

Transcript for *Fading Beacon: Why America is Losing International Students*

BILLBOARD

From American Public Media, this is a documentary from APM Reports and The Chronicle of Higher Education.

Liping Bu: Everybody looked up to the United States as ‘Hey, this is a place where you could really learn the latest, most cutting-edge knowledge.’

More than a million international students a year come to U.S. colleges and universities.

Divyansh Kaushik: I definitely don’t think I would have gotten this experience anywhere else.

During the Cold War, the U.S. hoped to win over hearts and minds. In recent years, it’s been more about cash.

Robert Daly: They need the tuition. They need full four-year, out-of-state tuition payers. They’ve become addicted to this money.

Andreas Cangellaris: A significant amount of the revenue that comes from those out of state international students is directed back to financial aid for in-state students.

But the flow of students is slowing down.

Emily Dobson: You're cool, but maybe you're not exactly what I want anymore, U.S.

Coming up, *Fading Beacon: Why America is Losing International Students*. First, this news.

Transcript for *Fading Beacon: Why America is Losing International Students*

PART 1:

From American Public Media, this is an APM Reports documentary with the Chronicle of Higher Education. I'm Sasha Aslanian.

Zee: Can you see me now?

Sasha: I can--I can just see the top of your head.

Zee: Wow, why didn't we do this earlier?

Sasha: That was my exact thought. Why did we wait so long?

That's me, talking to my old college roommate, Ziphele Cele, on our first-ever Zoom call during the pandemic. She goes by Zee now. It's a nickname she picked up in the States.

Sasha: So it's been 30 years [Zee: wow!] since I've seen you.

Zee: Wow! Good to see you. And you're looking good as usual.

Zee and I first met at Grinnell College in the fall of 1986. We were assigned to be freshman roommates.

Sasha: And I remember you were in the room first and then--

Zee: Oh yes, you came with your parents?

Sasha: Yeah.

Zee: But I do remember what, what it is that I was wearing? I had a maroon shirt on. And a black skirt and you said you 'Why are you looking so-- you're fancy.' And I was thinking, you thought I was dressed up fancy?

Sasha: Well, I remember you dressed really nicely. And I was a kind of a hippie slob.

Zee: But I liked your style. I liked your style. I was, I was dressing like that, because that's how we dressed in South Africa.

Zee grew up in Soweto, a black township just outside Johannesburg in South Africa.

Her first language was Zulu. She tried to teach me how to pronounce her name. Listen for the click:

Z: Cele. Cele.

Sasha: And I would say Cele and you would laugh and laugh because I never could get -- I couldn't get the click.

And I still remember Zee's whooping laughter when I taught her how to ride a bike.

Transcript for *Fading Beacon: Why America is Losing International Students*

Zee: Yes I remember very well and I fell (laughs).

But I also remember the weight of her worries ... that sometimes made her cry under the covers at night.

[News clip] The South African government now says that 21 South African Blacks -- not 12 -- were killed in yesterday's very violent confrontations with police. Black leaders in Soweto

Zee grew up under Apartheid.

[Apartheid schools news clip] In South Africa's segregated school system, Blacks complain bitterly about the low quality of education and the disparity between how they and whites are taught.

Zee: You know, we didn't have a teacher. We taught ourselves math.

Sasha: You're kidding? You did not have a math teacher?

Zee: Yeah, we taught ourselves. I think our teacher left.

Anti-Apartheid leaders decided one way to fight back was to get talented Black students educated abroad. The international community stepped up to fund it. And where did they send them? To the United States.

Zee went on to earn a master's degree in mechanical engineering at Tuskegee University. Apartheid was finally crumbling and she returned home to South Africa to work as an engineer. Today, she's an entrepreneur, running her own engineering firm.

(music)

For a long time, I thought Zee's story was typical of international students in the U.S.

The best and brightest came, regardless of their ability to pay. Somebody invested in them; I wasn't clear who.

And they went home to become leaders in their own countries.

American students like me got a more worldly education from getting to live and learn alongside them.

Transcript for *Fading Beacon: Why America is Losing International Students*

I didn't know bringing students like Zee here to study was part of America's Cold War strategy. They were supposed to carry home the seeds of democracy.

I report on education now. And in the past three decades, I've seen how the story of international students on American campuses has changed dramatically.

In 1990, the year Zee and I graduated, there were fewer than 400,000 international students studying in the U.S. They weren't a substantial source of income for U.S. universities.

Since 2015, more than a million international students have enrolled in U.S. colleges and universities every year. They make up less than 6 percent of higher ed students in the U.S.¹ overall, but their impact is much larger. Foreign undergrads and master's students are more likely than domestic students to pay full tuition. And that's money that helps keep colleges afloat.

(music still low, long slow fade)

Higher education is now one of the United States' largest service exports. I know it seems strange to think of education as an export because students come here to get it. But think of the diploma they carry home as the export. And these million students coming from abroad bring in \$44 billion in revenue.² That's equal to the United States' exports of soybeans, corn and textile supplies combined.³ These are rich fields colleges are tilling.

And there's something else those international students bring: brain power. They contribute their thinking to American research projects. They intern and work for U.S. employers. They link the country to a global network of scientists, inventors and entrepreneurs. And that adds to America's influence and reach.

But the U.S. is slipping as the top destination -- and it's not just because of the pandemic.

I wanted to understand why that's happening, so I got in touch with Karin Fischer. She's covered the international students' beat for The Chronicle of Higher Education since 2007. Karin agreed to team up with APM Reports to look at how American degrees became such a massive export, and what's at stake if these students stop coming.

Karin takes us along to the beginning of the pipeline ... a recruiting session for foreign students.

