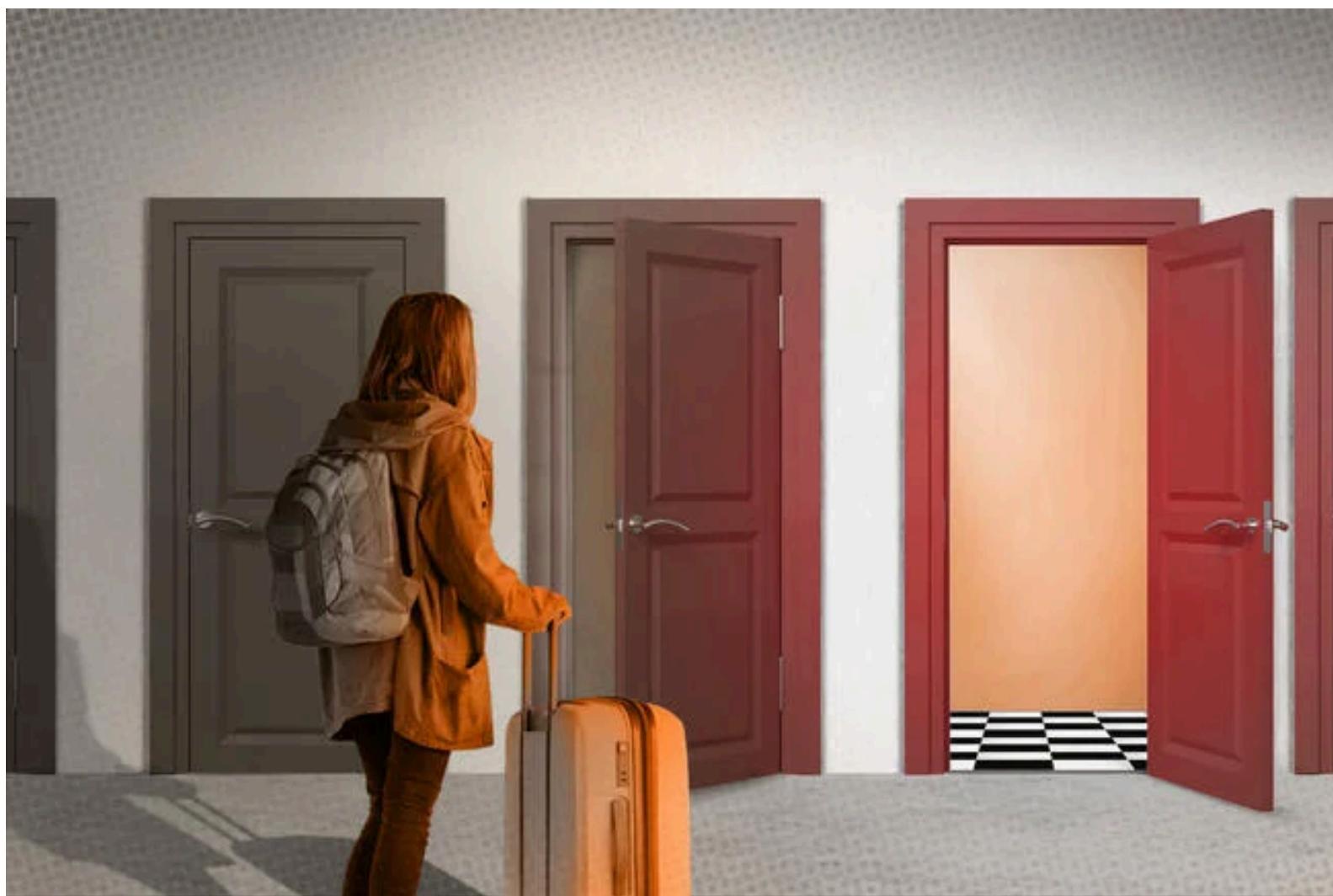


# 2025 Brought Chaos for International Students. In 2026, Institutions Hope to Adapt

Visa appointment delays, threats to OPT, SEVIS revocations and more made 2025 a complicated and ever-changing environment. Colleges are looking to innovate this year to withstand the tide.

By Johanna Alonso



About 17 percent fewer new international students arrived in the U.S. this fall compared to the previous year.

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**C**olleges and universities are deep in the first admissions cycle since the Trump administration dramatically disrupted the landscape for international students in the United States, and experts say that the past year has altered how they're recruiting this year—and perhaps beyond.

Amid uncertainty about what the future may bring for international higher education, institutions are investing in new recruitment strategies or looking at new ways to reach international students, according to international education experts. That may involve recruiting more from countries that weren't as affected by visa delays, forging new partnerships with international recruiting agencies or launching new branch campuses to reach international students in their home countries.

Anthony C. Ogden, founder and managing director at Gateway International Group, an international higher education firm, said he's heard from a swath of institutions in recent months that are considering shaking up their international recruitment strategies as a result of the tumult of the past year.

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“And that’s not unique to a certain section of higher ed,” he said. “It’s from the Big Tens to smaller institutions. Everybody’s considering different partners.”

In the year since President Donald Trump took office, his administration has, among other things, revoked students' SEVIS records, implemented travel bans, advocated for institutions to cap the number of international students they admit, attempted to disallow Harvard University from hosting international students and frozen visa interviews for about three weeks, creating a backlog that has made it incredibly difficult to secure an appointment in many countries once interviews resumed. Further restrictions are expected on how long international students can stay in the United States and on Optional Practical Training, which allows international students to work in the country for up to three years after completing their schooling.

