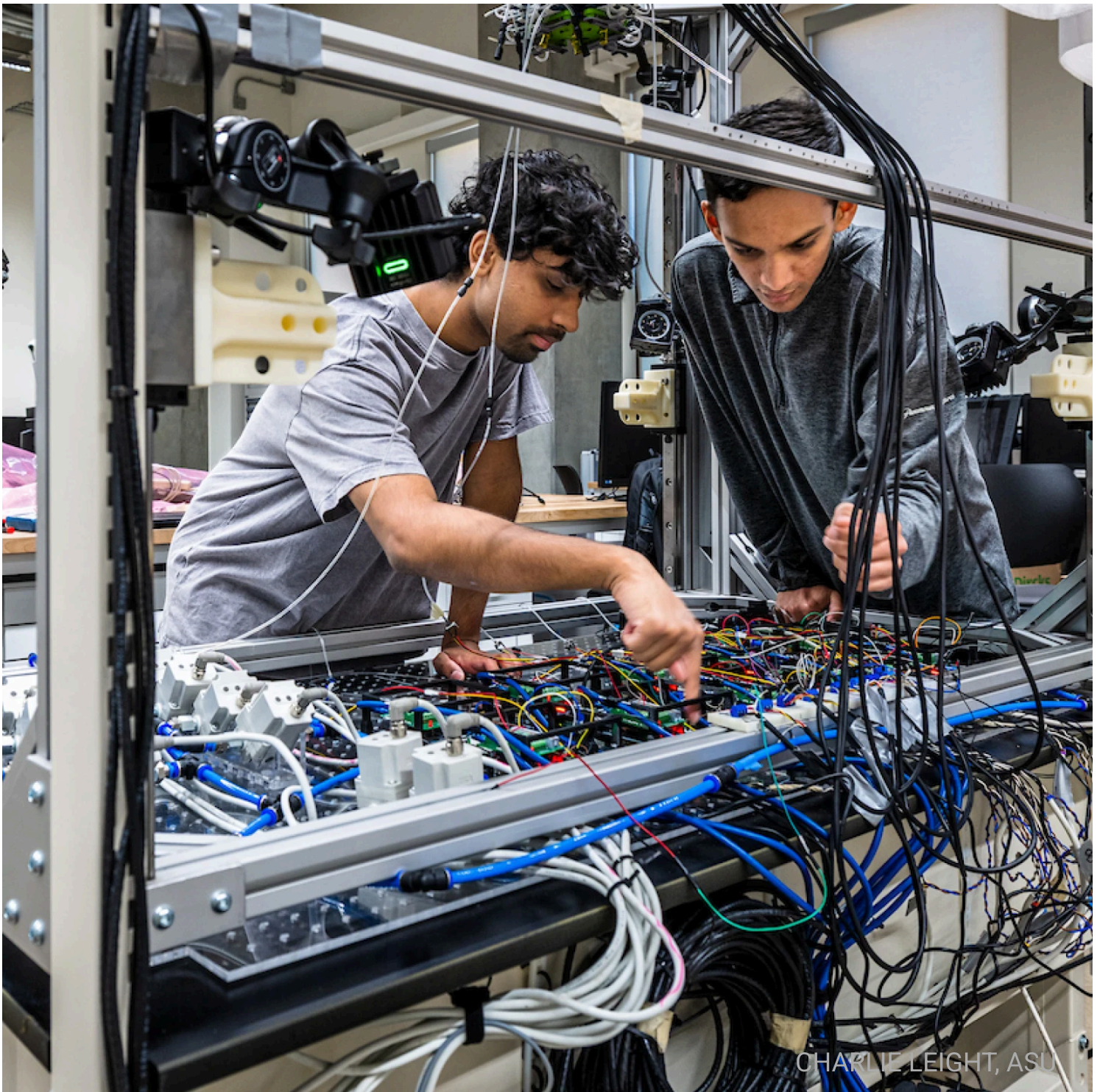


The Missing Students

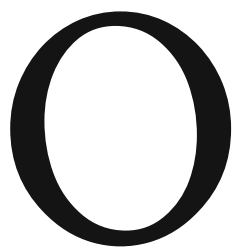
A 'global university' measures shrinking international enrollments in more than dollars.



