



The Power of International Education



Fall 2021 International Student Enrollment Snapshot

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Introduction

The *Fall 2021 International Student Enrollment Snapshot* includes the findings from a survey of 864 U.S. higher education institutions on current patterns in international student enrollment as of Fall 2021. The report focuses on international students studying at U.S. higher education institutions in person or online (in the United States or from abroad). The report, conducted by the Institute of International Education (IIE) and nine partner higher education associations, complements the *Open Doors® Report on International Educational Exchange*, which is conducted by IIE in partnership with the U.S. Department of State and provides a comprehensive view of international students from the previous year (IIE, 2021a).

Key Findings

The *Fall 2021 International Student Enrollment Snapshot* findings reflect the resilience of U.S. higher education and student mobility during the COVID-19 pandemic.

International student totals at U.S. higher education institutions rebound from Fall 2020.

- The total number of international students (enrolled and on Optional Practical Training (OPT)) increased by four percent. This is a rebound from the 15 percent decrease reported in *Open Doors* for Fall 2020.
- The total number of enrolled students (undergraduate, graduate, and non-degree students) at U.S. universities increased by eight percent. This indicates a marked improvement over the prior year when total international student enrollments fell by 17 percent.
- The number of international students pursuing employment opportunities following their academic studies on OPT continues to decrease (-10%). This is in part due to the COVID-19 pandemic. It is also due to a shrinking OPT base as fewer students have been eligible for OPT after the surge from the STEM Extension announced in 2016.

New enrollments of international students at U.S. higher education institutions are up.

- Higher education institutions report a 68 percent increase in the number of new international students enrolling for the first time at a U.S. institution in the United States or online from abroad, a surge from the 46 percent decline reported in *Open Doors* for Fall 2020.
- Seventy percent of institutions report an increase in new international student enrollment, 10 percent indicate the number to be the same as last year, and 20 percent report a decrease.

U.S. colleges and universities commit to international students' studying in person.

- Ninety-nine percent of responding institutions are holding classes in-person or implementing a hybrid model. Only one percent of institutions are offering online classes only in Fall 2021.
- At least 65 percent of the reported international students are on campus in the United States.

International student recruitment is a priority in the United States and abroad.

- U.S. institutions are prioritizing international student outreach in India (56%) and China (51%) and to international students at U.S. high schools (44%).
- For outreach and recruitment to prospective international students, institutions are leveraging current international students (64%), online recruitment events (56%), and social media (55%).
- Seventy-seven percent of reporting institutions indicate that financial support for their student recruitment efforts is the same or higher than in previous years.

Methodology

Survey Background and Data Collection

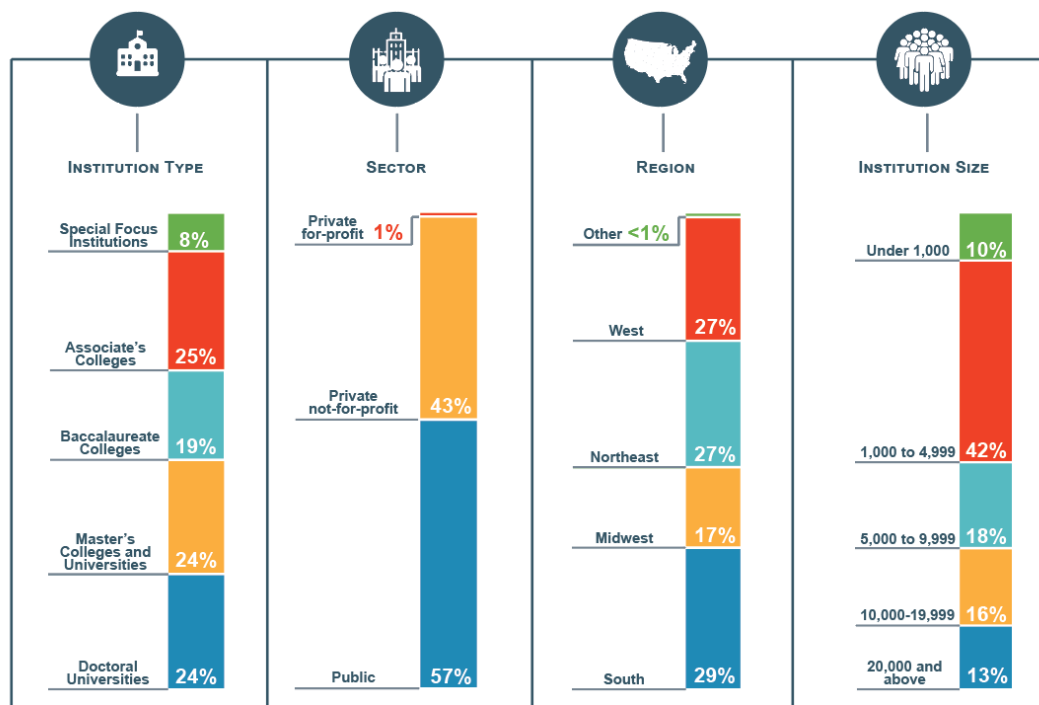
Ten partnering higher education associations distributed the *Fall 2021 International Student Enrollment Snapshot* to their member institutions across the United States from September 21 to October 11, 2021. The survey was carried out by IIE in cooperation with American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers, American Association of Community Colleges, American Association of State Colleges and Universities, American Council on Education, Association of Public and Land-grant Universities, College Board, Council of Graduate Schools, National Association for College Admission Counseling, and NAFSA: Association of International Educators.

