

Chinese Students Wary of Studying in the United States

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Abstract

In a recent survey, 87 percent of high school college counselors in China said that their students and parents are now reconsidering plans for studying in the United States. Eighty-five percent among them attributed this new trend to Trump's hostile rhetoric and unpredictable policies toward Chinese students. This has pushed Chinese students to look elsewhere for alternatives, directly benefiting competitor countries. Despite the pessimistic outlook, the United States still remains a prime destination for many Chinese students, particularly its top-tier institutions.

At a seminar with a group of Chinese high school principals organized by Amherst College and Williams College in Shanghai last summer, one of the principals raised concerns about whether the United States still welcomes Chinese students. We reassured him that higher education institutions in the United States still welcome all international students. The principal, however, did not seem completely convinced, and sadly, we knew where his hesitation came from.

Throughout the two-week trip, we repeatedly heard concerns from parents and students about studying in the United States, including difficulties getting a student visa, frequent gun violence and mass shootings, deportations of Chinese students at the airport, the skyrocketing cost of US college education, OPT (optional practical training) authorization delays, and unclear H-1B visa reform. The constant anti-immigrant rhetoric of the Trump administration, talks of banning student visas for all Chinese students, and suggestions that “almost every [Chinese] student that comes over to this country is a spy” do not resonate well with people on the other side of the globe.

In a recent survey designed by the international admission team at Amherst College and directed at 54 school-based college counselors in China, 85 percent of the respondents indicated that the biggest concern of Chinese parents is Trump's unpredictable policies toward Chinese students; 78 percent pointed to safety; 65 percent to the uncertainty of remaining in the United States for a work experience after graduation; and another 65 percent indicated fear of visa denial or deportation after arrival.

Considering Alternative Destinations

As a result, a whopping 87 percent of the counselors said that Chinese students and their parents are now reconsidering their plans for studying in the United States and diversifying their options of college destinations. One counselor said, “Our students have planned to go to college in the US for years. However, a significant number of them are now looking at other countries, such as the UK, Canada, and Australia.” This is bad news for the United States.

At the same time that international students are discouraged by the hostile rhetoric of the Trump administration, competitor countries have increased their efforts to recruit Chinese students, with significant progress in the last few years. From 2017 to 2018, Canada saw a 33 percent increase in the number of students from China. Chinese students now account for one-third of all international students there, injecting five billion Canadian dollars into the economy annually. UCAS, the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service, a UK-based organization that coordinates the application process for British universities, recently reported a 33 percent increase in Chinese applications with acceptances up by 28 percent since 2018. One counselor illustrated this trend by saying, “I've been at international schools in China and Switzerland for almost 10 years, and I've never had as many visiting university reps from the UK as we've had in the last three weeks.”

A few counselors also cited the rising cost of US higher education as a source of concern. With the ongoing trade war, China's currency has plunged to the lowest valuation in 11 years. This has made an American college education less affordable. It costs international students only half as much, or less, for a college education in Canada or the United Kingdom. The reintroduced Post Study Work (PSW) rule in the United Kingdom will now allow international students to stay in the country for two years after graduation to work, starting with the class graduating in 2021. The change in ruling coincided with an announcement of the world's largest genetics research project aimed at fighting deadly diseases. When asked whether the new PSW option in the United Kingdom

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would influence Chinese students considering US colleges, 78 percent of the counselors surveyed replied yes.

The United Kingdom's openness to international students is in stark contrast to its former colony. In June 2018, the Trump administration rolled back an Obama-era policy on issuing five-year visas to Chinese students, thereby limiting the length of stay for those in high-tech fields such as robotics, aviation, and high-tech manufacturing to one year. This shift in US policy comes while these fields are priorities in Beijing's Made in China 2025 Plan, intended to make China a manufacturing superpower. As a result, Chinese students already studying these high-tech fields on US campuses have become increasingly concerned about traveling to China during their program, for fear of not being allowed to return.

More Chinese Students Preparing for Undergraduate Study Abroad

According to a Beijing-based research firm on international education, there were more than 820 international schools in China in 2018, with a total student population of over 480,000. Most, if not all, of these students will pursue higher education abroad. When Chinese students opt for an international curriculum in high school, they have essentially forfeited the option of taking the college entrance exam for admission to Chinese universities. With no path to attend colleges at home, they have bet on admission to a college abroad.

The United States has taken notice. Caroline Casagrande, deputy assistant secretary for academic programs in the US Department of State's Bureau of Education and Cultural Affairs, posted a video on the US Embassy's official WeChat account. In it, she affirmed that "The vast majority of student visas are granted. In fact, every year, for the last five years, the number of student visa rejections have gone down in China. I am here ... to make sure we continue to have the best and brightest Chinese students in our American classrooms." The video garnered over 48,000 views during the first two weeks after it was posted.

When asked to predict the growth trend of numbers of Chinese students in the next couple of years, 43 percent of counselors in the survey predicted it would go down, while 38 percent predicted it would be consistent with current numbers. Only one counselor out of 54 who responded said that it would go up.

It Is Not All Gloom and Doom

In our survey, 70 percent of counselors shared that if their students were admitted to comparable colleges in the United States and other countries, most would still choose the United States. One counselor added that this is particularly so when students apply to highly selective colleges.

When asked what the most attractive characteristics of US higher education are, counselors listed the "melting pot" nature of society and the diversity of the student body; rich academic and research resources; flexibility in choosing and changing majors; the liberal arts education; academic freedom; high-quality education with world-class professors, as well as a competitive edge in the job market and strong networking opportunities. These qualities have always been what make US higher education desirable. ▲

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