DISAPPEARING TALENT

By [Karin Fischer](#) October 17, 2025

n the first day of the fall semester at Arizona State University, Onkar Falle should have been in a Tempe



classroom. Instead, he was nearly 9,000 miles away in India, waiting for a visa.

Falle didn't even get an appointment for an interview at the American consulate until August 22, the day after classes began. He finally made it to campus almost a month late.

Falle, who is studying for a master's degree in robotics, considers himself fortunate. A multiweek [freeze on visa interviews](#) for student applicants led to worldwide disruptions this summer. Students competed for last-minute appointments; in places where capacity was especially constrained, like India and parts of Africa, students traveled to other countries to find available slots. Every day for 75 days, Falle logged on to the computerized scheduling system hoping to secure an interview.

Many of his would-be classmates never got their travel documents. At the start of the admissions cycle, university officials had hoped to hit new international-enrollment records, but the number of incoming foreign students fell this fall by 5 percent.

“It is visible in my classrooms that there’s not as many students as last semester.”

All told, it could have been worse for ASU. Some colleges reported new overseas enrollments were down by 10 or 15 percent. A few, like [Eastern Illinois University](#) and the [University of Idaho](#), lost half of the students they’d predicted would come from abroad. Although some institutions — primarily elite, brand-name colleges — saw increases, the number of foreign students arriving in the United States in August dropped by 20 percent, the [largest decline outside of the pandemic](#). (The number was suppressed in part by many current students’ decision not to go home this summer for fear they would have trouble reentering the United States.)

Official tallies of new student-visa issuances have not been posted by the State Department since May, leaving experts to piece together the full enrollment picture. More than an unwelcome reminder of the height of Covid, this fall’s

enrollment anxieties could be a portent of rockier times to come.

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The visa suspension was put in place to give the State Department time to implement new [social-media screening](#) for student applicants — presumably a one-time occurrence. But evidence indicates that welcoming foreign students isn't high on President Donald J. Trump's America First agenda.

In its first months, the Trump administration moved to revoke students' legal status for [minor driving infractions](#) and made [high-profile arrests](#) of several visa holders involved in pro-Palestinian campus activism. It has threatened to [cap overseas enrollments](#) at 15 percent of

undergraduates, [kick out Chinese students](#), shut down a [popular international work program](#), and [limit the duration of visas](#). Beyond politics, American higher education faces increased competition from online learning and cheaper destinations in other parts of the world.

A substantial drop-off could empty classrooms and deplete research labs. It could wreck colleges' bottom lines and damage the [broader economy](#). It could close a window to the rest of the world for many students. And it could cut off a major source of talent that has fueled American innovation and competitiveness for much of the last century.

Despite those stakes, the extraordinary politicization of international students — and of higher education, in general — has made talking openly about consequences a hot potato. Nearly a dozen colleges turned down requests by *The Chronicle* to report on their campuses.

At ASU, the public posture is of an institution rolling with it.



International students gather for a welcome ceremony at the beginning of the fall semester at Arizona State U. at Tempe. ARIZONA STATE UNIVERSITY

Less than a thousand missing students is not an insurmountable loss in a student body of 78,000 (with another 80,000 online). Still, “every student that’s not able to get here is a problem,” said Matt López, deputy vice president for enrollment services.

A recent visit to the campus underscores the real effects — financially, academically, and culturally — that a drop in

international students could have on ASU and colleges across the country.

A rizona State touts itself as a global university. It means that in many ways: in the reach of its online programs, in the ambitions of its president, Michael M. Crow, and in its student body.

Two decades ago, ASU enrolled about 3,000 international students. Before the drop in international enrollments, it had more than 18,000, a six-fold increase.

Arizona State's international-student enrollment stands out for its magnitude, but not for growth itself. The number of international students in the United States has doubled over the past 20 years.

At many institutions, students from abroad have helped offset declining numbers of high-school graduates. In the next few years, foreign students could be even more critical as a countervailing force, thanks to a looming [demographic](#)

[cliff](#) and growing disillusionment among many Americans about the value of a college degree.

This year, the dynamic was flipped, with a number of highly selective colleges, including Stanford and Duke Universities, trying to make up for international-enrollment losses by offering last-minute admission to domestic students they had [waitlisted](#).

