

RESEARCH  
BRIEF

A woman with short, white hair and black-rimmed glasses is shown in profile, looking intently at a small globe of the Earth. She is wearing a light blue button-down shirt under a dark grey blazer. The globe is positioned in the foreground, showing the Americas and parts of Europe and Africa. The background is a softly blurred office or library setting with bookshelves and a window.

# International Students in Admissions

How they fit into colleges'  
overall enrollment strategy

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# International Students in Admissions

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Contact [CI@chronicle.com](mailto:CI@chronicle.com) with questions or comments.

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



**A**s anxiety over future enrollments continues to simmer at American colleges, a significant number of them are turning their attention to international students. It's an attractive strategy for many reasons, especially given that international students largely come from countries where college-age populations are growing, not shrinking, as they are in many parts of the United States. However, international enrollments have been on a roller-coaster ride lately, plunging during the pandemic when international travel collapsed, then surging 12 percent in the 2022-23 academic year, the largest one-year growth in four decades. But in the post-Covid era and with a new set of complicated geopolitics — tension with





China and war in the Middle East — where do enrollment managers and admissions officers see opportunities? What might be the best investment of their recruitment dollars? When, for example, will less-expensive virtual recruitment prove effective, and how much is old-fashioned travel, slogging from Mumbai recruitment fairs to Lagos high schools, necessary? To get a better sense of the new recruitment environment and the current reality of international enrollments, *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, with support from ICEF, conducted a national survey of enrollment managers and international-admissions officers who work at two- and four-year institutions. The survey was conducted from November 1 to December 1, 2023, and 230 administrators responded. Additional research and more than a dozen follow-up interviews helped provide a fresh perspective on international-student recruitment.

# INTRODUCTION

A majority of American college administrators responsible for recruiting international students are confident about their work, the *Chronicle* survey found, but a strong minority expressed doubt about their budgets, administrative support, and overall success. For example, 61 percent of those surveyed said their institution’s “international enrollment environment” either meets or exceeds expectations, but 39 percent said they were not meeting expectations.

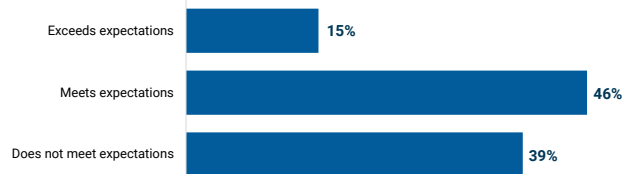
When it came to hard numbers, 46 percent of administrators said their international-student enrollments increased significantly or slightly. Only 25 percent “fully agreed” with the statement “My institution does a good job recruiting international students.” (See chart, bottom bar, page 7.)

Recruitment officers face common challenges. Administrators say the difficulties admitted students face in obtaining visas are a key concern, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa. Global competition has become more intense: Canada is offering a smooth pathway from education

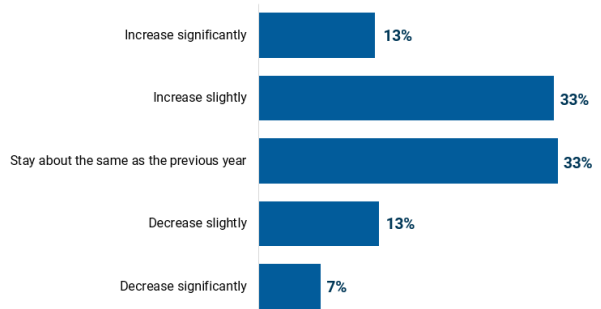
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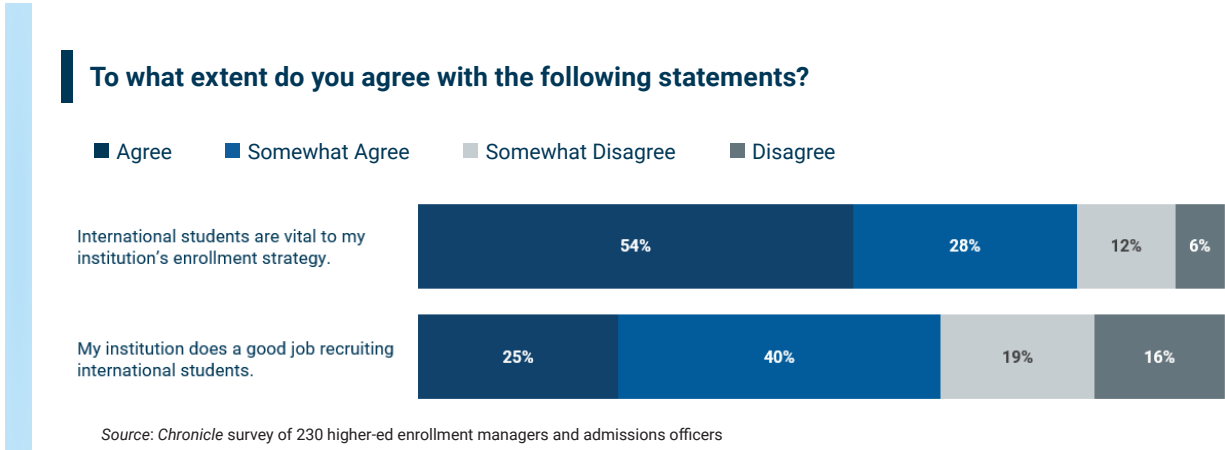
## Please rate how well your current international enrollment environment aligns with your institution’s expectations.