The survey captured 864 valid responses from higher education institutions throughout the United States and was the highest response rate in the 16-year history of the survey. Not all respondents provided complete data. As a result, valid item response rates are lower for some questions. The Fall 2021 Snapshot respondents represent a subset of the almost 3,000 U.S. higher education institutions surveyed annually as part of the *Open Doors International Student Census*. The reporting institutions represent 59 percent of all international students in the *Open Doors Report on International Educational Exchange* (IIE, 2021a).

Respondent Profile

Respondents to the Fall 2021 Snapshot reflect a broad range of institutional types and locations from 49 states, one U.S. territory, and Washington, D.C. Overall, the Fall 2021 Snapshot respondents' profile closely mirrors the profile of the institutions that completed the *Open Doors 2021 International Student Census*. Similar proportions are noted among geographic regions, institutional sector, type, and size.

Figure 1: Fall 2021 Snapshot Institutional Representation



Note: Percentages may not sum to 100% due to rounding.

International Students at U.S. Colleges and Universities in Fall 2021

The findings from the Fall 2021 Snapshot indicate a rebound of international student numbers at U.S. higher education institutions as we enter the 2021/22 academic year. In the previous two years, and since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, the mobility of international students to the United States has been affected in many ways, from application and selection processes and visa processing to continued challenges due to travel restrictions, and safety and security (Mason, 2021). In Fall 2021, while the COVID-19 pandemic continues to affect the U.S. higher education system and education systems worldwide, we begin to see an optimistic picture of international student enrollment increases in-person and online.

Total International Student Enrollments at U.S. Higher Education Institutions

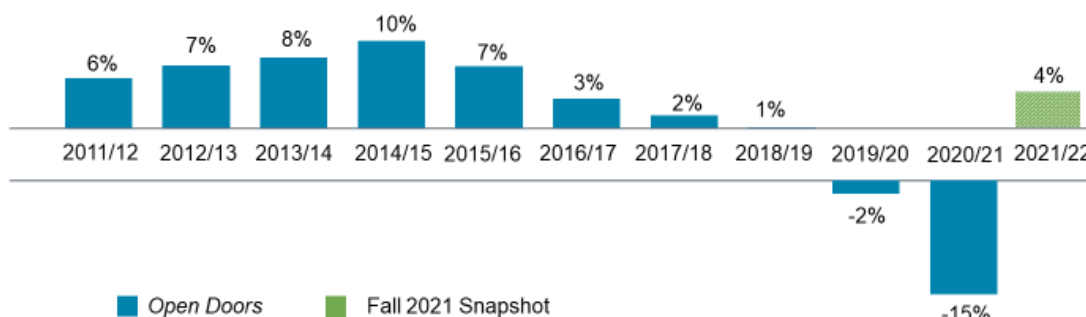
The Fall 2021 Snapshot continues to use an expanded definition of international students at U.S. higher education institutions to capture the most comprehensive picture of international enrollments. This year's analysis includes:

1. International students physically present on campus at U.S. higher education institutions
2. International students physically present in the United States attending classes online
3. International students outside the United States attending classes full-time online
4. In addition, we captured data on students on Optional Practical Training, or OPT.

This expanded definition was used in last year's *Fall 2020 International Student Enrollment Snapshot* (Baer and Martel, 2020) and the *Open Doors 2021 Report on International Educational Exchange* (IIE, 2021a). As most U.S. colleges and universities continue to have hybrid models of instruction in place in Fall 2021 (see [Mode of Study](#)), this expanded definition best captures the current picture of international students studying at these institutions.

