

Policy Memorandum

To: Mr. Huai Jinpeng, Minister of Education

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Executive Summary

The objective of this policy memorandum is to propose feasible means of carrying out President Xi's goal of inviting 50,000 young Americans to China on exchange and study programs in the next five years. Enhancing study programs between China and the United States is essential for promoting cultural exchange, cultivating mutual understanding in a time of tension, and finding shared solutions to our world's most pressing challenges. The initiative faces significant challenges that necessitate Chinese policy solutions; existing programs are inaccessible, there are significant barriers to obtaining visas for students, finding employment is difficult, and some programs endanger Chinese national security. To alleviate these issues, we recommend several policy changes, including streamlining the process to obtain visas and employment, creating scholarships for new study exchanges, readjusting the budget to fill fiscal gaps, and bolstering background checks to protect national security. With these reforms, we aim to improve US-China relations through academic exchange.

Background

On January 28, 2024, the U.S.-China exchange program marked its 45th anniversary where it highlighted its critical role in fostering mutual understanding, collaboration, and innovation between the two nations. The Chinese Embassy in San Francisco city of the U.S., celebrated this anniversary by hosting an event in which Ambassador Xie Feng attended and emphasized the program's positive impact, particularly in cultivating renowned scholars, driving research developments, and enhancing mutual prosperity between the two countries. Despite the challenges posed by restrictive policies and geopolitical tensions, both countries reaffirmed their commitment to advancing educational exchanges. Notable initiatives, such as the Young Envoys Scholarship (YES), which aims to bring 50,000 young Americans to China over the next five years, demonstrate this ongoing dedication¹. The Institute of International Education (IIE), a global nonprofit founded in 1919, plays a key role in supporting such efforts by managing scholarships, fellowships, and other programs that provide students, scholars, and professionals with access to international educational opportunities². Through partnerships and funding, IIE actively promotes study-abroad opportunities, including for U.S. students wishing to study in China. Despite these efforts, however, the number of American students studying in China remains low. While the number increased from about 200 during the pandemic to 800 in 2024, it is still far from the over 11,000 students who studied in China in 2019³. Key barriers, including concerns over geopolitical tensions, limited financial incentives, and difficulties in securing visas

¹ "The Chinese Embassy Held an Event Celebrating the 45th Anniversary of China-U.S. Student Exchanges and the Spring Festival Gala for Chinese and American Youths," Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the United States of America, January 31, 2024, https://us.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/dshd/202402/t20240201_11237798.htm.

² Laughlin, Shepherd. Educational Exchange Between The United States and China, July 2008. <https://www.iie.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/IIE-White-Paper-Educational-Exchange-Between-the-US-and-China.pdf>.

³ John Ruwitch, "Why the Number of American Students Choosing to Study in China Remains Low," WBOI, June 13, 2024, <https://www.wboi.org/2024-06-13/why-the-number-of-american-students-choosing-to-study-in-china-remains-low>.

and work permits, continue to hinder participation in these valuable exchanges. As U.S.-China relations evolve, strengthening this exchange program will remain essential for tackling global challenges and maintaining stable ties between the two nations.

Analysis

There exists established programs that facilitate scholarly exchange between the U.S. and China. For example, the Schwarzman Scholarship supports over 200 students to study at Tsinghua University in China for a one-year master's program⁴. Many universities in the U.S. also have proprietary study abroad programs that allow students to study in China. However, many of these programs, like the Schwarzman Scholarship, can be highly selective—out of more than 4,000 applicants, only 200 are selected to participate. For programs that are less selective, they can be very expensive. For instance, studying abroad for one academic semester in Beijing through the University of California's Education Abroad Program can cost up to \$11,585⁵. These barriers to entry pose a significant roadblock to the effectiveness of these programs; if only a handful of the most privileged students have the opportunity to receive an education in China, then the overarching goal of promoting mutual understanding and easing international tensions between the U.S. and China is diminished. This exclusivity of the programs stratifies access to knowledge and unfairly reserves opportunities to engage with Chinese culture for those who may not benefit as much from the experience, compared to students from disadvantaged backgrounds whose understanding of China is more limited and stand to gain more from studying abroad. More efforts should be made to increase the number of accessible programs to lift the barriers to

⁴ Schwarzman Scholars, March 4, 2024. <https://www.schwarzmanscholars.org/>.

