

## Chapter Two

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# Diverse Entry Points to Degree Studies in the United States

Mirka Martel

*Head of Research, Evaluation & Learning, Institute of International Education,  
New York, United States*

Julie Baer

*Research Specialist, Institute of International Education, New York, United States*

### **Abstract**

There are many entry points for more than one million international students at higher education institutions in the U.S. While international students may enroll directly in undergraduate or graduate programs or pursue study at community colleges, others take advantage of the many additional pipelines to higher education, including high school studies and intensive English programs. Drawing upon quantitative data from the *Open Doors Report on International Educational Exchange* and the Department of Homeland Security's Student Exchange Visitor Information System (SEVIS), this chapter explores the landscape of international students at U.S. colleges and universities and the possible origins of their academic journeys, as well as pathways to study for prospective students looking to learn in the U.S.

**Keywords:** International students, global student mobility, Open Doors, SEVIS, high schools, community colleges, intensive English programs, entry points

## **Introduction**

The expansion of global mobility in secondary and tertiary education has created new and diverse opportunities for students to consider an academic degree outside of their home country. Many students who otherwise would not have been able to pursue academic study overseas are now considering their options and related factors around the quality of education, cost, and pathways to the workforce or additional academic study. With a globally mobile student population of more than 6 million in 2021 (UNESCO, 2023), the United States remains the top destination for international students. In 2022-2023, the United States hosted more than one million international students at U.S. colleges and universities and an additional 51,272 students at U.S. secondary institutions.

As the Association of International Enrollment Management (AIRC, 2023) *indicated*, there are a number of entry points to include secondary schools, community colleges, four-year institutions of higher education, intensive English programs, short-term exchange programs, vocational programs, and virtual educational programs. As we move beyond the COVID-19 pandemic, as student mobility begins to rebound, there will continue to be increased global competition for international students. With 92% of U.S. higher education institutions citing the desire to expand international student enrollment over the next five years, understanding the unique and diverse profiles of international students participating in many of these entry points can help institutions better attract and recruit students as well as encourage future study beyond each entry point (Baer & Martel, 2023).

This chapter will discuss the diverse entry points for international students in the U.S. with a focus on those directly enrolling in undergraduate or graduate programs, high schools, and intensive English programs.

## **Academic Enrollment in the U.S. Higher Education Institutions**

The most well-known and significant pipeline for accessing the U.S. higher education system is direct enrollment at a college or university in an undergraduate, graduate, or non-degree program. The United States has nearly 4,000 degree-granting U.S. higher education institutions, the largest academic market in the world, meaning that prospective students have diverse options for where and what to study (U.S. Department of Education, 2022). As such, international students are often attracted to the United States due to the wide range of schools and programs, the high quality of the U.S. higher education system, the welcoming environment, and the support that many colleges and

universities offer for international students (Institute of International Education, 2015).

The data from the *Open Doors Report on International Educational Exchange* provide a robust understanding of the trends in international student enrollment over time and the current profile of students entering this pipeline. The IIE has published *Open Doors* data on international student enrollment since 1949 and has been supported in this research by the U.S. Department of State's Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs since 1972. This longitudinal study provides us with nearly 75 years of data and insights into the trends of international student enrollment in the U.S. higher education system. Through this data lens, we are able to understand the evolution of this main pathway for international academic study across multiple academic levels, institution types, and places of origin. Unless otherwise specified, the data in this chapter are from historical and current analyses of data from the *Open Doors Report on International Educational Exchange*.

Over the past 75 years, *Open Doors* has reported on how the number of overall international students grew from approximately 25,000 in 1948-1949 to more than 1 million in 2022-2023. Throughout most of this time, the number of international students has steadily grown, except for when external shocks caused slight downturns, such as the period following the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks and the COVID-19 pandemic. However, soon after each of these events, the number of international students quickly rebounded.

In the 2022-2023 academic year, U.S. colleges and universities hosted 1,057,188 international students from more than 210 places of origin around the world. Of the more than one million students, 858,395 international students directly enrolled in undergraduate, graduate, and non-degree programs, and 198,793 international students in Optional Practical Training (OPT).

To better understand the flows of international students directly enrolling at U.S. institutions and expanding enrollment in the future, *Open Doors* provides insights into both new enrollment and academic levels and places of origin.

