



Is studying in the U.S. worth it?

International students on the “value”
of their U.S. education experience

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Foreword

There was a time when the U.S. education experience spoke for itself. International students from across the globe embraced the opportunity to study at a U.S. higher education institution in droves, seemingly without question. The U.S., to them, provided what their home countries could not – a degree from a globally-recognized university, access to world-acclaimed programs and professors, a verdant campus experience with football games and arts quads that was unparalleled.

The question was more, why wouldn't you want to study in the U.S.?

But times have changed. Today's international student has more options than ever when it comes to studying overseas. With the knowledge economy, employers often value skills over a diploma's pedigree, and students are also wising up to that evolution. Sure, the U.S. might still have the clout and swagger that other countries lack, but when it came to "value," some students might think the U.S. comes up short, especially when it comes to jobs and career pathways.

At Interstride, we pride ourselves on keeping a finger on the pulse of what international students are thinking. **Through this groundbreaking, survey-based research report, we capture student sentiment – about their goals, their university career centers, even their confidence – during a critical post-pandemic period.** The better we understand the international students, the better we can do our jobs. And in today's competitive market, that's what matters most.



Nitin Agrawal

CO-FOUNDER AND CEO



Interstride



About the author

Anna Esaki-Smith is Co-Founder of Education Rethink, a global research consultancy that provides advice on international strategies to higher education institutions, private companies, and governmental organizations. Anna specializes in helping universities develop and maximize their global outreach activities including international student recruitment, partnership development, content creation, and global branding. She is also a contributor to Forbes, covering education and workforce trends. She previously worked at UC Berkeley, the British Council, and EF Education First, and has been based in Tokyo, Hong Kong, Shanghai, Paris, and currently in New York.



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Key findings:

01

The main reason why survey respondents chose to study in the U.S. was the reputation of our colleges and universities, with 42 percent of students citing that as the driver. Twenty-three percent of respondents said a desire to work in the U.S., after graduation, was the reason for their selection, and 17 percent cited financial aid or a scholarship.

02

Regardless of their main reason for studying in the U.S., working here after graduation is a priority goal for students. Forty-one percent expressed interest in working in the U.S. for a few years, post-graduation, before going home or to another country. Thirty-one percent of respondents said they wanted to work in the U.S. after graduation and then live in the U.S. for an undetermined period of time.

03

In their professional endeavors, students are relying largely on their own resources. When asked what has been most helpful in terms of supporting them in achieving their career goals, 29 percent of survey respondents said personal connections, like family and friends, and 23 percent said they did everything themselves.

04

Career centers are generally assessed positively by students. When asked to describe the services offered by their college/university career center, 53 percent said they were helpful, and 28 percent said they were very helpful, with only 11 percent saying they were not helpful.

05

However, career centers are not being fully utilized by international students. In response to a question about what has been most helpful in helping them achieve their career goals, only twenty-two percent of respondents ranked their university career as the most helpful resource. When asked to describe the services offered by their career center, seven percent of respondents said they didn't use the center at all.



06

If getting a job in the U.S. was easier, more students would want to work and stay in the U.S. after graduation. When students who said they were not interested in working in the U.S., post-graduation, were asked if an easier employment environment would change their minds about remaining, 71 percent said that yes, it would.

07

The difficulty in getting jobs and internships in the U.S. takes students off guard. While 46 percent of survey respondents felt prepared for their career exploration in the U.S., 34 percent said they were not and 20 percent said they didn't know. When those who said they were not prepared were asked for the reason for that sentiment, the most often-cited reason was the difficulty in getting a job, followed by how hard it was to get an internship.

08

Students find networking in an authentic and genuine manner to be challenging. In providing a free answer to a question about their biggest obstacle, a number of respondents cited cultural and linguistic discomfort when it came to networking, perceived as a key element to getting an internship or a job.

09

Students wholeheartedly enjoy the U.S. study abroad experience. When asked if they would recommend studying in the U.S. to friends and peers back home, a resounding 84 percent said yes, they would, with only five percent saying no. Eleven percent said they didn't know if they would recommend it.

10

However, students are more circumspect when assessing the “value” of the cost through a career lens. Only 49 percent believed the value of a U.S. education justified the cost, while 29 percent said it did not and 22 percent said they didn't know. This contrasts with the more enthusiastic stance of the surveyed students when it came to recommending the U.S. experience overall.



Getting back to fundamentals as the pandemic ebbs

After more than two years of holding our collective breath, it's nice to breathe a sigh of relief.

As the pandemic starts to ebb in many countries, air travel has resumed and global mobility has made a comeback, after being just a faint memory. While the financial toll of Covid on higher education will likely take years to fully realize, so far, the market's resilience is palpable.

