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Latitudes: A foreign-enrollment downturn isn't coming. It's already here.

1 message

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Wed, Nov 19,
2025 at 11:00
AM

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Latitudes

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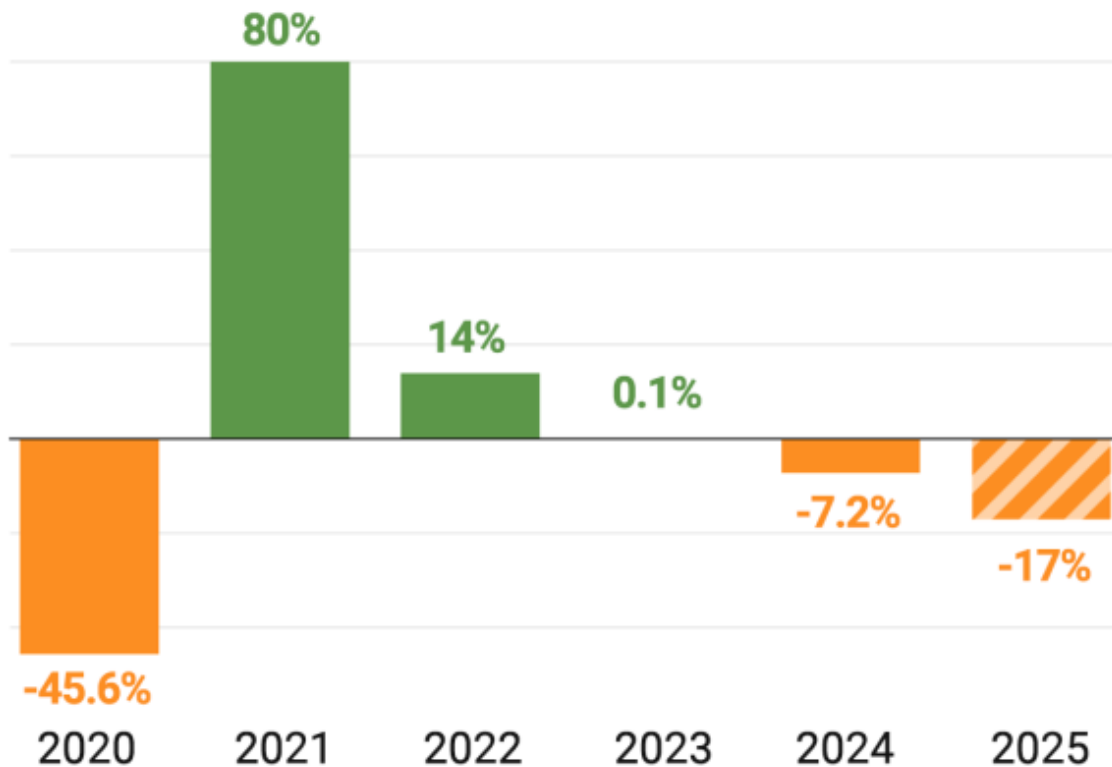
You can also [read this newsletter on the web](#).

Evidence of decline

After all the speculation about whether international enrollments would decline, it turns out the slide has already begun.

The number of new foreign students coming to the United States dropped 7 percent *last* fall, according to the Institute of International Education's annual "[Open Doors](#)" report. Declining interest in master's and professional programs precipitated the slowdown in the fall of 2024.

The slump is continuing. New international enrollments plummeted another 17 percent this fall, a preliminary snapshot survey conducted by IIE and other global-education groups found. (While the snapshot report is less comprehensive than the “Open Doors” report, it has been a previously reliable predictor of the official census.)



Two big and sobering conclusions to draw from the data:

- The post-Covid enrollment boom now looks like a bubble. After shooting up by 80 percent in 2021, the influx of new foreign students petered out. In hindsight, the explosive growth was likely pent-up demand from students who deferred acceptances and postponed applications during the pandemic.
- Yes, Trump administration policies, like visa revocations or a foreign-student cap, are having adverse effects (see, 17-percent drop). But the earlier-than-understood slump suggests colleges face other headwinds, such as a slowing global economy, growing competition from nontraditional education hubs, and lingering unease because of the China Initiative. In short, the current political environment is

compounding existing international-enrollment challenges and is not the sole cause.

