PRESIDENTS' ALLIANCE | ON HIGHER EDUCATION AND IMMIGRATION

HIGHER ED IMMIGRATION PORTAL

Data Brief: New SEVIS Data Reveals Sharp Drop in International Student Enrollment

International Student Numbers Decline Sharply Between 2024 and 2026, with Major Destination States Seeing the Largest Losses

New data from the Student and Exchange Visitor Information System (SEVIS) reveal a significant decline in the number of international students enrolled at U.S. higher education institutions, with losses accelerating sharply over the past year.

As of October 2026, approximately 1.09 million international students were enrolled in associates, bachelors, masters, and doctorate programs across the United States or participating in post-graduate Optional Practical Training as part of those programs — nearly 78,000 less than in October 2024 before President Trump took office.

This represents a 6.7% decline in total international student enrollment between October 2024 and 2026.

To put the decline in perspective, during the first Trump administration, the overall number of international students as reported by the Institute of International Education saw a decrease of less than a percentage point or approximately 0.3% — with numbers declining from 1,078,822 in 2016/17 to 1,075,496 in 2019/20. New international student enrollment during the same period saw a much steeper decline with a cumulative drop of 11.4% from 2016 to 2019. While Open Doors and SEVIS measure different sources and time periods, the figures provide an important comparison for the more recent drop.

The 6.7% decline underscores the adverse impacts of the administration's actions on both prospective international students and those already in the U.S., and it shows the damaging consequences to programs and budgets for U.S. colleges and universities. It also raises real concerns about the United States' ability to continue attracting and retaining international students and scholars amid a series of the administration's restrictive immigration policies.

The Growing Uncertainty Facing International Students

International students contribute to classrooms and research, support academic programs and local businesses, and serve as an important bridge within our talent pipeline that connects U.S. higher education to the workforce. Their declining numbers have implications beyond the students themselves. Fewer international students means fewer opportunities for American students to learn alongside peers from around the world, greater financial pressure on institutions, and reduced access to U.S.-educated global talent for employers.

Most of the decline occurred this past year. While the number of international students declined slightly between October 2024 and October 2025, the much steeper drop of 73,264 fewer

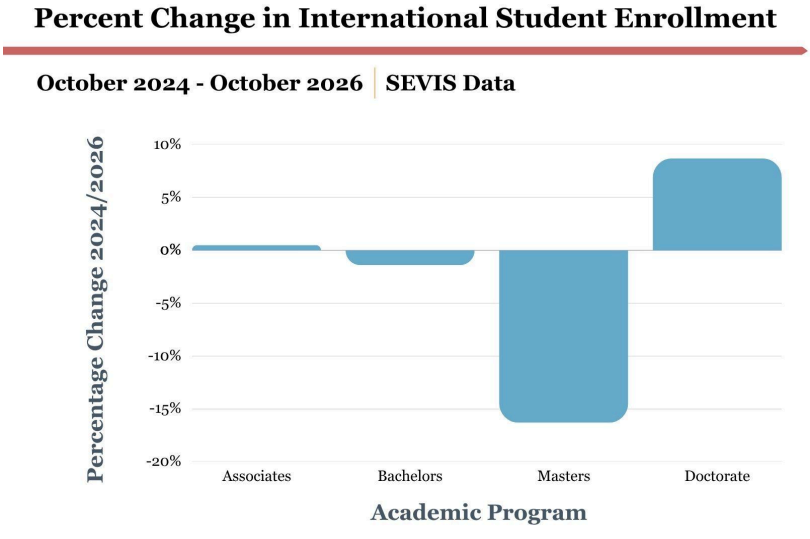
students or 6.3% occurred from October 2025 to October 2026. What overall totals can mask is the specific drop in new international student enrollment as students already in the U.S. remain to pursue post-graduate practical training. The latest SEVIS data show a substantive overall decline, suggesting a continued steep drop in new international enrollment as well as possible shifts in the plans of international students already in the United States. Indeed, IIE's Fall 2026 Enrollment Survey of 809 U.S. institutions found a 15% decline in new international enrollments and a 6% decline in OPT participation for fall 2026.

The decline is taking place amid a series of policy changes by the current administration that impact international students at every stage of their journey. Visa delays and travel restrictions make it harder for students to reach the United States. Visa revocations, SEVIS record terminations, and changes impacting Curricular Practical Training (CPT) have created uncertainty for students already on campus. Meanwhile, the proposed fees for Optional Practical Training (OPT) and changes to H-1B visas have raised questions about opportunities to gain experience and pursue careers after graduation. On top of that, the rule ending Duration of Status has added further uncertainty for current and prospective students, even though a federal court has blocked its implementation while litigation continues.

