

Chinese Students Halt Plans to Study in the United States

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The United States has seen a dramatic rise in the number of Chinese students studying on its campuses over the past ten years. Approximately 370,000 Chinese students studied in the United States in the 2018–2019 academic year, accounting for a third of all international students in the country, according to the Institute of International Education (IIE). They contributed nearly \$15 billion dollars into the US economy in 2018, according to the Department of Commerce, and created thousands of jobs. But this may soon take an unexpected turn.

In a June study of ChinalCAC, the China Institute of College Admission Counseling, 36 percent of Chinese high school students responded saying that they had foregone their plans of studying in the United States completely. Among their many concerns, 85 percent pinpointed their primary concern to the potential health risks of being in the United States. Nearly half of them also cited uncertain visa policies and anti-Asian racism as their main concerns.

On May 29, President Trump signed a proclamation barring Chinese graduate students and researchers who have ties with the People's Liberation Army from entering the United States, citing fears of intellectual property and technology theft. As of September 8, 2020, the State Department has revoked more than 1,000 visas of Chinese nationals who were found to be ineligible for a visa, based on the proclamation. These moves have worsened fears among Chinese students that they would face tougher visa scrutiny should they choose to major in a STEM field, potentially upending years of preparation to study in the United States. As Sino-US relations continue on a deep, downward spiral, concerns about more hostile policies against Chinese students and using them as political pawns further unsettle Chinese families.

Then, there is the raging pandemic across the United States and surging anti-Asian racist attacks, verbal and physical, fanned by the country's very own president who repeatedly calls COVID-19 the "China Virus." These are deeply disturbing factors for Chinese parents when they weigh the pros and cons of sending their children, many of whom were born under the one-child policy, halfway across the globe for school.

Abstract

The United States has seen a dramatic rise in the number of Chinese students studying on its campuses over the past ten years. However, the ravaging pandemic across the United States, hostile visa policies toward Chinese students, and the constant xenophobic rhetoric of the Trump administration may soon reverse this trend significantly. The interest in an American education among Chinese families is still there, but impacts may be long lasting.

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Rock Bottom? Not Yet.

“Winter is coming,” said Frances Zhang, dean of college counseling at WLSA Shanghai Academy, commenting on potential implications of the current trend to US colleges’ recruitment of Chinese students. “There will be a delayed impact to the number of Chinese students applying to US colleges. The real decline will manifest itself in two to three years when current 9th and 10th graders enter the college process,” she added.

Recent data shows a 20 percent increase in the number of *zhongkao* (high school entrance exam) students in Beijing compared to 2019, and a 15 percent increase in Shanghai. However, many international programs at both public and private high schools across the country have reportedly failed to meet their enrollment targets far past the traditional recruitment season.

At the recent Amherst, Williams, and Yale seminar with Chinese high school principals, the principal of a prestigious public high school in Xi’an, a metropolis in western China’s Shaanxi Province, lamented that their international program only managed to meet 40 percent of its enrollment goal. To retain those already enrolled, the school had to add additional *gaokao* courses to the curriculum, so students would still be qualified for Chinese university admissions, an unprecedented move for the school. Parents had threatened to pull their children out if otherwise.

A recent [white paper](#) published in China shows that the United Kingdom has surpassed the United States for the first time as the primary overseas destination for Chinese students. However, even for schools that offer an exclusive A-Level curriculum and send most of their graduates to the United Kingdom, widespread declines in enrollments are also common. A branch campus of a selective English independent school in southern China’s Jiangsu Province saw a 50 percent drop in its high school enrollment this year.

Does the United States Still Welcome International Students?

One of the underlying concerns of Chinese families is that the United States as a whole is no longer a welcoming place for them. Political and cultural differences may be in play here, as many Chinese families associate the Trump administration’s xenophobic rhetoric with public opinion, including higher education institutions.

[The recent lawsuit](#) against the new rule of the US Immigration and Customs Enforcement barring international students from taking only online classes in the United States, championed by Harvard and MIT, showed Chinese families that the US government did not have full control over higher education institutions’ attitude toward international students. The lawsuit itself and the subsequent victory were in stark contrast to what their system allows.

Additionally, widespread misinformation on Chinese social media, including on WeChat and Weibo, around college admissions and the future of Sino-US relations, has generated anxieties among Chinese families about the wisdom of selecting the United States as a study destination. “We hope that there’s more direct communication between US colleges and Chinese families. So our families know that US colleges still welcome them, and that they are not easily agitated by misleading information on the Chinese web,” said the principal of one of the most prestigious public high schools in Beijing, at the recent principals’ seminar.

A Future Outlook

One thing is for sure, Chinese families still see value in sending their children to study in the United States for the many beacon-like ideals and opportunities that US higher education embodies and provides. Although the impact of the current political and health crises seems dire and will undoubtedly be long lasting, the wish of Chinese families to provide their children with the best education possible is not going to change.

That said, recruiting Chinese students in the next couple of years may present more challenges than ever before. How well the United States puts the pandemic under control is key to rebuilding their confidence to enter in the country. In the absence of national leadership to control the spread of the virus and embrace talent from abroad, higher education may need to take on more of the work. Families will not care about how many resources we provide, until they know how much we care about the wellbeing of their children, especially during a global pandemic. As the first point of contact, admission

officers have a critical role in voicing our welcoming stance and our commitment to support international students directly, to avoid filtered information and to clear any doubts and misconceptions about studying in the United States—so that Chinese students will not only want to come to the United States again, which I believe they will, but thrive on our campuses and beyond with dignity and support. ▲

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