In Fall 2021, institutions responding to the Snapshot reported a four percent increase in the total number of international students, including those on campus, online in the U.S., online outside the U.S., and on OPT. This is a marked improvement from the 15 percent decline reported in *Open Doors* for Fall 2020.

Figure 2: International Students at U.S. Higher Education Institutions, Fall 2021



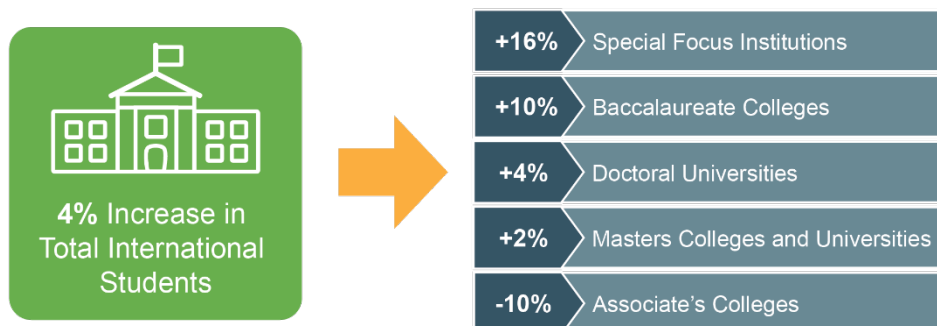
The vast majority of responding institutions (94%) report that at least some of their international students are on campus in the United States. If we take the total number of international students reported in the Fall 2021 Snapshot, at least 65 percent are on campus. Last Fall 2020, 47 percent of international students had

attended studies in person. This indicates an increase and return of international students as campuses have resumed in-person instruction in Fall 2021. Both continuing and new international students are able to attend classes in person.

Online study continues to be an important alternative for international students in Fall 2021. Almost half of the reporting institutions report that some international students study online in the United States (48%) or online from abroad (46%). However, fewer than four percent of all international students are studying fully online from abroad. This is in significant contrast to the Fall 2020 Snapshot, when one in every five students, or 20 percent, were studying online from abroad. While international students still pursue their studies online outside the United States this Fall for various reasons, the data indicates that more international students are in the United States for their studies.

Finally, there continues to be a difference in international student totals by institutional type. The majority of institutions report increases, including Master’s colleges and universities (+2%), Doctoral universities (+4%), Baccalaureate colleges (+10%), and Special Focus Institutions (+16%). Associate’s colleges continue to report a decrease (-10%), compounding the decrease reported last year. It is important to consider these variations in understanding the context and realities that institutions face this academic year and the variable effects that the COVID-19 pandemic has had on different institutional types.

Figure 3: Changes in International Student Totals by Institutional Type, Fall 2021



Enrolled International Students and those on OPT

International Enrollments. Enrolled international students include those pursuing undergraduate, graduate, or non-degree study, a subset of total international students. According to the Fall 2021 Snapshot, the total number of enrolled international students increased by eight percent. In Fall 2020, the total enrolled international students decreased by 17 percent (IIE, 2021a), including a 14 percent decrease in undergraduate students, a 12 percent decrease in graduate students, and a 64 percent decrease in non-degree students. Enrollments in Fall 2021 have improved as more international students were able to continue or begin their studies.

There is also an indication that more international students are beginning their studies rather than deferring. In the Fall 2020 Snapshot, 90 percent of reporting institutions indicated that over 40,000 international students had deferred their study to a future semester or year, in large part due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This Fall 2021, 60 percent of reporting institutions indicate that approximately 16,000 international students have deferred to a future semester or year. The primary reasons cited include travel restrictions in students’

home countries (60%), health-related concerns due to COVID-19 (46%), and limited funds to pursue study in Fall 2021 (38%). While concerns over the COVID-19 pandemic and associated travel restrictions continue, significantly fewer international students are deferring their studies at the start of this academic year.

