

U.S. Colleges and Universities Remain Top Choice for International Students

The Open Doors® 2021 Report on International Educational Exchange reveals that international students studied at higher education institutions across all U.S. states and territories, welcoming more than 914,000 students for academic study during the 2020/21 academic year

WASHINGTON, D.C., November 15, 2021 — The [Open Doors® 2021 Report on International Educational Exchange](#), released today, underscores the continued commitment of students and scholars, U.S. higher education, governmental partners, and industry stakeholders to international educational exchange amid the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

The *Open Doors* 2021 report, released by the [U.S. Department of State's Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs](#) and the [Institute of International Education](#) (IIE), has been an important benchmark for international educational exchange to the U.S. for over 70 years. In the 2020/21 academic year, the *Open Doors* report included international students enrolled at U.S. higher education institutions in the United States and online from abroad, and those on Optional Practical Training (OPT).

In the 2020/21 academic year, 914,095 international students pursued studies at U.S. colleges and universities, a decrease of 15% from the previous academic year. These students represented 5% of all students in U.S. higher education and, according to the U.S. Department of Commerce, contributed \$39 billion to the U.S. economy in 2020.

U.S. remained open to international students during the COVID-19 pandemic

More than 710,000 international students enrolled at the undergraduate, graduate, and non-degree levels from more than 200 places of origin. In addition, more than 200,000 international students pursued OPT, a welcome opportunity for students to gain practical work experiences in the U.S. after academic study.

The COVID-19 global pandemic primarily impacted international students studying at a U.S. university for the first time, or new international students. This segment declined by 46%, in line with anticipated declines reported last November in the [Fall 2020 International Student Enrollment Snapshot](#). Despite challenges due to travel and enrollment, 145,528 international students were able to begin their studies in person or online in the United States or from abroad.

International students already enrolled at U.S. universities, or continuing students, largely remained committed to their U.S. education experience. The total number of continuing students at U.S. universities decreased by just 3%. "International students are central to the free flow of ideas, innovation, economic prosperity, and peaceful relations between nations," said Matthew Lussenhop, Acting Assistant Secretary for the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs, U.S. Department of State. "As reiterated in the recent Joint Statement of Principles in Support of International Education by the U.S. Departments of State and Education, the United States is strongly committed to international education as we continue to build back better."

Chinese, Indian students continue to seek an American education

Chinese and Indian students continued to pursue their education at U.S. institutions in large numbers. While both groups declined this year (by 14.8% and 13.2%, respectively), they did so by less than the overall rate, illustrating the strength and appeal a U.S. education holds in both countries. All places of origin and regions saw declines due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Canada, Latin America, and Sub-Saharan Africa saw relatively smaller declines, with potential ease of access to the U.S. during the pandemic and the ability to begin or continue programs virtually within a similar time zone as many U.S. institutions.

“U.S. colleges and universities remained open and welcoming in face of COVID-19 challenges and are well prepared for what’s ahead,” said IIE Chief Executive Officer, Allan E. Goodman. “The *Open Doors 2021* report gives us all a benchmark to gauge the progress we are making to recover from the COVID-19 pandemic.”

STEM fields remain a strong focus of international students

As in previous years, most international students (54%) pursued a major in a science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) field (engineering, math and computer science, physical and life sciences, health professions, or agriculture). Engineering continued to be the most popular major, with one in five (21%) international students pursuing it. Intensive English Programs (IEP) were most adversely affected by the COVID-19 pandemic as many were canceled or postponed. This contributed to the wider decrease (of 64%) in non-degree programs—primarily IEPs and J1 exchange programs, many of which were canceled in the 2020/21 academic year.

