



Highlights of [GAO-07-1047T](#), a testimony before the Subcommittee on International Organizations, Human Rights, and Oversight, Committee on Foreign Affairs, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

More international students obtain a higher education in the United States than in any other country, and they make valuable contributions while they are here. For those students returning home after their studies, such exchanges support federal public diplomacy efforts and can improve understanding among nations.

International students have earned about one-third or more of all U.S. degrees at both the master's and doctoral levels in several of the science, technology, engineering, and mathematics fields. Yet recent trends, including a drop in international student enrollment in U.S. colleges and universities, and policy changes after September 11, 2001, have raised concerns about whether the United States will continue to attract talented international students to its universities.

This testimony is based on ongoing and published GAO work. It includes themes from a September 2006 Comptroller General's forum on current trends in international student enrollment in the United States and abroad. Invitees to the forum included experts from the Congress, federal agencies, universities, research institutions, higher education organizations, and industry.

What GAO Recommends

This testimony does not contain recommendations.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-07-1047T.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact George Scott at 202-512-5932 or ScottG@gao.gov.

HIGHER EDUCATION

Challenges in Attracting International Students to the United States and Implications for Global Competitiveness

What GAO Found

GAO identified the following key issues that may affect the United States' ability to continue attracting the world's most talented international students to our universities and colleges:

- The global higher education landscape is changing and providing more alternatives for students, as other countries expand their educational capacity and technology-based distance learning opportunities increase. For example, enrollment in college-level distance education has nearly quadrupled since 1995. In addition, U.S. universities are establishing branch campuses in other countries and partnerships with international institutions, allowing international students to receive a U.S. education without leaving home. Greater competition has prompted some countries to offer courses in English and to expand their recruiting activities and incentives. Some countries also have developed strategic plans or offices focused on attracting international students.
- The cost of obtaining a U.S. degree is among the highest in the world and rising, which may discourage international students. Average tuition in 2003 at public U.S. colleges and universities was second only to Australia. Moreover, tuition and associated costs continue to rise. While the effects of high and rising costs and related factors are difficult to estimate, some policymakers are concerned they may be discouraging international students from coming to the United States.
- Visa policies and procedures, tightened after September 11 to protect our national security, contributed to real and perceived barriers for international students. Post-September 11 changes included a requirement that almost all visa applicants be interviewed, affecting the number of visas issued and extending wait times for visas under certain circumstances. GAO has made several recommendations to strengthen the visa process in a way that reduces barriers for international students while balancing national security, and recent changes have improved the process. Processing times for certain security reviews have declined, and recent data show more student visas issued in the last few years. The Department of State also has taken steps to ease the burden on students, including expediting interviews and extending the length of time that some visa clearances are valid. We are continuing to study aspects of these issues.

The United States must maintain an appropriate balance between protecting national security interests and ensuring our long-term competitiveness. Monitoring current trends and federal policies is essential to ensuring that the United States continues to obtain talented international students in the face of greater global competition.