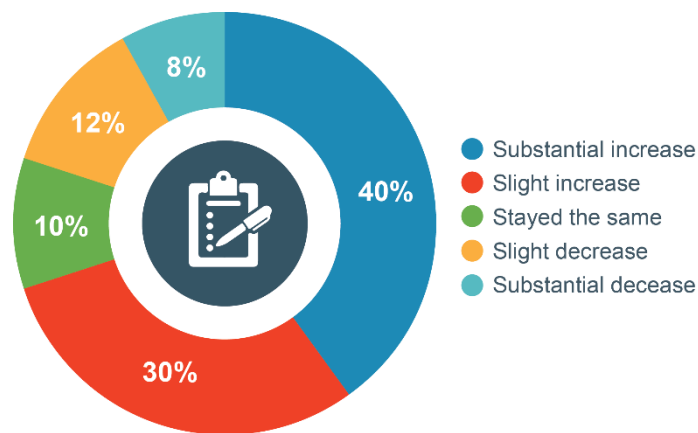
Optional Practical Training. The number of international students on OPT pursuing employment opportunities following their academic studies decreased in Fall 2021 by 10 percent. Last year, the total number of students on OPT decreased by nine percent, following several years of significant OPT growth (IIE, 2021a).

Two factors are driving these decreases. First, before the COVID-19 pandemic, *Open Doors* already reported slowing OPT growth (Martel et. al., 2020). Following the 2016 OPT extension, which allowed international students pursuing degrees in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM) to extend their stay in the United States from 17 to 24 months, the numbers of OPT students initially increased sharply to more than 223,000 in 2018/19. The total then leveled off at higher levels in 2019/20. The decline from Fall 2020 through 2021 was exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, when international students may have chosen to return home rather than pursue OPT or may have faced COVID-19-related delays in getting their OPT approved. We continue to see this trend in Fall 2021 as OPT continues to decrease.

New International Student Enrollments

In the last year, the COVID-19 pandemic has primarily affected new international student enrollments for students studying for the first time at a U.S. higher education institution. In the 2020/21 academic year, many new international students could not travel to the United States to begin their studies. Institutions in the Fall 2021 Snapshot indicate a resounding increase in new international student enrollments, with 70 percent reporting that the number of new international students has increased compared to the previous year. Approximately 20 percent of reporting institutions indicate that their new international student numbers have decreased.

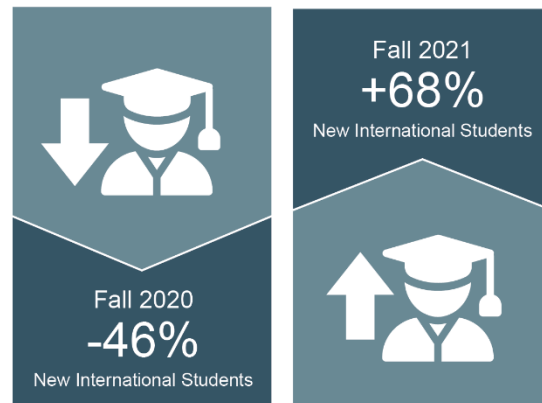
Figure 4: Changes in New International Student Enrollments, Fall 2020 to Fall 2021



Fall 2021 indicates a significant rebound as the number of new international students has increased by 68 percent. *Open Doors 2021* reported a decrease of 46 percent in new international student enrollments as of Fall 2020, primarily due to the COVID-19 pandemic. It is also important to note that most reported new international students, or 78 percent, are located on campus in the United States. Again, comparing this to last year, we find that most new international students in Fall 2020 (51%) were enrolled online outside the

United States. This signals a return of new international students to U.S. campuses as travel restrictions have eased and new international students are able to obtain visas for U.S. study.

Figure 5: New International Student Enrollments, Fall 2020 and Fall 2021



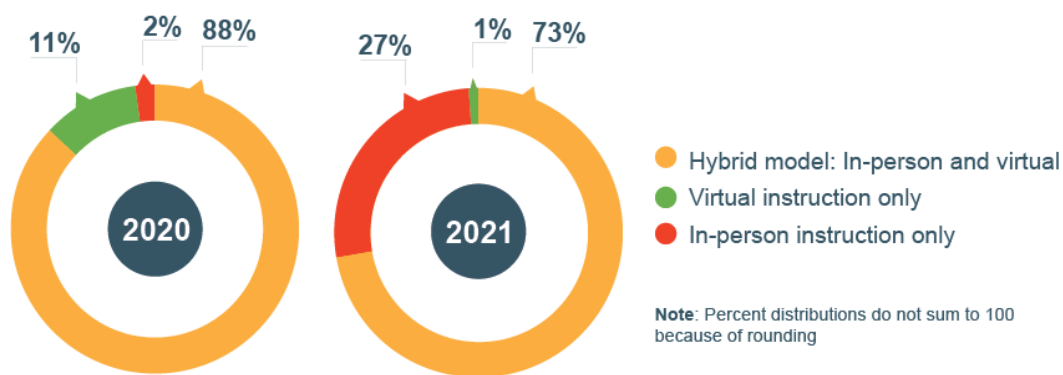
U.S. Higher Education Realities in Fall 2021

This section outlines the realities on U.S. campuses as of Fall 2021 and provides further context to the enrollment patterns presented in the previous section. It also presents further data on the support institutions provide to international students, either in person, on campus or online.

