

## “The Trump Effect:” How Does it Impact International Student Enrollment in U.S. Colleges?

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### Abstract

Since Donald Trump took the office of President of the United States in 2017, international student enrollments have declined at U.S. colleges due to the “Trump Effect.” Anti-immigration rhetoric, personal safety threats, legal stress, and shifting requirements for both students and colleges means potential losses of billions of dollars in revenue and fewer degrees awarded by U.S. colleges. The loss of revenue aside, less diverse student bodies, fewer visiting scholars, and less international travel caused ripple effects throughout the global higher education landscape. This literature review explores the Trump effect, alternative explanations to the Trump effect, and suggests future research directions.

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## **“The Trump Effect:” How Does it Impact International Student Enrollment in U.S. Colleges?**

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*Since Donald Trump took the office of President of the United States in 2017, international student enrollments have declined at U.S. colleges due to the “Trump Effect.” Anti-immigration rhetoric, personal safety threats, legal stress, and shifting requirements for both students and colleges means potential losses of billions of dollars in revenue and fewer degrees awarded by U.S. colleges. The loss of revenue aside, less diverse student bodies, fewer visiting scholars, and less international travel caused ripple effects throughout the global higher education landscape. This literature review explores the Trump effect, alternative explanations to the Trump effect, and suggests future research directions.*

**Keywords:** Trump | higher education | college enrollment | international students | internationalization

### **Introduction**

Internationalization has been a growing part of higher education law for decades as more students travel to and from the United States to study every year (Lee, 2010). As security restrictions continue to increase due to political pressure domestically and abroad, students, faculty, and colleges must navigate legal regulations ranging from the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act of 1974 to residency and visa issues that have increased dramatically since President Trump took office (Altbach & de Wit, 2017). International students studying in the United States must navigate changing travel restrictions imposed by the Trump administration and increasing border security in the name of immigration reform, the war on terror, and public health, while colleges struggle to keep pace with these changes (Brajkovic & Matross Helms, 2018).

Although international enrollments were trending downward when Trump took office, policies and rhetoric from the election campaign and his first months in office exacerbated the issue. In the 2017-2018 academic year, new international student enrollment in U.S. colleges decreased by 6.6% from the prior year and decreased 0.9% in the 2018-2019 academic year (Institute of International Education [IIE], 2019). Also, college campuses have increased staffing to support students and establish pathways for educating staff on the fluid rules and regulations (Lee, 2010). This additional administrative burden resulted in a growing need for higher education law assistance with internationalization efforts (Lee, 2010). In this manuscript, we will examine the short-term and potential long-term impacts the Trump administration (i.e., “the

Trump Effect”; Patel, 2018, para. 2) may have on the higher education landscape based on the current state of sanctions, travel restrictions, and anti-immigration rhetoric. We will also discuss the resulting legal challenges for international students and colleges, alternative explanations to the Trump effect, and future research directions to consider.

## Literature Review

### Internationalization

The American Council on Education (ACE, 2019) defined internationalization as "a strategic, coordinated process that seeks to align and integrate policies, programs, and initiatives to position colleges and universities as more globally oriented and internationally connected institutions" (para. 1). In 2010, ACE established the Center for Internationalization and Global Engagement (CIGE) to assist in the advancement of internationalization and interact with the global higher education community (ACE, 2019).

CIGE developed a model for comprehensive internationalization, which includes six pillars: (a) articulated institutional commitment; (b) administrative leadership, structure, and staffing; (c) curriculum, co-curriculum, and learning outcomes; (d) faculty policies and practices; (e) student mobility; and (f) collaboration and partnerships (ACE, 2019). This model is the basis for all of ACE's internationalization efforts and focuses on developing, implementing, and assessing international activities (ACE, 2019).

