
| RESEARCH ARTICLE

Immigration Policy, International Talent and the Future of U.S. Higher Education: Potential and Existential Threats Analysis

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| ABSTRACT

The U.S. has gained many benefits over the years through partnerships in higher education and immigration, including the recruitment of talent and international students who contribute to innovation and research within the system and the economy. The latest changes to immigration policies by the U.S. federal government pose a threat to this relationship. This research investigates the relationship between immigration policy and the sustainability of U.S. higher education, focusing on the academic years 2020 to 2025. The study reviews immigration policies, economy, immigration data, and research to ascertain the implications of changes in the U.S.'s immigration policy and the flow of international students into the U.S., resulting in a loss of \$43 billion/yearly and a competitive disadvantage in the global economy. Findings indicate that international students at U.S. institutions are approximately 6% of total enrollments, and 57% of them study in fields like STEM that are critical to U.S. innovation. The study examined the impact of policy shifts, such as visa revocations, travel bans, and deportations, which would cause international enrollments in higher education to fall by 17% in the academic year that begins this fall of 2025. The research has policy implications for full-scale reforms by the U.S. federal government that provide trade-offs between national security concerns and strategic talent-retention priorities.

| KEYWORDS

Immigration Policy, Higher Study Abroad, International Students, Talent Acquisition, STEM Workforce, U.S.A.

| ARTICLE INFORMATION

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1. Introduction

The United States (U.S.A.) remained the top destination for international students worldwide, attracting a record 1.17 million students from 50 different states in the academic year Fall 2024-2025 (IIE, 2025). This also implies that the prominence of the United States in attracting international students is not just an educational function but also a geopolitical one, i.e., bringing into America neither its defense nor its economic importance abroad. Students have become an integral part of the U.S. higher education system, with more than \$55 billion attributed to their presence, as well as 355,000 jobs (NAFSA, 2025).

In January 2025, the second Trump administration began using its executive powers to make rapid modifications to the policies that govern international students and scholars (Presidents' Alliance on Higher Education and Immigration, 2025). These changes include more rigorous vetting processes, thousands of students receiving visa revocations, 39 country travel bans, and the proposed removal of the Duration of Status principle, which has governed the international student system for decades (Shorelight, 2025).

The effects of these policy changes extend beyond simple administrative hassles. It addresses fundamental competitive features that American higher education has traditionally offered: the American principles of academic and research freedom, as well as the fluidity of cross-border ideas. The most affected students have been international students, especially those in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) fields (Oh, 2025). Since 57% of international students study STEM and this

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group has been responsible for over 30 percent of U.S. patents and 33 percent of U.S. Nobel Prizes, the potential loss of American innovation capacity is severe (Association for Women in Science [AWIS], 2025).

The world competition for international students has also intensified. As we witnessed, while the U.S. kept being the biggest market for it, other countries such as Canada, U.K. and Australia adopted things like fast visa procedures after studies and post-study work opportunities, and much clearer ways to permanent residence, also attention is not only about inviting people but getting them to stay, according to NAFSA (2023). While Canada, for instance, saw an 80% rise in international student numbers over the five years leading up to the travel disruptions brought on by the pandemic, this may be attributed to positive immigration policies, including three-year post-study work permits (NAFSA, 2023). These rival destinations have seized upon policy uncertainty in the U.S. to market themselves as more welcoming options for global talent.

The long-term stability of U.S. higher education has increasingly relied on tuition income from international students. International students account for a significant share of tuition revenue at many institutions — including up to 20% at some large research universities — and typically pay full tuition, making them ineligible for federal financial aid (Bound et al., 2021). This income stream has enabled institutions to subsidize domestic student financial aid, enhance their curricula, and maintain competitive faculty salaries. The possible decline in international enrollment could compromise more than just institutions' bottom lines; it could also weaken the accessibility and quality of American postsecondary education overall.

This paper attempts to develop a rigorous framework to think about the complicated interactions between immigration policy, the flow of international students, institutional capacity and national competitiveness in higher education. The five-year period from 2020–25 encompasses not only pandemic-related disturbances and those caused by activity in one or another policy domain, but also identifies how different regimes enable some educational phenomena to occur internationally. Recognizing these dynamics is critical to generating sound, evidence-based policy recommendations that can preserve American preeminence in global higher education while reasonably addressing rightful concerns about national security and the economy-skilled workforce.