### *New Enrollment*

New enrollment reflects international students studying at their U.S. higher education institution for the first time and is important because it shows the pipeline through which international students enter the U.S. tertiary system. *Open Doors* tracks new enrollments by academic level, enabling us to see flows of

students starting at the freshman or associate's levels in undergraduate education, as well as those starting their master's or doctorate.

The enrollment of new international students can be especially sensitive and often provides an indication of the future direction of overall international student mobility. For example, this was particularly true amid the COVID-19 pandemic from 2019-2020 to 2022-2023. As a result of worldwide closures and restrictions on travel, the new international student pipeline was significantly affected in the 2020-2021 academic year, resulting in a 46% decrease in new international students. Signs of improvement came just one year later, when new international student enrollment soared by 80% in 2021–22. New enrollments increased by an additional 14% to more than 298,000 new international students in 2022-2023, which exceeded pre-pandemic levels from 2019-2020 and nearly reached an all-time high. Should new enrollment continue to increase, it is likely that overall international student enrollment will once again surpass pre-pandemic numbers.

### *Academic Levels and Places of Origin*

As institutions work to expand their international student enrollment, it is important to understand what types of students are pursuing this pathway of direct enrollment. As of 2022-2023, two notable trends from the *Open Doors* data were increases in graduate-level studies and emerging places of origin.

For most of the past forty years, more undergraduates than graduate students have pursued study in the U.S. However, beginning in 2021-2022, the number of graduate students surpassed the number of undergraduate students for the first time in a decade. By 2022-2023, there were nearly 120,000 more graduate students (467,027) than undergraduates (347,602) studying at U.S. institutions.

An increase in the number of graduate students in 2022-2023 was noted across nearly all of the top 25 places of origin. The growth in Indian graduate students was particularly notable; they grew by 63% to 165,936 and surpassed China in 2022-2023. China remained the second leading place of origin at the graduate level, with 126,028 students. While these top two places of origin comprise a majority of the graduate study body (63%), there was also strong growth of more than twenty% among many emerging markets, including Nigeria (+33%), Bangladesh (+23%), Nepal (+21%), Pakistan (+25%), Ghana (+39%), and Indonesia (+22%).

Over the past decade, there has been a significant amount of fluctuation in the undergraduate pipeline. In 2012-2013, there were 339,993 international

undergraduate students, which rapidly expanded to reach a high of 442,746 in 2017-2018. Since then, the number of international undergraduate students has fallen to 347,602 by 2022-2023.

Several factors contributed to this period of growth and decline. The significant increase in the number of undergraduates was primarily driven by the swift influx of undergraduates from China, which grew from 93,789 to 148,593. Another contributing factor was the rise of large, government-funded scholarship programs, such as the Saudi Arabian government's scholarship program, now known as the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques' External Scholarship Program (Ministry of Education – Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2023). This scholarship provided opportunities for students to begin studying in intensive English programs and then transition to undergraduate and graduate studies.

Since then, there have been changes in the eligibility of governmental scholarship programs, leading to smaller cohorts coming to the U.S. For example, 27,646 undergraduates were studying in the U.S. from Saudi Arabia in 2017-2018, and 7,507 were studying in 2022-2023. Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic significantly impacted undergraduate student mobility flows from China due to travel restrictions and expanded access to undergraduate programs at home, which decreased from more than 148,593 to approximately 100,349 over the same period of 2017-2018 to 2022-2023.

While there have been significant declines at the undergraduate level since 2017-2018, there are promising signs for the future. The number of international undergraduate students increased in 2022-2023, and the *Fall 2023 Snapshot Report on International Student Enrollment* indicates that this number will continue to grow in 2023-2024 (Baer & Martel, 2023). In addition, historical data indicate that the U.S. has the capacity to host more international students at the undergraduate level, given that five years ago, 100,000 more students were enrolled than currently enrolled at U.S. colleges and universities.

### *International Students at Community Colleges*

The number of undergraduate students included is the level of international students enrolling in community colleges, which is another important pathway for entering U.S. higher education. With more than 1,000 community colleges across the United States, these inclusive institutions support workforce and skill development and can provide coursework for students proceeding to a four-year institution (American Association of Community Colleges, 2023). There are numerous benefits that community colleges can provide to international

students. Many students can use community colleges as an affordable way to begin their studies in the U.S. before transferring to a four-year institution. Furthermore, many community colleges have articulation agreements with four-year colleges and universities that allow students to transfer after two years. Given the “community” focus of community colleges, many institutions also endeavor to work closely with advising and helping students succeed on campus and can provide a positive entry point for understanding the U.S.