Lukman Arsalan on Zoom: Welcome everyone, we're just waiting for folks to come in.

¹ <https://www.iie.org/Why-IIE/Announcements/2020/11/2020-Open-Doors-Report>

² <https://opendoorsdata.org/services/research-special-reports-and-analyses/>

³ https://www.nber.org/system/files/working_papers/w28342/w28342.pdf

Transcript for *Fading Beacon: Why America is Losing International Students*

Karin Fischer: Lukman Arsalan is hosting a Zoom call for students in China who are thinking about coming to America.

When we recorded this, Arsalan was dean of admissions at Franklin & Marshall College, a small liberal arts college in Lancaster, Pennsylvania. A fifth of their enrollment comes from abroad. Arsalan really needs students like this to say yes to his pitch.

Lukman Arsalan: And good evening for those of you in China, good morning or good afternoon wherever else you might be joining us from.

There are 13 prospective students on the call plus a handful of Franklin & Marshall staff members. There are also three current students who are all from China. The F & M delegation all have their cameras on. The prospective students are a grid of dark squares on Zoom.

The Zoom call is happening January 8, two days after the violent uprising at the U.S. Capitol. Six minutes into Arsalan's presentation, he brings it up.

Lukman Arsalan: For you looking from China looking into the United States ... it might appear that the U.S. is in chaos (laugh) and I wanted to acknowledge that because this is what is happening right now, this week, in the United States with transition of power.

Safety is a big concern for international students and their families. America's gun violence worries them. So do anti-Asian hate crimes. The attack on the capitol is not going to help Arsalan sell the U.S. either.

The Chinese students on the Zoom call aren't asking questions out loud -- they're just putting them in the chat. They don't ask follow-up questions about the Capitol uprising so it's hard to know if they're reassured. Instead, they post questions about access to professors. They ask how easy it would be to get the course selections they want. And they want to know if the international students on the panel have American friends.

The three Chinese students from Franklin & Marshall talk about the bonds they've formed with Americans and with other international students:

Yichen Liang: You can become friends with whoever you want. You will know a lot of people.

Their favorite traditions, like dorm bagel breakfasts.

Transcript for *Fading Beacon: Why America is Losing International Students*

Guangyu Yang: American bagels, they are the best!

And professors who even invite them home for Thanksgiving and Christmas.

James Zhou is a junior English major. He told the students about a memory that sticks with him from the past year: a poetry class around a bonfire.

James Zhou: It was late at night, we have like this huge like bonfire, and like sit around it and read our own poems that we wrote ... and our professor was like pulling up this iPad and like, broadcasting like us reading our poems in front of the bonfire to like to all the students back home. So that was like really this moment of realization, like, we're socially distant, all right. There's still this huge connection, this bond between us. And, you know, that's here to stay.

Zhou's story evokes a uniquely American style of higher education that combines passion and personal discovery and fun -- even during a pandemic.

Arsalan knows his prospective students have other options. There are other countries they can choose from. There's more homegrown competition as China rapidly builds its own universities.

But Arsalan thinks he's got something special to sell. He believes in the flexibility of an American education. He was once an international student himself. He grew up in Jordan.

Arsalan sees himself as a sort of ambassador for America, responding to concerns of students and families looking at the U.S. from the outside.

Lukman Arsalan: I recall being in the United Arab Emirates when Trump had won his election. And I know there was a lot of anxiety by Middle Eastern families leading up to that election.

As a candidate, Donald Trump had called for a "total and complete shutdown of Muslims entering the United States."⁴ So the people Arsalan was meeting with were understandably wary.

Arsalan was ready with a response. He reminded them of America's virtue: its openness to dissent.

4

<https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/2018/04/24/travel-ban-donald-trump-campaign-promises-president-tweets/542504002/>

Transcript for *Fading Beacon: Why America is Losing International Students*

Lukman Arsalan: Hey, think about it. In the U.S., you can say, ‘The President is crazy. He’s an idiot.’ And nothing would happen. That’s the beauty of the U.S. There’s this freedom of speech and expression There’s a checks and balances that’s set up and in the government, when these Muslim bans happened, they immediately went to courts. And there were attorneys waiting at the airports. So all of these pieces, I think that’s what’s unique about the U.S. that I so admire.

Arsalan thinks America’s reputation for innovation will keep it the premiere destination. But the 70 percent drop in new international enrollments, due to the pandemic, is a jolt to colleges.

Lukman Arsalan: A pipeline of students that we took for granted is of paramount importance. And it brought international students into the forefront of discussions, which is awesome. I love sitting in cabinet meetings and sitting in trustee meetings, and being asked to talk as one of the first agenda items, international students, because that was not the case before Covid.

Music

Sasha: International students are at the forefront of discussions for a lot of college leaders these days. One major reason is the cash these students bring. Full tuition, room and board at Franklin & Marshall is \$75,000 a year. That’s a huge investment those full-pay families from abroad are making.

That money has come to be a lifeline for schools around the country, private and public.

The public university with the largest number of foreign students in the United States is the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

Yashovardhan Maheshwari arrived in the fall of 2019 from India. He was one of nearly 11,000 international students -- about a fifth of the enrollment at the state’s flagship university.⁵

Maheshwari admits he wasn’t originally looking for a school surrounded by cornfields.

Yashovardhan Maheshwari: I was more of a very New York person. New York University was kind of the place I wanted to be.

NYU’s a popular choice. America’s big coastal cities are a draw for foreign students. But Maheshwari found Urbana-Champaign so warm and welcoming he didn’t end up transferring.