That's not an option at ASU, which prides itself on admitting all applicants who meet the university's entrance requirements. The university has had to "play defense" to retain students who received 11th-hour offers elsewhere, working to "sweeten the pot" with scholarships and other incentives, López said.

Its inclusive admissions policy, along with state-population growth, has meant the size of ASU's overall student body has continued to increase along with the uptick in international enrollments. As a result, the impact of foreign students on Arizona State's campus is more localized. In the engineering school, for instance, more than three-quarters

of resident graduate students are international.

“Engineering is global,” Kyle D. Squires, the dean, said.

As the United States struggles to produce enough of its own graduates in science and engineering, institutions like ASU are casting a global net for talent. The majority of foreign students today are in STEM fields.

Given that math, it’s unsurprising that many colleges report that STEM programs, particularly at the graduate level, have been hardest hit by this summer’s visa delays. At Arizona State, seven in 10 of the students unable to make it to campus planned to study engineering, the university said.

Vishnu Dwivedi, a data-science major, said he can see the loss. “It is visible in my classrooms that there’s not as many students as last semester,” he said.

Arizona State gave students waiting for visas the option to start classes online, but many declined, unwilling to pay American tuition to watch recorded lectures. For Falle, the late-arriving robotics student, the lack of opportunity for

hands-on research or networking made that option unappealing. “I think you have to be local to get the best knowledge of AI and the best experience with professors,” he said.



Onkar Falle, a student enrolled in the robotics master's-degree program at ASU, started classes late this fall due to visa disruptions over the summer.

ASH PONDER'S FOR THE CHRONICLE

The engineering school is offering a noncredit course to get students familiar with academic resources so they can hit

the ground running when they do arrive. University officials hope that will be in time for the spring semester, which starts in January — although at some consulates, the earliest-available visa appointments aren't until February or March.

ASU has the largest engineering school in the country, so it was able to absorb the fall's enrollment losses without cuts to courses or other programming, although it will need to make adjustments, such as shifting course schedules to keep students who have had to defer on track to graduate. It's a credit, Squires said, to ASU's "robustness."

Cities compete to be the site for the Super Bowl. Phoenix played host to the championship game two years ago, raking in dollars from fans of the Kansas City Chiefs and the Philadelphia Eagles.

But the metro area gets an equivalent windfall annually from another source — ASU's international students. In 2024, overseas students contributed an estimated \$679 million to the local economy, according to calculations by Kent Hill, a research professor in economics at ASU's

business school. “It’s like having a Super Bowl every year in town,” he said.

Foreign students’ financial footprint includes spending on housing, entertainment, and other living expenses. At ASU, they shop for groceries at H Mart and Bharat Bazaar and Trader Joe’s, and debate where to go for the best boba tea and khichdi. Locals like Hill point out high-end apartment buildings that cater largely to wealthier foreign students.

“It’s not that things change — that’s not the issue. It’s the rate, the abruptness.”

The university counts on their tuition, which can be double that of Arizona residents. Last year, foreign-student revenue underwrote about \$360 million, or 12 percent, of the operating budget — paying for salaries, to keep the lights (and the air conditioning) on, and for tuition breaks for their American classmates.

In fact, ASU gets about the same amount in general-fund appropriations from the State of Arizona as it does from

overseas tuition, said Domenico Ferraro, an associate professor of economics and one of Hill's colleagues in the Office of the University Economist. With taxpayer support lagging — funding per student in Arizona remains 40 percent below pre-recession levels — that revenue could become more important, not less, to public institutions like Arizona State, he said.

Ineligible for most financial aid, international students typically cover the full costs of their education. While an American degree is more expensive than studying at home or in countries like Canada or Australia, they are making a bet that paying a premium today will pay off in their future career.

Like many students, Dwivedi, the data-science major, borrowed to come to the United States. He plans to stay here after graduation through a federal program called optional practical training that allows international students to work for at least a year after they earn their degree, and for up to three years for those in STEM fields. (More than two-thirds of STEM graduates participate in

OPT.) He estimates that, with a higher American salary, he could earn enough in a year to pay back half of his loan.