To understand international student mobility trends at community colleges, our analysis focused on associate degree granting colleges, as defined by the Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education (2023). Associate’s colleges are traditionally two-year institutions that confer an associate degree as the highest degree level offered. In addition to two-year colleges, institutions classified as baccalaureate/associate’s colleges are also included under the umbrella of community colleges, as they predominantly offer associate degrees.

Over the past 50 years, the number of international students at community colleges has grown from just over 15,000, first reported in 1971. Since then, the number of international students at community colleges has often fluctuated, with data showcasing periods of both growth and decline. The number of students at community colleges reached a high of 96,472 in 2016-2017 and declined over the past five years until 2021-2022. The first declines were due to a downturn in the number of new enrollments until 2019-2020. Like many of the other student mobility pathways discussed in this chapter, the COVID-19 pandemic significantly impacted the number of international students at community colleges. In 2019–2020, the total number of international students fell by 24%, from 79,187 to 60,170. Even as other U.S. institutional types began to rebound in 2021-2022, the number of international students at community colleges continued to decline, falling to 49,099 students. Positively, as of the 2022-2023 academic year, the number of students at community colleges had increased for the first time since 2016-2017, growing by 7% to 52,622.

To better understand this pathway, it is important to understand the profile of the students who have chosen to pursue enrollment at community colleges. The leading places of origin for international students at community colleges in 2022-2023 were China, Vietnam, Japan, South Korea, and Brazil. This number varies from that of the international undergraduate student population, where the top places of origin were China, India, South Korea, Vietnam, and Canada. While the undergraduate statistics show that students from China and India composed 38% of the total international student population, the top two places of origin of international students at community colleges, China and Vietnam,

comprise only 16% of the total international student population. This indicates the unique draw community colleges have among students from a wide range of places of origin. Furthermore, students from Vietnam, Japan, Brazil, Nepal, Mexico, Colombia, and Nigeria composed a greater proportion of international students at community colleges than in the undergraduate statistics.

As international students look to the future, community colleges offer an excellent option for students worldwide. However, as we think about community colleges as a pipeline, there are unique challenges that many community colleges face in recruiting international students. Mason (2022) notes that many community colleges may not have mandates from leadership, recruitment budgets, or internationalization strategies and that there may be challenges in helping international students understand how the community college system in the U.S. works. This has led community colleges to focus on creatively leveraging alums, relatives, and heritage ties to attract students. Furthermore, with many community colleges being known pathways to four-year institutions, there are opportunities to leverage joint recruitment opportunities. Many four-year institutions also view community colleges as important pipelines for their schools, with recent research highlighting that more than a quarter of institutions are recruiting international students from community colleges (Martel & Baer, 2022).

We see from the history of data collection that after each decline, the numbers have returned stronger than ever at community colleges. We also know that the current number of international students at community colleges has room for growth, given historical data showing that five years ago, there were nearly 100,000 students at community colleges. As we look to the future, this approach remains a promising pipeline because international students seek affordable opportunities to pursue higher education in the U.S.

While direct enrollment remains a robust and popular pathway with much support, diversifying approaches to student recruitment can increase this student pipeline. As such, institutions need to expand their recruitment approach beyond direct enrollment at two- and four-year institutions to consider the many diverse entry points to university study, particularly at the undergraduate level.

### **International High School Students**

Each year, a significant proportion of international students enter the U.S. well before they reach university or college experience and choose to begin their education abroad in U.S. high schools. Programs for international students

in high schools offer an important entry point for learning about the U.S. education system, learning more about life in the U.S., usually with a host family or stay, and gaining the necessary U.S.-based credentials for university applications. Analyses of international students at U.S. high schools provide important insights into the trends in secondary schools and the choices these students make in continuing to study in U.S. universities (Mason & Andrejko, 2022; Farrugia, 2017). International high school students enter the U.S. on F-1 or J-1 visas and different types of academic exchange. Our trend analysis analyzes aggregate visa data from the U.S. Department of Homeland Security Student and Exchange Visitor Information System (SEVIS). Students with an F-1 visa are nonimmigrants who come to the U.S. to “pursue a full course of academic study in SEVP-approved schools” (U.S. Department of Homeland Security, 2023). Students on a J-1 visa also come to study at an accredited secondary school; however, these stays are usually shorter, such as a semester. Both types of students can live with an American host family or at an accredited boarding school.