According to a “snapshot” survey conducted by the Institute of International Education (IIE) last fall of more than 860 U.S. higher education institutions, the number of new international students increased by 68 percent in fall 2021 compared with a year earlier, while total international students grew by four percent.¹

This demonstrates, at the very least, **a robust underlying demand for study abroad** and the pent-up aspirations of students who have spent the past two years at home, taking classes on their laptops while their gaze remained firmly fixed overseas. The powerful pull of the globally-branded universities of the U.S. also underscores the rebound we've been seeing in recent months.

But it's important to remember that, **even with these positive indications, we're not out of the woods. Not anywhere close.**

Today's international student has more options than ever, and many of those non-traditional host countries offer language support, internships, jobs, and pathways to citizenship while charging cheaper tuition. Sure, the U.S. still had some of the world's most prestigious universities and offers an unparalleled campus experience. But considering today's career-focused students, is enough being done to help them realize their professional goals to offset high fees?

In fact, the pandemic largely served as a distraction from the larger, more fundamental issues at hand. **Before coronavirus entered the picture in March 2020, the U.S. had been losing its luster as the study destination of choice. New international undergraduate enrollments were down.** The growth in Chinese student numbers had been falling, and the U.S. was hard-pressed finding other ways to make up for that gap.

It's hard to argue with numbers. Fewer than one million international students enrolled for either online or in-person classes at U.S. universities in the 2020-2021 academic year, comprising 4.6 percent of total enrollment at American higher education institutions. That not only marks a 15 percent year-over-year decline from the



2019-2020 academic year but also marks the first time fewer than a million international students have enrolled at U.S. colleges and universities since 2014-2015.²

Certainly, the pandemic played a big role in this decrease. But **overall numbers had been at best stagnant before the global health crisis** while new enrollments of international students fell.

So, rather than take a breather, we need to revert to the fundamentals as we try to build back what we've lost. We need to understand what's motivating students today.

Pent-up study abroad demand is welcome, but that's not a sustainable strategy as we look ahead. Students and their families will soon refocus on assessing the tangible outcome of studying in the U.S. and whether that perceived "value" is enough.

The first step in answering these questions is to better understand student motivations. In January 2022, Interstride conducted a survey to gauge student sentiment about the study abroad experience, with 1,087 students from over 100 countries finishing the self-completion online survey.

Through this survey, we see a distinct dynamic arising, about the personal and professional sides of the study abroad experience. How we can best bridge these often-conflicting areas will likely be key in our ability to provide students with what they feel they need and deserve.

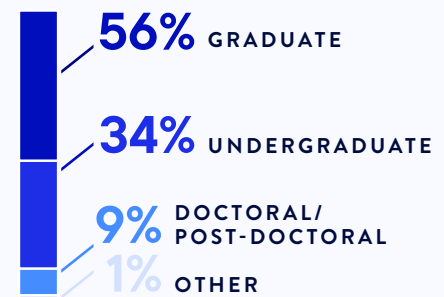


Our students – a sampling of the overall international student population

Of the 1,087 respondents to the Interstride survey, 48 percent identified as men, and 51 percent were women. A small number preferred not to answer and to self-describe.

Fifty-six percent of the respondent cohort were studying at the graduate level, 34 percent at the undergraduate level, nine percent doctoral or post-doctoral and one percent other.

What level are you at college or university?



By means of comparison, of the overall international student population in the U.S., there are slightly more undergraduate students than graduate students.

The largest student population represented amongst survey respondents was from India, and the second-largest was from China. Interestingly, this compares with a decline in Chinese student numbers growth overall in the international student population in the U.S., paired with a renewed university recruitment focus on India.

What country are you from?

Top 20 of 108



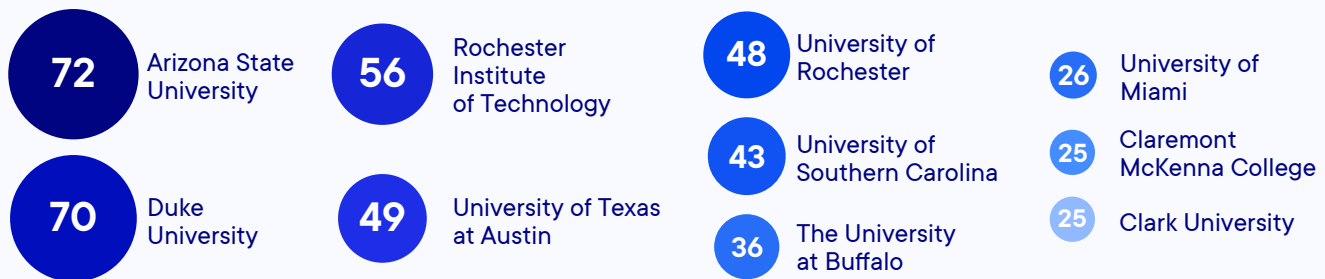
Amongst the survey respondents, the next-most cited countries were Nigeria, Taiwan, Brazil, and Vietnam. The wide variety of countries represented amongst our survey sample reflects to a degree the diversity of the overall international student population in the U.S.

