

The Atlantic

EDUCATION

'American Universities Are Addicted to Chinese Students'

A new report estimates that 8,000 students from China were expelled in the 2013-14 school year. That's bad news for U.S. schools.



Bo Guagua, son of fallen Chinese politician Bo Xilai, walks offstage after receiving his masters degree in public policy at the John F. Kennedy School of Government during the 361st Commencement Exercises at Harvard University in Cambridge, Massachusetts May 24, 2012.

Brian Snyder/Reuters

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A startling number of Chinese students [are getting kicked out](#) of American colleges. According to [a white paper](#) published by WholeRen, a Pittsburgh-based consultancy, an estimated 8,000 students from China were expelled from universities and colleges across the United States in 2013-4. The vast majority of these students—around 80 percent—were removed due to

cheating or failing their classes.

As long as universities have existed, students have found a way to get expelled from them. But the prevalence of expulsions of Chinese students should be a source of alarm for American university administrators.

According to the Institute of International Education, [274,439 students from China](#) attended school in the United States in 2013-4, a 16 percent jump from the year before. Chinese students represent 31 percent of all international students in the country and contributed [an estimated \\$22 billion](#) to the U.S. economy in 2014.

“American universities are addicted to Chinese students.”

In the past, Chinese students in the United States tended to be graduate students living on tight budgets. Now, a large number of students come from China’s wealthiest and most powerful families. President Xi Jinping, for example, studied in the United States. The presence of wealthy Chinese students has even caught the attention of luxury retailers. Bergdorf Goodman, the New York City-based department store, [sponsored Chinese New Year](#) celebrations at NYU and Columbia, while Bloomingdales [organized a fashion show](#) for Chinese students at their shopping center in Chicago.

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Chinese students have become a big market in the United States—and nobody understands this better than the universities themselves. Over 60 percent of Chinese students [cover the full cost](#) of an American university education themselves, effectively subsidizing the education of their lower-income American peers. Some schools—such as Purdue University in Indiana

—[profit further](#) by charging additional fees for international students.

But the symbiotic relationship between cash-strapped American schools and Chinese students is not without its problems. Demand for an overseas education has spawned a cottage industry of businesses in China that help students prepare their applications. The industry is poorly regulated and fraud is rampant. [According to Zinch China](#), an education consulting company, 90 percent of Chinese applicants submit fake recommendations, 70 percent have other people write their essays, 50 percent have forged high school transcripts, and 10 percent list academic awards and other achievements they did not receive. As a result, many students arrive in the U.S. and find that their English isn't good enough to follow lectures or write papers.

Until recently, American schools have been happy to look the other way.

“American universities are addicted to Chinese students,” Parke Muth, a Virginia-based education consultant with extensive experience in China, told me last year. “They're good test takers. They tend not to get into too much trouble. They're not party animals. The schools are getting a lot of money, and they, frankly, are not doing a lot in terms of orientation.”

Is the relationship between Chinese students and American universities sustainable? The Chinese government has invested billions of dollars in improving its own tertiary education system in an attempt to persuade students to remain in the country.

“China is beefing up their labs, their research, while in the U.S. they've cut back,” said Muth. “At the grad level, students are staying in China because now they're starting to be able to compete.”

For American universities, expelling Chinese students may someday be an overture to a bigger problem—they not coming at all.

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