⁵ https://isss.illinois.edu/download_forms/stats/fa20_stats.pdf and IPEDS data 2019: <https://nces.ed.gov/ipeds/datacenter/institutionprofile.aspx?unitId=145637>

Transcript for *Fading Beacon: Why America is Losing International Students*

Yashovardhan Maheshwari: My friends have noted this to me that the day you walked into Champaign freshman year, you're like, Oh my God, I hate this school. I love New York. I hate the school. And now for two years, you're like, oh, shit, I can't leave this school!

Why are there so many international students here?

Part of it is that Illinois needs their tuition dollars.

Breno Braga: So state governments since the 1990s, are giving less money to American universities.

Breno Braga is a labor economist with the Urban Institute. He studies high-skilled immigration. Braga came to the U.S. from Brazil and earned his Ph.D. from the University of Michigan. Braga was part of a team of economists that looked at the relationship between the drop in state funding for universities and the growth in international student enrollment. Braga says beginning in the '90s, the portion of state budgets that went to entitlements like Medicaid grew bigger.⁶ And because most states can't run deficits, the pot of money is only so large. That meant the money available for higher education got smaller.⁷

So universities had a couple of options. They could raise in-state tuition.

Breno Braga: But we know that this is not politically feasible, right? So families ... will complain about that.

People will say tuition is high enough already.

Breno Braga: So the other thing you can do is to cut expenses, right? So you can decide instead of paying, you know, professors well, or you know, supporting research ... but that affects the quality of the education that the university provides ... so it's also not a good idea.

OK, so they've got two bad options.

6

<https://www.pewtrusts.org/en/research-and-analysis/articles/2020/01/09/states-collectively-spend-17-percent-of-their-revenue-on-medicaid> and

<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4194659/#:~:text=Between%201990%20and%201992%20C%20Medicaid,annual%20rate%20of%2027%20percent.&text=Medicaid%20managed%20care%20was%20also,some%20longstanding%20public%20health%20goals>.

7

<https://www.brookings.edu/research/higher-education-spending-the-role-of-medicaid-and-the-business-cycle/>

Transcript for *Fading Beacon: Why America is Losing International Students*

Breno Braga: But then universities noticed that something was happening abroad. And it was like a lot of families, especially in China, they were becoming richer.

A huge new middle-class was rising in China, and because of the one-child policy, these families only had one child to send to college. And when parents wanted the best education for that child, they looked to America, even if cost was steep.

Breno Braga: You would pay full price and you will contribute to the revenues of the university.

For American universities it was a win-win. They charge higher tuition to students from out of state. Having more foreign students who pay that higher rate helps keep tuition down for domestic students. Universities jumped on board.

Breno Braga: So you can see a clear connection there when state governments decided to spend less money with higher education, universities turn to foreign students, especially undergraduate and master's students as a source of revenue.

Braga has published papers charting this trend. Where it really takes off is after the Great Recession.

The University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign was among those feeling the squeeze. It needed more foreign students who could pay full out-of-state tuition.

Andreas Cangellaris: I remember the conversations with my colleagues. They were not easy conversations.

Andreas Cangellaris is the provost of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. He's originally from Greece and came to Berkeley as a grad student in electrical engineering in the '80s.

During the Great Recession, he was leading the department of engineering at Urbana-Champaign. And they were under pressure to bring in more revenue.

Andreas Cangellaris: And everybody appreciated the fact that, that that was one of the things we had to do, we were in a position to make it happen. And we committed to doing that.

Transcript for *Fading Beacon: Why America is Losing International Students*

To give you a sense of what they were up against, according to the Illinois Board of Higher Education, in 2002, two-thirds of Urbana-Champaign's revenues came from the state. The other third came from tuition and fees. Now, those numbers have flipped. Three-quarters of the revenue comes from tuition and fees. The University of Illinois couldn't avoid the two options Breno Braga, the economist, talked about: raising tuition for domestic students and cost-cutting. But revenue from wealthy foreign students saved the day.

In the 2008-2009 school year, the foreign undergraduate population jumped by 30 percent over the previous year. And international enrollment kept growing by double digits after that. Over the next four years, university revenue from international undergraduates doubled.

Karin Fischer: International students brought diversity to campus. Urbana-Champaign students held Lunar New Year's parties and invited the entire school;⁸ they hosted Holi, the Indian festival where celebrants mark the arrival of spring by throwing brightly colored powders into the air.

And they brought new perspectives to their classrooms.

J.W. Morrissette's theater appreciation class has been popular with international students.

J.W. Morrissette: Inevitably, we will move into topics of world theater or portions of where American theatre has borrowed or been influenced by world theatre. And having students for whom those traditions come directly has been a fabulous thing in the classroom.

But there were some growing pains from the rapid influx of international students.

Morrissette found some of those students were reluctant to approach a professor to ask for help.

J.W. Morrissette: I love to sit down and chat with students. And that was really hard for me to overcome, sort of like, 'Oh, just call me up, I'm here, I'm at the office, come to office hours.' Because that that bit of energy seemed to be like, Whoa, this is really casual. And I don't know if you really mean this.

He found it was more effective to reach out to students via email. In lectures, he'd mention questions students had brought to him, so that others students could see it was normal and expected.

⁸ <https://dailyillini.com/news/2019/04/02/largest-holi-festival-midwest-region-hosted-university/>

Transcript for *Fading Beacon: Why America is Losing International Students*

In 2013, the Urbana-Champaign campus newspaper reported foreign students were having trouble adjusting to life on campus⁹. The International Student Barometer Survey found Illinois ranked second-to-last in students making friends with domestic classmates. The next year, the university produced a series of videos featuring young international alumni giving advice to incoming students.

Kyungeun Lee: Hey! Get to know your roommate and other students on your floor. Try to go out with meals with students on your floor or live-in learning community. Don't be scared to try something you haven't before or get to know someone new.