## For the 2023–24 academic year, did your institution’s international enrollment...



Source: *Chronicle* survey of 230 higher-ed enrollment managers and admissions officers  
Note: Percentages do not total 100 percent due to rounding.



to immigration; some European countries, such as the Netherlands, offer programs in English, and longstanding competitors such as Australia and Britain are continually upping their game.

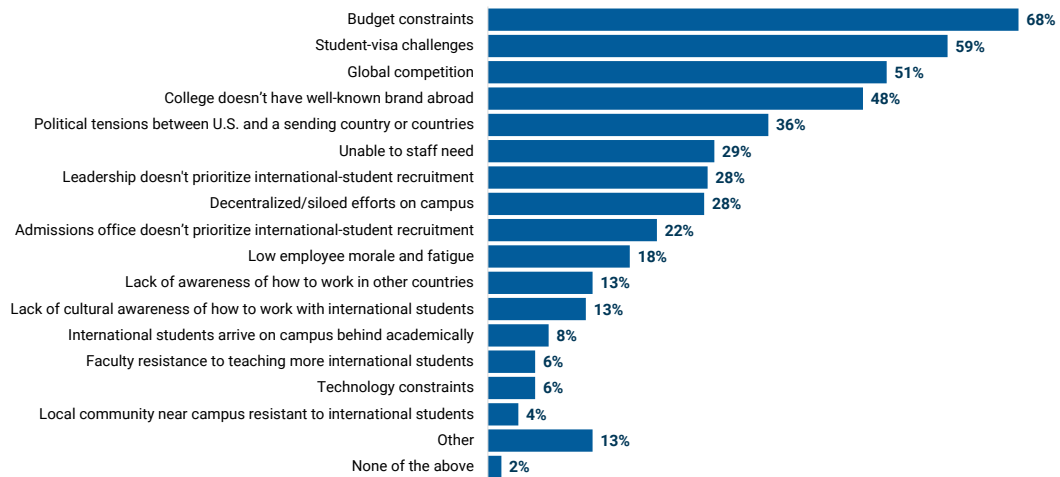
Indeed, many international universities, mostly Australian, British, and European, recruit in the United States, seeking American and foreign high-school students and undergraduates potentially interested in going to graduate school overseas. The foreign institutions that recruit in the United States have their own [consortium](#), visit U.S. college fairs, host luncheons for high-school counselors, and seek out expatriates from their countries who are working in the United States.

The proportion of globally mobile students who come to the United States has fallen from 28 percent of students in 2001 to just 15 percent today, according to the U.S. for Success Coalition, an organization that advocates for a coordinated national strategy to attract international students.

Not surprisingly, the major factor that splits colleges into haves and have-nots when it comes to international-student recruitment is the amount of resources devoted to the effort. When administrators were asked in the *Chronicle* survey what their barriers are to increasing international enrollments, the No.1 response — 68 percent — was budget constraints.



**What are the barriers to increasing international enrollment?  
Choose all that apply.**



Source: Chronicle survey of 230 higher-ed enrollment managers and admissions officers

The institutions that invest in international offices and scholarship support for international students win students' hearts. Scholarships are especially important, with more students coming from cost-conscious middle-class families in countries such as Brazil and Vietnam. The common belief that all international students pay their entire costs is not true now, if it ever was: They hustle for discounts and scholarships just like domestic students.