1.1 Objectives of the study:

The primary objectives of this study are to conduct a detailed analysis of the complex relationship between U.S. immigration policy, international talent, and the future direction of American higher education. The objectives of this research are to:

- ✓ To evaluate the impact of international student policies to be in effect during 2020-25, including those of a potential second Trump administration.
- ✓ To assess both the national and state-level economic impacts of international students in terms of fiscal impact, jobs supported by those spending, and regional specialization with a district focus.
- ✓ To examine the impact of policies that restrict immigration on the U.S. STEM workforce, research productivity, and global science and innovation competitiveness of the U.S.
- ✓ To learn about institutional vulnerabilities and strategies pursued by U.S. institutions of higher education amid uncertainty in international enrollment.
- ✓ To make policy recommendations based on evidence and enable the U.S. to maintain a balance between national security imperatives and talent attraction to U.S. higher education.

2. Literature Review:

The relationship between immigration policy, international talent, and U.S. higher education has attracted considerable scholarly attention since 2020, driven by policy instability by the U.S. federal government, geopolitical realignment, and rising global competition for skilled human capital. This review gathers the peer-reviewed literature into four interconnected thematic areas: the structural and financial roles of international students, talent pipelines and labor market dynamics for STEM jobs, policy-induced disruptions at the institutional and faculty levels and high-level geopolitical realignments in higher education.

Bound et al. (2021) have provided the empirical foundation for U.S. higher education, specifically documenting that international student enrollment in U.S. universities has grown fourfold since 1980 and outlining the role of foreign students in both the academic labor force and as a revenue source at research-oriented institutions. They find a structural connection between chronically declining state appropriations and increasing institutional dependence on full-fee-paying international students, which they contend leaves public universities systematically exposed to shocks in enrollment from external policy environments. McKivigan (2020) expands upon this by showing that Trump-era changes to federal policy, such as heightened visa fees and aggressive rhetorical deterrence, led to pre-comparative declines in actual and expected enrollment before demonstrable aggregate effects were observed statistically significant at the mean—illustrating how sharply policy signaling outweighs regulatory adjustment effects.

Beine et al. (2023) use an instrumental variable strategy based on quasi-random variation in public university tuition to quantify the labor market contribution of internationally educated students and estimate that each additional international master's graduate adds 0.23 workers to the U.S. skilled labor supply in his or her graduation year. Amuedo-Dorantes et al. (2023) show that OPT STEM extensions substantially disproportionately increased international student enrollments in particular fields of study and established employment opportunities after graduation as upstream recruitment incentives with measurable selectivity effects. Anelli et al. (2023) provide a critical qualification: greater shares of foreign students in STEM lead to the displacement of domestic students from those majors, but only very rarely out of STEM altogether (the displaced students tend to end up in high-earning social science fields), indicating that substitution is occurring at the level of major rather than earnings penalties for affected individuals.

Kahn and MacGarvie (2020) study cross-country variation in annual employment-based permanent visa caps, discovering core attrition effects whereby delays of over five and a half years from the time of PhD for Chinese and Indian STEM graduates' vis a vis unconstrained peers generate stay rates 10.6 percentage points lower among Indians—a structural inefficiency resulting in immense deadweight loss on prior human capital investments by U.S. systems. Doran et al. (2022) use H-1B lottery randomization to calculate that each additional visa won crowds out about 1.5 domestic workers and achieves at best modest innovation gains, questioning the commonly assumed direct productivity advantage from high-skilled immigration and shifting analytical focus towards systemic and ecosystem-level consequences.

Chen et al. (2023) provide causal evidence that visa restrictiveness can have adverse compositional consequences: higher expected rates of F-1 refusals dissuade more high-ability international applicants than should be the case, degrading the quality of human capital in U.S. research environments rather than common simplex compressions of enrollment volume. Feeney et al. (2023) conducts a parallel analysis at the faculty level, using logistic regression from survey data which reveals that disruptions in immigration policy are shown to significantly restrict international research partnerships; damage the recruitment of post-doctoral scholars; and increase emigration plans among U.S.-born and foreign born STEM faculty—the relationship most understudied but critical within the leg-workforce components influencing short- and long-term productivity on U.S. science competitiveness.