The survey respondents were students enrolled at a wide range of higher education institutions, with the most enrolled at Arizona State University, followed by Duke University, the Rochester Institute of Technology, University of Rochester, University of Texas at Austin, and the University of Southern California. Many of the universities cited are amongst the most international in the country. It should be noted that a number of the universities also have academic program strengths in STEM subjects.



At what institution are you studying?

Top 10 of 125+



In addition, even in the most well-funded and globally-branded universities, **international students still face considerable challenges when it comes to their pursuit of professional and career goals.**

When asked about their major or area of study, many of the respondents said they were studying business and management, followed by engineering, math or computer science, other fields of study, social sciences, physical or life sciences and health professions. **The significant number of students studying STEM subjects may reflect a desire to qualify for a two-year extension of the Optional Practical Training (OPT) work scheme** that normally allows international graduates to work in the U.S. for one year.

Between 2004 and 2016, nearly 1.5 million international graduates of U.S. colleges and universities got authorization to remain and work in the U.S. through the federal government's OPT, with more than half of the graduates approved for employment specialized in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) fields, according to Pew Research Center research.³

The number of international STEM graduates participating in OPT grew by 400 percent since the first employment extension was introduced in 2008. OPT is very popular, with 203,885 international students currently on OPT⁴ in 2020-2021, although that represents an 8.8 percent drop from the previous year.

What is your major, or area of study?

Top 10 of 16





Making the decision to come to the U.S.

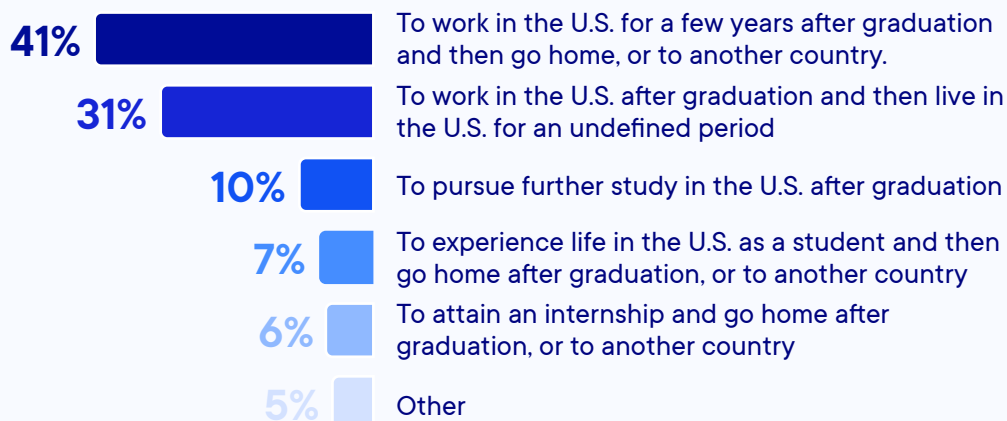
When asked about their reasons for selecting the U.S. as a study destination over other competitor countries, **42 percent of respondents said the ranking and reputation of American universities is what drew them.** This was followed by 23 percent of students saying they came to the U.S. because they were interested in working in the country after graduation, 17 percent who had scholarships or financial aid that brought them here, and those who selected the U.S. because of friends and family who lived in the U.S.

Why did you select the U.S. over other study destinations such as the U.K., Canada, Australia, or New Zealand?



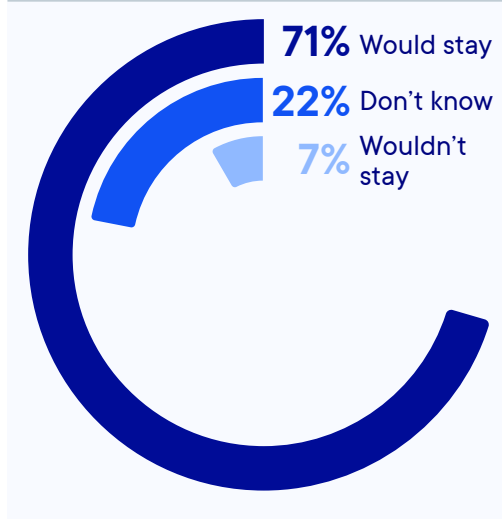
If we pull the data on graduate students alone, who presumably come to the U.S. with more of a career focus than younger counterparts, they also cite the ranking and reputation of American universities as the main draw, with a desire to work in the U.S. as the second-most cited reason. Obviously, the increased publicity surrounding global rankings has influenced students across the globe, especially those with parents who don't speak English who may rely more on numerical metrics to base their choices. And as competition for places at Ivy League universities, MIT and other globally-branded institutions has intensified in recent years, the "soft power" allure of highly-ranked U.S. universities has grown, in tandem.

