

Status of International Graduate Students in the United States: Data from 2026 CGS Survey of Graduate Institutions

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Recent data from the Council of Graduate Schools' (CGS) annual Status of International Graduate Applications Survey show declines in applications from prospective international students for Fall 2026 compared with Fall 2025 for both doctoral and master's programs. This reduction in applications was accompanied by fewer offers of admission to prospective international students at both the doctoral and master's levels. These declines put U.S. innovation at risk and threaten the health of the U.S. economy and workforce.



Key Takeaways

- Fewer international students applied in 2025 for 2026 admission, compared to the preceding year. Similarly, fewer offers of admission were made in Fall 2026 compared to Fall 2025. The decrease in applications and offers of admission was greater for master's programs than for doctoral programs.
- Respondents agreed or strongly agreed that in 2026 (compared to 2025):
 - Prospective international graduate students declined admission offers citing concerns about the U.S. visa process and the cost of graduate education.
 - International students who did accept admission offers cited concerns about longer processing times for their U.S. visas, their U.S. visa status and deportation, and the cost of graduate education.
 - Existing international graduate students expressed concerns about their U.S. visa status or deportation, the risk of removing OPT, and the cost of graduate education.
- A majority of respondents believe that the elimination of the Duration of Status policy and the adoption of a fixed four-year admission period will decrease international student applications and admissions.

The decline in applications and admissions, as shown in the CGS data, aligns with findings reported by the Institute of International Education (IIE) and NAFSA: Association of International Educators. Together, these findings should raise concerns about the state of international graduate education in the U.S. In this context, international talent is essential for the U.S. to maintain its leadership in global education, scientific and technological advancement, and innovation.

Additionally, international graduate students play a critical role in the U.S. economy. They contribute nearly \$43 billion annually, support more than 355,000 American jobs, and go on to be important contributors to the American workforce and research (Baer & Ekin, 2026).

Contraction of International Student Applications and Admissions Offers

Although data collected from 99 CGS member institutions show fewer applications to both doctoral and master's degree programs in the last year, master's programs experienced a larger decline in applications from prospective international students than doctoral programs. Master's programs saw a decline of 38.2% compared to a decline of 22.7% among doctoral programs. This pattern suggests reduced demand for a U.S.-based graduate education across degree levels.

	1-year change in applications	1-year change in offers of admission
Doctoral programs	-22.7%	-16.3%
Master's programs	-38.2%	-27.1%

The data also show fewer admission offers to prospective international graduate students. Compared with the previous year, admission offers to international applicants for doctoral programs fell by 16.3%, and admission offers to master's programs fell by 27.1%, indicating decreased capacity across program types. These changes may reflect rapidly changing visa policies and tightening of institutional budgets due to cuts in federal funding.

The Implications of Reduced Acceptance Rates

The data also indicate that international applicants are cautious about attending graduate programs at U.S. colleges and universities. Most institutions (53.6%) report that the percentage of admissions offers to master's programs accepted by prospective international graduate students was less than average compared to previous years. Similarly, over a third (38.8%) of institutions reported a lower than average percentage of offers accepted to doctoral programs by international applicants.

When asked the reasons why prospective international students declined offers of admission, institutions report that students primarily cite concerns about the U.S. visa process (60.5%). The rate of student visa rejections peaked within the last year. Thirty-five percent of student visas were rejected in 2025, up from 31.0% in 2024. Patterns of visa rejections disproportionately affected global regions. Rates were particularly high for South Asia (61%-84%) and Africa (64%), where the U.S. imposed travel bans on several countries, including Eritrea, Sudan, and Nigeria (O'Haire & Landry, 2026). The CGS survey data reflect these trends, with institutions reporting India, Nigeria, and Bangladesh as the top countries with prospective international graduate students declining offers of admission.

The challenges of funding graduate education, including obtaining or losing funding, were often reported as a reason for declining offers (43%). Federal funding for research was subject to large cuts in 2025, including the freezing or termination of research grants at higher education institutions. The reduction in funding has contributed to universities' limited capacity to support students and academic programs.

Reduced federal funding has constrained colleges and universities, and the decreasing enrollment of international students has also affected the revenue streams of higher education institutions. Declining enrollments have decreased revenue at higher education institutions. In turn, fewer enrolled international students have also led institutions to reduce the number of programs offered. The loss of this pool of students has significantly affected the bottom line of U.S. colleges and universities.

How Policy Reform is Increasing Barriers to International Education

In 2026, the U.S. Department of Homeland Security issued a final rule that ends the longstanding Duration of Status policy, which allowed F-1 students and J-1 scholars to remain in the United States to complete their degree programs, research activity, and training. The final rule replaced the policy with a fixed four-year term for these visa holders. This change adds another barrier to international graduate education and follows the broader policy pressures described above.

When asked about the potential impact of the elimination of Duration of Status, the majority of survey respondents anticipated decreases in both international student applications and admissions. 78% of institutions expect a decrease in international student applications, and 67% expect a decrease in international student admissions. The U.S. risks losing its

position as the gold standard for graduate education if federal policies impede U.S. universities' ability to attract top international talent and foster educational opportunities and research collaborations. This risk is heightened by the policy changes described above.

While eliminating Duration of Status is a significant shift in established practices, international graduate students have faced a rapidly changing policy landscape since early 2025. In April 2025, the Trump Administration made significant changes to U.S. visa policies through executive orders, including the implementation of travel bans for certain countries, limitations on Optional Practical Training, and social media vetting of visa applicants.

Both newly admitted and current international graduate students have voiced concerns about new and significant changes to U.S. visa policies. The overwhelming majority of institutions (82.6%) report that admitted international graduate students have experienced longer U.S. visa processing times. Consistent with these delays, nearly equal proportions of institutions report that admitted (74.4%) and current international graduate students (75.3%) have expressed concerns about their U.S. visa status or deportation.

The data also show that the risk of removing [Optional Practical Training](#) (OPT), a program that allows recent international graduates to work in the U.S. for up to one year, with eligible STEM graduates able to receive an additional 24 month extension, is a top concern for current international graduate students. Sixty percent of institutions reported this as an expressed concern. In this context, the future of OPT is uncertain. The administration has recently proposed a \$100,000 fee for OPT, creating an obstacle to post-graduate work for international graduate students.

Conclusion

International students are vital to the nation's research enterprise and workforce, serving as our leading scientists, scholars, and professionals who drive innovation, provide critical services, and contribute to U.S. competitiveness, local communities, and the advancement of science and technology. Taken together, these trends suggest that losing international postgraduates from the workforce could slow scientific advancement and pose a substantial setback to the U.S. economy.

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