Mok et al. (2024) show that elite Chinese students perceive bilateral tensions between the U.S. and China, and that geopolitical relations will much improve perceptions of American institutional attractiveness, which are indeed underestimated on a structural level, as an institutional habitus is shaped by scientific internationalism. The theoretical framework construct is given by Moscovitz and Sabzalieva (2023), who give birth to a new "geopolitics of higher education" in which nation-states weaponize universities as soft-power objects on a canvas of securitization, technological nationalism, and increasing deglobalization. All together, this body of literature suggests that the difficulties facing U.S. higher education represent a multi-pronged, structural challenge, where fiscal dependence, the pathways to talent loss, and selectivity distortions stemming from geopolitical competition come together to threaten U.S. sustained dominance in global knowledge production.

3. Methodology:

The latest immigration policy and enrollment of international students for higher studies are analyzed using a mixed-methods approach that combines policy analysis, collection of immigration-related enrollment data, and the calculation of various economic impacts of immigration policy. This study utilized various authoritative sources, including the Open Doors Report Series by the Institute of International Education (IIE) from 2020 to 2025, NAFSA's (Association of International Educators) economic impact analyses, SEVIS report by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS) & peer-reviewed journals published during the study period. The analysis examines and provides longitudinal trends in international student enrollment across academic levels (Undergraduate, Graduate, and Optional Practical Training [OPT]), as well as fields of study and countries of origin. The economic impact analysis and NAFSA's methodologies, which involve the immigration-related enrollments, tuition, cost of living, the employment multiplier, and U.S. Department of Commerce economic data, are integrated for economic impact assessments. The geographic distribution study assesses national and institutional levels of enrollment data to determine the regional and institutional economic dependency.

Beginning with policy analysis will involve reviewing the executive orders, strategies, and administrative activities from 2020 to 2025 for the first time, with a particular focus on what was put in place in 2025. The major sources include orders from the president, proposed rules from the Department of Homeland Security, guidance from the State Department, and policies with records of litigation against their enforcement. The analysis employs content analysis of the policies to identify the mechanisms that limit access for international students, particularly the alterations in visa processing, the increase in travel restrictions, and the restrictions on employment authorization after graduation. The qualitative parts will include statements and position papers from experts affiliated with the associations of higher education, such as NAFSA, the American Council on Education, and the Presidents' Alliance on Higher Education and Immigration.

4. Findings and Discussion:

4.1 Enrollment Trends and Policy Impacts:

In the academic year 2020 to 2025, the international student enrollments in the United States (U.S.A.) are expected to exhibit an unusual pattern- a decline due to COVID-19 pandemic-related issues. This was an impressive rebound and subsequent declines resulting from immigration policies taken by the United States Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) that affected international students. From 2024-2025, there are an estimated 1,177,766 international students enrolled, a 5% increase from the 2024 academic year (IIE, 2025). This increase keeps the United States at the top of the international higher education destination. Although the rise appears promising, there is a lack of sustainable support for continued enrollment.

In 2025, both graduate & undergraduate international student enrollment data suggest a negative trend in policy-related enrollment declines in the U.S.A. For the 2025 Fall academic semester, there is a 17% decline in international graduate students and a 2% decline in international undergraduate students. This is the greatest decline since the start of the pandemic (IIE, 2025). NAFSA projects a loss of \$1.1 billion in economic contributions and 22,000 jobs related to international students for the Fall Semester of 2025 (NAFSA, 2025).

Table-1: International Student Enrollment and Policy Indicators, AY 2023-2024 to AY 2024-2025.

Indicator	AY 2023-2024	AY 2024-2025 / Fall 2025	Change
Total International Students (all levels)	1,121,682	1,177,766	+5.0%
Graduate Enrollment (Fall term, YoY)	Fall 2024 baseline	Fall 2025	-17%
Undergraduate Enrollment (Fall term, YoY)	Fall 2024 baseline	Fall 2025	-2%
Countries Under Travel Restrictions	0 (pre-June 2025)	39 (by Dec. 2025)	+39 countries
Projected Economic Loss, Fall 2025 semester	-	\$1.1 billion	-
Projected job loss, Fall 2025 semester	-	22,000 jobs	-

Note: Sourced from IIE (2025), NAFSA (2025) and Presidents' Alliance on Higher Education and Immigration (2025).