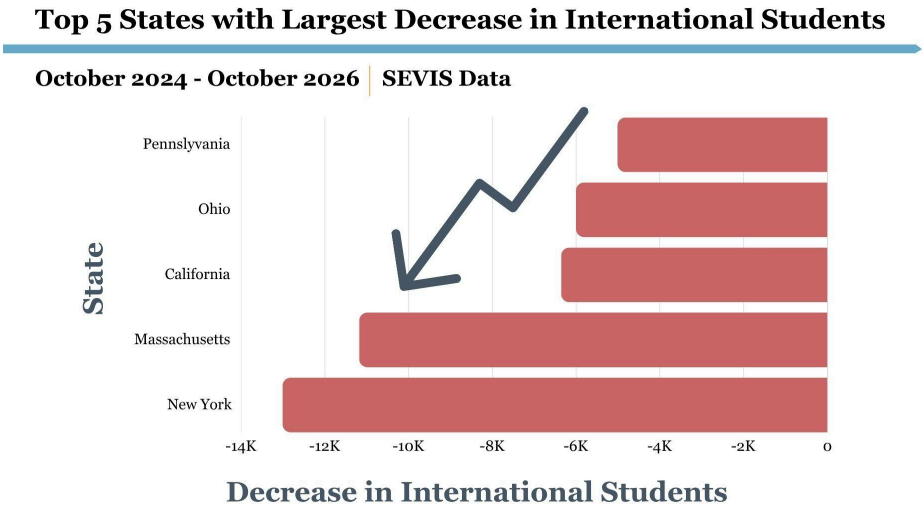
While the SEVIS data do not establish how much of the decline can be attributed to any single policy, taken together, these changes impact the predictability students consider when deciding where to study. Students who choose other countries take their knowledge, skills, and potential contributions with them.

The Economic and Educational Risks Extend Across the Country

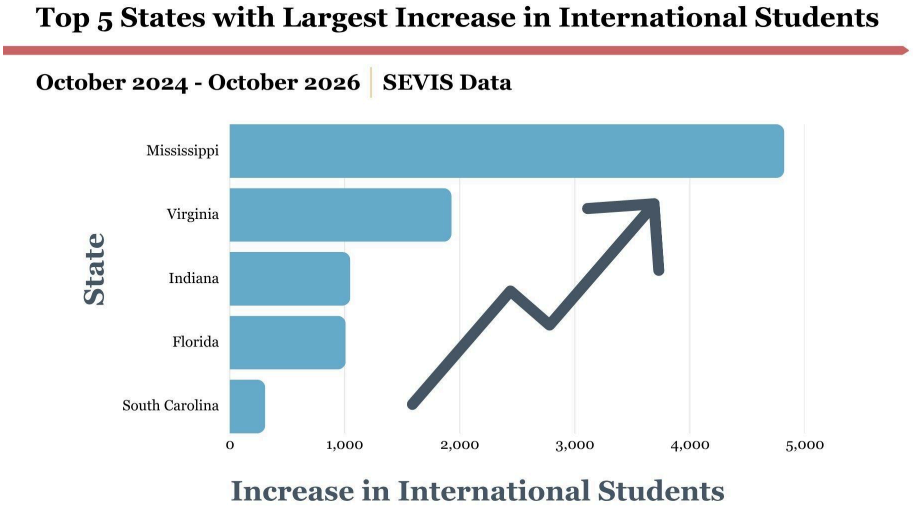
International student enrollment varied across academic programs between 2024 and 2026. Master's enrollment fell by 16.3%, a loss of nearly 90,000 students that drove the overall decline in international student numbers. Most of this decline occurred between 2025 and 2026, when master's enrollment dropped by nearly 15%, compared with less than 2% the previous year. In contrast, doctoral programs gained more than 16,000 students between 2024 and 2026, an 8.7% rise, with most of that growth also occurring in the previous year. Over the two-year period, bachelor's enrollment declined slightly by 1.4%, while associate degree enrollment remained relatively stable.



States with large international student populations experienced the biggest losses. New York, Massachusetts, California, Ohio, and Pennsylvania recorded the largest declines between 2024 and 2026. Together, these five states lost more than 41,000 international students, accounting for over half of the nationwide decline.



Only a handful of states experienced growth. Just eight states recorded increases in international student numbers between 2024 and 2026. Mississippi experienced the largest increase — with the increase coming primarily in doctoral programs which nearly doubled their international student enrollment — while Virginia, Indiana, Florida, and South Carolina also recorded gains. Together, the eight states added fewer than 10,000 international student records, while New York alone lost more than 13,000.



According to NAFSA, international students contributed approximately $39.9 billion to the U.S. economy and supported more than 309,000 jobs during the 2025–26 academic year. Compared

to the previous academic year, that's $3 billion less in spending and over 46,000 fewer jobs supported. Their spending supports housing, dining, transportation, and other local businesses, while their presence helps institutions sustain courses, programs, and campus resources that benefit American students.

International students contribute to research groups, sports teams, and music programs. They sustain programs that serve American students and help build connections between the United States and countries around the world. After graduation, those who gain practical experience or join the U.S. workforce contribute skills to U.S. employers, research institutions, and communities. Declining enrollment reduces both the immediate economic contributions associated with students' spending and the longer-term benefits of their skills, ideas, and talent.

As global competition for international talent intensifies, the latest SEVIS data raises serious concerns about the United States' ability to maintain its position as a top destination for international students and scholars. The harmful impacts of declining enrollment reach well beyond individual students and campuses to broader national interests in research, innovation and technology as well as to the American students, employers, industries, and communities that benefit from their presence and contributions.