That would be good advice for any student, but for international students, the enormous cultural gaps made adjusting to college life tougher.

And it wasn't just cultural differences. Some of the students coming to American universities didn't have the English skills they needed. I reported on colleges accepting students who were woefully underprepared: students who couldn't write papers in English, or contribute to a group project. Getting a good score on an English-language test didn't mean they could handle an American classroom.

Some critics think colleges ignored international students' unreadiness in pursuit of their tuition dollars. Robert Daly directs the Kissinger Institute on China and the United States at the Wilson Center.

Robert Daly: But you want the money. So what do you do? The answer is that you lower your standards, you pass them, you pass them, everybody, you know, gets a worse education. Can you assign ... as much group work if you've got a classroom with a lot of people who aren't really ready to do university level work in English? Can you still grade students on in-class participation? The papers they hand in you can't you can't grade these you just B, B, B. You pass them on.

Daly says that affected the classroom experience for everybody, international students and Americans.

And some families worried: With so many international students coming to schools like the University of Illinois, were they squeezing out students from Chicago and Peoria? Whenever I tell people I write about international students, the top question I get from Americans is whether foreign students are taking spots from U.S. students. And the answer is, not really. It might be true in a few competitive majors ... or in states with lots of high-school graduates. But mostly it's

⁹

<https://dailyillini.com/uncategorized/2013/04/18/university-considering-changes-to-welcome-process-for-international-students/>

Transcript for *Fading Beacon: Why America is Losing International Students*

not. Universities have added new seats for international students; in many parts of the country, they made up for the Gen Z baby bust.

By 2017, international enrollment at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign had grown so high that some university leaders feared a crash.

What if something interrupted the flow of students, particularly those from China? Provost Andreas Cangellaris remembers they turned to a new idea: insurance to manage the risk.

Andreas Cangellaris: I was dean of engineering at that time when we did that, and, and our colleagues from from the Gies College of Business came over and said, ‘Hey, what do you think?’ And we said, ‘Well, that’s a good idea.’

The business and engineering schools took out insurance policies against a sudden drop in Chinese students. But right before the pandemic, they hit a snag when trying to renew and now insurers won’t offer that kind of coverage.

Illinois’ insurance policies made headlines, but they were also a sign of American universities’ dependence on revenue from foreign students. Then, in 2020, the global pandemic rushed students off-campus and froze new enrollments from abroad. It was the sudden crash colleges feared.

Sasha: That was Karin Fischer and I’m Sasha Aslanian. You’re listening to *Fading Beacon: Why America is Losing International Students*, a documentary from APM Reports and The Chronicle of Higher Education.

We’ll take a short break, and then, colleges worry the pandemic isn’t just a temporary setback in foreign enrollment, and what’s lost, isn’t just money.

Michael Osterholm: The most important lessons you can learn come from relationships. ... It’s when you break bread in someone’s house, in a foreign country, or they in yours.

We have more about this story on our website, APM Reports dot org. You can also explore our archive of education documentaries and subscribe to our podcast Educate.

Support for APM reports comes from Lumina Foundation and the Spencer Foundation. More in a moment. This is APM, American Public Media.

Transcript for *Fading Beacon: Why America is Losing International Students*

PART 2

Host: From American Public Media, this is an APM Reports documentary, *Fading Beacon: Why America is Losing International Students*. It's a co-production with The Chronicle of Higher Education. I'm Sasha Aslanian.

In the spring of 2020, a global shutdown from the pandemic sealed borders and forced most of higher education online. International enrollment, which had already been slowing, plunged. Students couldn't get visas or flights or deal with quarantine requirements. Karin Fischer's beat covering international students for The Chronicle couldn't have gotten hairier. The pandemic forced an examination of U.S. reliance on these students, and how the country is changing in their eyes. Karin picks up the story.

Sfx: Lantern Festival Fireworks

Karin Fischer: Lily Cao is watching fireworks for the lantern festival in her hometown of Lanzhou. It's an industrial city in west-central China.¹⁰

Cao's home because of the pandemic, taking her classes online in America.

Lily Cao: I'm a senior currently at Mount Holyoke College, studying biological sciences.

Cao is the only child of an engineer, and a government worker.

Lily Cao: And currently I've been in the States for almost seven years.

Cao's parents made a pretty incredible investment in their daughter's education: They sent her not just to college, but to high school in the United States. She had four years to perfect her English to get into a good college.

The California boarding school she went to offered a different type of education from what her friends back home in China were getting.

Lily Cao: So, in China, we basically have no freedom in choosing what classes we want to take ... and the types of courses are all determined by the school.

¹⁰ <https://worldpopulationreview.com/world-cities/lanzhou-population>

Transcript for *Fading Beacon: Why America is Losing International Students*

In China, Cao would have had to focus on crushing a national exam. And as that test grew near, she would have had to set aside all her extracurricular activities. She didn't want to give up art, music and sports.

When it came time to choose a college in the U.S., Mount Holyoke stood out:

Lily Cao: Yeah, I loved the vibe there.

Cao liked that Mount Holyoke is a women's college. And she liked its biology program.

Lily Cao: And the idea of women doing science really struck me.

Lily Cao's presentation: All right, so today I'm going to be talking about the factor function of the cytotoxic T-lymphocytes

Here's Cao making a presentation in her immunology class.

Lily Cao: Just a quick recap of the cytotoxic

She had to give her talk on Zoom because of the pandemic.

Cao had returned to China in July of 2020, after her junior year, as the virus spread in the United States. She had hoped to go back to Mt. Holyoke for part of her senior year, but it just wasn't possible.