By choosing to study in the U.S., what is your goal?





If getting a job in the U.S. was easier, would you want to stay and work in the U.S., post-graduation?



Perhaps students who prioritize overseas careers are truly selecting countries such as Canada that provide easier pathways to work and citizenship, while those who come to the U.S. prioritize university reputation above other factors.

While the reputation of U.S. higher education institutions was the most-cited reason why students picked the U.S. to study, working and living in this country in some form was mentioned by 72 percent of the respondents as a goal to achieve while they are here.

When asked about their goal in selecting the U.S. as their study destination, **41 percent said they wanted to work in the U.S. for a few years after graduation, and then go home, or to another country.** This was followed by 31 percent wanting to work in the U.S. after graduation, and then live in the U.S. for an undefined period. Ten percent wanted to pursue further education in the U.S. after graduation, seven percent aimed to experience life in the U.S. as a student, six percent said their goal was to attain an internship and five percent said other.

Students who said they were not interested in remaining in the U.S. after graduation, or that they did not know, were then asked, if getting a job in the U.S. were easier, would they want to stay in the U.S.? Seventy-one percent of those respondents said yes, under those circumstances they would want to stay and work in the U.S., while 22 percent didn't know and seven percent said no.

This indicates that, should U.S. career pathways for international students be widened, the upside for the country in terms of drawing enrollments is quite significant.

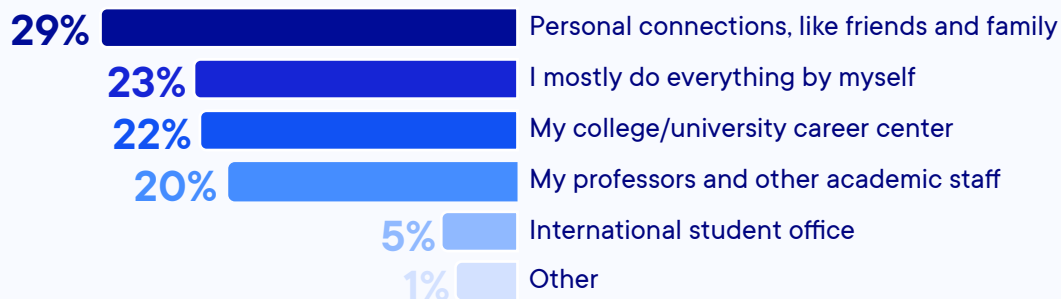
However, even with a U.S. president widely viewed as more welcoming than the previous one, the ability for international graduates to get jobs in this country remains significantly constrained and stands in contrast with some competitor countries such as Canada.



The heart of the matter – the career center and the job search process

After gathering information about the background and motivations of our surveyed students, we posed a series of questions regarding the pursuit of career goals. These involved assessing their university career center, prioritizing resources they've tapped and gauging confidence regarding their ability to achieve their goals. The purpose was to develop a better understanding of the environment within which students were operating as well as the challenges they faced when anticipating post-graduation pathways.

What has been the most helpful to you, in terms of supporting you to achieve your career goals?



When asked what has been the most helpful in terms of supporting them to achieve their career goals, the student respondents' answers were fairly spread out, with 29 percent saying personal connections were most helpful and 23 percent noting they did everything themselves. Another 22 percent said their university career center was most helpful in supporting their career goals, while 20 percent cited professors and academic staff as helpful, five percent the help of the international student office, and the remaining one percent, other.

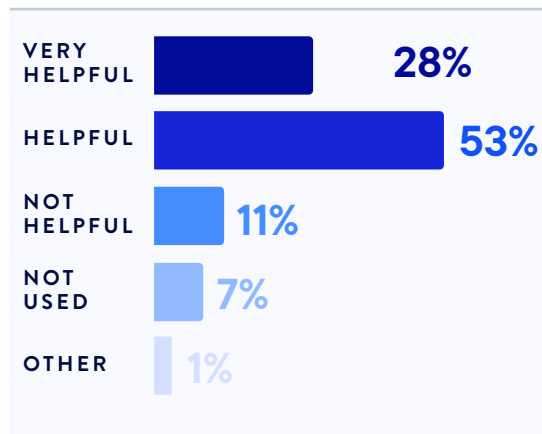
What's striking here is that more than half the respondents are relying on resources outside of their university – namely, personal connections and their own resourcefulness – in achieving their professional career goals.