There are numerous complicated enmeshments in terms of policy explanations driving the enrollment contraction. Starting in March 2025, the Donald Trump administration took steps that had never been seen in the history of the U.S.A. regarding international students, including mass F-1 Visa cancellations and SEVIS record cancellations for thousands of international students (Stop AAPI Hate, 2025). While the federal courts later intervened (albeit only partially) to restore some records, the reputational damage to the U.S. education institution, coupled with the erosion of student confidence, took a toll. Immigration specialists reported unprecedented levels of visa denials for applicants from major source countries, especially India, reaching record levels in 2025, where students cited rejections stating that there were insufficient connections to their home countries, to which they were born and raised, and from which they derived (Stop AAPI Hate, 2025).

Presidential proclamations imposed further restrictions that limited the travel of international students. The travel ban of June 2025 first restricted visitors from 12 countries, and by December 2025, the number of restricted countries increased to 39, including full and partial travel restrictions for F-1, J-1, and M-1 visa applicants (Presidents' Alliance, 2025). These restrictions affected the largest number of students from Sub-Saharan Africa, which had shown a 13% increase in 2023-2024 and comprised new potential markets for the United States (IIE, 2024).

The most notable change in this policy would be the removal of "Duration of Status" which, from a structural perspective, stands to be the most impactful. Under the new policies set to be implemented by the Department of Homeland Security in August 2025, students will not be able to remain in the United States for the duration of their studies. Instead, students will be admitted for pre-determined, fixed periods not to exceed four years (Shorelight, 2025). This will create significant administrative burdens for students in doctoral programs, which are typically four years or longer. It will also reduce flexibility for students in specialized, intermediate, or cross-disciplinary programs. Bureaucratic burdens of this decision has diminished a school's ability to attract international students of top talent (Cantwell et al., 2023).

4.2 Economic Dimensions and Fiscal Impacts:

It is essential to understand the economic value of international students in the U.S. higher education system and the economy in general. For the 2023-2024 academic year, international students spent 43.8 billion dollars on the economy. This is a 9.5 % increase from the previous year and is the highest spent by students (NAFSA, 2024). This value is calculated as a function of their

tuition, housing, and other expenditures. The international students, in the case of 60% of students, pay for their education mostly from external sources (outside the U.S.), including their family, personal savings, and government-sponsored programs from their home countries (IIE, 2024).

The magnitudes of the economic multiplier effect from the spending of international students are also significant. For every 3 international students, there is one job created for an American national in support of the higher education system, housing, food, retail, travel, mobile, and health insurance (NAFSA, 2024). For the year 2023-2024, international students created 378,175 job opportunities for U.S. Citizens. The opportunities created by international students are spread evenly across the 50 states. However, there are a significant number of opportunities in the states with high numbers of international students (NAFSA, 2024).

The regional economic effects provide some degree of economic variation; however, states with large research universities reap the benefits first. For example, California, with 14.6% of all international students, followed by New York, Texas, Massachusetts, and Illinois (IIE, 2025). Texas had the highest economic rate, with an appreciation of 8% in international student participation of 2024-2025, translating to about 7,500 new international students in Texas (IIE, 2025). Despite the overall smaller enrollment numbers, community colleges had the highest growth rate of 8%. They also contributed \$2.2 billion to the economy, representing a 10.5% increase (NAFSA, 2025).

Over the last several years, a decrease of 2.3 million students in the last decade has caused many institutions to become even more reliant on students from international sources. A large portion of the revenue loss is attributed to large research universities and those that offer master's programs. Without international student enrollment, they are forced to cut or drastically limit domestic student financial aid and cross-subsidize, or eliminate, programmatic revenue (Bound et al., 2021). However, revenue loss due to restricted international student enrollment, resulting from policy changes, the global economy, or other countries, creates significant revenue loss for institutional research universities.

For the 2024-2025 academic year, the first decline in economic contribution from International Students was reported at 42.9 billion USD, which is a 2% drop from the previous year (NAFSA, 2025). Combined with the anticipated decline in enrollments for Fall 2025, this marks the first major impact on international student spending on institutional budgets and regional economies. The National Foundation for American Policy estimates that the U.S. higher education sector stands to lose over \$7 billion and 60,000 jobs if enrollment continues to decline without policy changes (Shorelight, 2025).

4.3 STEM Workforce Implications and Innovation Capacity:

International students, thus shaping a considerable portion of a country's immigration policy and its innovation rates, are key influencers for the latter, as in the U.S.A. In the 2024-2025 academic year, among the international students- 57% majored in STEM fields, 26% studied Mathematics and 18% studied Computer Science and Engineering, respectively (IIE, 2025).