A key research project that ACE's CIGE undertakes every five years is the *Mapping Internationalization on U.S. Campuses*, which assesses the current state of internationalization on college campuses across the United States, reviews progress, and recommends future priorities (Brajkovic & Matross Helms, 2018). The most current survey was published in 2017 and included data from 2012-2016 (ACE, 2017). Overall, the survey found increased institutional support for internationalization from 2012 to 2016 (i.e., administrative systems, staffing, financial assets; Brajkovic & Matross Helms, 2018). Two-year institutions made considerable advancements in multiple areas, including articulated institutional commitment, administrative leadership, structure, and staffing, while doctoral institutions appeared to stagnate in specific areas of faculty policies and practices and collaboration and partnerships (Brajkovic & Matross Helms, 2018). In general, student mobility, defined as education abroad programs and international student recruitment and support, and international partnerships were the focus of internationalization efforts for most U.S. campuses (Brajkovic & Matross Helms, 2018). In contrast, on-campus internationalization did not appear as vital; curriculum, co-curriculum, and faculty professional development ranked at the bottom of campus internationalization efforts according to the *Mapping Internationalization on U.S. Campuses* study (Brajkovic & Matross Helms, 2018). Brajkovic and Matross Helms (2018) argued that, being the two center pillars of the CIGE model for comprehensive internationalization, “Their position is indicative of their importance; attention to these areas is critical in order for internationalization to fully take hold throughout colleges and universities, rather than remaining a peripheral activity” (p. 12). It is important to note that this most recent survey closed in December 2016, after the election of President Donald Trump, but before his inauguration (Brajkovic & Matross Helms, 2018).

Since taking office, President Trump has issued several executive orders, most notably Executive Order No. 13769 (2017), known as the Muslim ban, which prevented entry into the

United States by individuals from Muslim-majority countries. In addition to the executive orders, President Trump’s foreign policy and immigration policies may significantly impact student mobility, which is the upmost priority for U.S. colleges as noted in the data (Brajkovic & Matross Helms, 2018). Preventing international students and their families from entering the United States created chaos while further damaging the relationship with foreign scholars.

### “The Trump Effect”

Despite colleges' increased commitment to internationalization, policy effects have hampered these efforts in the past several years. While prior administrations have contributed to the current climate, the Trump administration has exacerbated the issue (Wise, 2020). Due to the anti-immigration rhetoric and decreased mobility of international students and scholars (*Aziz v. Trump*, 2017; Patel, 2018), the Trump administration's impact on the college landscape is significant (i.e., “the Trump Effect”; Patel, 2018, para. 2).

### *Anti-Immigration Rhetoric*

Closed borders and anti-immigration rhetoric define the United States under President Trump in international students' eyes, specifically those from Arab-speaking countries who just four years ago were coming to the United States in record numbers (Patel, 2018). Recently, the perceived lack of safety and security while studying within the United States led to an enrollment drop of 15.5% from Saudi Arabia alone (Patel, 2018). The reason cited by one in three international students no longer interested in studying in the United States was the political climate and the Trump administration (Patel, 2018). These numbers only tell the story of new international students, not of those already in the United States seeking higher education. Many international students have remained in the United States after completing their degree, taking advantage of the Optional Practical Training program that allows them to stay up to three years after graduation (Redden, 2018b). This Obama-era program provides opportunities to work while remaining on a student visa. However, it means the actual number of international students in the United States is difficult to ascertain with these graduates still in the pipeline (Redden, 2018b). The coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic provided the Trump administration with additional avenues to affect the lives of international students. The federal government chose not to extend student visas for international students taking online-only courses beyond the spring of 2020 (Rosenberg, 2020). While this legislation was eventually withdrawn, this move “extends the pattern of this administration of treating the pandemic not as a public-health emergency but as an opportunity to advance policy objectives” (Rosenberg, 2020, para. 6).

As closed border threats and anti-immigration rhetoric have increased in the United States, other countries have taken the opposite approach. Canada, China, and India have all enacted policies to attract more international students, with Canada providing the opportunity for citizenship to foreign-born graduates (Brajkovic & Matross Helms, 2018). Considering international students account for more than \$32 billion in annual revenue to the United States, the potential windfall to these countries' economies is a worthy investment (Altbach & de Wit, 2017).