Two universities in Kentucky, one private, one public, show how institutional experiences with international students can differ. At Campbellsville University, a Christian university, 35 percent of students are international, a proportion that is as high as the institution wants to go. Annual tuition, room, board, and fees for an undergraduate international student total \$34,300 — affordable compared with many private institutions that weigh in at more than \$80,000. Campbellsville offers master's degrees in subjects

popular with international students, such as STEM disciplines and business management, and in a hybrid format. That format gives students more flexibility in when they can work and where they can live.

Peter Thomas, Campbellsville's director of international affairs, says the university has a good partnership with a recruiting agent in India and a strong record of job placement and graduates' getting H-1B visas for professionals with specialized knowledge. Despite its strong Christian identity, the university accepts students of all faiths and does not proselytize, says Thomas.

Administrative support is important, too. Thomas is writing a dissertation on the career satisfaction of international administrators and has an interest in their working conditions. "I report directly to the provost," he says. "It's very important to our institution. It gives me a lot of quick decisions about budgets, and also recruiting."

A fellow Kentuckian, Susan M. Roberts, associate provost for internationalization at the University of Kentucky, has a different perspective on international-student recruitment. "I think many of us are struggling mightily to get the results that we're hoping for from international recruitment," says Roberts. "There's a lot of change. And there's a lot of headwinds that we're up against." Among the headwinds she cites: The rising quality of education in many students' home countries, a decrease in applications from students in China, and increased international competition.

Kentucky welcomed a record number of first-year undergraduates in the fall, Roberts says, but the number of degree-seeking international students went down slightly. "That was not for lack of trying," she says. The university had a record number of international applications and admitted many well-qualified applicants, she says, but they did not ultimately enroll. Undergraduate tuition, fees, living expenses and books for international students at the university total \$48,406 annually, the same price as for all out-of-state students. Nearly 4 percent of all students at the university are international.

Roberts speculates that the low yield of enrolling students is a result of international applicants' using the same strategy as many domestic applicants: Applying to more institutions than students once did and then taking the best financial deal they are offered. The University of Kentucky and other public institutions don't always have the scholarships to offer international students that some private institutions do, she says.

As colleges in Kentucky and the rest of the country look to the future in their recruiting strategies, many are focusing on three major themes: building new pipelines to countries with emerging middle classes, refining their recruiting strategies, and making sure international students get the on-campus support they need once they have enrolled — in part so they will eventually provide word-of-mouth advertising.







# Building New Pipelines

**F**earful of becoming too dependent on any one country, international administrators now seek to diversify their student portfolios by building new pipelines to additional countries.

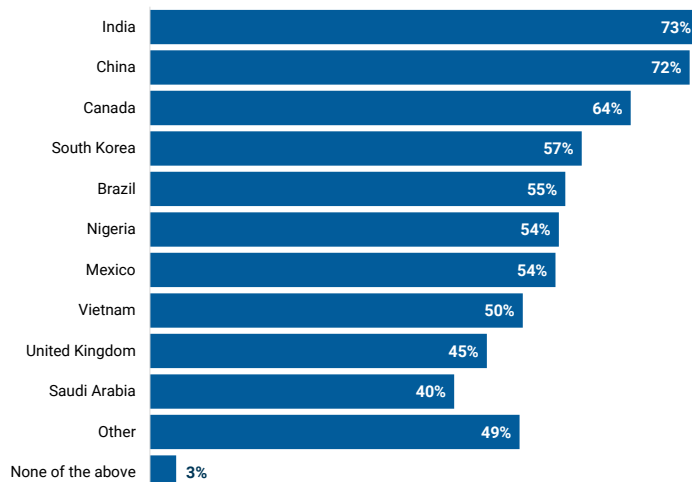
That strategy is being employed at the same time as a major shift has taken place among the top countries that send international students to the United States. India is outpacing China both in the number of new students it sends annually and in the total number of U.S. visa holders, the *Chronicle* survey and other data indicate. As of September, more than 320,000 active Indian student-visa holders were in the United States, compared with 254,000 from China, according to a U.S. Department of

Homeland Security [database](#). But American colleges are cautious about the rapid expansion in Indian applicants, many of whom are seeking graduate degrees.

Many institutions realize they were once overdependent on China, whose applicant numbers plunged during the pandemic. And, before that, Saudi Arabian students were coming in droves to U.S. universities, buoyed by generous Saudi government financial support, which has since been cut.

As a result of such experiences, international administrators are casting about for a broader set of countries with rising middle classes and a thirst for higher education. Prime examples of such countries, from four continents, surfaced in the *Chronicle* survey: Brazil, Nigeria, Mexico, and Vietnam.

