. "Sometimes when I am teaching them synthesis of pharmaceutical drugs, they openly ask me, 'Hey, professor, when are you teaching us how to synthesize cocaine and other things?'" he said.

Latitudes will be off for the next two weeks for the holiday publishing break. I'll be back in your inboxes in 2025!

Thanks for reading. I always welcome your feedback and ideas for future reporting, so drop me a line at karin.fischer@chronicle.com. You can also connect with me on [Twitter](#), [LinkedIn](#), or [Bluesky](#). If you like this newsletter, please share it with colleagues and friends. They can [sign up here](#).

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