### ***Mobility***

President Trump's travel ban (Exec. Order No. 13769, 2017) brought consequences for international students intending to study in the United States and those already studying at U.S. colleges. With the Supreme Court overturning the lower court in *Trump v. Hawaii* (2018), immediate travel restrictions prevented students from Muslim-majority countries from entering the United States. For students already studying in the United States., this meant that leaving to visit family in their home countries would result in being unable to return to their academic institutions (Redden, 2018a). *Aziz v. Trump* (2017) presented this issue during the original travel ban in 2017, wherein the Commonwealth of Virginia produced evidence of travel disruptions for more than 350 international students at colleges within the state. The lack of mobility impacted students, faculty, and university business by preventing family visits, conferences, medical student residency placement, enrollments, and visiting professorships (*Aziz v. Trump*, 2017). Furthermore, the Commonwealth of Virginia was able to outline the financial impact to the colleges through lost tuition and fees but stopped short of outlining the loss of grants, contracts, or future research endeavors (*Aziz v. Trump*, 2017).

Where *Aziz* (*Aziz v. Trump*, 2017) outlined broad impacts resulting from the travel ban, the *Sarsour v. Trump* (2017) case broke down as a result of using a predominantly religious freedom argument that failed to pass numerous tests, including the Lemon test, to withstand an Establishment Clause challenge of the First Amendment of the Constitution. Per *Lemon v. Kurtzman* (1971), the Lemon test considers a law constitutional if it meets three criteria: (a) has a legitimate secular purpose, (b) the primary effect is not advancing or inhibiting religion, and (c) does not result in excessive entanglement of government and religion. Because the complaint was deemed speculative and the plaintiff could not prove the necessity of immediate relief in the public interest, the court considered the case not likely to succeed. As a result, Judge Trenga ruled in favor of President Trump (*Sarsour v. Trump*, 2017). Ultimately, the Supreme Court's decision in *Trump v. Hawaii* (2018) avoided the travel ban's constitutionality, instead leaning on a vague interpretation of national security, empowering the President to leverage executive orders with impunity.

### **Legal Challenges for International Students**

Through the Equal Protection Clause (U.S. Const. amend. XIV) and Title VI of the Civil Rights Act (1964), the U.S. law addressed the significance of halting individual and institutional discrimination in education (Hacker & Umpstead, 2019). While these laws may be used to fight inequalities in the education system, it is vital to consider that many U.S. laws are made to shield individuals against various inequalities as well (Hacker & Umpstead, 2019).

### ***Declining Mobility***

The Immigration and Nationality Act (1965) addressed immigration in terms of admission to the United States and travel control. After the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 and the recent executive orders of President Trump, international students can struggle to obtain visas to study in the United States (Exec. Order No. 13769, 2017; Lee, 2010). Due to these continually changing federal regulations, international student enrollment trends have continued to decrease

dramatically from a peak of 903,127 in the 2016-2017 school year to 891,330 in the 2017-2018 school year and 872,214 in the 2018-2019 school year (IIE, 2019). Altbach and de Wit (2017) predicted that there would continue to be remarkable changes in student mobility, primarily in the United Kingdom and the United States, even though it is already decreasing.

Subsequent attempts by the Trump administration to prevent international students from coming and returning to the United States in the spring and summer of 2020 created more upheaval under the guise of coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic preventative measures, reinforcing the anti-mobility rhetoric directed at international students. In March 2020, the Student and Exchange Visitor Program, which is a division of U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, stated that non-immigrant students could continue to reside in the United States as long as they made progress in their studies, regardless of the location of the courses (i.e., online or in-person; Pierce & Bolter, 2020). Although, in July 2020, the Student and Exchange Visitor Program notified colleges that international students enrolled in the 2020 fall semester would be required to leave the United States if their classes were completely online (Jordan et al., 2020; Pierce & Bolter, 2020). Countering the new restrictions, Harvard College and Massachusetts Institute of Technology sued the Trump administration to prevent the rules from taking effect (*Harvard College and Massachusetts Institute of Technology v. United States Department of Homeland Security and U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement*, 2020). On July 14, 2020, the Trump administration announced that they were rescinding the new policy in a resolution with the plaintiffs (Caldera & Kurilla, 2020; Pierce & Bolter, 2020). This announcement resulted in a reversion to the March 2020 policy for current international students; new international students still could not arrive in the United States in fall 2020 if their course load included more than three credits of online-only instruction (Pierce & Bolter, 2020).