(piano sound)

So her ballet classes and Korean language classes, piano lessons and science labs all happened over Zoom. She would stay up until 5 a.m. when her last class finished, and then sleep until noon. Her body was in Lanzhou, but she lived in Eastern Standard Time.

Lily Cao: I dream about Mount Holyoke. I like, I miss everything about Mt. Holyoke. I miss my friends. I miss the dining hall, the dance studios being able to do labs on campus. I miss the coffee shop. ... I miss everything. I miss Amherst. I used to get bubble tea with my friends on the weekends. And I even miss the Chinese restaurants there even though they're not, you know, as authentic as the ones here but still! (laughs)

Transcript for *Fading Beacon: Why America is Losing International Students*

But as much as Lily Cao missed America, she also found herself reassessing the country where she'd spent so many years. The pandemic changed her views on America and her future here. The uptick in hate crimes against Asians because of the coronavirus shook her.

Lily Cao: Before then I had, you know, such good impressions of the U.S. But now, you know, I'm, in the past, while I was still in high school, I have thought about, you know, staying in the U.S. and continuing my career and getting a job in the U.S. But right now, after Covid, I am not sure anymore.

Karin: Chinese students like Lily Cao are by far the largest group of international students studying in the United States. They account for 40 percent of the undergraduates who come here from abroad. Cao's still planning to pursue graduate school in the U.S. What's changed is that after that, she plans to return to China to build her career in public health. Her new misgivings about the United States aren't unique to her. And multiply those worries about safety and not feeling wanted across hundreds of thousands of potential students -- and it spells trouble.

In the 2018-2019 school year, international enrollment hit a peak in the U.S., and began to level off. For the first time since 9/11, the number of international students began to fall.

After 9/11, there was a clear reason that enrollments were dropping -- terrorists attacked on American soil and, for a time, student visas were restricted. But now there were signs America's beacon was fading. There was stiffer competition from abroad. American colleges are expensive. U.S. gun violence frightens people. And, for four years, the Trump administration took a hard line, signaling to people from Muslim countries, poor countries and China, that they weren't welcome.

The Trump administration's policies made it more difficult for foreign students to come, stay and work in the U.S. The government stepped up vetting of student visas and turned away some students, from places like Iran and the Palestinian territories, at the border. They proposed regulations to curtail the amount of time foreign students could study in the U.S. and threatened to do away with a program that allows recent graduates to work here. In the middle of the pandemic, they forbade international students from taking online-only classes -- only to reverse course after colleges sued.

And the Trump administration was particularly wary that so many students on American campuses were from its main geopolitical rival, China.

President Trump's Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo, gave a speech in December of 2020, outlining the threat of Communist China to American campuses.¹¹

¹¹ <https://2017-2021.state.gov/the-chinese-communist-party-on-the-american-campus/index.html>

Transcript for *Fading Beacon: Why America is Losing International Students*

Pompeo described a Chinese regime intent on stealing American know-how, surveilling students and co-opting American faculty and institutions through grant money.

Mike Pompeo: The Chinese Communist Party knows it can never match our innovation. It has state-owned enterprises; it's an authoritarian regime; it is a government-centric focus. That's why it sends 400,000 students a year to the United States of America to study -- 400,000 students a year studying in our universities come from one country. It is no accident.

To combat that threat, the Trump administration policed the money colleges were getting from China, investigated American researchers' work there, and restricted visas for Chinese grad students in some sensitive high-tech fields. At one point, President Trump reportedly considered banning all students from China from coming to the U.S. ¹²

There have been scholars charged with secretly working for China, and Pompeo pointed to those cases to raise suspicions about students.

Mike Pompeo: What more bad decisions will schools make because they are hooked on Chinese Communist Party cash? What professors will they be able to co-opt or to silence? What theft and espionage will they simply overlook? What business deals will get done as a result of that? Look, there's a lot of work to do.

China scholar Robert Daly says the Chinese government does have an agenda, and it's important to be cognizant of it, but security fears shouldn't overshadow all the gains from Chinese talent.

But there's a long history of mistrust.

Robert Daly: Higher educational exchanges, primarily Chinese students coming here have been a deal in which China sought tech and the United States sought talent. That's been the deal. ... And the suspicions that we have today on both sides were present from the beginning.

12

<https://www.chronicle.com/article/it-would-have-been-catastrophic-trump-administration-suggested-then-shelved-a-plan-to-bar-all-chinese-students/>

Transcript for *Fading Beacon: Why America is Losing International Students*

The first Chinese student came to Yale in 1850¹³. His name was Yung Wing, and after he graduated, he encouraged China to send more young men to be educated in the United States,¹⁴ but Daly says the effort soon ran into problems.

Robert Daly: On the United States side, we were not willing to let these Chinese into our service academies, like West Point, because it was deemed as too sensitive. And on the Chinese side, there was a great fear ... that these boys were becoming Americanized.

They changed their hairstyles.

They were cutting off queues, which was an act of rebellion. They were dating American girls, they were becoming Christian, they had a baseball team, they were losing their Chineseness.

Sasha Aslanian: China and the U.S. have had a bumpy history with education exchanges surging and then slamming on the brakes. The flow of students is tied to geopolitics. The United States recognized long ago that bringing in international students could affect how it exerted its influence around the world. And not just with China.

In the 19th century, churches were the main players. Missionaries recruited students to the U.S. so they could be trained and return to their native countries to spread Christianity.

After World War I, big philanthropies like the Rockefeller Foundation began pouring money into education exchanges as a part of peacebuilding efforts.

Liping Bu: Then, by 1930s, you know, the clouds of war were gathering again.

Liping Bu is a professor of history at Alma College in Michigan. She came to the U.S. in the '80s as an international student at Smith College. Bu's written extensively on how America used higher education as part of its influence as a superpower.

