

July 07, 2025

They Want to Leave the U.S. Is a Master's Their Ticket Out?

Young Americans unhappy with Trump's leadership are going to graduate school abroad as a way of escaping, at least temporarily.

By Johanna Alonso



Debby Couture, a graduate admissions coach, said that some of her U.S.-based clients plan to apply only to colleges abroad for fall 2026.

Photo illustration by Justin Morrison/Inside Higher Ed | azgek and voinSveta/iStock/Getty Images

When Patrick became one of the thousands of probationary federal government workers fired in a sweeping reduction in force dubbed the Valentine's Day Massacre, he wished he could hop on a plane and move to Europe. His areas of expertise—foreign service and environmental justice—are at risk in the U.S., he said, as the federal government slashes funding to government agencies. And as a progressive, he said he's long felt misaligned with American politics—particularly since Trump took office.

“I [had] this realization of, ‘Why am I continuing to deal with this feeling of settling and whatnot when I can instead go to a location or region where I’m more in the norm or feel like I’m represented?’” he said.

But getting a work visa overseas isn't easy. So, Patrick, who asked to be referred to by a pseudonym to avoid retaliation from the government, pivoted. Starting this fall, he plans to attend a master's program in Austria, about an hour away from Vienna.

Most Popular

“Big, Beautiful Bill” Means Big Changes for Higher Ed

To Avoid Program Closures, PASSHE Explores Course Sharing

Army Reorganizes, Closes ROTC Units at Colleges

He doesn't speak German. He doesn't have ancestry in Austria. And he doesn't need a master's—he already has one in a different field. But as one of a growing number of Americans looking to leave the U.S. due to their disagreement with President Trump's policies, studying abroad seemed like the path of least resistance for emigrating.

Ahead of the 2024 election, about one in five Americans said they would be interested in moving abroad if their preferred candidate did not win. Following Trump's victory, the number of Americans searching for study abroad opportunities on the site Studyporals multiplied fivefold. CNBC reported that Google searches for “how to move to Canada” surged, especially in blue states such as Maine, Oregon, Vermont and Washington.

After Trump took office in January, launched a mass deportation campaign against immigrants, attacked universities and stripped funding from public services, those sentiments grew. Record numbers of Americans applied for U.K. passports in the first quarter of 2025, according to CNN. Within academia, a report in *Nature* showed that over

three-quarters of researchers polled want to move elsewhere, with many reporting that they are actively looking for jobs abroad. (Several international universities, meanwhile, are making efforts to court U.S. scientists.)

Why Study Abroad?

For individuals without a second passport or ancestry in another country, leaving the U.S. can be difficult. (Patrick was seeking Italian citizenship by descent until the laws recently changed.) Most nations reserve their work visas for individuals in specific, high-demand fields. More and more countries are beginning to offer “digital nomad visas” for individuals who can work online from anywhere in the world, another attractive option to many Americans. But these visas often come with certain barriers, such as income requirements, and in some cases only last a short period of time—Japan’s, for instance, is capped at six months.

Student visas, on the other hand, are easier to access and available to anyone with the funds who can manage to get accepted to a university outside the U.S. While the traditional study destinations—the U.K., Australia and Canada—are moving toward limiting the number of international students they allow in the country each year, opportunities at universities in non-Anglophone countries continue to grow; France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, the Netherlands, Spain and Sweden each offer over 1,000 English-taught programs across a variety of disciplines.

The Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU) is one institution that offers such programs. The largest university in Norway, NTNU has 48 English-taught master's, including an Erasmus Mundus program in coastal and marine engineering and management. (Erasmus Mundus is the European Union's flagship program to attract international students and typically involves students studying across multiple institutions and nations.)

“NTNU is an internationally oriented university,” Audum Grøm, the head of the Office of Admissions and International Relations at NTNU, said in an email to *Inside Higher Ed*. “We believe that an offering of English-language programs and courses is valuable for all. It helps connect our Norwegian students to the broader world, and attracts bright minds from abroad, whose different cultures, ideas and perspectives enrich our university.”

Despite caps on study permits for international students in Canada, the University of British Columbia saw a rise in the number of graduate school applicants from the U.S. at the beginning of the year, prompting it to reopen applications to Americans for one week in April. It's seen an increase of international students across the board this year, including 38 percent growth in the number of students from the U.S.