But the Trump administration could upset Dwivedi's calculations — the official appointed to oversee OPT has said publicly he wants to shut it down. Without OPT, many students would no longer be able to afford their studies, and it could dissuade those who consider gaining hands-on experience a vital part of their education from choosing the United States.

That possibility is a reminder that while current visa problems have grabbed headlines, they might be only a precursor to greater turmoil in international enrollments.

A short-term dip in international-student tuition is manageable, said Squires, the engineering dean. "Is there a concern on my part about paying the bills right now? No."

The greater challenge for administrators is uncertainty about the federal government's policy plans for international students. Although the Trump administration

has telegraphed some actions, others, like the visa freeze, have come out of the blue.

“If I can plan for an outcome, I will say unequivocally that we’re never going to be worried about paying the bills,” Squires said. These days, planning is harder. “It’s not that things change — that’s not the issue. It’s the rate, the abruptness.”

But the value of international students is measured in more than dollars and cents. They are integral to the scholastic heart of any university.

Malika Lugogo’s data-science classmates come from around the globe. Lugogo, a senior from the Phoenix suburbs, said her classmates have raised the academic bar, introduced her to new ways of learning, and brought unexpected perspectives to discussions. Many, from Asian and African cultures that emphasize working together, have invited her to join study sessions and group projects. “I lucked out,” she said.

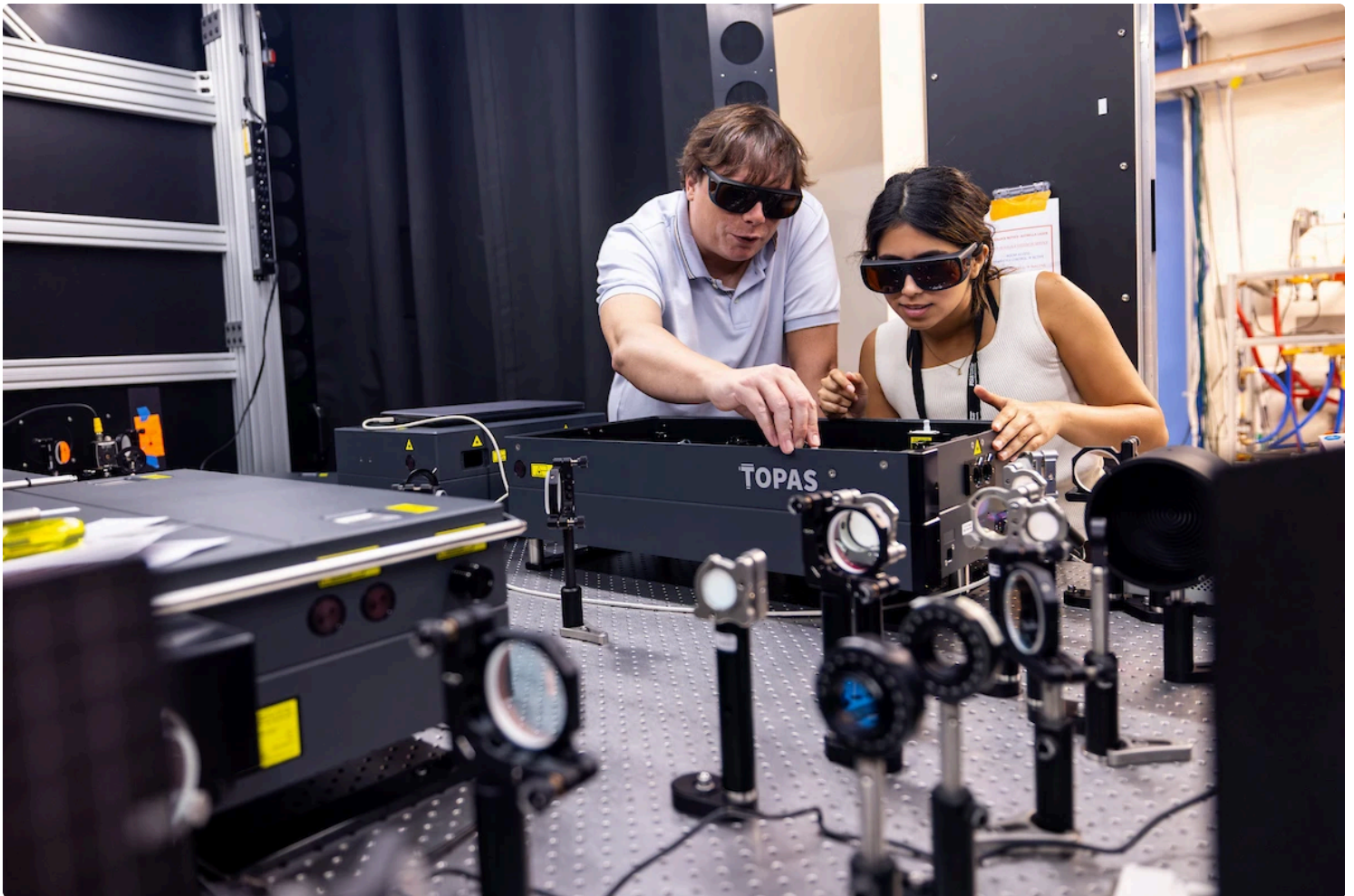
International students aren't just at ASU as learners; they are actively engaged in teaching and research as graduate assistants and postdoctoral fellows. Many of ASU's labs run on international talent: A cognitive-robotics group includes researchers from China, Iran, and Turkey. An Indian-born professor leads a team focused on power electronics and engineering, with members from Pakistan, South Korea, and Bangladesh.

