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## Latitudes: Skewing toward selectivity

1 message

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# Latitudes



By *Karin Fischer*

**In this week's Latitudes:** The State Department issues a worldwide caution to American travelers. More calls for investigations into research security. Are group projects what ails higher education? But first ...

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## QUALITY OVER QUANTITY?

Visa-issuance data paint a [grim enrollment picture](#) for American colleges, with the number of student visas plummeting by more than a third last fall.

But the news was not uniformly dire: At universities including Harvard, Princeton, Stanford, and MIT, international enrollments held steady or increased slightly.

The exclusivity of that list points to a possible shift in global mobility: What if the United States, long the most popular destination, became defined more by quality than quantity?

Yes, academic reputation has always been an American calling card. But because this country has such a big, heterogeneous higher-education system, there was room for all sorts of colleges to attract all sorts of foreign students. Going forward, could the aperture narrow, to elite students attending elite institutions, both public and private?

Here are three data points that got me thinking:

**Selectivity = resiliency.** Elite colleges have advantages that can help them ride out the storm: They can pull from wait lists, and because of their brand names, visa denials by American consulates are low.

An unpublished analysis shared with me by Chris R. Glass, a professor of education leadership and higher education at Boston College, found that nonselective institutions, those with acceptance rates of 50 percent or more, bore the brunt of last fall's downturn.

Using publicly reported data on about 60 institutions, Glass found a significant correlation between selectivity and enrollment: For every 10 percentage points of higher acceptance rates, there was a corresponding 3.3-percentage-point decline in enrollment.

“What we’re seeing isn’t a uniform decline in international enrollment,” Glass told me. “It’s a stratification of impact.”

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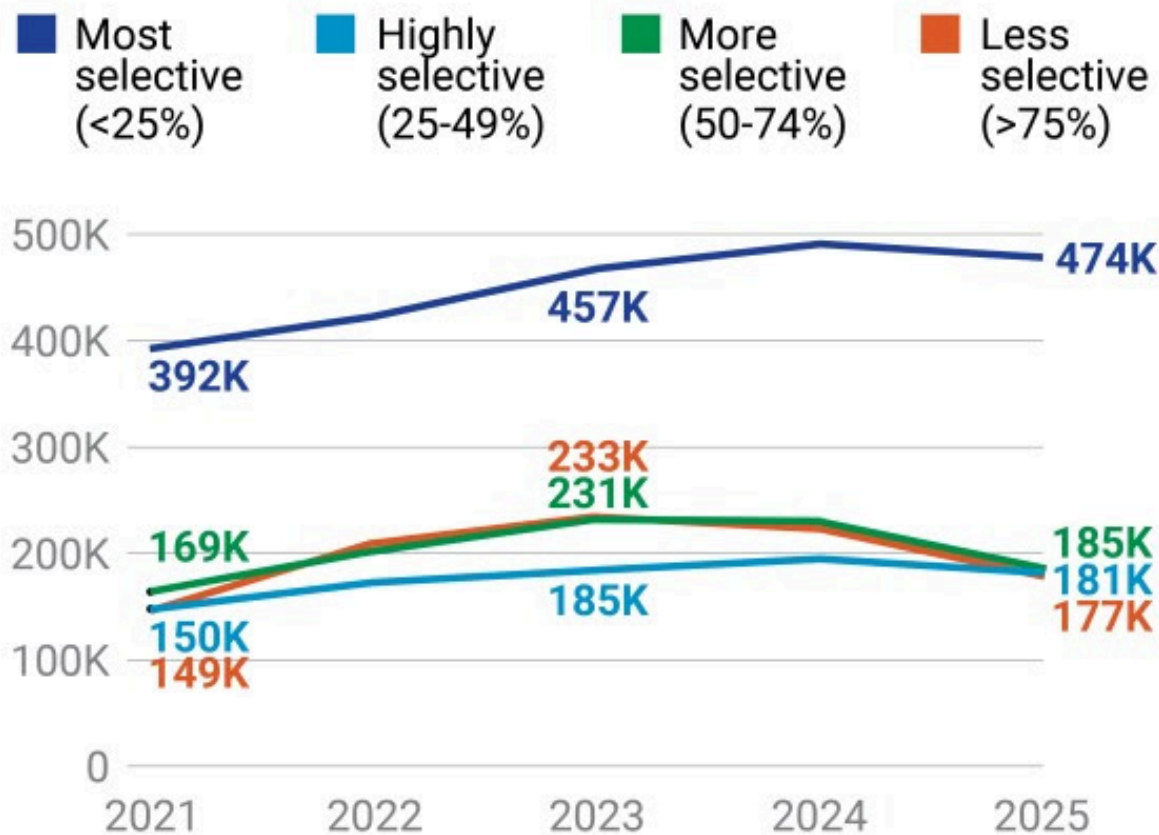
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## THE ELITES ARE WHERE THIS YEAR'S APPS ARE.