**What countries do your current international students come from?  
Choose all that apply.**



Source: *Chronicle* survey of 230 higher-ed enrollment managers and admissions officers

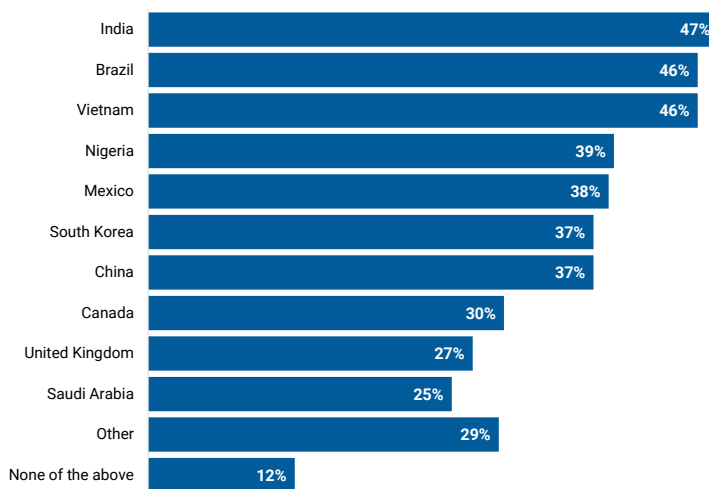


Paul Burgess, director of international admission and global initiatives at Tulane University, says Tulane looks for developing countries with strong economies and growing populations of 10- to 14-year-olds; countries that don't yet have home institutions with strong academic offerings. Brazil, for example, fits that bill, he says.

Students from such countries often come with new demands, though, administrators say. The students and families from less-developed economies want tuition discounts, scholarships, or credit for college-level courses they have taken in their home countries so they can graduate in a shorter time period. They may arrive at a four-year institution and jump ship to a community college once they realize they can spend less for the first two years of their college education.

In data from the Open Doors report released in November by the Institute of International Education, sub-Saharan Africa had the biggest increase in enrollments, up by 18 percent. Nigeria and Ghana were among the top 25 countries sending students to the United States. In interviews, international-admissions officers welcomed the uptick in interest from African students but expressed concern that they are not

**What region does your institution want to expand its pipeline of international students?  
Choose all that apply.**



Source: Chronicle survey of 230 higher-ed enrollment managers and admissions officers

always getting visa appointments, much less approvals.

At Touro University, in New York, James Shafer, director of international-student recruitment and enrollment, says, "If I had to put money into a trip, one trip, it would not be to Nigeria and Ghana. It would be to India because I don't have the faith that [African students] would be getting the visa after all the hard work I put in to get them." Shafer is also looking at other countries that he believes have education-focused families who are looking for affordable higher education. Turkey, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan are on his list. Likewise, he sees second-tier cities in India and Muslim students in India as ways to diversify. Despite the institution's Jewish identity, Touro's Graduate School of Technology already has

more Muslim students than Jewish students, he says.

Touro draws in foreign students with a 15-percent scholarship for all first-year international students, with no extra charge for taking an extra three credit-hour course over the usual 15 credit hours a semester. To help retain students, that scholarship goes up to 30 percent for the rest of their studies, resulting in an approximately 25-percent scholarship for all four years, on top of an affordable \$40,000 for tuition, fees, and “living expenses” (what would be room and board at a residential university).

Clay Hensley, a consultant who works with a variety of higher-education associations, divides countries into “global south” and “global north.” Those terms have come to refer to the divide between well-developed countries and the developing and least-developed countries, regardless of geography. “Everybody knows that they’re overdependent on these global north countries,” says Hensley. “The engine of growth is coming from the global south, particularly India, and universities want to invest in making sure they can attract talent from those areas.”

But, he says, when courting global-south students, American academe may experience shifts in academic preferences and university destinations. Flagship research-intensive state universities with little scholarship money for international students that have done well in the

global north may not fare so well in the more cost-conscious global south, he says.

Global-north students from countries such as Saudi Arabia and South Korea know they can return to good jobs and are less concerned about immigration, which may have more appeal for global-south students whose job prospects at home may not be as bright.