Mode of Instruction

In Fall 2021, 99 percent of responding institutions report an in-person or hybrid mode of instruction. Approximately one in five reporting institutions, or 27 percent, indicate that their campus is in-person only, meaning all international students are studying in-person. Only five institutions (1%) report having classes and instruction that are online only in Fall 2021. This is in stark contrast to the environment reported in the Fall 2020 Snapshot, when the vast majority of institutions (99%) were either online only (11%) or hybrid (88%).

Figure 6: Mode of Instruction, Fall 2020 and Fall 2021

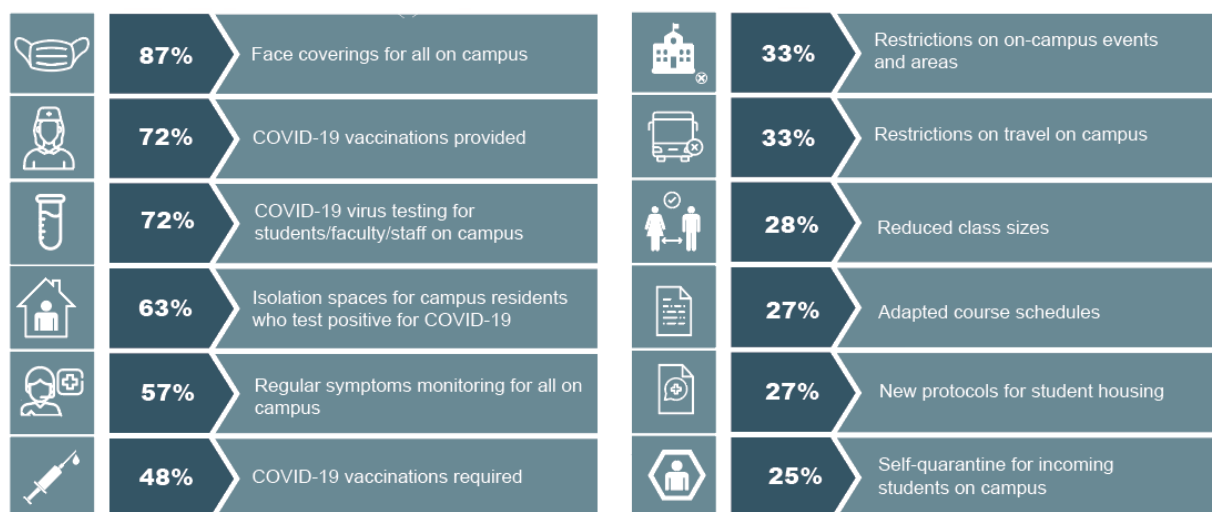


When we compare the two graphs, we see that more institutions are reporting in-person instruction only, decreasing both the number of institutions reporting virtual instruction only and those offering a hybrid model. This may indicate that in addition to institutions moving from virtual to hybrid, institutions have moved from a hybrid model to a full in-person experience in Fall 2021.

Safety and Security Measures on U.S. Campuses in Fall 2021

To ensure a safe return to in-person instruction in Fall 2021, institutions have implemented numerous measures to ensure that students, faculty, and staff on their campuses can study and work on campus. IIE has been following safety measures on U.S. campuses since the beginning of the pandemic with the *COVID-19 Snapshot Series* (IIE, 2021b). Many of the measures reported in Fall 2021 continue to be adopted.

Figure 7: Safety and Security Measures on Campuses in Fall 2021



To reduce the spread of COVID-19, 87 percent of responding institutions continue to require face coverings for all on campus. This has been a consistent safety measure since campuses resumed in-person operations, though if we compare the findings to Fall 2020, we note this is a reduction from 96 percent. Conversely, the findings indicate that COVID-19 virus testing has increased, from 62 percent in Fall 2020 to 72 percent in Fall 2021. This may be linked to more readily available COVID-19 virus testing as more students, faculty, and staff return to campus in person.