Check out my [Chronicle piece](#) for more about the implications for colleges and the economy.

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What's OPT got to do with it? A lot.

Much of the current attention on the international-enrollment picture has reminded me of the parable of the blind men and the elephant:

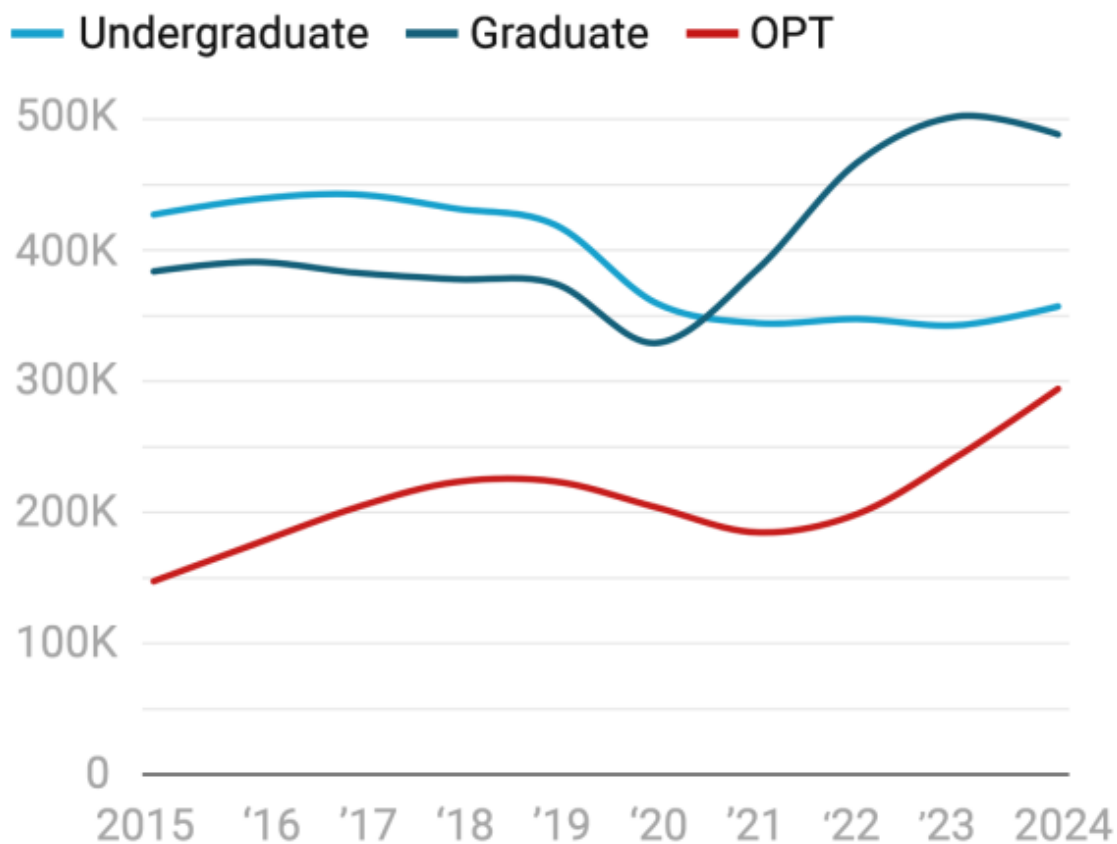
Each one touches a single part of the pachyderm's body — its trunk, its tail, its side — and ends up describing a wholly different animal.

Likewise, there's been a tendency to [hold up isolated statistics](#) as The Explanation for enrollment trends. The "Open Doors" report, however, shows that seemingly contradictory data can coexist — and why.

Case in point, even as new enrollments dipped, the total number of international students in the United States increased almost 5 percent in the fall of 2024.

One explanation is that even as enrollment in master's programs fell, it increased at other academic levels, including the first real growth among undergraduates since the pandemic. Plus, the post-Covid bubble is still making its way through the system, so many in those larger cohorts have yet to complete their degrees.