### **Legal Challenges for International Affairs Offices in Higher Education**

Colleges face challenges on multiple fronts due to travel bans and growing anti-U.S. sentiment over the Trump administration's policies and rhetoric (Leisyte & Rose, 2018; Redden, 2018a). With the Supreme Court deferring to the President in the name of national security, colleges dependent on international students, staff, and faculty were directly affected (Redden, 2018a; *Trump v. Hawaii*, 2018).

#### ***Recruiting***

Colleges are finding it increasingly difficult to recruit and retain faculty, students, and staff in the wake of decisions like *Trump v. Hawaii* (2018) as anti-immigrant rhetoric and fear over safety and mobility increase (Leisyte & Rose, 2018; Redden, 2018a). More than half of U.S. postdoctoral positions, and more than a one quarter of the same positions at European colleges, are staffed by foreign-born employees, making them critical to the sustainability of many programs (Leisyte & Rose, 2018). The Trump administration's policies have resulted in large decreases in short-term travel (e.g., conference travel) as well as the number of student visas issued between 2016 and 2017, with the most significant decreases coming from countries listed in Executive Order No. 13769 (Redden, 2018a). Iraq, Lybia, Somalia, and Yemen each saw their student visas decreased by more than 50%, while visas for students from Sudan and Syria decreased by 47.5% and 49.4%, respectively (Redden, 2018a). These numbers represent

thousands of students prevented from attending U.S. colleges. Unable to draw credentialed international faculty, staff, and graduate students due to “current political developments, characterized by increasing populism, nationalist tendencies, and strong anti-immigration discourses” (Leisyte & Rose, 2018, p. 5), U.S. colleges face uncertainty regarding the future of smaller programs and research opportunities.

### ***Supporting Existing Students***

It is evident that U.S. colleges and their surrounding communities recognize the importance of, and support, international students on their campuses. Universities' responses to recent immigration, asylum, and deportation policies illustrate the championing of their students. This support was apparent in *Harvard College and Massachusetts Institute of Technology v. United States Department of Homeland Security and U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement* (2020), which was part of 20 states, the District of Columbia, and approximately 24 universities that filed various lawsuits to block the most recent policy regarding international students' mobility in the summer of 2020 (Redden, 2020).

College campuses are becoming sources of legal assistance to those students, faculty, and staff facing denied visas or problems related to travel bans. The International Affairs department at Cornell University compiled resources for their community, including free legal aid and guides for dealing with detainment (Cornell University, 2017). Universities also face security and privacy concerns for international students being targeted by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement in the wake of multiple travel bans and deportation threats. The Association of American Universities, the National Association for Foreign Student Affairs, and others partnered with the American Civil Liberties Union to provide international students with resources to understand and defend their rights while attempting to navigate the current travel bans (Cornell University, 2017).

### **Practical Implications**

The practical implications from the travel bans and growing anti-U.S. sentiment over the Trump administration's policies and rhetoric are wide-ranging. These consequences include the colleges' financial operations, staffing, diversity, institutional research, the economy, faculty and student diversity, and cultural competence.

### ***Financial***

The backlash from international students to recent U.S. policies has directly affected many colleges' science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) programs (Redden, 2018a). Decreased enrollments in STEM fields have immediate implications for the colleges, the market share of research in the United States, and academic mobility (Altbach & de Wit, 2017). The lack of mobility also impacts faculty and staff in higher education, limiting collaborative opportunities and the pipeline for graduate students who perform field and laboratory work at research-intensive colleges (Altbach & de Wit, 2017; Rhoades, 2017). Without these external funding sources, many research-intensive programs could cease to operate, leading to long-term implications across numerous fields and the potential of loss of prestige associated with these fields and colleges.