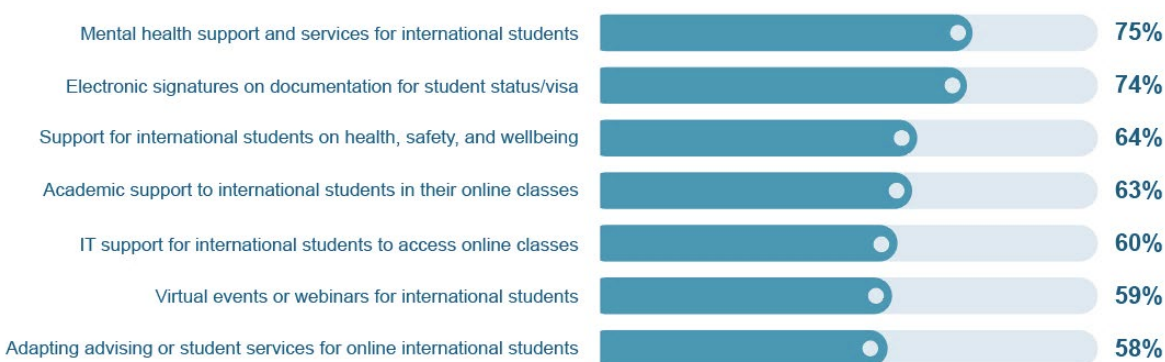
Findings related to vaccinations indicate that most institutions (72%) are making COVID-19 vaccines available to their students, faculty, and staff, including international students. While reporting institutions are making these vaccinations available, less than half (48%) are requiring them. This is similar to IIE's findings in its fourth COVID-19 Snapshot Report in May 2021, indicating that less than half of institutions intended to require COVID-19 vaccines (Martel and Baer, 2021). More institutions are opting to offer COVID-19 vaccinations to students but not mandate these vaccines, especially with the availability of virus testing.

Finally, several restrictions on U.S. campuses have been lifted since last year, including restrictions on on-campus events, travel, class sizes, and housing. Whereas most institutions in Fall 2020 were reporting these measures, a majority of institutions in Fall 2021 are focusing on COVID-19 vaccinations and virus testing to reduce the spread of COVID-19 on campus.

Support for International Students

In Fall 2021, U.S. universities and colleges continue to respond to the needs of their international students in the United States and studying online abroad. The realities of international students' circumstances and locations can create additional obstacles as well as opportunities for colleges and universities to focus on this important demographic of their student population.

Figure 8: International Student Support in Fall 2021



Seventy-five percent of reporting institutions provide international students with mental health support and services, and 64 percent support students' health, safety, and well-being. Institutions have reported using text messages, WhatsApp, and other social media platforms to communicate with international students. Some institutions noted an individualized approach, regularly checking in on students to feel well. During the COVID-19 pandemic, this individualized support for international students, who may be dealing with the COVID-19 realities in their homes or places of origin, is critical.

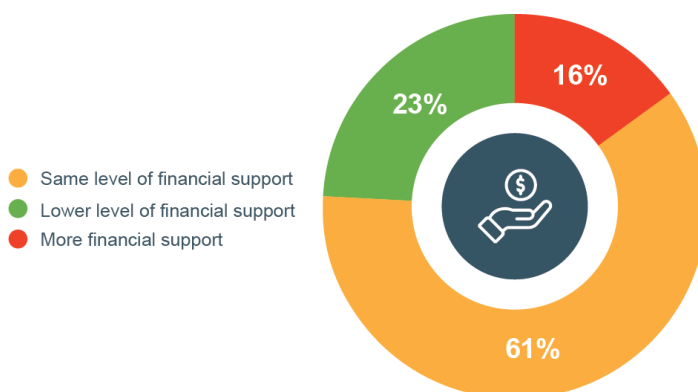
Looking to Next Year's Recruitment Cycle

U.S. institutions looking ahead to future semesters are considering how to reinvigorate international student mobility to their campuses. This section outlines the various strategies that U.S. higher education institutions use to recruit international students to the United States.