⁵ "UC Exchange Programs: Chinese in Beijing." UCEAP. Accessed December 9, 2024. <https://uceap.universityofcalifornia.edu/programs/chinese-in-beijing/cost>.

studying in China to encourage broad-based scholarly exchange. Requirements for existing programs like the Young Envoys Scholarship should be reduced, such as degree and GPA requirements. More funding should also be directed towards the programs, so that the program participants bear less of the economic burden. Visas for students attending Chinese universities are notoriously difficult to obtain, especially for American students. First, students must submit their application physically at a Chinese consulate. This can cause many problems because the Chinese consulate isn't in every state. The entire country has only five consulates, including New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, San Francisco, and Houston. Unfortunately, that means that if a student doesn't live in one of these cities, then they would have to use a service that would have a courier drop off their documents at the consulate in order to apply for the visa. If accepted, the courier would then have to pick up the visa and then mail the physical visa back to the student so that they could use it to enter the country for their program. Another big part of the visa process is paying for the visa. Currently, a student visa has a cost of \$140, which is fairly pricey (3). These costs can accrue if the student has to use one of those courier services to get their documents to the consulate. A streamlined process should be established to make it easier for students to obtain visas. Agreements should be made between the governments to create simplified pathways. For example, if there is a trusted institution that has established exchange programs, then there should be an expedited process so that it can be much easier for students to obtain a visa. These trusted institutions could also have a waiver for the visa so that there is less of a burden on the student to pay the fee. Having institutions have a bigger part in the visa process can make it a lot easier for a student to make the choice to attend the exchange program. Another big part of the problem is that students have to drop off the application in person. If the

application could be fully digitized like in other countries, it could make the process a lot easier so that students would not need to use courier services anymore and could obtain a digital visa.

While these proposals will certainly help President Xi realize his vision of facilitating the exchange of 50,000 young Americans to study in China over the next 5 years, there are challenges to overcome. First is the question of budget; many of the proposals, such as subsidizing exchange programs, require high amounts of funding. To alleviate the financial burden for students wishing to study abroad, funding in the order of millions of dollars would be needed. However, there are various sources of funds that could be siphoned from. For example, in 2024, the CCP spent \$231.3 billion on defense and only \$22.9 billion on education⁶. If \$1 billion—which is more than enough to cover the expenses of the 50,000 scholars that President Xi hopes will study in China—is directed from defense to education to support study abroad programs, that would mean that a .5% decrease in defense spending would support a 5% increase in educational spending that could directly facilitate the exchange program. A slight redirection of budget and reorientation of values could help unlock boundless potential in cultural and intellectual exchange that would result in boundless innovation that would pay itself off.

Beyond funding, however, there are potential concerns regarding national security. Many areas of academic research are highly sensitive and have direct ties to national security. For example, with the current push towards the development and deployment of artificial intelligence (AI) in virtually all sectors of the economy, research in advanced semiconductor technology is highly

⁶ Hart, Brian. “Making Sense of China’s Government Budget.” ChinaPower Project, March 14, 2024. <https://chinapower.csis.org/making-sense-of-chinas-government-budget/>.

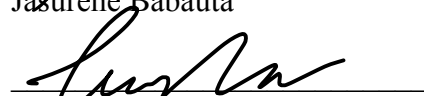
critical in the current political landscape. In fact, China is the global leader in AI research⁷.

Allowing foreign students access to Chinese knowledge in these fields could open the door to intellectual property theft and academic espionage. However, this can be prevented by instating rigorous background check procedures for foreign students wishing to study these disciplines; multiple rounds of interviews, extensive documentation reviews, and polygraph examinations can be incorporated into the selection process to ensure that the students admitted have no ties to foreign government entities.

Recommendation

To foster US-Chinese international relationships and encourage American students to study abroad in China, we recommend to increase scholarship and stipend funding, to reform visa requirements while employing Chinese nationals at the US embassy in Beijing to expedite the processing of visa applications, and implementing a complaints and suggestions system administered by both the American Embassy and the local Chinese bureaucracy to ensure the security and integrity of foreign exchange students.


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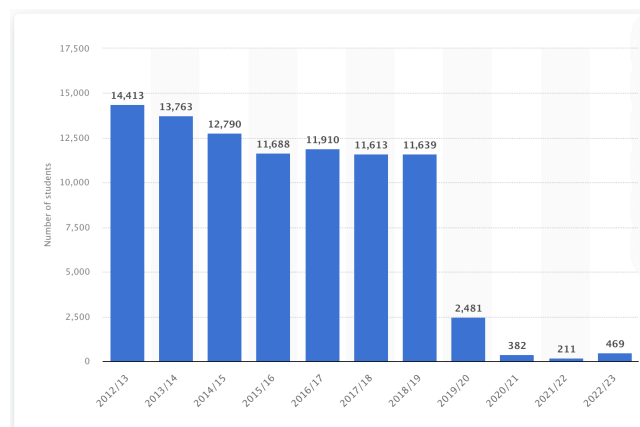
Ryan Tee

⁷ Omaar, Hodan. "How Innovative Is China in Ai?" RSS, November 25, 2024.
<https://itif.org/publications/2024/08/26/how-innovative-is-china-in-ai/>.

