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International Students Start to Sail for Other Shores. Will the U.S. Signal Them to Return?

November 18, 2025

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A study released by the Institute of International Education has found that foreign student enrollment in the United States has fallen 17% in the current academic year relative to last year. While these figures presumably reflect the effect of Trump administration initiatives like F-1 student visa cancellation and new political and social media vetting requirements for visa issuance, as well as expectations that H-1B opportunities at the end of foreign students' U.S. studies will be curtailed, they are only the opening chapter of a longer story. The administration has taken a piecemeal approach to

announcing and implementing new policies, and many that may still be in the works could *increase* the appeal of the United States as an educational destination for some people.

What are some of those yet-to-emerge policies?

- President Trump floated in September of this year making 600,000 visas available to Chinese students. This is roughly twice as many visas as are issued currently.
- While on the campaign trail in 2024, the president proposed granting “automatic” green cards to many F-1 students. While this proposal has been neglected since the campaign, the administration has not foreclosed it since taking office, and many in industry clamor for it to be taken up.

While we wait for the broader picture to emerge, who wins, and who loses with the present decline in enrollment?

Winners

- **Employers with sporadic H-1B needs focused on very specific candidates rather than on overall skill shortages in occupations.** For example, a lab hiring a single researcher with just the right academic niche who happens to be a foreign national. With declining foreign enrollment will surely come declining demand for H-1Bs in the years when these reduced student cohorts graduate. Whether cap-subject visas end up being distributed according to a new wage-weighting system by then or continue to be distributed by pure lottery, with fewer people in the pool, such employers will have a greater chance of succeeding than they have today.
- **U.S. students competing for places at highly selective American universities.** Again, fewer competitors for a fixed quantity of places equals greater odds of success.

Losers

- **Less selective or lesser-known colleges and universities.** The reduction in the size of the foreign applicant pool will surely accelerate the industry shakeout that has already been long predicted because of declining U.S. student-age populations through the 2020s and 2030s. Accelerating institutional closures and accompanying job losses could also create pressure on the administration to bring forward any pro-student measures more quickly than it has so far shown willingness to do.
- **American innovativeness and know-how?** The measures that appear to have led to the current-year enrollment decline have not been driven by economic policy considerations, but by debates over the extent of visitors' adherence to American values and foreign policy positions, and by the administration's larger law-and-order deportation initiative. Even Trump's proposal to issue 600,000 visas to Chinese students has been framed as a revenue-generating measure for the higher education industry itself, not as a means to recruit and retain talent for American industry more generally ("You know, the students pay more than double when they come in from most foreign countries."). The exception has been the "automatic green card" for F-1 graduates proposal, which was raised as part of a discussion about promoting U.S. success in the global artificial intelligence race, but has since been sidelined. A crucial element to watch as the administration continues its re-calibration of the United States' immigration posture will be how explicitly long-term economic considerations like talent retention and technological innovation are weighed.



"...the pipeline of global talent in the US is in a precarious position..."