Financial Commitment to International Student Outreach and Recruitment

Figure 9: Financial Support for Outreach and Recruitment

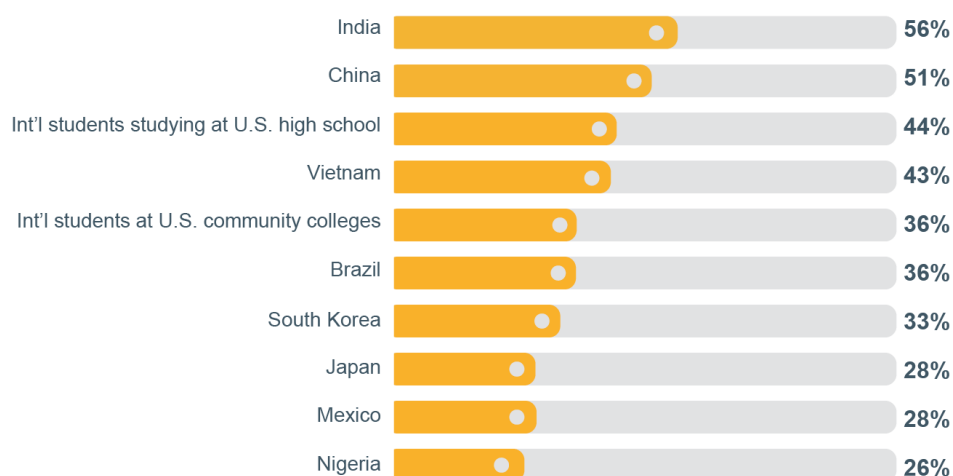
While U.S. colleges and universities have already invested significant funding to ensure a safe return to in-person instruction in Fall 2021, our findings indicate that the levels of financial support for international student outreach and recruitment have not waned. The majority (77%) of reporting institutions are funding outreach and recruitment at the same level or higher than previously.



Institutions Prioritize Overseas Outreach to Asia

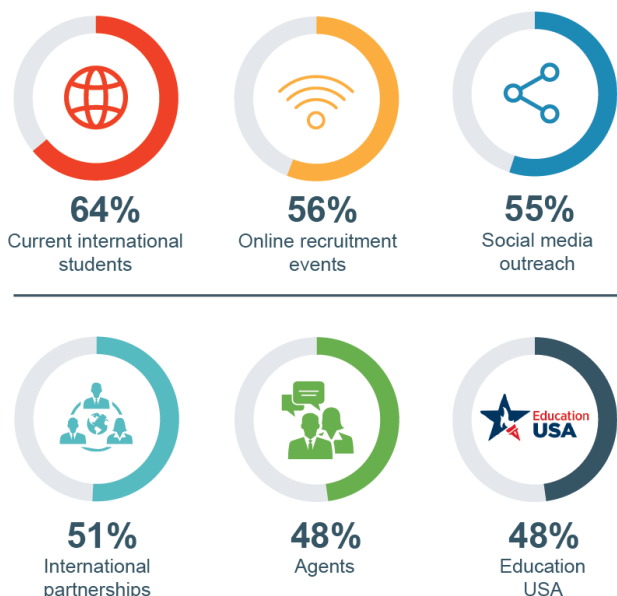
Reporting institutions have returned to prioritizing overseas places of origin for their international student outreach and recruitment. Last year, in Fall 2020, a substantial proportion of institutions were recruiting international students at U.S. high schools, most likely due to travel restrictions and limitations on outreach and recruitment efforts. This year, institutions have renewed their focus places of origin in Asia, including India (56%), China (51%), and Vietnam (43%), for their recruitment efforts. Although places of origin in Asia continue to be the national recruitment area of focus, U.S. colleges and universities are also prioritizing outreach to 75 other locations worldwide. As institutions plan for recruitment in the Fall of 2021, colleges and universities can visit the Embassy or Consulate’s websites for up-to-date information on operating status and services offered (U.S. Department of State, 2021).

Figure 10: Institutional Recruitment Priorities



Institutions Leverage Multiple Sources to Recruit International Students

Figure 11: Resources Leveraged International Recruitment



To better analyze the recruitment of international students both in the United States and globally, the Fall 2021 Snapshot also collected data about the resources U.S. higher education institutions are leveraging to recruit international students.

Of institutions actively recruiting international students, 64 percent report proactively working with current international students for recruitment efforts. Current international students are often able to provide personal, authentic testimonials as to how international students can succeed on their campus and in the United States.

Similar to last year, more than half (55%) of responding institutions use social media outreach to engage international students. Many U.S. colleges and universities run their own social media campaigns that showcase campus life, provide virtual tours, and give insights into the successes of students, faculty, and alumni.