Bu says in the build-up to World War II, Franklin Roosevelt was worried about Germany and Japan making overtures to Latin America. He created something called The Good Neighbor Policy to draw his southern neighbors closer to the U.S.

¹³ <https://ceas.yale.edu/yung-wing>

¹⁴ <https://connecticuthistory.org/yung-wings-dream-the-chinese-educational-mission-1872-1881/>

Transcript for *Fading Beacon: Why America is Losing International Students*

FDR 1940: On this side of the ocean there is no desire, there will be no effort, on the part of any one race, or people, or nation, to control any other. The only encirclement sought is the encircling bond of good old-fashioned neighborly friendship.¹⁵

Part of that “neighborly friendship” was inviting Latin American scholars to the United States, and sending U.S. scholars to Latin America to promote cultural understanding. Bu says it was a different tactic than just relying on military might or business dominance.

Liping Bu: Even though U.S. was powerful, but, you know, people did not love U.S. But afraid of U.S. That wasn't the kind of relationship you want to have when a war broke out.

Bu says the Good Neighbor policy paid off. The Western Hemisphere stayed united against the Axis powers. And the U.S. saw that faculty academic exchanges could be a useful tool of what’s known as “soft diplomacy.” In the Cold War that emerged after World War II, soft diplomacy broadened to include students.

1955 newsreel: A group of foreign students who have completed a year’s study in this country applaud President Eisenhower as he arrives to address them at the White House.

¹⁶

President Eisenhower was on his way to a Summit in Geneva in 1955 to diffuse Cold War tensions. He told the visiting international students they could help too.

Dwight Eisenhower: We are hopeful that there may be some way in which all of you can live out your lives tranquilly, helping over the years to promote the kind of understanding that you have gathered in the past year, that you will help to spread in your own countries when you go home.”

Eisenhower came home from Geneva and established the People to People International program to promote cultural exchanges. The idea was that if people from different countries got to know each other, they’d see what they had in common, and they’d be less likely to go to war.

But the U.S. government wanted to win more than a popularity contest against the Soviets. To win the Cold War, it needed to dominate in science:

(dramatic filmstrip music)

¹⁵ <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/address-hemisphere-defense-dayton-ohio>

¹⁶ https://archive.org/details/1955-07-15_President_Foreign_Students_Hear_Peace_Hopes

Transcript for *Fading Beacon: Why America is Losing International Students*

Filmstrip: The day Soviet scientists jauntily drop-kicked the first Sputnik around the world, the average American was shocked, bewildered and resentful.

¹⁷

This newsreel from 1957 describes America's reaction when the Russians leapt out ahead in the space race. The USSR's satellite Sputnik was doing laps of earth from outer space.

Filmstrip: Sputnik is a product of higher education: of instructors who teach much of the physics and mathematics in high school that we teach in college. How important? Our survival may depend on degrees and graduates we are not now equipped to produce.

Congress struck back with the National Defense Education Act of 1958. It rushed a giant infusion of federal money into higher education to fund scientific research, engineering, math and foreign language instruction, and low-cost student loans. The number of Americans pursuing college doubled in the 1960s.¹⁸

America's arms race in education also drew interest from abroad. Here's historian Liping Bu.

Liping Bu: Many international students came to America for graduate studies because of the high level of technology, scientific development here, because everybody looked up to the United States as, Hey, this is a place where you could really learn the latest, most cutting-edge knowledge.

Bu says foreign students seeking top-notch educations provided a valuable opportunity. American universities could tilt hearts and minds toward America instead of the Soviets.

In 1962, President Kennedy addressed an annual reception of foreign students on the South Lawn of the White House.¹⁹

He thanked them for choosing to study in the United States.

John F. Kennedy: We regard this as a great compliment. I hope you'll permit us to do so. And we regard it also as an indication of your curiosity and interest in this free society, which we believe develops an intellectual atmosphere which permits progress.

Kennedy described the 40 percent of Nobel prizes that went to people who'd studied in the United States. But Kennedy also conceded the students could see America warts and all.

¹⁷ RKO-Pathe filmstrip 1957

¹⁸

https://www.senate.gov/artandhistory/history/minute/Sputnik_Spurs_Passage_of_National_Defense_Education_Act.htm

¹⁹ <https://www.jfklibrary.org/asset-viewer/archives/JFKWHA/1962/JFKWHA-092-002/JFKWHA-092-002>

Transcript for *Fading Beacon: Why America is Losing International Students*

John F. Kennedy: I hope that you will think well of this country and recognize what we are trying to do. To run a free society is very difficult. Winston Churchill once said democracy is the worst form of government except for all the other systems that have been tried. (laughter) And it is very difficult; it is not easy. I hope while you are here you will have an opportunity to gain more knowledge of us, our good things and our bad.

Historian Liping Bu says students wanted to help solve America's problems and teach what they knew from their own countries.

Liping Bu: So, did these students go back and preach what they were expected, to shape up the public opinion in their own countries, according to American wishes? Probably some of them did. I mean, just from their own personal experiences. ... But they also brought back stories about the other side, the not so successful, the so-called "darkside of American society."

The dark side students saw was America's racism, poverty, and xenophobia.

Kennedy closed his remarks that day on the White House lawn, with a plea to his fellow Americans to get to know these students.

John F. Kennedy: I think a good many foreign students come here and are left alone and feel alone, see other foreign students, don't see many Americans. I hope that we are making progress in that area. This is not an organized society, we treat our own students that way. (laugh) And when I was at Harvard, no one spoke to me for the first nine months and I suppose if I hadn't been staying, I might have gone back to another country and had a conclusion about this country which wouldn't have been accurate. I hope that those Americans who are desirous of doing something for their country will think of the thousands of foreign students who are here and give them a chance to see American life intimately.