While their reasons for not utilizing their career center more are not articulated, perhaps there is room for increased messaging to international students about the center's potential role in a career search and the corresponding benefits.

When responses from graduate students alone are analyzed, they, too, say personal connections have been the most helpful. However, their second-most cited resource is the university career center – possibly due to the more career-focused stance of older graduate students – followed by their own resourcefulness.



How would you describe the services offered by your college/university career center?

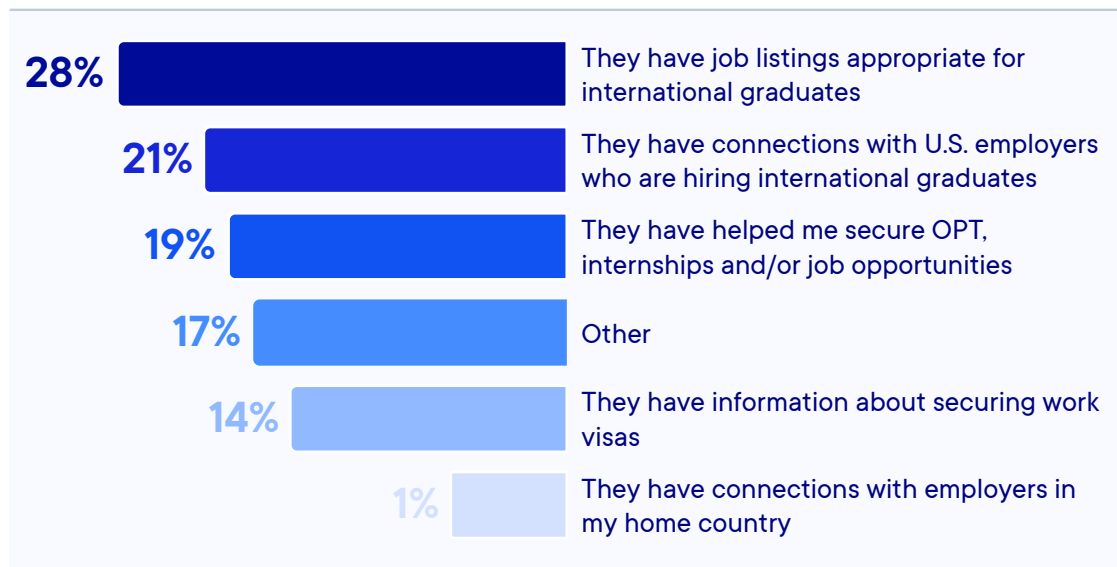


When asked about the services offered by their university career center, however, survey respondents generally were favorable in their assessment, with 53 percent characterizing the services as helpful and an additional twenty-eight percent saying the career center was very helpful. In contrast, 11 percent said their university career center was not helpful, seven percent of respondents said they did not use the career center at all and one percent cited other.

While the overall positive assessment by students is encouraging, the fact that nearly 20 percent of respondents were not being well-supported by their career centers – either because the services offered were not helpful or not being utilized – is a point to be noted.

We asked the respondents who characterized their career center as helpful or very helpful for the reasons for their assessment. Twenty-eight percent said the career center had job listings appropriate for international graduates, 21 percent cited connections with U.S. employers who are hiring, 19 percent said the center had helped secure internships, OPT and/or job opportunities, 17 percent cited other, 14 percent said they had information about work visas and one percent said they had connections with employers in that student's home country.

Why is your career center helpful?





The perceived strengths of career centers were distributed across a number of areas. This can be seen as indicative of career centers that are helpful across a broad variety of topics, rather than offering areas of deep expertise. In addition, while the more granular support services offered – such as resumé and cover letter critiques, mock interview training and portfolio reviews – were not specifically referred to in this question, those elements may have contributed to this overall upbeat assessment.

Why is your career center not helpful?



Conversely, we asked the respondents who described their career center as not helpful for the reasons why they found it to be so. Again, the reasons are well-dispersed – **27 percent said their career center doesn't have connections with U.S. employers who are hiring international graduates**, 25 percent said other, 24 percent said they don't have job listings appropriate for international graduates, 18 percent said they have not helped secure OPT, internships and/or work opportunities, five percent said they don't have information about securing work visas and one percent said they don't have connections with employers in my home country.

The perceived weaknesses are spread across a wide variety of areas, as were the responses to the question asking why career centers were helpful. These similar response outcomes could indicate an overall lack of core focus, when it comes to what career centers offer international students. The fact that 25 percent cited “other” as a reason for their career services being unhelpful – and 17 percent saying “other” as a reason why the centers were helpful – could further underscore this hypothesis.