ASU isn't unusual in that regard. Forty-three percent of all STEM doctoral students at American colleges are from abroad. In fields like computer science, engineering, and math, they earn the bulk of Ph.Ds.

Experts have sounded the alarm about the imperative to [build up domestic capacity](#), in particular about getting more underrepresented students to study science. But it's not an either-or proposition, they argue: The United States' not-so-secret weapon for decades has been its ability to attract and then export what Michael Crow, Arizona State's president, calls "unbelievable talent."

Studying alongside the world's top students “makes our own talent better, that makes our own students achieve more highly,” Crow said.

“It’s a global economy. It’s a global labor market. And we need to make certain that Americans are the most successful.”



An electrical-engineering graduate student, Shreya Tripathi (*right*), and Aaron LaForge, a research scientist, work in the Hutch of the CXFEL Lab at ASU. SAMANTHA CHOW, ASU

ASU made every effort over the summer to get its new Ph.D. students to the United States, even providing stipends for them to fly to other countries if visa backlogs were too great in their home countries.

But the visa delays are just one obstacle among many, researchers fear. Several faculty members said highly recruited students from Iran had been blocked by a [travel ban](#) restricting entry of all visitors from a dozen countries, leaving hard-to-fill holes in their labs. A drumbeat of rhetoric about research security has made it more difficult to recruit from China.

The Trump administration's actions on science — including frozen funding, cuts to research infrastructure, and cancellation of projects that clash with the president's worldview — [disrupted](#) the most recent admission cycle, with some colleges pausing doctoral recruitment or even rescinding offers to candidates.

There are concerns that such policies could put American colleges at a long-term [disadvantage](#). Top students could choose to go to places where funding is more plentiful, like

China, or where the government doesn't dictate the terms of their research.

At Arizona State, some faculty members hope the current difficulties are just a hiccup, while others say they are considering ways to offset potential losses in foreign scientists, such as involving more master's and even undergraduate students in research as sort of a homegrown pipeline.

"I think we're courting disaster if we restrict international talent coming into the country," said one professor. Like all faculty members contacted by *The Chronicle*, he asked not to be identified because of the sensitivity of the subject. Many others did not respond to interview requests. "That's not a political statement," the professor said, "but reality."

The sun had set, but residual heat still lingered on a late September evening when the Sun Devils women's soccer team faced off against visiting Brigham Young University.

Few of the players on the field grew up playing in temperatures of 90 degrees or more. Two defenders were British, the goalkeeper was German, and four of the game's starters Canadian. In fact, all but seven of the 26 women on the ASU roster are international students, from as far as Japan and South Africa, an athletic version of the United Nations.