The interest in immigration will also tighten international students’ focus on STEM degrees. Global-north students could pursue a wide variety of majors, including the social sciences and humanities, although science and engineering were certainly also popular. For employability reasons, global-south students are more interested in hard sciences, engineering, computer science, and business administration. Almost any full-time international student ([with an F-1 visa](#)) is eligible for one year of [Optional Practical Training](#), or paid work related to their major, usually taken after graduation. But STEM students whose majors are on a [government list](#) can stay for three years of training. Highly specialized areas of knowledge, such as in a STEM subject, also help students to win the coveted H-1B visa that generally lasts up to six years. Universities seeking to diversify their international-student bodies may face pressure to expand STEM and business programs and find the money for discounts and scholarships.





# Refining Recruiting Practices



**T**ravel is back and agents are in. Those are two of the major recent changes in recruiting practices.

The *Chronicle* survey asked, “In what areas are you investing?”

The top answers were overseas travel for recruiters (70 percent), virtual recruiting efforts (55 percent), hiring international recruiting agencies and building alumni networks (both 50 percent).

While virtual events remain a staple in many international offices, few administrators expressed enthusiasm about them. “We have had good luck doing virtual things,” says Roberts, at the University of Kentucky, “but honestly, I think people are tired of that now.”

Shafer, at Touro University, says that the most important long-term strategic investment is branding: two- or three-year efforts at getting

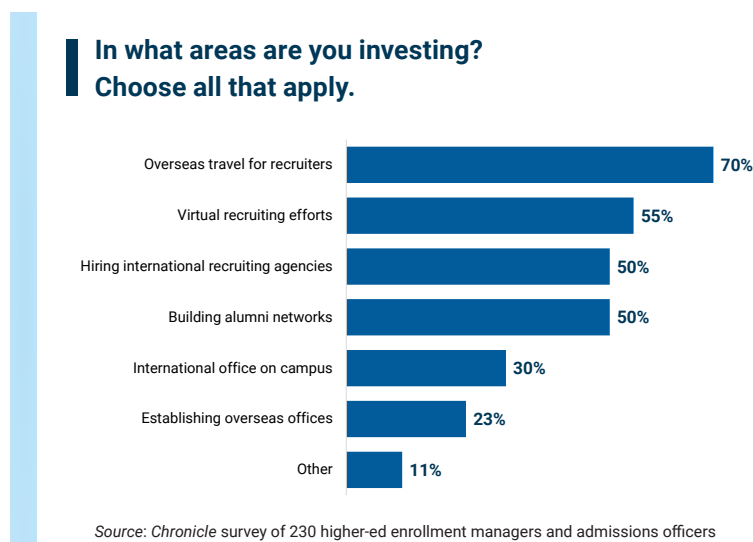
known in target markets. Indeed, in the *Chronicle* survey, 48 percent of those who responded said their institution does not have a well-known brand abroad. (See chart, p. 8)

International-admissions officers were asked in follow-up interviews what recommendations they would give to newcomers in their field. Their answers echo ancient advice: Know thyself. “I think the first thing that you really need to do,” says Burgess, at Tulane, “is understand your product and your offering and where it holds some really strong appeal.”

International-student recruiters must understand their institution’s academic programs inside and out, and in what parts of the world those programs would be attractive to students. Recruiters need to know what countries their college already has alumni in. If an institution already has a customer-relationship-management system for connecting with prospective students, the interna-

tional administrator needs to take advantage of that, and, if necessary, buy some prospective student contact data to feed into it, says Burgess.

At Lewis University, outside Chicago, Tyler King, executive director of the office of international affairs, says experience has taught him to avoid



blanket marketing and connect in different ways with different parts of the world. “We’ve devoted a lot of effort to analyze what makes our institution attractive and taken a more surgical approach,” King says. The Catholic university is sponsored by the De La Salle Christian Brothers, who are well known in the Philippines, a strongly Catholic country. So King builds on that when reaching out to Filipino students. In India, he emphasizes degrees with high employability in the tech industry there. In African countries, he emphasizes affordability. Lewis has been so successful in international recruitment that it has capped international enrollment at 25 percent of the student population and been able to make admissions more selective. “I think it’s absolutely made us a more attractive and competitive university,” King says.

After getting a deep understanding of their institution, international-student recruiters need to hone their elevator pitches. Smaller American colleges that emphasize a liberal-arts approach say one of their main challenges is making sure foreign students and their families understand what that entails. “Within the international-recruitment space, most families are only familiar with large research institutions across the world,” says Lisa Shen, director of international recruitment at Swarthmore College, outside Philadelphia. “It can be dif-

ficult to imagine that a small, residential college can offer the same research, academic, and co-curricular opportunities.”