Colleges face losses across the board when travel restrictions prevent the exchange of ideas and operations in the form of research, grant funding, and tuition dollars for all undergraduate and graduate programs. Altbach and de Wit (2017) stated:

The operational side of internationalization has, in recent years, become big business—many billions of dollars, euros, and other currencies are spent on internationalization programs and earned by universities, private companies, and a vast array of providers, insurance companies, recruiters, and others. International students contributed more than \$32.8 billion to the U.S. economy. (p. 3)

Because the money spent to attend a university goes beyond the college's boundaries, there are likely to be substantial downstream effects on the surrounding communities and the overall economy (Altbach & de Wit, 2017). Increased tuition across the board at U.S. colleges also pushes international students to seek education elsewhere. The loss of revenue from those students will impact smaller colleges that have relied on those enrollments for decades the most (Altbach & de Wit, 2017; Cooper, 2018).

### ***Staffing***

Attracting and retaining highly ranked academics in all fields equates to a global job search for many positions. Scientific fields specifically draw international faculty and students, something the current administration is damaging through isolationist policies (Redden, 2018b). The rhetoric accompanying the populism and nationalistic tendencies classifies universities as part of the establishment, pushing the idea of elitism and reinforcing the argument that these liberal colleges create and maintain class inequities (Rhoades, 2017). Because of the disruption to faculty and staff international migration patterns, colleges within Central and Eastern Europe have an opportunity to attract the talent that no longer feels welcome in the United States, improving their status (Leisyte & Rose, 2018). Relaxed immigration standards and less isolationistic rhetoric position European colleges as attractive and ripe for influxes of international faculty and students performing vital research that builds reputations for researchers and colleges (Leisyte & Rose, 2018).

Continued rhetoric and travel bans bring attention from international faculty, who are boycotting travel to the United States for conferences or consideration for professional opportunities (Redden, 2018a). Some organizations, like the Middle East Studies Association, saw significant drops in their membership and annual conference attendance since the institution of travel bans where, just two years prior, they experienced record numbers (Redden, 2018a). While these opportunities harm the organizations, the impact of the missed networking and learning opportunities directly affects mobility on both sides of the U.S. border, trickling down to the students and colleges.

### ***Diversity***

Preventing the safe passage of international students, faculty, and staff to and from the United States has implications beyond employment or education. With declining numbers of international students, the impact on a diverse student body is dramatic at smaller colleges and those located in the Midwest (Redden, 2018b). Colleges with higher Carnegie classifications, typically found on the East and West coasts, can absorb lost numbers of international students;

however, colleges in general that are closer to the nation’s interior struggle (Redden, 2018b). For many smaller colleges in the nation’s interior, international students represent the heart of a diverse collegiate experience. The lack of diverse student bodies means "internationalization, already perceived to be elitist, will likely only be afforded by prestigious universities" (Altbach & de Wit, 2017, p. 4). The limited opportunities for learning from and with those of diverse backgrounds puts students at risk of widening the divide between the haves and have-nots (Altbach & de Wit, 2017). The global economy and workforce these students enter following graduation demand a level of cultural competence and social responsibility that clash with the populist and nationalistic ideals contributing to this problem (Altbach & de Wit, 2017).

## Discussion

The Migration Policy Institute recently published a report entitled *Dismantling and Reconstructing the U.S. Immigration System: A Catalog of Changes under the Trump Presidency* (Pierce & Bolter, 2020). This report addressed the sweeping and significant changes to U.S. immigration policy since Trump took office, which occurred primarily by executive action (i.e., without congressional input; Pierce & Bolter, 2020). The Trump administration's viewpoint on immigration is significantly different from prior administrations, regardless of party affiliation (Pierce & Bolter, 2020). It has resulted in "drastically narrow[ing] humanitarian benefits, increase[d] enforcement, and decrease[d] legal immigration" (Pierce & Bolter, 2020, p. 1). The report details over 400 immigration policy changes that have been put in place by the Trump administration since 2017. Also, since the policies resulted from executive branch efforts, it could be difficult for future administrations to undo the policies (Pierce & Bolter, 2020). As a result, the Trump administration policies could impact U.S. immigration for years to come (Pierce & Bolter, 2020).