Stadiums and playing fields have drawn many students to the United States who lack opportunities to compete in sports at the college level in their home countries. About 13 percent of Division I players are on student visas, according to the National Collegiate Athletic Association. At last year's [Olympic Games](#), hundreds of competitors were current or former college athletes, including fellow Sun Devil and gold-medal swimmer Léon Marchand of France.

Sports are one of many ways that international students are woven into the campus fabric, at Arizona State and elsewhere. The student-body presidents of ASU's Polytechnic campus and graduate-student government are foreign students. Events like the Lunar New Year and Holi,

a Hindu celebration of spring, attract attendees from across the university. Clubs for Bollywood dance, dragon-boat racing, and table tennis reflect the institution's multicultural identity.

When international students leave their imprint on campus, all students can benefit, said Daniel Hoyle, senior director of international student and scholar experience. Dishes like tikka masala tofu, pho, and halal chicken, catering to those homesick for home cooking, are now on the menu in the dining halls. Women's-only hours at the gym originated with students whose cultural backgrounds made them uncomfortable exercising around members of the opposite sex but appeal to a cross-section of gym-goers.

Lugogo, the data-science student, is president of Chinese English Language Bridge, a club focused on language and cultural exchange. The group holds conversation hours for students interested in practicing Chinese or English, as well as events like mahjong nights that foster more casual connections.

Lugogo, who is minoring in Chinese, started taking Mandarin at her suburban high school. Studying a foreign language in college has been a different and deeper experience, she said, thanks, in part, to relationships she's formed with students from China and Taiwan. "The cultural part is what's hardest in learning a language. You can't get that without them."

Activities like Language Bridge "allow room for conversations that you might not feel comfortable having," Lugogo said. And the understanding goes both ways.



Students play Taboo at the International Students and Scholars Center's game night and trivia contest at ASU. ASH PONDER'S FOR THE CHRONICLE

Jason Tannato, who is from Indonesia, said getting to know people from different countries and cultures was one of the biggest attractions to studying in the United States. In his first month on campus, he had met only two other Indonesian students.

Tannato was among those who swung by a meet-up organized by the international-student center to nibble on

Taiwanese fried chicken and sip milk tea, learn about East Asian student groups, and catch up with friends. The center offers a full calendar of events, from storytelling circles and game nights to career advising, sometimes several in a day, a complex logistical choreography.

“This is what a university is supposed to be,” Tannato said. “When you go out in the world, you aren’t in a bubble.”

Administrators are trying to bring pieces of ASU culture to students still waiting for visas. They have organized online poker tournaments and football watch parties. There are plans to livestream a campus celebration of Diwali, the Indian festival of lights.

Before dawn in Tempe one recent morning, a group of ASU staffers logged on to an online welcome session, timed for students from Asia, to run through information about visa applications and airport pickups. Although most of the questions in the chat were about whether first-year students could live off campus (they can’t), Bobbe Fernando, senior director of international recruitment and