The report underscores another critical element — growth in optional practical training, the work program for recent graduates. Because OPT participants are on student visas, they count toward enrollment totals, meaning that fully a quarter of international students aren't in the classroom.

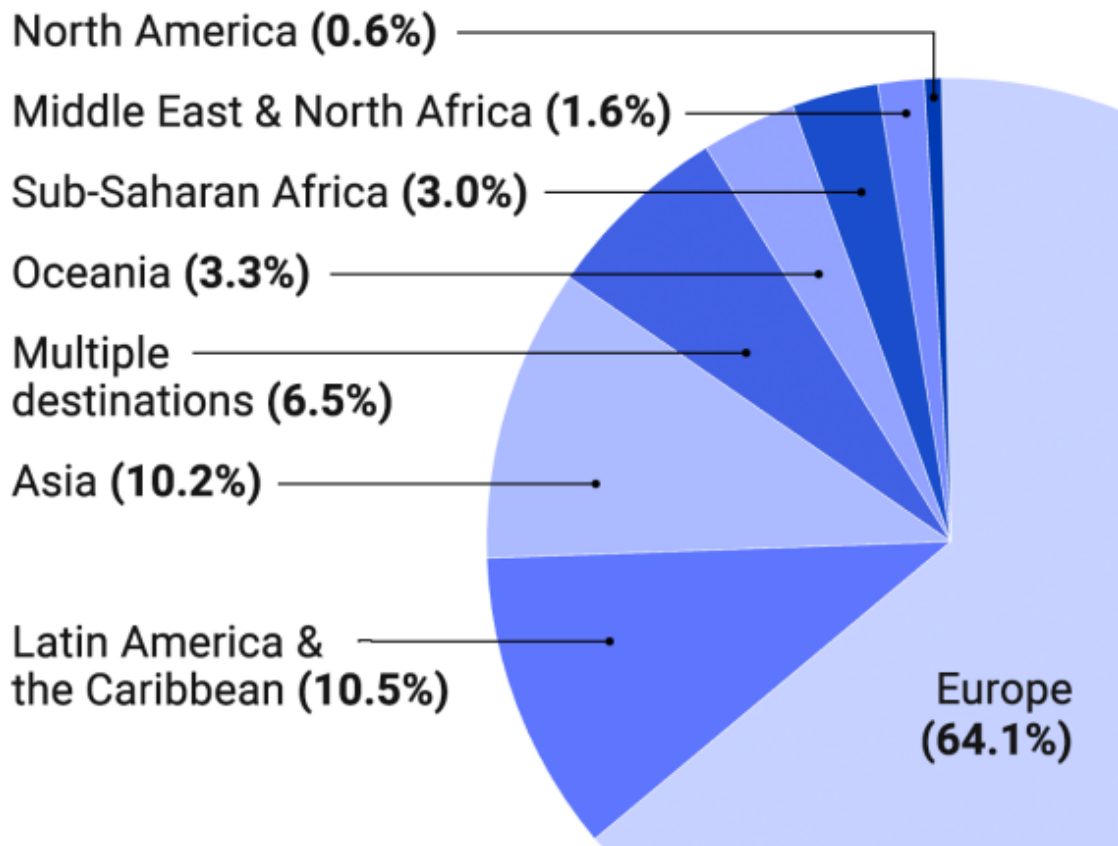


That distinction matters to colleges, of course, since they aren't getting tuition from those students. And OPT, which the Trump administration has pledged to reform, has grown so much it can obscure year-to-year enrollment variation. Not only were participants in the program the fastest-growing group, by far, of visa holders in 2024, their numbers have doubled in the past decade.

Chris R. Glass, a professor of educational leadership and higher education at Boston College, has [smart framing](#): "OPT shifted from an optional supplement to structural pillar" of international enrollment.

Meanwhile, study abroad by American students is continuing its slow recovery from the [pandemic](#). The number of students going overseas ticked up by 6 percent, to about 298,000 students in the 2023 academic year.