The number of new international students enrolled college in the U.S. this past fall dipped 17 percent as compared to the year before. Although surveys show international students still want to study in the U.S., they worry that they could have their visas revoked or face discrimination here.

Those fears, as well as concerns about securing a visa, have also influenced how students and their families are approaching the admissions process this year, international education leaders say. Many are still applying to U.S. universities, but an increasing number of students and families are developing backup plans, applying to institutions in other countries like the United Kingdom or Australia, said Samira Pardanani, associate vice president for

international education and global engagement at Shoreline Community College.

“I think students are interested in more flexibility, and universities that used to not be very flexible, I’m seeing more flexibility,” she said. “What we’re seeing is students are looking for that low-risk start.”

## International Innovations

But this precariousness and demand for flexibility could lead to new innovations in how institutions engage with international students, Ogden said.

“If we can’t bring students here, should we go to them, either on-site in-country or remotely in some ways? I think there’s some optimism there and when new modalities and new approaches—what we saw in the pandemic—comes out, some of that moves from the periphery to the mainstream,” he said. “Is that a Pollyannaish way of looking into January 2026?”

The University of Cincinnati, for one, is leaning in to new strategies to attract international students to its campus, according to Jack Miner, UC’s vice provost for enrollment management. The institution is exploring partnerships with schools in other nations—both high schools, which can funnel applicants to UC, and colleges where students can start a degree before transferring to the Ohio university.

Partnering with institutions rather than recruiting broadly across an entire country, Miner said, gives UC access to students who are already aware of and interested in studying in the U.S., removing a hurdle in the recruitment process. UC already has

such partnerships in China and Vietnam but is planning to expand.

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“What these partnerships has done for us is essentially streamline those conversations, because the students always end up knowing peers who have come to the U.S. or come to the University of Cincinnati. You know 20 students in the grade before you ... or you have an older brother or sister that came to the university,” he said. “So that conversation about what it’s like to study in the United States, what it’s like to be at the University of Cincinnati, is a much easier conversation because it’s in context.”

It's not just the Trump administration that has changed the international education landscape, said Liz Nino, executive director of international enrollment at Augustana College, a private Lutheran college in Illinois that began recruiting large numbers of international students in 2013. She said that visa appointment

delays this year did seem to impact Augustana—the college’s first-year international cohort declined about 16 percent this fall from fall 2024—but that problems with visa interviews stretch back to COVID-19.

In recent years, she said, the “flood” of students who are interested in studying in the U.S. is more than U.S. embassies can handle, leading to interview wait times as long as a year and a half in certain countries. Currently, she said, she’s working with about 10 students from Ghana who were hoping to enroll in fall 2025 but had to defer to spring 2026; now it appears they may not be able to secure visas until October.

Such issues have influenced how Augustana recruits international students.

“This has been a huge challenge for U.S. universities because, as you can imagine, we’ve invested so much. I used to travel to Ghana once, sometimes twice a year, and now we’ve had to pull back because we cannot be putting so many resources into a market where we know that students simply cannot enroll,” Nino said.

The unpredictability can also be reflected in university budgets, said George F. Kacenga, vice president for enrollment management at William Paterson University in New Jersey.

“One of the most important things we can do, as enrollment managers, from my perspective, is give a forecast that is reliable so that a sound budget can be built,” Kacenga said. “In certain times, I might be aspirational about what I think that incoming number [of international students] looks like or share certain stretch goals. But right now, at least for myself and I think most of

my colleagues, we are being very conservative in those international enrollment numbers.”

## Deferred Students

The ultimate fates of students who were unable to secure visas in time for the fall 2025 semester appear to vary by institution.

Cornell University ended up having only a small number of students—primarily in graduate programs—who weren’t able to make it for the fall. Of that number, almost all will arrive for the spring semester.

“We feel like students were able to get to campus and were really relieved about the visa pressures not being as bad as we thought,” said Wendy Wolford, vice provost for international affairs at Cornell.

William Paterson had dozens of deferrals from fall 2025 to spring 2026 due to visa issues, Kacenga said. It’s not yet clear how many of those students will make it by the start of classes later this month, he said, but there has been “a lot of continued interest from those students.”

William Paterson also offered those students the opportunity to begin their coursework online until they’re able to secure visas, but Kacenga said students were generally uninterested in that option.

“There was too much uncertainty about actually being able to get here for the spring that people didn’t want to have a lost semester or an investment, and I’ve heard that story from institution types located all over the country,” he said. “So, a valiant effort to rally

and support the students, but because of the uncertainty principle, it just wasn't a smart choice for many folks."

Fanta Aw, CEO and executive director of NAFSA, said in an email to *Inside Higher Ed* that visa delays have persisted, especially in China and India, the two largest suppliers of international students in the U.S. As a result, she wrote, it's likely that most students who didn't get visas in time to come in the fall opted to begin their studies elsewhere.

"The losses seen this past fall will continue to be felt for the foreseeable future as a decline in enrollments is not a one-term issue, but will have a compounding effect," she wrote. "It is vitally important for the administration to reverse course if it wishes for a stronger, safer and more prosperous America."

Aw and other experts expect visa delays to continue, but they say that, because there is so little new enrollment in the spring semester, those numbers won't indicate much about the state of visa processing. Instead, the fall 2026 numbers will offer more insights into whether these delays were just a blip or if they'll have a longer-term impact on international higher education.

As institutions begin to dole out acceptances this year, Kacenga said, he has been emphasizing to prospective and admitted students the importance of starting the college application and visa processes early.

"We're helping students understand the urgency to complete your process to get admitted early—it's not just about getting your class selection that you want or the housing arrangements that you're most interested in," he said. "It's about doing it early so that you have the runway that you need for the immigration process."

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