Liberal-arts colleges have to fight the misconception that they only graduate artists and writers. “We do business,” says Matt Bonser, director of admission at Colorado College, a small liberal-arts institution in Colorado Springs, who then rattles off a list of other majors such as organismal biology, environmental science, and computer science that students can specialize in at liberal-arts colleges.

At Barnard College, which seeks to develop women to become future leaders who will fight for social change, Ruby Bhattacharya, director of admissions, tells prospective international students that being in small seminars with intensive, roundtable discussions will help prepare them for a life in boardrooms. “From their first year,” she says, “our students are in an environment where they have to defend their point of view. They have to collaborate. They’re problem-solving with people from all walks of life.”

As they seek to expand international enrollments, many recruiters might be humming Willie Nelson’s “On the Road Again.” According to Bonser, “Zoom and other platforms have extended our reach, but seem not to be achieving our definition of what a good job is of truly engaging students.”

Bonser is traveling with admissions staff members from other liberal-arts colleges to meet students, families, and school counselors in Europe, China, South Korea, and Japan. “We don’t likely have the pre-existing awareness or reputation of many larger schools,” he says, “and so we feel like traveling in small groups of similar liberal-arts colleges is really valuable for us.”

Small-group travel has efficiencies, from sharing rental cars to making it easier to persuade local schools to host an event. Traveling consortia can have evening events open to all in which they try to explain the American system of higher education and introduce their own institutions. They can have breakfasts with high-school counselors.

When Evelyn Levinson, the international-admissions director at American University, travels for work, she brings a bespoke, personal approach to recruiting. She reaches out to recent alumni. She hosts receptions for students and their families and invites the prominent parents of current students to speak.

She recalls visiting Cairo American College, a U.S. embassy-affiliated international school in Egypt. She had a guest speaker, a current American University student who had graduated from the school, address an audience of eight students. “They listened to me,” she says, “but they really listened to Ali, because he’s one of them.”

When traveling, international recruiters need to understand the cultures they visit. “International recruitment is not just student recruitment, it is also family recruitment,” says Bhattacharya of Barnard College, which has 55 countries represented among its 3,223 undergraduates. American parents often take the attitude that a college search is their child’s search, and they are just in the background to support. But that priority can be flipped outside the United States. The parents are often guiding the conversation with admissions officers even if the student ultimately should take ownership.

Overseas travel is not always needed to connect in person with international students. “One of the best places to recruit international students is right here in the U.S.,” says Bhattacharya. The children of foreign parents who live in the United States and children sent to the United States to get an American education are ripe candidates for recruiting.

Recruiters can also bring foreign student-recruiting agents or high-school counselors to their U.S. campuses. Shafer, at Touro University, hopes that Study New York, which promotes the state’s higher-education institutions, will bring about 10 agents from Colombia to visit New York campuses in the spring.

At the University of Kentucky, Roberts says she wishes she had the

budget to fly more secondary-school counselors to the campus. “Many people aren’t familiar with Kentucky,” she says, “much less with the university. So getting people here and seeing how beautiful the campus is and the facilities that we have is a huge plus for us.”

At American University, Levinson has about 50 students who are “AU diplomats.” They speak a wide variety of languages, come from a wide variety of cultures, and she uses them throughout the admissions cycle. She introduces them to prospective students based on shared academic interests, or a common language or background; to students who have been admitted but have not enrolled; and to enrolled students who are on their way to campus or settling in. The AU diplomats allow for a more personalized approach to recruiting, she says, and give prospective students a chance to learn about the university from similar enrolled students.

Recruiting agencies are another important resource for many American colleges. Nearly half of U.S. colleges use recruiting agents, a 2021 survey by the American International Recruitment Council and the National Association for College Admission Counseling (NACAC) found. That is a sea change from a decade ago. Before 2013, using agents who operate on commission was against the code of ethics for NACAC members. The State Department and its educational

network, Education USA, disapproved of paid agents until 2018, when the policy was changed under the Trump administration.

Other countries used recruiting agents long before the United States and still do. “When we engage with students, we make them aware that there are education agents, that their services are free and that it’s an extra layer of support,” says Todd St Vrain, North American manager of offshore student recruitment for the University of Melbourne. Agents may be particularly useful for colleges that do not yet have a global reputation, admissions officers say. “Agents are a really important piece of the puzzle here,” says James Monahan, director of graduate and international admissions at Southern Illinois University at Edwardsville. “That’s where I put most of my money, frankly. They’re on the ground. They’re talking to the parents and students in the language that they speak and reassuring them that, maybe you haven’t heard of Southern Illinois University at Edwardsville before, but I guarantee you, we’ve had students go there. I’ve visited there, and we know it’s a safe place for your son or daughter.”