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[Common App](#) data for the current admissions cycle shows that the most-selective American colleges have continued to draw international students — nearly half of all international applications have been to colleges that accept less than 25 percent of

interested students. Through March 1, overseas applications to these institutions have been stable, about 1 percent lower than at the same time last year.



By contrast, international applications to colleges in the two lowest selectivity bands declined nearly 20 percent, the Common App found. While more foreign students have applied to top institutions since tracking began in 2021, the selectivity gap is growing.

That's the inverse of American users of the joint application who apply in the largest numbers to institutions with admit rates of 75 percent or more.

**You can't spell "reputation" without "academic quality."** In a global [survey](#) of 8,000 current and prospective students by IDP Education, respondents gave the United States the highest marks for educational quality among major English-speaking destinations.

However, when the company, which helps place students globally, conducted the same survey a year earlier, the United States was viewed favorably across categories. Now, it ranks dead last in three of four other areas, including international-student and work-visa policies and impressions of whether the environment is safe and welcoming.

For American colleges, this is a moment of unparalleled uncertainty: Will there be money for graduate-student stipends? Will visa rules change? What about postgraduate work?

Even the pandemic was a time of “difficult certainty” for international enrollments — we knew foreign students weren’t able to travel. (Credit to Omar Chihane of TOEFL for the phrase; during a panel I moderated at SXSW last week, he made the point that unpredictability can scare off potential students.)

Given all the current unknowns, it is hard to pinpoint nascent or developing trends. Still, if the American market does skew toward selectivity, that could mean trouble for colleges the least able to absorb enrollment or tuition shock.

I’m interested in what readers think about this possible shift and its consequences — and in what you’re seeing on the ground. Email me at [karin.fischer@chronicle.com](mailto:karin.fischer@chronicle.com).

## IRAN WAR AND HIGHER ED

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Universities in [Bangladesh](#) and [Pakistan](#) shut down to save on fuel because of shortages caused by the war in the Middle East, while New York University announced it would offer [free emergency housing](#) over the summer to international students who are afraid to travel.

NYU also scrambled to evacuate 300 prospective students visiting its Abu Dhabi campus when airstrikes on the Persian Gulf country began.

In Beirut, two faculty members at [Lebanese University](#), the country’s public institution, were killed in an Israeli airstrike.

And the U.S. Department of State has issued a [worldwide alert](#) to American travelers to “exercise increased caution.” Safety concerns have already led some colleges to cancel overseas trips over spring break, but could the broader advisory affect summertime study abroad?

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## AROUND THE GLOBE

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**Florida's governor, Rob DeSantis, a Republican, wanted** state colleges to [report](#) international students who "promote" a foreign terrorist group to federal immigration officials. The provision was not included in the final version of a domestic-terrorism bill passed last week, which instead mandates that those students be expelled.

**A House select committee on China is** urging the National Science Foundation to [review](#) a grant to Texas A&M University and the University of Washington because of research-security concerns.

**The Chinese government has** pledged to increase [scientific spending](#) by 10 percent and to invest more in its elite universities.

**Participation in BridgeUSA, a government exchange program, dropped** by 9 percent in 2025, the first decrease in five years. Some of the [biggest declines](#) were among research scholars.

**A new scholarship hopes** to expand access to [study abroad](#) for community-college students.

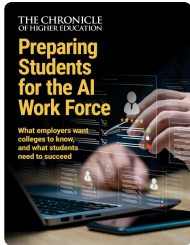
**An anonymous donor has** pledged \$2 million to a scholarship program that sends top American students to [Ireland](#) if others contribute the same amount. The U.S.-Ireland Alliance Scholarship program has paused the selection of new classes because of concerns about sustainable funding.

**Congrats to Samba Dieng**, associate vice provost for global engagement at Louisiana State University, who was named [senior international officer of the year](#) by the Institute of International Education.

**Extra reading:** My colleague Emmy Martin reported on the [ripple effects](#) of immigration enforcement on colleges in Minnesota, while an international graduate student at the University of California at Santa Barbara argues that the university

system should add more [protections](#), including a legal fund, for foreign students as part of contract negotiations. Forty-three percent of the system’s student workers are from overseas.

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## AND FINALLY ...

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A politician in Australia has staked out a high-profile position on a contentious topic — student group projects.

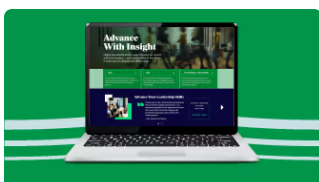
Julian Leaser, the shadow education minister, publicly called for a [ban on collaborative assignments](#), saying that students “hate” them and do not learn much from the exercise. “Unless there are compelling reasons or exceptional circumstances,” he told a higher-education conference, “I am calling on you to get rid of group assignments.”

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

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