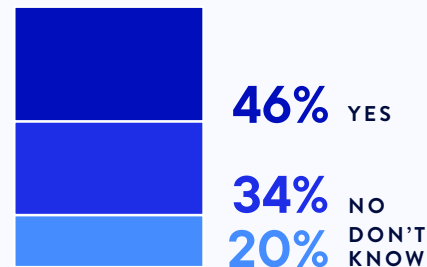


Preparedness, confidence about achieving goals, and personal obstacles

When asked whether they were prepared for their career exploration in the U.S., 46 percent of respondents said yes, they were, while 34 percent said they were not prepared and 20 percent said they didn't know.

We then asked the “no” respondents to this question the reasons why they felt unprepared for their career exploration.

Do you feel you were prepared for your career exploration in the U.S.?

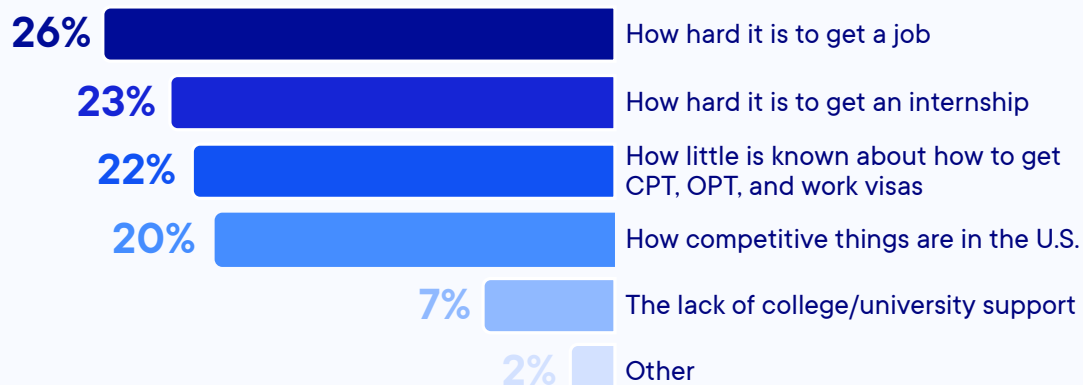


Of survey respondents who said they were not prepared for their U.S. career exploration, the most oft-cited reason for them feeling that way was the difficulty in getting a job. This reason was followed by how hard it was to get an internship, and then how little is known about how to get CPT, OPT and work visas.

Again, prior to arrival in the U.S., these students may have had inaccurate perceptions about the competitive jobs marketplace, made that much more challenging for international students due to visa restrictions. Of course, working in the U.S. was not the primary motivation driving these students to this country, but their sentiment in this area is striking.

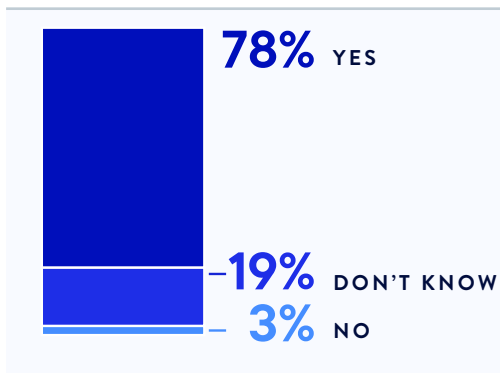
It may be advisable for those involved in recruitment and marketing to more clearly articulate to potential recruits the professional challenges they are likely to face in the U.S., and for universities to provide more support, on-the-ground, once students are actually on campus.

Reasons given by those who answered NO to 'Do you feel you were prepared for your career exploration in the U.S.?'





Do you think you'll be able to achieve the goals you have set out for yourself?



However, when asked whether they thought they'd be able to achieve the goals they had set out for themselves, a resounding 78 percent of respondents said yes, with only three percent responding in the negative. Nineteen percent said they didn't know.

It may be fair to surmise that the international students that come to the U.S. are by nature focused and capable, and have taken a big step, both emotionally and financially, in this pursuit. Despite the challenges they face, perhaps it's not surprising that they still feel confident about achieving their personal goals. This is indeed a positive baseline for university career centers to build upon.



What is your biggest obstacle?

Students were given the option to fill in their answer to the question, “what is your biggest obstacle?” Predictably, students responded in a wide variety of ways, from citing “myself” and “procrastination” to the lack of sponsored job postings for graduates in the humanities and related fields.

However, there were two marked answers that appeared frequently amongst student responses. The first was the reluctance of U.S. employers to hire international students in lieu of domestic graduates, or in terms of providing necessary sponsorships.