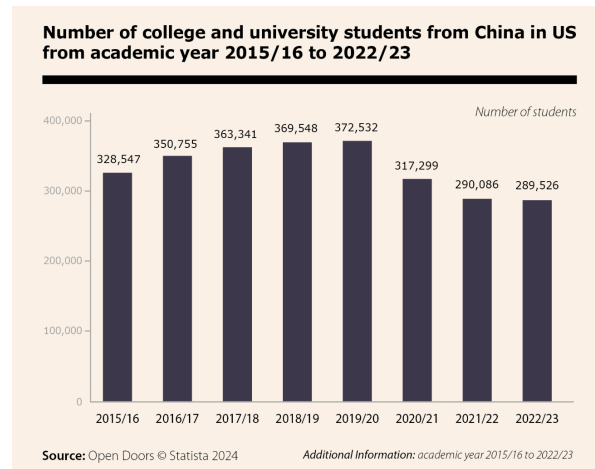
Appendix

The figures included below show data on the number of Chinese and American students in each country, as well as historical data on these numbers and the changes in these numbers over the last decade.

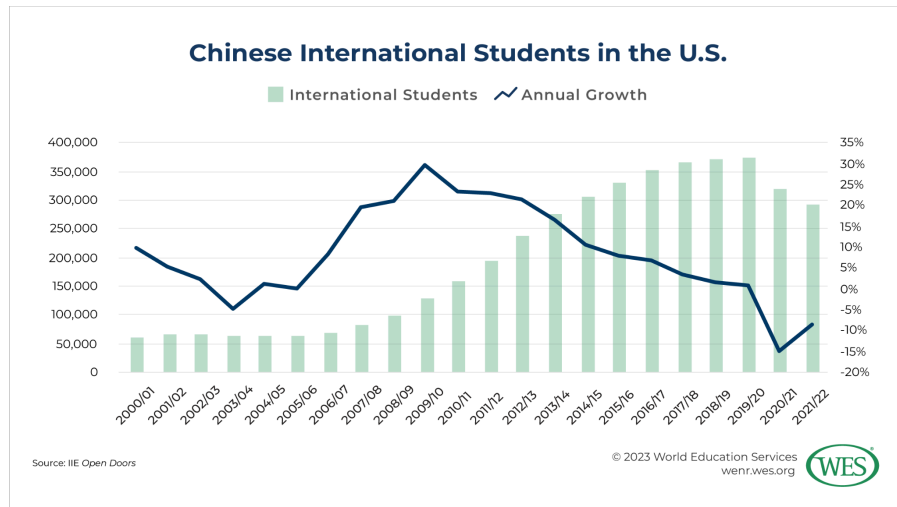
Number of college and university students from the United States studying in China
from academic year 2012/13 to 2022/23



(Figure 1) The above figure shows the number of US exchange students in China between the 2012/13 school year and the 2022/23 school year. As can be seen in the graph, the number of US students in China declined somewhat from 2012/13 to 2015/16 and then remained stagnant until the pandemic in 2020, where there was a significant drop off. In the years since the pandemic, the numbers have barely recovered and remain very low.



(Figure 2) This bar graph shows the number of Chinese students studying in the US from 2015/16 to 2022/23. Like the Figure 1, this graph also reflects a significant drop in exchange student numbers following the 2020 pandemic. While Figure 1 showed a minor increase in numbers going into the 2022/23 school year, this chart reflects a further (minor) drop in numbers going into the 2022/23 school year. Both Figure 1 and Figure 2 display the detrimental effects of the pandemic on exchange student numbers. It is also important to note the significant difference in overall average number of Chinese students in the US compared to the overall number of American students in China. While the pre-pandemic numbers of American students in China hung in the low ten thousands, the number of Chinese students in America neared 300,000 even after the pandemic.



(Figure 3) This figure displays the overall growth in the number of Chinese international students studying in the US. It is shown that while the total number of international students in the US increased steadily until the pandemic, the number of Chinese students in the US has actually been decreasing steadily since 2009/10. While there has been some recovery since the pandemic, these numbers still remain low compared to the historical numbers of Chinese students in the US.

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