Editors' Picks

A Multiday In-Class Essay for the ChatGPT Era

The Reckoning College Sports Needs

Universities Need to Go Corporate

“We have a strong track record of attracting international students to our campuses,” said Matthew Ramsey, UBC’s director of university affairs, in an email. “Mobility patterns fluctuate over time and depend on a number of factors, including academic fit and availability of research supervisors, research funding, exchange rates/financial considerations, geographic proximity etc.”

But elsewhere, the growing interest in studying abroad has not translated into a surge of U.S. applicants. The number of Americans applying to NTNU this year did not increase, Grøm said, though he noted that their application deadline was Dec. 1, only weeks after the election. They did see an increase in American applicants to the Erasmus Mundus program—NTNU’s only tuition-free program—from seven applicants in 2024 to 17 for 2025.

Other European institutions told *Inside Higher Ed* that their increase in applicants from the U.S. is not out of the ordinary. The University of Copenhagen in Denmark, for example, had about 100 more American applicants this year than in 2024, but that was consistent with trends over the past several years, according to data provided by a spokesperson for the institution.

Those numbers could change in the coming admissions season, though. Debby Couture, a graduate admissions coach, said she's seen a major shift in the schools her clients—most of whom are scientists seeking Ph.D. programs—are willing to consider.

For students who are going to apply to graduate school this coming December to start in the fall of 2026, Couture said she's seen people “just not wanting to apply to graduate school in the U.S.”

“That's a first for me—working with people who are in the U.S. and opting to apply to graduate school completely outside of the U.S. without having any options in the U.S.,” she said.

Historically, American students are fairly uninterested in studying abroad. According to data in the Open Doors report published by the Institute of International Education, just 9 percent of undergraduates studied abroad for academic credit last year, and most of them went for a summer term.

Anna Esaki-Smith, an international education expert and the founder of the consulting firm Education Rethink, said that for many bachelor's students, the international college experience tends to be unlike the stereotypical American experience—there are fewer parties, no American football (obviously), and students rarely live on campus. She also said students are often intimidated by studying in non-

Anglophone countries, even if they can access programs taught in English.

“Part of the study abroad experience is to at least familiarize yourself with another language, but I think for many students, that ends up being a psychological barrier and students lack the confidence,” she said.

Logistics and Costs

Emily, another American planning to start a graduate degree in Europe, made the decision to study abroad on election night.

She’d had a successful career with a defense contractor, but in late 2024 she was transferred to a new job within the company that, she said, “really sucked.” She decided soon after that if Trump was elected president, she would start applying to international programs. (Emily requested to use only her first name to protect her employment until she leaves for Europe).

Starting in the fall, she’ll enroll in an Erasmus Mundus master’s program in Germany.

Both Emily and Patrick said the logistics of applying were not difficult. The admissions office at Emily’s future university in Germany answered any questions she had—and responded to emails in excellent English, she said. For Patrick, the most complex part of the process was gathering and notarizing the necessary documents: his bachelor’s

diploma, his transcripts and a background check to secure his student residence permit. (He's traveling with two cats, so he also had to secure immunization records and a USDA-issued veterinary certificate.)

Neither said they had particularly strong concerns about finding housing in the countries they are moving to; Patrick has friends in Austria who are touring apartments for him in Vienna, while Emily said she has enough savings to afford a nicer apartment than most students would be able to. And contrary to popular stereotypes that studying abroad is only for the wealthy, both programs will be more affordable than the average U.S. master's degree. Erasmus Mundus programs are typically fully funded, while Patrick's program has a sticker price of only \$800 per semester, a fraction of what he would pay even for in-state tuition in the nation's least expensive states. He will also be able to work part-time during school.

Esaki-Smith said that tuition in nearly every other country is less expensive than in the U.S.—and is significantly less in what are known as nontraditional destinations, which includes countries such as Germany, India and South Korea.

“I'll use Japan as an example, and they recently raised tuition fees for international students. I think in Japan, one year at one of their top universities would be \$5,000,” she said. “Many private American universities charge about \$60,000 for international students' tuition. You could do a

whole degree in Japan for one-third of one year in an American private university.”

What is less certain is what Americans can do after they graduate. Both Patrick and Emily are interested in staying in Europe, and many nations offer students a chance to stay for a period of time to work after they graduate—equivalents of the Optional Practical Training program in the U.S. But even then, those offers aren’t permanent.

“It remains to be seen how that all is going to play out,” said Patrick, who told *Inside Higher Ed* his ultimate dream would be to open an agritourism bed-and-breakfast somewhere in Europe. “But the route of studying is a way to still make a move to Europe and potentially have that be a longer-term viable option, while this other situation becomes more clear.”

Written By



Johanna Alonso

Share This Article