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U.S. | U.S. NEWS

Political Lines Shape U.S. College Picks of Some Foreign Students

Texas, previously a popular academic destination, slips 9 percentage points; 'I have never seen a handgun'



The University of Texas at Austin, above, saw a small decline in undergraduate admissions this year after years of steady growth. Some international students are concerned about gun laws in the state. PHOTO: SANDY CARSON/ZUMA WIRE

By *Doug Belkin and Newley Purnell*

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International students accepted to U.S. schools are planning to enroll at a similar rate as last year in most areas except the southern part of the country, especially Texas, according to data from 165 U.S. colleges and universities.

The enrollment numbers help dispel fears that President Donald Trump's anti-immigrant rhetoric would scare international students away.

"I think people just seem to be more cautious these days" about the political climate in the U.S., said Allan Goodman, president of the Institute for International Education, a New York-based nonprofit that advocates for international education, which conducted the survey of schools. "I think you have to weigh that against the fact there is such enormous good will in the world toward America."

More than one million international students were enrolled in U.S. schools during the 2015-16 academic year, according to the IIE. International students contributed more than \$35 billion to the U.S. economy in 2015, according to the U.S. Department of Commerce. There are 85% more international students studying at U.S. institutions than were reported a decade ago.

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U.S. colleges and universities have become increasingly dependent on the revenue from international students. Public schools often charge international students two to three times what domestic students pay, helping offset the decline in state

funding for public universities since the credit crisis and the demographic dip in college-aged students.

The rate of international students accepted to a U.S. school that plan on enrolling held steady in the West and Northeast and declined by 5 percentage points each in the South and Midwest.

In Texas, one of four states that enroll the most international students, the rate, known as yield, fell by 9 percentage points.

Dr. Goodman of the IIE believes the declines are rooted in a perception of religious and racial intolerance and in some cases, gun policies.

“International students, more and more ask, ‘Does everybody in Texas have a gun?’” Dr. Goodman said. “Most students are coming from countries where it’s not easy to get a gun and it’s really easy to get a gun in America and they worry about their safety.”

Last year, a Texas law went into effect which allowed concealed handguns on public university campuses.

Despite the large drop this year, Texas still has relatively high yield among international students, largely because of its proximity to Mexico. Students from other parts of the world are increasingly leery about the state.

“I think there is a PR thing that might be happening,” said Teri Albrecht, director of international student scholar services at the University of Texas at Austin, which saw a small decline in undergraduate admissions this year after years of steady growth. “I’m sure we’ve had students and scholars that have concerns and might have looked elsewhere to states that don’t have those laws in place.”

One of the students coming to study in the U.S. is India-born Utsav Gupta. When he began looking for colleges to attend this fall, his parents said he could apply wherever he wanted, except for one state: Texas.

“I really wanted to apply to Rice but they didn’t let me,” said the 18-year-old New Delhi native, referring to the prestigious private university in Houston.

Mr. Gupta said his parents were frightened at the prospect of him studying in the state, although Rice has opted out of the law and says it remains a gun-free campus.

“In India, I have never seen a handgun,” he said. “The idea that I could be sitting next to someone in class” with one was disconcerting, he said. Instead, Mr. Gupta is enrolling this fall at Olin College, an engineering school in the Boston suburb of Needham, Mass.

Students and their families in India are “very aware of red states vs blue states,” said Kavita Mehta, chief executive of Mumbai-based higher education consulting service The Red Pen, which facilitates study abroad for several hundred Indian students like Mr. Gupta every year.

Families and students tend to “see the South and the middle of the country as red,” Ms. Mehta said. Many are aware that political attitudes tend to be more conservative in such places. President Trump’s anti-immigrant rhetoric and tighter restrictions on H-1B visas for highly skilled workers also have fueled concerns.

Two Indian nationals who worked as engineers at technology company Garmin were shot in February at a bar in suburban Kansas by a man who witnesses say used racial slurs before attacking. One of the Indian men died. Both were working on H-1B visas, a Garmin spokeswoman said at the time.

A string of incidents on colleges campuses, many targeting Muslims wearing hijabs, as well as Mr. Trump’s ban on refugees from six countries, concerned U.S. colleges and universities. About 250 have joined a campaign called “You are welcome here” that is aimed at international students.

“We were hearing from a lot of prospective students more concerns than usual,” said Jessica Sandberg, director of international admissions at Temple University in Philadelphia, and the leader of the campaign. She said those concerned were particularly pronounced in India. “There seems to be this sense that something has changed, there are alarm bells for them.”

Last month, a 26-year-old Chinese student at the University of Illinois Urbana Champaign disappeared. A 28-year-old former doctoral candidate in physics at the University of Illinois was arrested in connection to her disappearance.

Among the Southern schools to feel the pinch is Tennessee Technological University. Associate Provost Mark Stephens said the Cookeville, Tenn., school received roughly 15% fewer international applications this year than last.

“It’s like paddling upstream,” Dr. Stephens said. “It’s hard for us to get our message out

that we respect our international students and treat them well.”

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