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5 Takeaways From New Data on International Student Enrollment

As international enrollment drops, institutions are re-evaluating where and how they recruit international students.

By Johanna Alonso



Institutions were more likely to say they anticipate large drops in their graduate than their undergraduate international enrollment.

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Last summer, colleges were dealing with the fallout of a chaotic spring for international education, as the Trump administration canceled students' statuses in the Student Exchange and Visitor Information System, paused F-1 visa interviews, implemented new social media screenings for applicants, and detained students based on their political beliefs.

Now, a year later, many have begun acclimating to the new normal, shifting their enrollment projections and recruitment strategies based on declining international enrollment. A new report by the Institute of International Education, an international education nonprofit and the organization that facilitates the Fulbright program, sheds some light on how institutions were thinking about international education this spring.

Here are five major takeaways from the organization's Spring 2026 Snapshot, which surveyed 585 U.S. colleges and universities.

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1. Institutions Are Still Prioritizing International Education

This academic year was brutal for some colleges and universities that ordinarily rely on international enrollment for revenue, as well as to work in labs and teach undergraduate courses. But colleges aren't giving up; 82 percent said they still see international recruitment as a priority—though that is a modest decline from the 89 percent who said as much in IIE's 2025 survey.

When asked why they're prioritizing international recruitment, about three-quarters of respondents said they value having diverse student perspectives on campus; the next most common reasons were institutional strategy and financial contributions, at 61 percent each.

2. But How They Recruit Is Changing

The report revealed different institutions have varying approaches on how to recruit international students. Some are changing their methods significantly, such as switching to primarily virtual recruitment methods, while others reported they plan to continue traveling to certain countries. Some reported that they plan to continue with their current

recruitment strategies, while others are trying new methods, like more personalized outreach to prospective and admitted students.

“For example, institutions cite working with current international students to connect directly with prospective students, helping to showcase a welcoming environment,” the report states. “Others are working to highlight the experiences of current students and alumni through testimonials, offering authentic insights into campus life.”

George Kacenga, William Paterson University’s vice president for enrollment management, said his institution is also looking at recruiting international students online.

“We are now exploring, in ways we didn’t feel an impetus to do before, offshore and online delivery. We already have a great and robust online program that’s doing well domestically, but we saw students who approached us [who] are very interested, but they’re concerned about crossing a border, then our online options make a lot more sense for them,” he said.

He noted that some students who may have previously wanted the on-campus experience are now open to online learning because they’re nervous about coming to the U.S.



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The Trump administration's travel bans, which restrict the entry of individuals from 40 countries and territories into the U.S., have affected where institutions are recruiting; 70 percent of respondents said they aren't recruiting from countries included in the ban.

3. Applications From International Students Declined

Data from the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center showed that international enrollment declined by about 5,000 students from fall 2024 to fall 2025, while the IIE's Open Doors report shows new international student enrollment declined 17 percent this past fall. But IIE's new survey indicates that the decline wasn't just because so many students struggled to secure visas; 59 percent of respondents said the number of applications they received from international students declined in the 2025–26 admissions cycle.

This was especially pronounced at the graduate level, with 43 percent of respondents reporting a “substantial” decline in graduate applications, versus 31 percent of undergraduate applications. Institutions reported especially pronounced decreases from India, which is the largest country of origin for international students in the U.S.

That runs counter to some polling that has shown international student interest in studying in the U.S. remains high and indicates the global perception of studying in the U.S. may be changing.

Anthony Ogden, founder and managing director of Gateway International Group, an international education firm, said he’s heard from higher ed leaders in Türkiye and India that coming to college in the U.S. is now seen as risky in their countries.

“You pay lot of money and you may get thrown out if you run a stop sign, and you may not be able to finish your doctorate degree in four years, and you may not get an extension-of-status approval,” he said, referring to the Trump administration’s plans to revoke a long-standing rule that allows international students to stay in the U.S. until they finish their degree. “They’re thinking it’s just too much of a gamble.”

4. Institutions Are Still Stressed About Enrollment

Institutions predict that their international enrollments will decline once again in the coming year, with 63 percent of institutions anticipating their international enrollment will drop either slightly or substantially.

Universities expect steeper drops among their graduate student populations, with 36 percent reporting they anticipate a “substantial” decrease for those students, while just 22 percent of institutions report the same for their undergraduate enrollment. Responses also varied by institution type, with almost four in every five doctoral institutions saying they believe their international enrollment will decrease.

On top of the overall concerns about enrollment, Kacenga noted institutions are seeing fewer students enrolling relative to the cost of recruiting.

“We have to do a lot of the same work and get into countries, build these relationships, but we know we’re going to get fewer students as a result,” he said. “We have to adjust our expectations. We’ve had really good trend lines in those areas for decades; now, that return on investment, in terms of dollars, isn’t as good as it used to be, But the desire to have the international students here is still so high that it is worth the effort. We just have to recalibrate our expectations around it.”

Institutions cited visa-processing issues as a factor they are concerned could impact international student enrollment, though the report notes that this number is always high. The

majority (80 percent) also said travel restrictions were a factor. An increasing number of institutions also report that competition from other countries could be contributing to declining enrollment.

5. Study Abroad Remains Steady

In contrast with concerns about international students, respondents largely said they expect study abroad participation at their institutions to increase (43 percent) or stay the same (44 percent), roughly the same figures as last year. Study abroad hasn't returned to pre-pandemic levels, the report notes, but has been growing steadily over the last several years.

Institutions also largely expect funding for study abroad to remain stable (49 percent), while 24 percent anticipate a decline in funding. Those who expect a decline say that could result in fewer students studying abroad or fewer scholarships for students looking to study abroad.

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