International students participating in the Optional Practical Training (OPT) program, which permits international students to work in the U.S.A. for 12 months for non-STEM subjects & up to 36 months for STEM fields after completion of their graduation or post-graduation studies. The number hit an all-time high of 242,782 in the 2023-2024 academic year. Of these participants, STEM OPT authorizations accounted for 165,524 students (IIE, 2024). These international graduates become a part of the domestic STEM workforce. Research indicates that a foreign-born STEM worker, even when still in training, adds an estimated annual contribution to the U.S. GDP of \$12,225 to \$13,568 (Bruner & Wainwright, 2020). When they enter the workforce, this contribution increases significantly. Bruner and Wainwright (2020) found that the U.S. postgraduate STEM workforce is estimated to have contributed \$409 billion to U.S. GDP in labor value-added in 2019, representing 1.9% of U.S. GDP.

Many graduates do not pursue designated immigration pathways because of their systemic absence, rather than personal choices. In the years 2015-2019, approximately 51% of master's graduates and 76% of doctoral graduates left the United States (Bruner and Wainwright, 2020). U.S. universities invest considerable amounts of money in their doctoral programs, and the loss of graduates represents a reverse brain drain loss. The loss goes even further, as the proposed changes to the H-1B visa, which are to include a \$100,000 fee to even apply for the visa (which is to be in place by September of 2025), and other changes, make the loss of employment opportunities in the United States a reality (Shorelight, 2025).

International students have also been pivotal in creating the ecosystem by being responsible for over a third of the patents and a third of the Nobel prizes awarded to Americans, even though they are a small percentage of the overall population (AWIS, 2025). The ecosystem and the patents it has produced must be seen as the direct result of the recruitment of international students and the unique and diverse perspectives they add when working as a group, and their ability to collaborate in diverse teams (Haque

& Rahaman, 2021). The primary concern today is the decrease in the number of students selecting the United States as their educational destination.

The intersection of immigration policies and STEM workforce development is creating new inequities deserving further scrutiny, especially for intersectional analysis of race and gender. Oh (2025) shows that compared to U.S.-born individuals, the race/ethnicity and gender gaps in STEM degrees for STEM first-generation immigrants are considerably larger. This points to the immigration process, which is inequitable on multiple levels. The imbalances are surely closing the diversity gaps that are essential to innovation in STEM. They are also limiting the available skilled workforce to address pressing national issues in fields such as Artificial Intelligence (AI), semiconductors, bio-science and other critical industries.

4.4 Institutional Responses and Adaptation Strategies:

The adaptive strategies deployed by U.S. higher education institutions demonstrate immigration policy volatility. However, these strategies have revealed differentials based on resource allocation, selectivity, position within the market, and institution type. While elite research universities with considerable global branding have proven to be more adaptable in retaining the interest of potential international students despite the policy administrative challenges, United States regional comprehensive universities, master's level universities, and community colleges do not have the means to persevere through the policy obstruction, and therefore, suffer from the loss of enrollment even more than the previously stated institutions (Cantwell et al., 2023).

The strengthening of communication policies to manage institutional risk in times of uncertainty has become apparent. In response to the policy changes, universities have streamlined their compliance processes, raised the international student support services, and provided more frequent communication concerning policy/legislation changes and the issues surrounding them (Shorelight, 2025). The loss of SEVP certification by Harvard University in 2025 (which was later restored by the courts) served to demonstrate the misuse of the authority to regulate, and the event created system-wide institutional compliance and risk assessments.

Another adaptive strategy is recruitment diversification, where institutions are widening outreach to new sending countries to lower reliance on traditional markets. While India became the top country of origin in 2023-2024 (surpassing China for the first time) with a 23% increase, institutions also fostered relationships with students coming from Bangladesh, Colombia, Ghana, Nepal, Nigeria, Pakistan, and Vietnam — countries with record enrollment levels in the 2024-2025 academic year (IIE, 2025). Such geographic diversification creates some insulation from country-specific policies and/or market conditions.

Still, there are fundamental constraints to these adaptive strategies. As systemic policy obstructions that discourage international students from applying to U.S. institutions persist and point-blank deny admission to admitted students, there are no visas to enter the country, and the U.S. institution's attempts to sustain enrollment are in vain. Data from college consulting surveys show that international students increasingly consider the U.S. a destination fraught with risk due to the instability of policies and the potential loss of legal status (CNBC, 2025). This erosion of the reputation of the U.S. as a study destination casts a shadow over the country even for the generations that come after the current one.