Indeed, this is an area of great stress for international graduates, and a signal for university career centers to foster closer ties with potential employers.

A second popular answer was a reluctance to network in order to get ahead, professionally. “Fostering a connection when no cultural similarities are present” is an obstacle, one student noted. “Adapt my speech for what is expected in interviews” was another obstacle cited by another. “To make genuine professional relationships/connections of LinkedIn” was another, while another student said, “culturally assimilating and breaking cultural cliques to secure decent networking opportunities.”

“

Fostering a connection when no cultural similarities are present

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Adapt my speech for what is expected in interviews

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To make genuine professional relationships or connections of LinkedIn

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culturally assimilating and breaking cultural cliques to secure decent networking opportunities

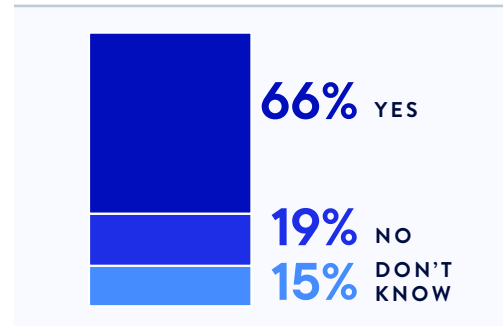
While networking is a helpful skill when trying to secure internships and employment, perhaps career advisers could more pointedly help international students figure out a way to professionally connect that’s enhanced by their cultural orientation.



The “value” proposition of the U.S. education experience

When asked whether respondents were eligible for STEM Optional Practical Training (OPT), the two-year extension offered to STEM graduates, 66 percent said they were, while 19 percent said no and the remaining 15 percent said they didn't know. The latter could be undergraduates who were not yet well-established in their academic pathways.

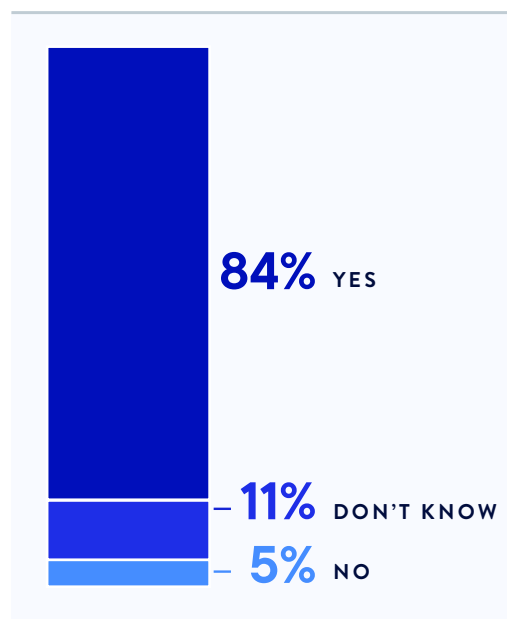
Are you or will you be eligible for STEM OPT?



The Biden administration recently announced a series of administration actions aimed at attracting and retaining international students and researchers in STEM fields. These actions include identifying 22 new fields of study eligible for the STEM OPT extension, including climate science and data analytics.⁵

While STEM OPT indeed contributes to driving student mobility to the U.S., whether that alone – without an established pathway to sponsored employment – is enough to satisfy the career aspirations of international students remains uncertain

Would you recommend studying in the U.S. to your friends and peers back home?



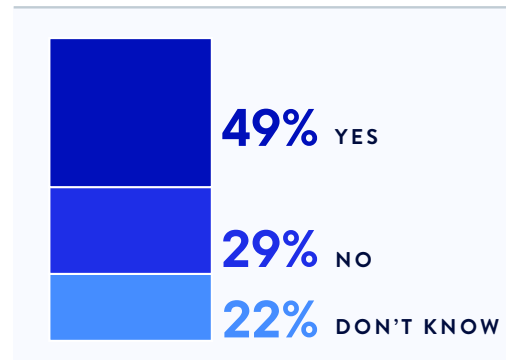
When asked whether respondents would recommend studying in the U.S. to friends and peers back home, the positive responses were marked, with a resounding 84 percent saying they would. Only five percent said no, they would not recommend the U.S., while eleven percent said they didn't know whether they would.

As recruitment directors at U.S. universities know, word-of-mouth recommendations are more powerful than any campaign messaging a marketing department can develop. International students are obviously deriving “value” when assessing their study in the U.S. from this general perspective.



However, when asked a question about the “value” of a U.S. education in terms of cost, the responses were a bit different. Less than half - 49 percent - of respondents agreed that, from a career standpoint, the value of a U.S. education justified the cost, while 29 percent said that no, it did not. Twenty-two percent of respondents said they did not know if the cost was justified.