Study abroad is as important as ever

The COVID-19 global pandemic affected U.S. study abroad programs across the country, and to all global destinations, resulting in a 53% decline overall. In the 2019/20 academic year, 162,633 American students studied abroad for academic credit. Declines in U.S. study abroad programming occurred primarily during the 2020 spring and summer durations. Summer programs, which comprised 39% of all U.S. study abroad programming in 2018/19, decreased by 99% in 2019/20. During Spring 2020, 867 U.S. higher education institutions launched emergency efforts to return students to the United States, bringing a reported 55,000 students home from their studies early amid the COVID-19 pandemic. Due to these efforts, U.S. study abroad programs were able to pivot and offer alternative modes of study abroad. For example, 242 institutions reported offering online global learning experiences to over 10,400 students.

European countries remain the most popular destination for American students, welcoming more than half (58%) of total U.S. study abroad students. However, some of these countries were also the hardest hit by the COVID-19 pandemic in spring 2020. As a result, these programs saw declines of 41% to 53%. Americans studied in more than 180 countries and had a presence on every continent, including Antarctica. In addition to the 162,633 U.S. students who received academic credit for study abroad in 2019/20, 252 institutions reported that an additional 11,256 U.S. students participated in non-credit work, internships, volunteering, and research abroad.

"Our commitment to Americans studying abroad is a commitment to our collective future," said Ethan Rosenzweig, Deputy Assistant Secretary for Academic Programs, Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs, U.S. Department of State. "As study abroad slowly returns, we must recommit ourselves to ensuring that study abroad becomes ever more accessible to, and reflective of, the rich diversity of the United States."

U.S. Institutions Report International Student Surge for Fall 2021

Following a challenging year in international educational exchange, the findings of the *2021 Fall International Student Enrollment Snapshot* reflect the resilience of U.S. higher education institutions during the COVID-19 pandemic. Higher education institutions reported a 68% increase in the number of new international students enrolling for the first time at a U.S. institution, a notable surge from the 46% decline reported in Fall 2020. Overall, the total number of international students (enrolled and OPT) increased by 4% in Fall 2021, a rebound from the 15% decrease in Fall 2020. In addition, 99% of responding U.S. institutions reported that they are holding classes in-person or implementing a hybrid education model, demonstrating the ongoing commitment to return students to campus or offer options to study online. Over 860 U.S. higher education institutions participated in the *2021 Fall International Student Enrollment Snapshot*, an increase from the 710 institutions that participated in the previous year.

To learn more about *Open Doors*, visit opendoorsdata.org.

To learn more about IIE's Fall Snapshot Survey, visit: <https://www.iie.org/Research-and-Insights/Open-Doors/Fall-International-Enrollments-Snapshot-Reports>.

About *Open Doors*

Open Doors is a comprehensive information resource on international students studying at U.S. higher education institutions, and U.S. students studying abroad for academic credit. *Open Doors* also reports on the number of international scholars at U.S. universities and international students enrolled in pre-academic Intensive English Programs. Further details on the *Open Doors* 2021 findings are on the *Open Doors* website. For more data, infographics and resources visit opendoorsdata.org.

About the Institute of International Education

Established in 1919, IIE is a global not-for-profit that creates and implements international education programs, conducts research, and provides life-changing opportunities for students and scholars worldwide. IIE collaborates with a range of corporate, government, and foundation partners across the globe to design and manage scholarship, study abroad, workforce training, and leadership development programs. IIE has a network of 18 offices and affiliates worldwide and over 1,450 member institutions. Visit [iie.org](https://www.iie.org).

About the U.S. Department of State Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs

The Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs (ECA) builds relations between the people of the United States and the people of other countries through academic, cultural, sports, professional and private exchanges, as well as public-private partnerships and mentoring programs. These exchange programs improve foreign relations and strengthen the national security of the United States, support U.S. international leadership, and provide a broad range of domestic benefits by helping break down barriers that often divide us. ECA sponsors the flagship Fulbright Program, the Benjamin A. Gilman Scholarships for U.S. undergraduates with financial need, the Critical Language Scholarship Program in support of U.S. foreign language study abroad, and the [EducationUSA](#) network of over 430 advising centers worldwide, which provides information to students around the globe who wish to study in the United States. Visit eca.state.gov.

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