American Cold War leaders like Kennedy calculated that "seeing American life intimately" would ultimately win over these young visitors to support democracy over communism.

America reaped the benefits. It gained talent when students stayed after finishing their educations. And those who went home could become useful friends someday.

A think tank in the U.K. releases an annual "soft power" ranking of countries that have trained the most foreign leaders. The United States tops that list.²⁰

²⁰ 2020 soft power ranking: <https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2020/08/27/hepi-soft-power-ranking-2020/>

Transcript for *Fading Beacon: Why America is Losing International Students*

Karin Fischer: But America's competitors are gaining students too, and they have national strategies for attracting them. The number two destination in the world after the United States is Australia. They've got an ad campaign.

Austrade Ad: To me, Australia is one of the most welcoming places in the world where everyone cares for everyone who is here no matter where they're from or who they are so I think it's the perfect destination to come.

The U.K. touts its prestige.

Study UK Ad: There are lots of different universities across the U.K. to choose from and if you're interested in global rankings, the U.K. has many that consistently rank in the top 200 worldwide.

Canada's ads stress that it's peaceful and encourages foreign students to stay and work.

EduCanada Ad: We are renowned for our competitive and entrepreneurial economy. Our society is safe and multicultural, which makes Canada the perfect study destination no matter who you are, or where you're from.

Nobody mentions the United States, but the subtext is clear -- safe and multicultural -- not like some other places you might choose.

The number of foreign students going to Canada has tripled in the last decade.²¹

To see how this competition plays through the eyes of someone looking from abroad, I called Emily Dobson. She's a college counselor in Brazil. She's originally from the United States, and that's where she helped most of her students go over the decade and a half she's been doing this work. But she says their view of American colleges is changing:

Emily Dobson: The students just said, you know ... we're not seeing the future we used to see here. Still love you. A few of you are on our list. But you know, we're going to go to other schools. We're going to go look at the U.K. a little bit more. We're going to go look at Trinity Dublin. You know, we're going to go to look at Charles University in the Czech Republic.

²¹

<https://www.cicnews.com/2020/02/642000-international-students-canada-now-ranks-3rd-globally-in-foreign-student-attraction-0213763.html#gs.4i62ip>

Transcript for *Fading Beacon: Why America is Losing International Students*

Dobson calls this shift to looking at colleges around the globe the “geoswerve.” The U.S. just isn’t as dominant in her students’ minds. They’re finding good, affordable options in places like the Netherlands, Japan and Qatar. Some countries offer faster degrees and better work opportunities. And she says the pivot to online recruitment during Covid made it easier to discover all these other options exist.

Emily Dobson: All of a sudden, we had access to schools we've never had access to, because they could travel without traveling, right? We were in their budget, all we had to do is make the time. That made people realize that schools don't have to be \$70,000 or \$80,000 a year. ... So this middle road that's kind of made its entrance into the mainstream has made all of us really sigh a big, big sigh of relief, because it's what we've been waiting for.

Now, the U.S. isn’t out of the game, of course.

EducationUSA Ad: Moving to the U.S. was life-altering for me. It opened me up for the best possible life that I could have.

That’s an ad from EducationUSA, which is part of the State Department.

A key part of the pitch: We’ve got Silicon Valley.

EducationUSA Ad: At a place like Google, we are looking for people who can adapt and aren’t afraid to take risks.

The U.S. plays up its tech advantage, not just the research in its universities but the many innovative companies where students can intern and work.

The opportunity to be part of that environment was what drew Divyansh Kaushik from India.

Divyansh Kaushik: It's well known that talent attracts talent. So the best students apply to U.S. universities.

Kaushik is at Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh. He’s crossing campus near the computer science center, where he’s a Ph.D. student.

[sfx street scene] Robot voice: Wait to cross Forbes Avenue at Cyert Hall Driveway.

Kaushik has been in the U.S. for four years and he volunteers his time representing Carnegie Mellon students on a steering committee for a redevelopment project in the Oakland neighborhood, which includes the campus.

Transcript for *Fading Beacon: Why America is Losing International Students*

Divyansh Kaushik: So I'd really love for this neighborhood to have, well, one, protected bike lanes obviously. It's not great to bike in Pittsburgh. And then I'd like more good places where you could just eat or chill out for a couple of hours.

Kaushik got his bachelor's degree in India, but he wanted to come to the U.S. for graduate study. Even though he'd be far from home, and his parents are educators -- so they're not wealthy people -- it was worth it to him to leave India for the opportunities he'd get in the U.S. He was accepted at five universities and chose Carnegie Mellon.

Divyansh Kaushik: There is a huge difference between the kind of work I'm doing here versus the kind of work I saw the Ph.D. students doing there. It's not that people have any less intellect or talent, it's that there's a whole ecosystem.

An ecosystem that includes well-connected mentors doing cutting-edge research and the chance to present papers at prestigious conferences. Kaushik's studying artificial intelligence. When we first met, he was doing an internship at Facebook. His skills are sought after by American tech giants.

Divyansh Kaushik: A couple weeks ago, I heard news that I'd been selected by Amazon, as an Amazon Graduate Research Fellow for the next year, and they'll be funding my Ph.D. for a year.

The economics of Ph.D. students studying in the U.S. is quite a bit different from undergraduates. Kaushik's tuition is covered by a fellowship. And Ph.D. students usually work as teaching or research assistants so the universities pay them to come. Undergraduates and master's students are where universities make their revenue.