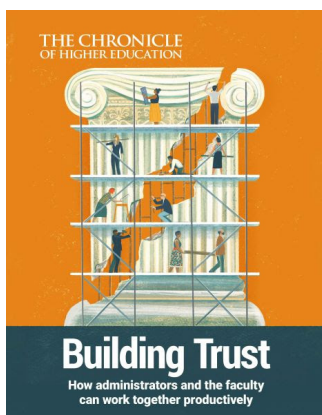
Before Covid, more than 347,000 students went abroad. (The count lags by an extra year because students have to return to their home campus before they can be included in totals.)



Two-thirds of students all go to one place, Europe. No more than 10 percent of students studied in any other single region in the world.

The “Open Doors” report is a veritable feast for those hungry for data on global mobility — and I’m just digging in. I’ll highlight other notable trends in future newsletters. **Readers can contribute:** Are there particular developments that interested/surprised/baffled you? Tell me what caught your eye at karin.fischer@chronicle.com.

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State Department to take charge of international-education programs

The U.S. Department of State will take over administration of the Fulbright-Hays program and other international-education and foreign-language programming being spun off from the Department of Education in a sweeping restructuring.

The Trump administration on Tuesday [announced agreements](#) that will transfer a number of the Education Department's core functions to other parts of the government in what many see as a backdoor way of dismantling the agency.

The State Department will assume oversight of a dozen programs, including Fulbright-Hays, which supports overseas research and exchanges, as well as ones focused on area studies, critical languages, and global-business education. In a [written statement](#), the State Department said that absorbing these programs into its "existing international-education framework" would "streamline program management, enhance efficiencies, and ensure alignment with U.S. national security and foreign-policy priorities."

Around the globe

Nearly 60 former ambassadors and senior State Department officials have signed a [letter](#) urging Secretary of State Marco Rubio not to target international students and scholars in the United States.

Academic groups want the Trump administration to publicly declare that it is unlawful to [revoke the visas of noncitizens](#) and to arrest and deport them based on constitutionally protected speech. A federal judge [earlier ruled](#) that detentions of pro-Palestinian campus protesters violate the First Amendment rights of foreign students and scholars, and the case is now moving to the remedy phase.

The State Department has revoked more than 8,000 student visas since the beginning of the Trump administration, according to [updated figures](#).

A Korean-born scientist and green-card holder detained after reentering the country from an overseas trip has been [released](#) after three months.

The U.S. Department of Homeland Security unveiled a new “[fraud hub](#)” as a resource for college officials on student-visa fraud. The department also sent a [message](#) to colleges reminding them that authorities can conduct campus visits outside normal reviews.

Harvard University will [screen](#) international participants in programs affiliated with the institution, including executive-education and online programs, workshops, and conferences.

Colleges campuses across the Philippines have received [bomb threats](#), which may have been timed to discourage student protests.

And finally ...

Readers have continued to share their experiences of being away from home during major events, including Jennifer Lofing Boyle, who was on a six-month assignment in Albania in the fall of 2001. When Boyle, whose office was just blocks from the World Trade Center, learned about the terrorist attacks, she spent hours frantically trying to get in touch with people back in New York.

“My community of Albanian friends and colleagues surrounded me with love and care and supported me through all the emotional ups and downs,” writes Boyle, vice president for programs at Tilting Futures, a nonprofit group that encourages students to take on global problems. “It was such a surreal experience to watch what was happening in NYC, a place I considered home, from afar. But they were truly there for me, and that is a beautiful memory from an otherwise very dark time.”

Patrick C. Leech was in Budapest on a Fulbright grant during the October 7 attacks by Hamas on Israel. Leech, an assistant professor of history and political science at Anderson University, in South Carolina, already had plans to visit Dohányi Street Synagogue, which had been part of the city’s Jewish ghetto during World War II and is the burial site for many of those killed during the Nazi occupation.

His visit, two days after the attacks in Israel, was “surreal,” Leech said. The synagogue and its history “looked very different in the light of the events of October 7 and also framed those contemporary events in a different light than had I been at home.”

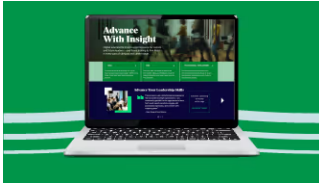
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