Monahan and other admissions directors say that institutions need to teach agents about their university and vet them to be sure they are operating ethically. “What I’m looking for is, are the agents helping the students?” he says.







# Bolstering On-Campus Support

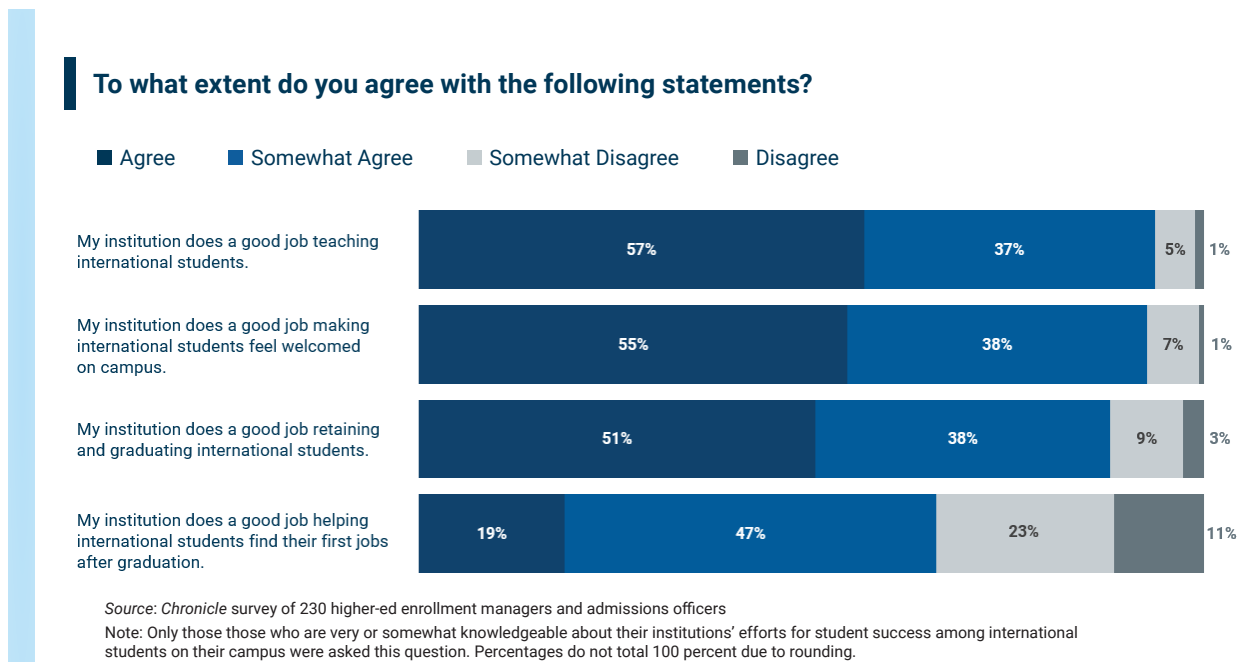
**A**s American colleges have strengthened their “student success” culture over the past decade, campus international offices have also enhanced student support, usually working in concert with student-affairs offices.

In the *Chronicle* survey, administrators were very confident that their institutions did a good job teaching international students, making them feel welcome, and retaining them. Ninety-four percent of respondents, for example, agreed or somewhat agreed with the statement “My institution does a good job of teaching international students.”

But achieving that goal takes some cultural sensitivity. The teaching approach in many countries is

centered on attending lectures, rote memorization, and an end-of-semester exam. Adapting to American colleges, where group projects, long papers, class participation, and weekly quizzes or essays may count as much or more than midterm and final exams can be difficult for many international students. Administrators say it’s essential to screen prospective students carefully to make sure they can make that adjustment, and then connect them to university offices to get help as needed.

King says that Lewis University takes a “just in time” approach to helping international students find their way at the institution. Pre-departure orientations focus on housing and navigating the physical campus. When students arrive, the focus is on basic needs, such as settling into their residence and finding



a grocery store. “Once a student has gotten over their jet lag and gotten some food in them, we can start elevating the service and support that we’re offering,” King says. Students can meet their advisers, register for classes, review tuition-payment plans, and learn what they need to do to maintain their student visa. The students get about two emails a week, King says, that contain “valuable information that they’re going to need.” It is far from a one-and-done orientation, he says.

