Some US colleges pinched by drop in foreign students

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While foreign-student enrollment remains solid at major universities with large populations of Chinese students, some smaller universities without international brand recognition, are concerned about a decline in the number of Chinese students, who comprise the largest number of foreign students in the US.  
Recent US State Department data show that the number of visas issued to foreign students declined by 17 percent last year and is nearly 40 percent below its 2015 peak.  
The biggest decline in visa approvals in 2017 was seen among students from Asian countries, particularly China and India, which typically account for the largest number of F-1 visas.  
"This year, we see about a 2 percent decline in Chinese students' applications when I checked last month," said Bryant Priester, the director of international admissions and recruitment at Purdue University.  
The number of Chinese students enrolled at the university in fall 2017 has decreased by about 10 percent, according to statistics on the university website.  
Last fall there were about 4,000 Chinese students enrolled at Purdue, representing about 44 percent of its international students and about 9 percent of total enrollment.  
The school in West Lafayette, Indiana, known for engineering, ranks third among US public institutions in international student enrollment. The University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign and the University of Southern California in Los Angeles are the top two, according to 2016 data.  
"But we are not very worried about the drop, because we are aiming to build a worldwide classroom for our students, and we accept a steady number of applications from Chinese students every year," Priester said.  
"The decline in the number of international student visas is problematic," he said. "The State Department has revised its guidance to US consulates that review and approve the applications. The agency said it now emphasizes that the consulates must refuse any applicants if they are "not satisfied that the applicant's present intent is to depart the United States at the conclusion of his or her study", said Earl Johnson, vice-president for enrollment management and student services at the University of Tulsa in Oklahoma.  
Nearly 20 percent of the University of Tulsa's 4,400 enrolled students are international, and the school has experienced a decline in such students for a few years. It has started to cut into revenue, and the university has even placed a school official in China to recruit more international students.  
"And political rhetoric on immigration is casting fear among international students and causing them to feel unwelcome in the US," said Johnson. "All US universities have expressed concern because of the potential impact on enrollment. Equally important is the effect a loss of international students would have on the ability of universities to deliver on their educational mission to offer a diverse and inclusive environment.  
"China is currently the largest sender of international students to US institutions. The University of Tulsa wanted to establish an experienced presence in China in attempt to stabilize international enrollment caused by the unforeseen political challenges and increased competition for students worldwide," Johnson added.  
Idaho State University had 662 international students at the end of the fall term, down from 928 last year. Tuition is $3,583 a semester for resident undergraduate students and $10,971 for those from out of state.  
The university has intensified its efforts since then.  
"Our International Programs Office has partnered with online national recruiting events to supplement traditional recruiting efforts," said Scott Scholes, associate vice-president for enrollment management at the university.  
He said the office is "supporting and fostering programmatic articulation agreements with overseas institutions, particularly in China. We have three university faculty members in China this week."  
"In terms of Chinese students, in 2014 there was a change in the agreement between China and the US on visa issuances, and both sides agreed to issue multiple entry visas to students," said Peggy Blumenthal, the senior counselor to the president at Institute of International Education.  
She indicated that the change in visa policy allowing Chinese students to obtain an F-1 visa for a five-year period instead of one could be a factor in the recent declines.  
Blumenthal said worldwide competition for international students is also heating up, as countries such as Canada, Germany and Australia make it easier for international students to stay in the country after they graduate and become part of the workforce.  
Meanwhile, in the US, the government's tougher stance on its popular H-1B foreign work visa and discussion on considering eliminating the regulation on STEM OPT (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics Optional Practical Training, an extension of the educational experience for students beyond the classroom) might also be deterring international students from applying American universities.  
"It's become more and more difficult to stay in the US after graduation," said Olivia Ma, an undergraduate student at Peking University who has applied for graduate school in the US for fall 2018 enrollment.  
"So, I plan to go back to China when I graduate, and Chinese companies in general prefer students who graduated from top universities in the US - those schools with widely internationally recognized brands," she said.  
Ma applied to five universities, including Columbia University, the University of Chicago and New York University.  
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