Despite what may seem an apparent link between Trump administration policies and an adverse effect on international student enrollment in U.S. colleges, other perspectives and explanations must be considered. There were red flags regarding international student enrollment in U.S. colleges before the Trump election (Wise, 2020). The election of President Trump in 2017 advanced the already precarious situation resulting in a 10% decline in new international student enrollment from 2015-2018 (Wise, 2020). Some scholars contend that President Trump's election was not exclusively to blame for this freefall, but the result of several elements that coalesced into the perfect storm (Usher, 2019; Wise, 2020). These elements included global economic decline, negative perceptions of the United States by international students, increased higher education growth and capacity in other countries, other governments’ intention to increase higher education growth and to become host countries when they usually were sending students outside the country, U.S. currency fluctuations, and, most notably, the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic (Usher, 2019; Wise, 2020). The resultant decrease in international student mobility and the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic has made U.S. colleges less desirable (Wise, 2020). In 2020, only 10% of globally mobile students listed the United States as their preferred destination (Wise, 2020).

Usher (2019) stated that there is currently a “mild recession in international student numbers” (para. 21), although the international enrollment numbers should not be concerning as this happened before from 2003-2005. In addition, from 2006-2016, international student enrollment increased by 60% (Usher, 2019). So, while there has been a leveling off of

international student enrollment, it may be at least partially attributed to the change in the make-up of countries sending students to the United States and location and type of college (Usher, 2019). Usher (2019) said that admissions professionals had ascribed the recession in international student numbers to two potential sources: (a) decreased attraction to studying in the United States and severe visa restrictions, and (b) exorbitant tuition costs that continue to rise for international study in the United States. While the visa concerns are a direct result of the Trump administration, the United States being a less attractive destination for international students may be partially due to the Trump administration (Usher, 2019). However, enrollment was trending downward before Trump took office (Usher, 2019). Highly prestigious research colleges continue to grow while less prestigious and less research-intensive universities struggle (Usher, 2019). While there is not enough data currently to tie the decline in international student enrollment to the Trump administration, it is logical that the administration’s impact on how other countries’ citizens view the United States and the visa process have affected the international student decline (Usher, 2019).

### **Conclusion**

Hostilities toward internationalization and “others” are the hallmark of Trump-era policies and right-wing populism, preventing the free-flow of ideas and the rich, diverse experiences higher education promotes (Rhoades, 2017). Lost revenue to colleges and communities, coupled with declining numbers in researchers able to perform the work necessary, means higher education faces problems beyond the cost of education. These issues directly impact both students and the global economy with dwindling numbers of educated and qualified graduates enter the workforce. The net effect of these issues puts the United States on a path towards more significant class inequities while robbing current and future generations of the opportunity to learn from and with colleagues of diverse backgrounds. While overall enrollment numbers in higher education began declining before President Trump's election, the restrictions enacted by his administration compounded the issues faced by U.S. colleges and international students alike.

Countering the rhetoric means providing international students, staff, and faculty the opportunity to see beyond the blustering of nationalistic and isolationist themed policies. Colleges must reinforce the democratic ideals of education while standing firm against the growing social divide to reverse the current course. The social responsibility inherent in higher education requires colleges to promote internationalization for the benefit of all, not just those privileged enough to be part of academe. To ignore the need for global understanding and cultural competence relegates U.S. colleges' students to a pre-WWI isolationist world view, hampering their ability to function as contributing members of a world economy. Continued vigilance in representing higher education's mission while providing tools and representation for those affected by the Trump administration's policies is crucial to counteracting the anti-internationalization movement in the United States.

### **Future Directions**

While the link between the Trump administration and decreased international students at U.S. colleges appears straightforward, there have not been studies to verify current or future correlation. Future quantitative studies may look at this correlation to validate or invalidate this

argument. Future qualitative studies may consider the lived experiences of international students studying in the United States during and after the Trump administration as well as alternative explanations for decreasing international students at U.S. colleges. Scholars should also consider studies on future trends in enrollment of international students in U.S. colleges and how to overcome the Trump effect.

### Author’s Note

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