

**Counting Contributions & Combating Misconceptions:
International Students in the United States**

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International students are a critical population within the higher education sector in the United States, attending colleges and universities across the country and pursuing various fields of study. International students have studied in the U.S. since the 19th century. Their perspectives help globalize U.S. higher education and make it world-class. Yet, despite their important role in U.S. society, many people have a limited understanding of international students: who they are, what they contribute, and why the U.S. needs them.

While public opinion polls in the U.S. show an overall positive attitude toward international students, they also find a significant gap in a clear understanding of the value and benefits of international students, with negative perceptions lingering that international students take college seats away from U.S. students and that they might pose a security threat to the U.S. These perceptions are not supported by evidence. Here are five common realities about international students in the U.S.:

Reality 1: International students expand enrollment opportunities for U.S. students.

The Myth: International students take seats away from American students.

International students make up only 5% of total higher education enrollment in the U.S. At the undergraduate level they make up only about 3% of enrollment, and at the graduate level their proportion is higher at 12%. But despite their relatively small proportions, they have a large and positive impact on U.S. higher education, local communities, and states. Check out data by state [here](#).

Contrary to the fear that international students displace U.S. students and take away college seats, past and current evidence points to the opposite, showing that the presence of international students increases the enrollment of domestic students. A [2016 study](#) found that a gain in every ten international graduate students was associated with an increase in domestic students, and with no adverse effects on the enrollment of under-represented U.S. students. A [more recent](#) 2021 study on undergraduate students by the National Foundation for American Policy finds that the presence of international students leads to an increase in the number of U.S. students receiving bachelor's degrees in STEM fields.

International students bring important global and cultural perspectives to classrooms and campuses and help internationalize U.S. higher education, especially given that only 10% of U.S. students will study abroad.

Reality 2: International students boost job growth, innovation, and the overall economy when they participate in the U.S. labor force.

The Myth: International students become workers who take jobs away from Americans.

Whether through Optional Practical Training (OPT), the post-study work program available to international students, or through subsequent employment through H-1B visas and/or Green Cards, multiple sources of evidence show that the presence of international students is beneficial for the U.S. Twenty-five percent of founders of a \$1 billion U.S. startup first came to America as an international student.¹ Companies founded by immigrants are worth an estimated \$168 billion and have generated thousands of U.S. jobs. Check out OPT participation by state [here](#).

The larger the presence of H-1B visa holders in a metro area, the larger the growth in invention (measured in patents) by both immigrant groups as well as by U.S. native-born workers.² Additionally, it is projected that an increase in H-1B visas could yield 1.3 million new jobs and add \$158 billion to the U.S. GDP by 2045.

Reality 3: International students primarily support themselves and contribute \$39 billion to the U.S. economy.

The Myth: All international students depend on the US for funding. Why should the U.S. pay for students from other countries to study here?

The majority of international students in the U.S. (56%) support themselves through their family and personal funds, and only 17% receive support from U.S. based funding sources (although a higher portion of international graduate students receive support from their U.S. institution). Because most international students pay for their tuition, fees and living expenses, they collectively contribute approximately \$39 billion to the U.S. economy, making U.S. higher education the sixth largest service export for the country, ahead of even cars and medicine exports. The presence of international students in the U.S. also helps create approximately 416,000 jobs that serve them. Check out your state numbers [here](#).

Reality 4: The U.S. economy and workforce needs to attract the best talent to remain globally competitive, including in the science and engineering fields.

The Myth: The U.S. has an over-reliance on international students and immigrants in the science and engineering fields.

Building an educational and talent pipeline for STEM fields is not a zero-sum game. While it is true that many international students pursue these fields—particularly at the graduate level—and that several stay on to join the STEM work sector, there is also a concerted effort by the U.S. government, the academic sector, and employers to create more opportunities for Americans in these fields.

A lesser-known fact is that in order to boost enrollment in these fields, part of the revenue that the U.S. generates from H-1B work visas goes towards funding enrichment programs in the STEM fields for U.S. students and for retraining programs for U.S. workers. According to one estimate, H-1B visa fees have supported over a million K-12 students and 50,000 teachers to receive education and training in the STEM fields, and have also helped fund almost 90,000 college-level scholarships in such fields. At the workforce level, H-1B fees have enabled the U.S.

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<https://nfap.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/2018-BILLION-DOLLAR-STARTUPS.NFAP-Policy-Brief.2018-1.pdf>

² <https://www.cato.org/blog/dont-ban-h-1b-workers-they-are-worth-their-weight-patents>
<https://www.americanimmigrationcouncil.org/research/h1b-visa-program-fact-sheet>

Department of Labor to provide grants of approximately \$2.5 billion to train U.S. workers in critical technology fields.³

Reality 5: International students benefit the U.S. both by staying on as skilled immigrants and also by returning to their home countries.

The Myth: All international students stay on in the U.S. after their studies. Doesn't the U.S. already have too many immigrants?

While a large proportion of international students (86%)—especially those from Asian countries—do stay on in the U.S., fueling American enterprise and innovation, many of them return home and have done so in increasing numbers over the past decade. Those who return home become ambassadors for the U.S., helping forge long-term international partnerships and collaboration amongst U.S. business, academia, and scientists. This is why U.S. higher education is one of the strongest forms of soft power for the U.S., ensuring long-term diplomatic ties with the rest of the world.

Despite the large numbers of international students who stay on in the U.S., it is not easy for them to do so as the process is time-consuming and complex. Upon completing OPT, students whose employers are applying for H-1B work visas are subject to a cap of only 65,000 visas per year (plus an additional 20,000 visas for graduates of U.S. institutions), with the limited number of visas running out within the first week of being available. Additionally, according to current estimates, the backlog for employment-based Green Cards stands at 1.2 million as of November 2020. Surveys of international students and U.S. campuses also point to difficult, restrictive, and lengthy immigration processes as being a significant factor in the recent declines in international students coming to the U.S.

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<https://nfap.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/Employer-Paid-H-1B-Visa-Fees.NFAP-Policy-Brief.April-2019-1.pdf>