In addition, the [#YouAreWelcomeHere](#) campaign, advanced nationally by Temple University, has continued to garner global attention, with more than 350 higher education institutions and organizations using this hashtag to promote that all international students are welcome to study in the United States ([#YouAreWelcomeHere](#), 2021). Building upon the success of the social media campaign, more than 50 colleges and universities have committed to providing scholarships to international students through the [#YouAreWelcomeHere](#) national scholarship program.

U.S. governmental resources are also cited as popular recruitment resources, with 48 percent of colleges and universities leveraging [EducationUSA](#), a U.S. Department of State network that promotes U.S. higher education to students around the world by offering accurate, comprehensive, and current information about opportunities to study at accredited postsecondary institutions in the United States (U.S. Department of State, 2021). In addition, EducationUSA provides services to the U.S. higher education community to help institutional leaders meet their recruitment and campus internationalization goals by offering resources such as the [Global Guide](#), student mobility fact sheets, recruitment fairs, and a network of more than 430 international student advising centers in more than 175 countries and territories.

The [U.S. Commercial Service](#) also has education and training services industry specialists who provide resources on the global competitiveness of the U.S. education industry, expanding market access, and recommendations on digital strategies for outreach to different markets (International Trade Administration, 2021a). They also convene the Education State Consortia (study state consortia), which brings together institutions within a state to promote that state as a destination for international students to study (International Trade Administration, 2021b). The U.S. Commercial Service most recently launched an initiative, USA: A Study Destination, to boost U.S. education exports by promoting the United States as a premier destination for international students to study. The initiative supports the state consortia and provides them with additional resources to recruit international students in line with their economic strategies.

Conclusion

The findings from the Fall 2021 Snapshot reflect the resilience of the U.S. higher education system in the COVID-19 pandemic and its continued support for international students. With large increases in new international student enrollments, the findings point to a potential rebound of international student totals in the 2021/22 academic year, with potential further recovery in future years. The full picture of the 2021/22 academic year will be available in November 2022 with the release of *Open Doors 2022* and will hopefully show a similar trend in both new and total international student totals. U.S. higher education institutions understand the economic of having international students in their diverse student body, with international students contributing approximately \$39 billion to the U.S. economy as of 2020 (U.S. Department of Commerce, 2021). Beyond the economic contribution, U.S. institutions also value the diverse perspectives and cultures international students bring to the classroom, enriching academic discussions and enhancing all students' understanding of the world.

As the 2021/22 academic year continues, the findings from this report provide essential contextual details that illuminate the complete picture of international students at U.S. higher education institutions:

- **A strong return to in-person study among new international students indicates these students' willingness to travel and pursue an in-person experience.** U.S. colleges and universities have already put into place significant measures to ensure the safety and security of students, faculty, and staff. In Fall 2021, we already see a return to in-person study among international students, with at least 65 percent of students on campus in the United States. U.S. colleges and universities should further consider and prepare for this return to campus and continue implementing necessary measures to ensure the safety and security of all, including international students. This year's findings indicate that while hybrid and online study will continue to be an option for international students, it will likely not replace the in-person experience of studying at a U.S. university.
- **The COVID-19 pandemic is affecting U.S. higher education institutions differently.** As reported in the COVID-19 Snapshot Series and this report, COVID-19 analyses indicate that the pandemic affects institutional types differently. While Doctoral universities are largely rebounding in their international student enrollments and other institutional types with smaller student numbers, community colleges continue to see a decrease in their international student totals. In providing support in COVID-19 to U.S. colleges and universities, it is critical to consider this variable effect and that the rebounds in international students may not be realized across all types of institutions.
- **U.S. institutions will need to continue to adapt and meet challenges.** The uncertainties of the COVID-19 pandemic have shown that institutions need to remain flexible given the realities of the evolving health crisis. As the traditional paradigm has been challenged, higher education institutions have been resilient and have innovated to offer online advising, expanded student support, and hybrid learning. Our findings also indicate that it will be critical to monitor how the U.S. higher education community leverages opportunities that arose as a result of the pandemic, and how institutions continue to come together to address realities that arise.

The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted the international education landscape on a global scale that had not happened before. Many international students were not able to travel to the United States due to travel restrictions in 2020, and U.S. colleges and universities showed incredible flexibility in offering many of these students the opportunity to begin or continue their studies online from abroad. This year, we see a commitment and desire among international students to pursue their U.S. academic degree through in-person study. This further solidifies why the United States remains a primary destination for international students, not only for the excellent academics our colleges and universities provide but also for the unparalleled experiences international students have living and studying in the United States.

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