But Ph.D. students are important for another reason: They often put down roots and stay in the United States. Nearly 80 percent of international students who earn a Ph.D. in science or engineering get their first job or post-doc in the U.S. and many of those make their careers here.²²They become professors or go to work in labs or start their own companies. In fact, one in five entrepreneurs who found start-ups in the U.S. is an immigrant -- and three-quarters of them first came to America as a college student.

22

<https://nces.nsf.gov/pubs/nsf21308/report/postgraduation-trends#temporary-visa-holders-and-postgraduation>

Transcript for *Fading Beacon: Why America is Losing International Students*

When Kaushik isn't doing research or volunteering, he's involved in politics.²³ He can't vote, of course, but through his leadership in student government he's met with members of Congress to talk about the needs of graduate students, and the importance of funding scientific research.

Kaushik's forging connections with policy makers, community groups in Pittsburgh, professors and tech companies, so it's perhaps surprising that he isn't sure his future will be in the U.S.

Divyansh Kaushik: Given that there are so many unknowns in the U.S., even if I get a job, I'd still weigh my options. You know, the U.K., for instance, was not a country, you would rank as you know, one of the friendly nations in terms of inviting you to come and work and settle. But now, last year, they started the Global Talent Visa, for instance, which is an uncapped visa meant for researchers who can come and provides a three- to five-year pathway to settling in the U.K. So at one point, you have to think about, like, actually thinking about your life ... and make a permanent base, I guess (laughs).

Universities are talent pipelines, feeding the American economy and seeding innovation. People are drawn by opportunity. If they don't get that, they'll go elsewhere. And they'll start their businesses there.

But colleges don't exist in a vacuum. Their ability to attract students from around the globe depends on our national policy -- and on many other factors like safety and affordability and students' sense of belonging.

The steep drop in international enrollment during the pandemic exposed just how dependent colleges are on international students, and how an unforeseen global disaster can change everything.

During the pandemic, I moderated a panel with Michael Osterholm. He's an epidemiologist who leads the Center for Infectious Disease Research and Policy at the University of Minnesota. Osterholm later told me global research ties have been critical in fighting the pandemic.

Michael Osterholm: It's something that we're only learning now, in retrospect, how valuable it's been, particularly as we deal with something like Covid.

International teams of scientists chased the virus, tracked the variants and collaborated on vaccines together.

²³ vice president for external affairs for the Graduate Student Assembly
<https://www.cmu.edu/stugov/gsa/About-the-GSA/Execs.html>

Transcript for *Fading Beacon: Why America is Losing International Students*

To be effective in moments of crisis, though, these relationships have to be built and nurtured over time.

Michael Osterholm: It's when you break bread in someone's house, in a foreign country, or they in yours. ... Some of the most important lessons I've learned in public health practice have come from my foreign colleagues, and the graduate students that they've sent to us and shared with us.

As colleges try to rebuild after the disruption of the pandemic, Osterholm says he's hopeful there will be more understanding of why international education is vital to solving the world's toughest problems.

Michael Osterholm: We place a high emphasis on bringing these students back because they are, in fact, so critical to the cultural and scientific sharing of information that makes us all better.

International students have been coming to the United States for more than a century. They've been valued for different reasons: peacebuilding, goodwill, diversity, cash.

But will they continue to be drawn here? In the short term, there's reason for optimism. There's pent-up demand from tens of thousands of students stuck in their home countries during Covid. They just need visas and vaccines to make it to campus this fall.

The long-term outlook is a lot less clear, though. Students who once would have come to America may be reconsidering that choice. U.S. colleges are going to have to get more creative, and more aggressive, to keep their edge. They'll need to look for students beyond the usual places like China and come up with more affordable options.

The pandemic may offer one possible blueprint: After more than a year of remote learning, both professors and students are more comfortable with online education. A recent global survey²⁴ found that two-thirds of prospective international students were open to doing a degree online or in a hybrid program. Colleges might consider other options, too: Open their own campuses abroad or work with overseas partners to deliver their programs. Models where students begin their studies at home and only come to the U.S. to finish their majors. Accelerated programs that compress students' studies into a shorter period. Universities will need to find new ways to sell the next generation on the dream of American education.

And if they don't? Then they will likely find themselves in a familiar predicament: States still aren't investing in higher education. And an even-steeper demographic cliff is looming, just a

²⁴ Done by StudyGroup

Transcript for *Fading Beacon: Why America is Losing International Students*

few years from now, because of the post-Recession baby bust. Without students from around the globe, colleges will be back where they were a few years ago -- facing a difficult trade-off: whether to cut their spending on research and teaching. Or raise tuition -- for the students they still have.

Sasha Aslanian: You've been listening to *Fading Beacon: Why America is Losing International Students*, a documentary from APM Reports and The Chronicle of Higher Education. It was produced by Karin Fischer and me, Sasha Aslanian, with research help from Ben Clary of APM Research, Will Callan and Alondra Sierra. The editor is Catherine Winter. The digital editors are Andy Kruse and Dave Mann. Fact checker: Betsy Towner-Levine. Mixing by Veronica Rodriguez. The APM Reports team includes Alex Baumhardt, Chris Julin, Chris Peak and Emily Hanford. The Managing Director & Editor in Chief of APM Reports is Chris Worthington.

Special thanks to The Chronicle's deputy managing editor, Jennifer Ruark.

You can learn more about the history of international students and see photos of some of the students we talked with on our website, [APM Reports dot org](http://APMReports.org).

Fading Beacon is one of three programs in our new season of education documentaries. You can get them all by subscribing to our podcast, Educate. We'd like to know what you thought about this program.

Send us an email at contact-at-apmreports-dot-org. Or find us on Twitter at EducatePodcast.

Support for this program comes from Lumina Foundation and the Spencer Foundation.

This is APM, American Public Media.