From a career perspective, does the value of U.S. education justify the cost?



The tuition fees of U.S. universities are amongst the highest in the world, and for students studying in expensive cities in states such as New York or California, the cost of living can be prohibitively expensive. It's fair to assume that, as a result, students and their families are looking for a tangible career outcome from their academic investment. These survey findings suggest that, when viewing their U.S. education through a return on investment lens, survey respondents are more circumspect in their assessment.



Looking ahead

There are a lot of things to be happy about with the Interstride survey findings.

Students, overall, find great value in studying in the U.S. Despite the many challenges they've encountered over the past few years, they overwhelmingly would recommend the U.S. as a study destination to their peers and friends. As we know, word-of-mouth recommendations from peers are perhaps the most powerful recruitment tool a university or host country can wield.

However, we're at the same time seeing a conflicting dynamic. When survey respondents were asked, from a career perspective, whether the "value" of a U.S. education justified the cost, their responses were more circumspect, with less than half of respondents replying in the affirmative. The remaining respondents said either no or that they didn't know.

So, what are the reasons behind the "value gap?"

We have international students who appreciate the U.S. study abroad experience, drawn to the country by the stellar reputation of U.S. colleges and universities. Universities, too, are investing significantly in their recruitment efforts to get international students onto their campuses. While working in the U.S., post-graduation, is not their primary motivation amongst our survey respondents for coming here, over 70 percent said they want to stay in the U.S. after graduation to work. Even those who indicated they didn't want to stay on said they might change their minds if getting a job were easier.

At the same time, our survey cohort largely relies on their own personal connections and resourcefulness when trying to achieve their career goals. Thus, it's fair to conclude that career centers at institutions are not being adequately utilized by students. While career services are generally well-regarded by our surveyed students, there don't appear to be distinctive areas of deep expertise that students can tap to help their career journeys – perhaps reflective of the many silos in the higher education system that preclude our ability to properly support international students, post-admission.

A significant number of surveyed students also feel unprepared for the difficulty in securing internships and jobs in this country. This sentiment may not necessarily reflect what's lacking in their respective university career centers, but there is definitely a disconnect between what higher education institutions can offer these students in terms of technical and emotional support and what is being utilized.

The environment is improving. The Biden administration has widened the criteria for who qualifies for the STEM OPT extension, one of few mechanisms the U.S. has to compete with other countries that more readily embrace international talent as workers and residents. We are hopeful that the administration continues to advocate for greater openness and flexibility. However, U.S. universities still need to contend with the fact that, no matter how expanded OPT becomes, the formidable challenges international students face when trying to secure employment remain largely unchanged.



There's a lot we can do in terms of improving infrastructure within a campus to jointly support international students and alumni. The engagement of international alumni – such a critical resource for university development – can only be successful if this group felt well-served while on campus and supported, too, once they left.

But, even so, growing enrollments and keeping the U.S. on its perch as the premier host destination is not entirely reliant on policy changes.

The onus is on us, the practitioners, to close the “value gap.” The inherent worth of the U.S. study abroad is well-established – strong academic programs, the world's pre-eminent faculty, campuses amongst the most beautiful in the world. **But what we offer in terms of tangible value to students through the lens of career outcomes is less well-articulated.** It's here where we can dedicate our focus and, hopefully, enable students to tout value in all its iterations.

But, even as we boost our understanding of international student demands, the nature of the jobs market continues to evolve, probably more quickly than we can keep up. The challenges being faced globally in today's tech-disrupted economy are unprecedented, in terms of preparing graduates to meet workforce needs. And, to boot, competition to attract the world's best tech talent underscores the recruitment strategies of host countries around the world. The contribution international students can make in this regard is invaluable. So, as a result, **the professional readiness of graduates will increasingly become front and center, no longer the responsibility of career centers alone, but that of a university in its entirety.**

Recommendations

- Engage more actively with international students to raise awareness of career services
- Manage the expectations of students when it comes to the reality of getting a job in the U.S.
- Message to qualified students that a three-year STEM OPT extension could be a fulfilling work experience, in and of itself
- Help students develop their own style of networking that takes into account personal cultural considerations
- Build upon students' existing positive attitude towards the U.S. study experience by providing both emotional and professional support
- Develop closer relationships with U.S. employers that could potentially hire international graduates



Endnotes

- 1 <https://www.iie.org/Research-and-Insights/Publications/Fall-2021-International-Student-Enrollment-Snapshot>
- 2 <https://opendoorsdata.org/data/international-students/enrollment-trends/>
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- 4 <https://opendoorsdata.org/data/international-students/academic-level/>
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