The Fall 2024 and Fall 2025 enrollment snapshots indicate that while 92% of institutions want to increase international student enrollment and 85% want to keep or increase funding for recruitment, actual enrollment results decreased. Recruitment efforts vs. enrollment results indicate that there are barriers beyond the institution's control. As one education consultant commented, whilst affluent families acknowledge the U.S. quality of education, the increasing unpredictability of policies from the institutions is beginning to overshadow the academic reputation (CNBC, 2025).

4.5 Global Competitiveness and Alternative Destinations:

Due to the emergence of competitors offering higher-paying policies to attract international talent, higher education has become a global marketplace. During the pandemic, Canada's balanced policies (accelerated work visa permits, post-graduation work permits, and three-year work permits) led to an 80% enrollment increase (NAFSA, 2023). The UK issued an international education strategy to reach 600,000 international students by 2030, following the reimplementation of 2-year post-graduation work visa policies for UK international students in 2020. Despite being recognized for its rapid-growth management, Australia still faces key competitors in international student and permanent residence policies (NAFSA, 2023).

The U.S.A. has seen a 13% decline in the number of international students since 2000, and even with the numbers rising, the growth has been attributed to increased competition (NAFSA, 2023). Relatively high numbers confirm that the level of education in the U.S. is high, but it has been shown that border policies are restrictive and highly needed in order for the U.S. to maintain its international student intake. The U.S., along with many other countries, is highly appealing to China due to the work being done at its universities. With the U.S. left out of the picture, China is becoming one of the world's education superpowers.

Table-2: Comparative International Student Growth -- United States and Competitor Destinations

Destination	Recent Enrollment / Policy Trend	Key Retention Policy Lever
Canada	+80% enrollment growth (5-yr period pre-pandemic)	3-year post-study work permit
United Kingdom	Targeting 600,000 international students by 2030	2-year post-graduation work visa (reinstated 2020)
Australia	Sustained rapid enrollment growth	Streamlined pathway to permanent residence
United States	-13% enrollment change since 2000; -17% graduate enrollment, Fall 2025	No dual intent; Duration of Status under removal; proposed \$100,000 H-1B fee

Note: Sourced from NAFSA (2023) and IIE (2025).

Research indicates that potential international students consider immigration policies, availability of work opportunities after the completion of studies, and route to residency as influential factors in selecting study destinations (Cantwell et al., 2023). The American immigration system is especially contradictory in disallowing 'Dual Intent' visa applicants; while aspiring students work to obtain proper work authorization, student visa applicants are required to prove non-immigrant intent. This places American institutions at a disadvantage compared to institutions that have clearer immigration policies.

The disadvantage is not limited to immigration policies but also to processing times. To add to the 2025 workforce cuts at global U.S. consulates, staff at the U.S. global consulates were also reduced in 2025. Because of this, there are severe appointment backlogs, and processing times are significantly delayed. Some students have reported waiting over six months even to obtain a visa appointment (Stop AAPI Hate, 2025). In contrast, other countries have improved their processes to encourage student mobility and eliminate unnecessary barriers. The difference in administrative processing times, when combined with the difference in substantive policies, creates competitive disadvantages for U.S. institutions.

5. Strategic Policy Implications:

Based on the findings of this study, policymakers, higher education institutions, and other actors are advised as follows:

- ✓ Grant international students of U.S. institutions, especially STEM graduates, permanent residency pathways, and streamline the inconsistencies between the student visa policies and labor market integration. This policy change would align U.S. practice with global competitors and reduce the loss of human capital investment.
- ✓ Further, with respect to Optional Practical Training (OPT), policymakers need to legislate its continuity and expansion, especially for Critical Technology Graduates, and permanently extend the work authorization for graduates. The OPT regulations should also be accompanied by more administrative guidelines to minimize future changes.
- ✓ Develop an integrated National International Education Strategy and establish a White House-level coordinating council to streamline and unify the policies of the State, Homeland Security, and Education Departments. The council should establish and track explanatory operational objectives, ensure cross-agency interoperability of databases, and manage conflicting policies.
- ✓ Allow for "dual intent" so student visa applicants can demonstrate bona fide study interests and genuine interest in working.
- ✓ Reinstate and develop further "Duration of Status" provisions for F-1 and J-1 visa holders, including flexibility for doctoral and specialized programs with appropriate monitoring. Fixed time constraints have created incompatible boundaries with the timelines of advanced research.
- ✓ Focus on expanding capacity for visa processing and funding for EducationUSA advising centers so that system infrastructure enables, rather than limits, the mobility of international students. This funding should be directed further down the development list to emerging sending countries to diversify sources of enrollment and reduce dependence on traditional sending countries.
- ✓ Create a systematic travel restriction exemption for all applicants of F-1, J-1, and M-1 visas. International students are thoroughly vetted and are a positive contribution to the nation. Instead of categorical exclusions, the travel restriction would be a security concern, and justified as such, but screening could be done as an alternative.
- ✓ Encourage the development of supportive mechanisms, such as federal funding programs, directed specifically at institutions that are experiencing enrollment disruptions of international students due to policy changes. This support should be directed primarily at institutions that serve, and under-serve, the domestic student populations most reliant on international student revenue for cross-subsidization.

- ✓ Create precise and predictable service standards for visa processing. Standardize decision timelines to align with academic calendars. Policies may not be prohibitive, but uncertainty about when a visa will be granted is a huge obstacle to students.
- ✓ Develop and implement programs for comprehensive compliance technical assistance. Support institutions with less administrative burden related to regulatory requirements, assisting smaller institutions with fewer staff and resources.
- ✓ Build structures for congressional oversight that look at the international student population, economic contribution, the impact of policies and provide reports at scheduled intervals. These must be aimed at ensuring no arbitrary administrative processes are put in place that run counter to the stated objectives of the policies.
- ✓ Develop alternative credential pathways for international students that are flexible, workforce-aligned and accelerated degrees that enhance employability and decrease both time & financial barriers.
- ✓ Federal govt. should invest more in data infrastructure to streamline administrative burdens by ensuring that SEVIS, USCIS, and State Department systems are interoperable. This will reduce the administrative burden on students and institutions while facilitating more efficient compliance monitoring.
- ✓ Re-engage diplomatically with international student exchanges as a means of transforming perceptions of U.S. power and influence in the world. Place higher education in international relations as a stakeholder in soft power and public diplomacy.

6. Limitations to the Study:

The study has several limitations. It analyzed the impact of the global pandemic and the policy shifts that occurred from 2020 to 2025. The time periods described for the studies undertaken are exceptional and will not represent typical timeframes for global higher education. The data gaps necessitated a less extensive study, reflecting the absence of institutional-level financial data and data on student decision-making, which compelled the researcher to rely on highly aggregated national-level data. The study is also not a comprehensive study of competitor countries, as it examines only a small set of cross-country policy comparisons. From the design of the proposal, it is reasonable to assume that the researcher will only be relying on secondary sources and not primary proprietary data, which inherently is limited in the depth of analysis it can provide for explaining the systems of cause and effect of the phenomenon.

7. Conclusion:

U.S. higher education now faces challenges in both gaining the interest of foreign students and retaining them. From 2020-2025, this industry saw huge disruption due to the pandemic, disruptive and overly restrictive policies, and the decline of the United States as a world leader in higher education. While global competition for talent has increased, the findings indicate that policies are unclear, leading to an international student mobility freeze.

The revenue that international students bring to a country is not the only benefit that they bring. They are economically impactful to the tune of \$43 million and support 355,000 jobs. They are also central to innovation in the STEM areas, with a large number of patents and research contributions. Approximately one-third of the Nobel Prizes awarded to Americans have been won in part by international students. Unfortunately, the pipeline of talent has been disrupted due to visa denials, travel bans, and prolonged and expensive vetting. More than just a statement of a temporary issue, the 17% drop in new international student enrollments for Fall 2025 signifies reputational risk.

In addition, competitor countries like Canada, United Kingdom, and Australia have strengthened their position with more attractive visa regulations, post-study work options, and pathways to residency, which have resulted in a steady erosion of the United States' share of the global student market. Although universities have adapted through the diversification of recruitment and support for students, institutional responses are unable to counter systemic barriers in policy. The evidence makes a strong case for the reform of complex issues in immigration and higher education. The United States would face the consequences of these policies in a loss of global standing with regard to innovation and economic competitiveness.

Declarations:

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