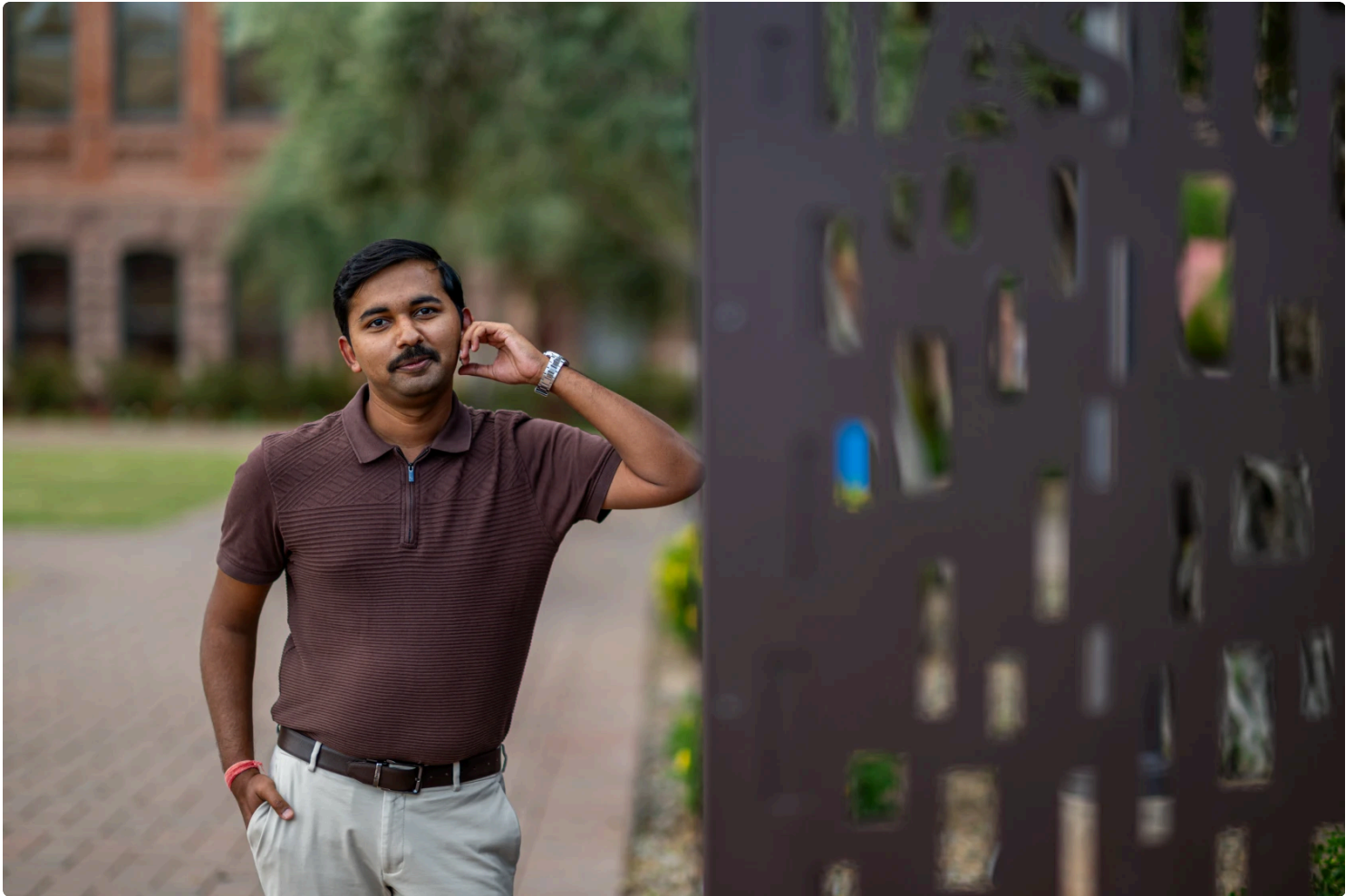
partnerships, stressed that the university's commitment to welcoming international students "comes from the top," pointing to a recent opinion essay by Crow on the importance of foreign students, published in [*The Wall Street Journal*](#).

Many of these students attended kick-off events for the new semester in India in late summer, even though they had yet to get visas. For them, it's not a question of whether they will come. It's when.

But what about next year's students? And the year after that? Even before the current headwinds, López, the admissions officer, anticipated that international recruitment would become more challenging and was developing new strategies, like hybrid programs and partnerships with foreign universities, to reach potential students.

Will those students and their families continue to view the United States as a place of welcome and opportunity? Mudit Lal, an ASU senior, said he has already seen changes in his own parents' perceptions since the visa revocations

and arrests this spring. “Before, if they called and I didn’t pick up, they thought, ‘Oh, he’s just busy,’” Lal said. “Now, they are worried.”



Mudit Lal, a senior at ASU ASH PONDER'S FOR THE CHRONICLE

While working as an intern in ASU’s international office over the summer, back home in India, Lal read “fearmongering” headlines about studying in the United States. When he met with students and their families, he gave them the advice he’d give a younger sibling: “ASU is

great, but, please, have a backup plan” outside the United States.

During his time at ASU, Lal, who will graduate in December, mentored first-year engineering students, took a graduate-level seminar on technology and innovation with President Crow, and started an India-policy club. He’s already founded his own company, focused on branding and business strategy.

What would Arizona State have lost if Lal had been forced to go with his backup plan? What will American higher education lose if it misses out on many more Mudit Lals?

We welcome your thoughts and questions about this article. Please [email the editors](#) or [submit a letter](#) for publication.

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