

In-Person or Virtual Study for International Students in the United States?

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Throughout the past two years, international students at US colleges and universities have grappled with what kind of educational experience they would be offered as part of their international exchange. While traditionally, international educational exchange meant gathering a passport and luggage in order to travel to one's desired study destination, the last two years have introduced the realities of the COVID-19 pandemic, health and safety, and the opportunity, or more often the necessity, to pursue study online from abroad. Where does this leave international students and their choices? And how have US colleges and universities adapted their role as hosts in the past two years?

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, the *Open Doors Report on International Educational Exchange* reported a steady increase of international students coming to the United States for degree study and Optional Practical Training (OPT). Despite growing competition from other countries, the complexities of US policies, and the cost of study, in the 2018–2019 academic year, just before COVID-19, there were over one million international students at US colleges and universities. And, like many international students worldwide, these students were on campus, studying in person.

Virtual Adaptations and Their Effects on International Student Enrollment in 2020–2021

Amid the COVID-19 pandemic, the mode of instruction shifted. In the fall semester of 2020, almost all US institutions (99 percent) offered hybrid instruction, and most students began their studies online from abroad. *Open Doors* reported 914,095 international students studying at US colleges and universities in the 2020–2021 academic year, a 15 percent decline from the previous year. In our analysis, the mode of instruction was a factor in international students' decisions to continue or pause their study plans.

Over half of all international students enrolled in degree programs (53 percent) attended classes online. Only 41 percent of new international students, or students enrolled in a US institution for the first time, were able to attend classes in person. The share of international students beginning their studies at the undergraduate level (35 percent) or the non-degree level (27 percent) was even lower.

For some students, the option to defer admission or take a leave of absence was preferable, allowing them to start their program in person in a consequent term. *Open Doors* 2021 reported 47,499 international students who deferred their studies to a future year, compared to just 9,249 international students in 2019–2020. In addition, 10,354 international students took a leave of absence in 2020–2021, compared to 3,817 the year before. Many considerations go into taking a leave of absence, well beyond the realities of COVID-19. However, the difference between 2019–2020 and 2020–2021 demonstrated the impact of COVID-19 as an exacerbating factor causing more international students to take a break from their studies.

Return to In-Person Study

In the fall of 2021, US colleges and universities were resolute in their plans to resume in-person study. With the rollout of COVID-19 vaccinations in the summer of 2021, a primary focus was a commitment to the safety and security of students, faculty, and staff on campus. This extended to international students, as most US institutions indicated in the summer of 2021 that they would offer COVID-19 vaccinations to all students, including international students. This also meant an opportunity for international students

Abstract

Throughout the past two years, international students at US colleges and universities have grappled with what kind of educational experience they would be offered as part of their international exchange. This article provides an overview of two years of data regarding international students' mode of study at US institutions and reflections on in-person and hybrid study in international educational exchange.

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traveling from places where the vaccine was not yet available to pursue their studies with their health and safety in mind.

The shift to in-person study was evidenced in our data as well. The *Spring 2022 Snapshot on International Educational Exchange* indicated that in the spring of 2022, 89 percent of US institutions reported most of their international students on campus. Over half of all institutions (55 percent) reported *all* their international students on campus last spring.

Most US institutions are reporting increases in applications for the 2022–2023 academic year, particularly master’s colleges and universities (76 percent), doctoral universities (73 percent), community colleges (68 percent), and liberal arts colleges (51 percent). These same institutions are also focusing on in-person study; almost all (96 percent) plan to offer international students in-person study in the United States. There continue to be options for hybrid study for students who may not be able to travel due to COVID-19: 66 percent of institutions noted offering students deferment to the spring of 2023 (down from 77 percent last year), while only 32 percent noted that they would offer online enrollment to international students until they could come to campus in person (down from 47 percent last year).

Several factors are contributing to these trends. They include the preference of institutions and students for in-person study. However, this trend also aligns with US immigration policies, which have adapted due to COVID-19. Student and Exchange Visitor Program (SEVP) guidance, first issued in 2020, allowed international students to “engage in distance learning more than regulatory limits due to the continuing public health concerns created by COVID-19.” While this guidance for continuing students has been extended, new international students beginning enrollment for the 2022–2023 academic year will not be able to enroll in fully virtual programs. They will be able to enroll in hybrid programs “with some requirement for in-person learning.” This guidance, updated for the 2022–2023 academic year, provides some flexibility for international students who may not be able to attend all classes in person, allowing them to participate in hybrid study within the regulations for students in the United States on nonimmigrant student visas.

Hybrid Study and Future Options for International Mobility

An overview of the findings from the past two years offers several takeaways for options for international students moving forward. First, both institutions and students seem aligned in their commitment to prioritize in-person study. Recent studies from IDP Connect and the College Board indicate that most international students prefer to study in person in the United States.

There is room, however, to explore hybrid options for international students. This could include international students beginning their studies online from abroad or options for international students to take online classes while in the United States for their academic program. Perhaps unsurprisingly, most US institutions offered hybrid teaching before COVID-19. Almost all the institutions that reported hybrid teaching before the pandemic plan to continue this approach in future semesters. Of those that did not offer virtual instruction before COVID-19, the majority (54 percent) plan to offer hybrid classes in future semesters.

This speaks to a broader shift to flexible teaching and learning that will likely remain at most US institutions, and this flexibility should extend to international students. This will require a coordinated effort among US colleges and universities and the US government to offer hybrid options as part of the international education experience. As mentioned above, the commitment to in-person international student study is clear. What remains to be seen is the possibility of hybrid options that complement, rather than replace, the in-person experience. ▲

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