



US Instability: Challenges for Inbound Student and Faculty Mobility

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Abstract

The United States is seen by many around the world as a significantly unstable society with an uncertain future. Trumpism, safety concerns, racism, and politicization of US higher education are the main concerns. This perception, based largely on reality, has, and will continue to have, implications for US higher education attractiveness and relations with the rest of the world.

At the 2022 NAFSA–Association of International Educators conference in San Diego, there was much discussion about global instability and what this means for international higher education. Clearly, geopolitical tensions, the diminished but by no means ended implications of COVID-19, the climate crisis, and, most recently, global inflation and related economic challenges, all weigh heavily on student and scholar mobility and on broader aspects of internationalization. But one aspect that did not seem to get much attention from the largely US audience was the key challenge of the instability of the United States in a more diverse and competitive global higher education environment.

The fact is that the United States is seen by many around the world as a significantly unstable society with an uncertain future. This perception, based largely on reality, has, and will continue to have, implications for US higher education attractiveness and relations with the rest of the world.

It is worth examining the nature and possible implications of this instability. The argument here is not that US higher education is collapsing, or that the United States will not continue to attract the world's largest international student population in absolute numbers, or that it will not continue to be an attractive environment for postdocs or international faculty—but rather, that there are, and will be, significant headwinds and a decreasing relevance and market share. It is worth examining the largely ignored, but serious challenges that are increasingly evident to students and academics outside the United States.

The Past and Perhaps Future of Trumpism

The direct impact of the Trump administration and the ideas and practices that underlie it have been influential, and are by now part of the way that US higher education and society are perceived around the world.

The overall nationalistic and populist ideology that characterized the Trump years and continues to have a significant influence on a large segment of the American population, in particular the Republican Party, also plays a role. Many in the United States and around the world are concerned about a second Trump presidential term—or about someone like him getting elected as president, although the results of the midterm elections show a positive sign in the opposite direction. The recent highly conservative decisions of the Supreme Court, outlawing abortion and expanding the use of guns, and the controversy surrounding these decisions, have also received much negative coverage outside the United States. All of these trends are especially evident in “red” (conservative) states, and universities in those states may be negatively affected. It is in those states that the public higher education sector is already facing severe budget cuts and lower local and international student numbers. The private, not-for-profit higher education sector is less known for its international reputation and quality in red states than in “blue” (Democratic) ones.

Is the United States Safe?

Mass shootings (some 300 in 2022) and other gun violence, and steady media reports of crime are on the minds of students and families as they think about options on where to study. It becomes particularly relevant when international students fall victim to gun violence.

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The tide of racial tensions and incidents of racial hate, stimulated in part by Trumpism, cause potential international students and staff to question whether they will be welcome in the United States. Violence against Blacks and Asians, including, but by no means limited to, the senseless shooting of six Asian women in Atlanta, is widely reported—and of special relevance to the preponderance of students coming from East Asia, still the largest region sending students and academics to the country.

The Politicization of Higher Education

This phenomenon will affect graduate students, postdocs, and prospective international faculty hires rather than undergraduates. A steady stream of stories about state government interference in university affairs, including forbidding teaching about critical race theory in a number of “red” states, debates about “wokeism” and “cancel culture,” and other political issues may deter some graduate students and professionals, in particular those who want to escape from authoritarian regimes and a lack of academic freedom in their own countries (for instance, Russian students and faculty after the invasion of Ukraine and related academic restrictions in Russia).

The “China Problem”

Chinese students have long seen the United States as a primary study destination. Their overall enrollment increased fivefold between 2000–2001 and 2021–2022. However, geopolitical tensions between the United States and China in recent years, during which Chinese students and researchers have repeatedly been used as “political pawns,” have turned the United States into an unwelcoming study and work destination. The surge of anti-Asian hatred toward Asian American and Pacific Islanders (AAPI) communities and rampant gun violence have intensified the concerns of Chinese families. The 15 percent drop in Chinese student enrollment during the pandemic was a clear signal that interest in the United States among Chinese students significantly declined. Mobility data for 2022 show a further decline. The perception of Chinese students that they are viewed simply as “cash cows” does not help US higher education institutions to create an inclusive environment. On the one hand, Chinese families still see the United States as a sought-after destination for their children’s college education; on the other, they are increasingly wary about sending their children to a country where they may be in harm’s way. A direct result of this dilemma is the recent trend of Chinese students applying to colleges in multiple countries instead of primarily the United States. This directly threatens the future mobility of Chinese students to US colleges, potentially weakening the strength of innovation and global competitiveness of US higher education.

Other Concerns

Difficulties obtaining visas (greatly exacerbated by the COVID-19 crisis) also enter into the thinking of potential students and scholars. Recent research notes that the United States is among the main receiving countries with the longest delays in issuing visas for international students and researchers. High inflation in the United States is not helping either. High tuition fees were already a barrier, but increasing costs of living will become even more of a challenge for international students. And while Europe, China, and Russia are looking at Africa as a new source of international students and faculty, the United States is rather absent in that region.

Conclusion

Several of the challenges and concerns mentioned here (racism, rising costs, geopolitical tensions with China, politicization) also apply to other leading countries, in particular the United Kingdom and Australia, but that is not an excuse for the United States to ignore them. It will remain the country with the largest number of highly ranked universities, an overall effective higher education system serving many different constituencies, and a sophisticated, productive, and reasonably well-funded research system. But the instability and challenges discussed above are accelerating the United States’ decline as the undisputed global academic leader. ▲

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