In the fall of 2022, 51,272 students were enrolled as degree-seeking or exchange students at U.S. secondary schools. Of these, 31,806 were on an F-1 visa, and 19,466 were on a J-1 visa. Over time, the majority of students have enrolled in an F-1 visa, and in 2022, F-students accounted for 62% of the full total. The COVID-19 pandemic affected international student high school enrollment gravely, and data from 2021 and 2022 signals a return. Interestingly, the J-1 student numbers rebounded more quickly than did the F-1 student numbers, possibly because these exchanges were shorter in duration.

Trends before and after the pandemic also signal the realities of international student mobility from Asia. Prior to the pandemic, in 2018, Asian students made up 75% of all international secondary students. A large portion of these students were from China, many of whom had the opportunity to start their U.S. education at a high school. In fall 2022, students from Asia made up only half, or 50%, of all secondary students. Conversely, the proportion of students from Europe increased from 10% in 2018 to 23% in 2022. This could be affected by continued travel restrictions in China and other countries through 2022; thus, a much more risk-averse student and parent population are less willing to enroll underage students in high schools. Since many students also stay with other families or in a boarding school, considerations around COVID-19 protocols were also prudent. For example, more than 90% of F-1 students were enrolled in private high schools.

Finally, the places of origin of high school students are also diverse and show varying trends. The F-1 students enrolled in the fall of 2022 were primarily



from China (27%), followed by South Korea (8%) and Spain (6%). The total number of students from China has decreased from a high of 33,275 in 2018 to 8,626 in 2022. Again, with the easing of restrictions, these markets may open up further in the coming years. Students on a J-1 visa were predominantly from Europe, including Spain (20%), Germany (19%), and Italy (14%). The short-term exchange market is more popular for European students, who look to come to the U.S. for a semester or academic year program rather than pursuing their full high school degree abroad.

### **Intensive English Programs**

Intensive English Programs (IEP) have historically been one of the first touchpoints for many international students coming to the U.S. to pursue higher education. Intensive English programs are educational programs that serve non-native English-speaking international students at varying levels of English proficiency with instruction in grammar, reading, writing, and speaking (Reese & Helms, 2018). Reese and Helms also note that these programs focus on English for high-level daily communication and academic study; often require a minimum of 18 hours of coursework per week; and are principally non-credit-bearing courses. IEPs also serve diverse cohorts of students and may be working with many different types of students, including juniors under the age of 18 who may also be touring the United States, college-age students who need to improve their English before being admitted to a college or university, English teachers in other countries improving their proficiency before teaching English to students in their home country, or business professionals expanding their English language skills to work with U.S. companies.

IIE has been conducting an annual survey through *Open Doors* to learn more about IEP participation since 1978, and this commitment to collecting comprehensive nationwide data on the IEP industry continues today. The survey collects information both on IEPs affiliated with U.S. colleges and universities and independent providers during the full calendar year, which allows us to provide a more robust understanding of this market than the data collected in the International Student Census. The addition of this survey was to better understand how many students pursue this pathway, given how IEPs can be an important option for students who need additional English language training before pursuing further academic study. Indeed, 44% of students attending college and university-affiliated IEPs in 2022 planned to pursue additional studies in the U.S.

When *Open Doors* first began collecting data on IEP enrollment, approximately 23,000 international students participated in these programs in the late 1970s. Through our data collection over the past forty years, we learned that IEPs have traditionally experienced significant fluctuations in growth and decline. This is likely due to the nature of IEP programs versus international students in full degree programs. International undergraduate and graduate students are often committed to multi-year programs and less susceptible than shorter-term IEP programs to market disruptions, changes in scholarship programs, or health crises, such as the recent COVID-19 pandemic. Conversely, IEPs can often be quick to rebound and adapt to the shifting market and often indicate the trajectory of the overall international student enrollment market.

