

KEY
TAKEAWAYS



Shifting International-Student Trends

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Shifting International-Student Trends

Key Takeaways from a virtual forum

Presented by *The Chronicle of Higher Education* with support from ETS TOEFL



SPEAKERS

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What happens when the conventional wisdom isn't true anymore?

For years, trends in international-student enrollment have been shaped by significant demand from China. But a combination of the Covid-19 pandemic, trade disputes, and other sociopolitical factors are flipping that prevailing logic on its head.

On November 15, *The Chronicle* held a virtual forum, “Shifting International-Student Trends,” to dive into the Institute of International Education and the State Department’s newest Open Doors report, explore the latest enrollment data, and re-examine the landscape for international-student recruiting.

The following comments, which have been edited for clarity and length, represent key takeaways from the forum. To hear the full discussion, watch the recorded webinar [here](#).

Karin Fischer: Where do things stand today in terms of international enrollments, both at your individual institutions and in the country?

Adam Sapp: I spent part of September traveling internationally for the first time in three years. I travel with a group that includes Williams College and Swarthmore College, doing a liberal-arts leadership program through Asia. The response was great. We were in six different countries, we had large crowds, high-level engagement. Parents were there, students were there. It felt festive. It left all three of us feeling really good about where the United States stands in relation to other countries as a destination of choice.

Also, at many conferences this fall, there is an energy and excitement about international recruitment, whether it's in Europe or Latin America, Asia, or Canada.

Robert Summers: I got back Friday night from a trip to Bangladesh and Vietnam. The reception was great — the excitement among our partners is not something I have seen before. The growth I had been seeing anyway is increasing. I remain incredibly optimistic about the outlook for us, both in my region and in North America in general.

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Fischer: Jeong, I'm interested in your impressions, too, but let me ask you about the Open Doors report as well.

Jeong Powell: What's happening at N.C. State is reflected in the report. China was our No. 1 country for international students, but in the last cycle the highest number of international applications was from India. We ended up enrolling more undergraduate students from India than from China.

Fischer: One of the things that really struck me about the Open Doors findings this year was the shift between graduate and undergraduate enrollment. What did you make of the fact that graduate enrollment overtook undergrads for the first time? Are there things when you travel, or that you're seeing and hearing in student forums, that might be causing those enrollments to increase, or on the flip side, perhaps depressing undergraduate enrollments coming out of the pandemic?

Summers: The best example is from an application for our M.B.A. program that we got from a student in Dhaka [Bangladesh] who completed his undergraduate degree in Malaysia. I'm seeing more and more of this — not

necessarily just Malaysia, but other English-medium institutions throughout the world that are not just in North America. That's part of what's going on. The higher-education market is maturing outside of North America.

Fischer: Given the report's findings on India and China, how are you changing your strategy? And while you're excited about the growth in Indian numbers, are you worried about China?

Powell: We've all learned that it's dangerous to put all the eggs in one basket. Even when China was our top country, we kept traveling to India, we engaged with Indian counselors, etc., and that made a difference in helping India grow. We are going to make our engineering program even larger, along with our computer-science program, so I think we will see higher demand from Indian students.

“The lesson for me is, I look at my top-sending countries, and I push for diversification.”

And though the numbers of Chinese students are going down, we still want to work with China. Currently we are not allowed to travel to China, because of Covid-19 measures there, but once the market is open, we will go back. Not being able to travel is a barrier, but it does not mean we are not going to engage with Chinese students. We have shifted — we will probably see a stronger presence in India than in China in terms of application and enrollment numbers in the next few years.

Summers: I just think about the precariousness that it can place our institutions in. At my former institution in New York, we were heavily China-based. I still have colleagues there, and it's hurt them. Here I'm in a different situation. China has always been an important player for us, but it has never been as important a player as other countries have been. The lesson for me is, I look at my top-sending countries, and I push for diversification.

Sapp: When I got to Pomona eight years ago, we were pretty anchored in on China. We were making occasional, but not necessarily intentional, trips to other parts of Asia. We were exploring other parts of the world, mostly Europe, and so we changed that. We made that pivot to India, and to diversify the countries that we're traveling to. Before the pandemic, we had a fairly simple logic, which was that every two years a Pomona admissions officer would visit and recruit on all six continents, with diversification being one of our institutional goals. We know the educational benefits of diversity are real and tangible, and to expand that to global perspectives only made sense.

Fischer: What is the return on investment on such a broad recruitment focus?

Sapp: One of the benefits of working at an institution of higher education is that we've been around for a long time, and we probably will be — so the ROI has a long tail. We have a lot of things going for us. We're in California, we have strong financial-aid programs, we're fairly well known as a liberal-arts institution.

But as you mentioned, that can sometimes be a challenge in a global space when you're trying to talk about your kind of education. So we need time to develop relationships. I don't expect one trip to Australia to net us 100 applications.

Also, we who work in the international field — people change jobs. A counselor I might be working with at Sydney Grammar School a few years later might be at Antwerp International and then, a dozen years later, winds up at Pearson College, in Victoria [British Columbia]. That's a wonderful relationship you started years ago in Australia, but it's going to benefit you as that professional moves from schools in Europe to Canada.

So we think about ROI a little bit differently than just "Go here. Get this." The transactional nature of our relationship doesn't really serve our purposes in that way.

Fischer: Are there things you learned in the pandemic that have helped inform and shape, and perhaps even add to, your recruitment strategies?

Powell: During the pandemic everyone was forced to move into a virtual format, and that turned out to be something really good, and we continue to do it. We feel comfortable meeting students in the virtual space, and parents and students themselves feel more comfortable meeting us in that space because they're used to, and comfortable with, using technology to meet.

We can't travel everywhere, so it gives us great flexibility to meet students, and also parents. We have been using the platform a lot for parents because it gives us great flexibility. We can target specific countries in the evening, when parents are home.

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Fischer: I have to assume, though, that you didn't get some influx of new resources. You haven't gotten a ton of new staff. How are you balancing going back to in-person recruitment with doing the virtual outreach?

Powell: I work for undergrad admissions, but I collaborate closely with graduate admissions. We maximize our resources together. When we travel, we also represent the graduate school, and when they travel, they bring undergraduate brochures as well. Same thing goes with the intensive language program.

Summers: I don't think virtual is ever going away. It is certainly not my preference. I am good at building relationships, and I like building them. That's hard to do virtually.