At Barnard College, international students share the use of an administrative hub, [Access Barnard](#), with first-generation and low-income students. While the needs of the students can be quite different, they are all navigating American higher education for the first time, says Bhattacharya.

Southern Illinois University at Edwardsville has created a series of seminars called Global Zone to help student workers, staff, and faculty members understand the international-student experience. Those who attend learn that international students face issues that many domestic students don’t: fluctuations in home-country currencies that affect their ability to pay tuition, learning in a non-native language, and not being able to drop courses

they are struggling in because a full-time course load is required to keep their visa.

Roberts, at the University of Kentucky, said she can look at data to see if international students are taking advantage of university resources. “I think the use data would show they by and large take full use of the academic-support services,” she said.

Respondents to the *Chronicle* survey were less confident about the international-student experience when it comes to career services. When asked if their institution did a good job helping international students find their first jobs, only 19 percent agreed, and 47 percent somewhat agreed. (See chart, page 24.)

The difficulty career-services offices face in helping international students, administrators said in interviews, is that they either have to help students find Optional Practical Training, which requires educating both students and potential employers about the program’s rules, or they have to assist students with jobs in their home country, which can be largely unknown territory.

Those career-services offices that succeed in helping international students get jobs often do so through alumni networks or through strong connections between academic departments and industry.



## CONCLUSION

As both the *Chronicle* survey and follow-up interviews show, life in international-admissions offices varies sharply depending on financial support. In the *Chronicle* survey, 44 percent of respondents said their institution is not allocating more funds for international recruitment.

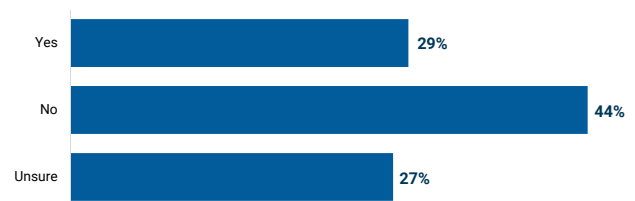
Other administrators exude confidence. “I’m fortunate to be at an institution where leadership does prioritize international enrollment,” says King, at Lewis University. “It is sewn into the fabric of how this university plans ahead and it funds it appropriately, which has always made my job a lot easier.”

Despite that split in experiences, international-student enrollments appear to be headed upward at a broad set of institutions. A [snapshot survey](#) of more than 630 colleges conducted in November by the Institute of International Education and partners reported an 8-percent increase from the year before in international students enrolled. Ninety-two percent of institutions surveyed plan to expand their foreign enrollments over the next five years.

Surveys have not discovered yet if institutions that don’t invest in international students will learn from the ones that do. To be successful, investments can’t just be in recruiting. Scholarships and student-success programs tailored to international students are also needed, administrators say.

St Vrain, at the University of Melbourne, has an unusual perspective on American efforts to recruit international students. An American citizen who studied in the United States, he also lived in Australia for 15 years and became a citizen there. Now he is based in San Francisco, recruiting

### Is your institution allocating more funds for international recruitment?



Source: *Chronicle* survey of 230 higher-ed enrollment managers and admissions officers

for an Australian university, explaining Australia to Americans and other international students, and answering their questions.

“It’s funny how much snakes and spiders come up,” he says. From his viewpoint, many American institutions do not have well-developed international strategies, although he sees that changing.

And he says the Australian hunger for international students is about a lot more than revenue. “I don’t think Australian universities are crass or crude in their approach,” he says. Rather, “It is very much a part of the Australian psyche that we want to be connected to the world.” That urge also results in an integrated approach to internationalization. “It’s not just about students,” he says. “It’s also about research, partnerships, and commercialization.”

The hunger to connect globally is rising among Americans, 48 percent of whom now have a passport, compared with 5 percent in 1990, according to [U.S. State Department statistics](#). But America still trails Australia in that regard, where 53 percent of citizens have a passport. The rising desire among Americans to engage with other countries and cultures may bode well for the country’s colleges.

Levinson, at American University, says, “As a whole, U.S. institutions are going through a reinvention process now and really rethinking where we are and what we’re doing.” International recruitment, she says, is one building block of that reinvention.

## METHODOLOGY

*The Chronicle*, with support from ICEF, drew responses from 230 senior administrators at two- or four-year American colleges in a 10-minute online survey conducted between November 1 and December 1, 2023.



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