To showcase this, we can look at the trends in IEP enrollment over the past decade. Most recently, there was a significant period of growth, beginning from when IEPs hosted approximately 50,000 students in 2010 and continuing to host more than 133,335 international students in 2015. This growth was driven principally by international students participating in the Saudi Arabian government scholarship program. However, changes to this program led to a dramatic decline in the number of IEP students, which was further exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic when enrollment numbers fell to 37,000 students. However, IEPs quickly rebounded in 2022 when enrollment numbers increased by 63%, with 64,106 international students studying at IEPs throughout the U.S. While IEP enrollments remain below the peak level recorded, they continue to be higher than the level of enrollment recorded before the Saudi Arabian government scholarship program.

To understand the profile of where students at IEPs come from, it is important to look at this information by the types of IEPs they attend, which include IEPs that are affiliated with higher education institutions and those that are independent providers of English language training. For programs affiliated with colleges and universities, we see a much stronger representation of international students from Asia, including both China and Japan, but also South Korea and Taiwan. Additionally, robust numbers from Latin America and the Caribbean, including Mexico, Colombia, and Brazil, have been reported. These trends more closely mirror the overall trends noted earlier regarding the overall undergraduate population. Interestingly, approximately 44% of students in programs affiliated with higher education institutions plan to continue further academic study in the U.S. at either undergraduate or graduate programs.

The profile of students for programs that are not affiliated with higher education institutions differs significantly. These programs draw much more international

students from European places of origin, with seven of the top ten places of origin being in Europe, including Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, Poland, Spain, and Switzerland. Independent providers of intensive English tend to have students who come for shorter-term durations, and many are only here for their English language learning experience, as only 9% intend to pursue further academic study. While these students may not be moving directly into higher education programs, U.S. colleges and universities should still consider connecting with these independent providers, as the individuals participating in these programs have developed English language proficiency and knowledge of the U.S. cultural context and could constitute a good group of prospective students for future study in the U.S.

In recent years, several factors have affected the pipeline of students pursuing IEPs, including increasing global competition, growing capacity for English training in a student's home country, and the advent of ed-tech tools that facilitate language training. However, IEPs continue to provide an opportunity for students who need additional language skills to become proficient while also offering robust support services. As IEPs can often scale nimbly to meet student demand, this is another pipeline for individuals interested in increasing their English language proficiency.

## Conclusion

With approximately 4,000 higher education institutions, more than 2,000 high schools with exchange students, and more than 700 intensive English programs, the U.S. offers many entry points to educational opportunities for international students. As such, the U.S. has the capacity to provide the right educational opportunity to meet the needs of many prospective international students, whether they are coming for short-term exchange, English language training, or full degrees. For practitioners focused on recruiting international students for the future, it is important to think about how each of these options can meet the needs of international students and how they may build off each other. Each of these are known entry points to the U.S. educational system and can often lead to future study; future research could build upon the known data from the *Open Doors* IEP Survey, which captures how many students intend to pursue further academic study. This approach would allow us to better understand how many high school, community college, exchange, or online students continue on to higher education opportunities in the U.S. While future research can inform the field, the data from *Open Doors* and SEVIS provide a robust understanding of more than 1.1 million students pursuing these options across the United States in 2022-2023. As more students pursue education outside of their home countries

in today's interconnected world, the U.S. can leverage these many entry points to remain the leading destination globally for educational exchange and build upon our long legacy of welcoming diverse international students from around the world.

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## Bios

**Mirka Martel** is IIE's Head of Research, Evaluation & Learning (REL) and a recognized researcher and author on international education issues spanning global academic mobility, international leadership and scholarship, and impact and evaluation. Her academic and professional focus is on advancing the role of research and evaluation in international education, using data for impact and storytelling, and leveraging insights to inform programs and policy. Dr. Martel holds a Doctor of Philosophy in International and Comparative Education from Teachers College, Columbia University, and Masters in Philosophy and International Affairs from Columbia University. E-mail: [mmartel@iie.org](mailto:mmartel@iie.org)

**Julie Baer** is a Research and Learning Lead on IIE's Research, Evaluation, and Learning Team, who serves as an expert on trends in international education mobility. Baer's nearly ten years of experience includes working with diverse stakeholders to coordinate research, providing programmatic insights, and engaging with external clients, such as the U.S. Department of State. She leads the *Open Doors Report on International Educational Exchange*, a comprehensive resource on international students and scholars in the United States and American students studying abroad for academic credit. E-mail: [JBaer@iie.org](mailto:JBaer@iie.org)

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