



# 2021 COVID-19 Pandemic Edition International Student Recruitment

A Report of the International Recruitment Committee

## Note from the Chair

We sincerely hoped to compile only one annual report focusing on COVID, yet we find ourselves in an environment where the effects are still ongoing and pervasive. Lack of access to vaccines, border closures, travel restrictions, and increased concern about affordability all left a strong imprint on recruiting and retaining our diverse and high-achieving international students. Additionally, U.S.-China relations remain chilly, impacting our enrollment from the biggest sending country.

However, there are some bright spots and reasons for hope. January 2021 ushered in a national administration much friendlier to international exchange. Looking ahead to fall 2022, we see a rebound in our applications. We've become adept at delivering information to prospective students, families, and educational advisors in a virtual format, including opportunities to connect via WeChat and WhatsApp. We've sought out ways to increase collaboration both internally and externally. We've explored digital marketing to boost our brand awareness and bolster applications in two markets. Moving forward, we have become creative in using multiple ways to reach future students that are sustainable.

As one of the top 100 national universities, we have much to offer our students. We make our way through these unusual times with optimism for the future, focused on ensuring the University of Minnesota remains a vibrant, global university.

— Aimee Thostenson,  
Committee Chair

## Fall 2021 Enrollment and Trends

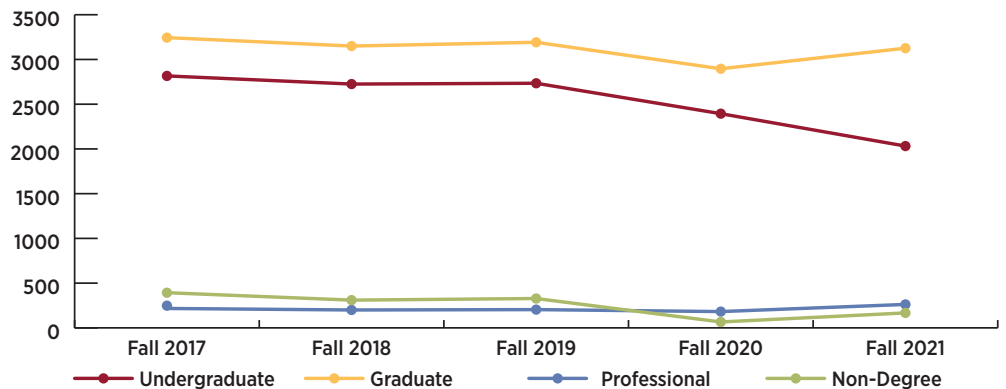
### Overall U.S. Enrollment

The total number of international students studying at U.S. universities began to rebound in Fall 2021. Enrollment of new students increased by 68% this fall, while the total number of international students grew 4%. This increase follows a 46% drop in new international students and a 15% drop in total international students in academic year 2020-21 compared to the previous year. (Source: Open Doors, IIE)

### UMTC Enrollment

While we rebounded slightly with freshmen (+2%), transfers declined by -10%. Increases in graduate, professional, and non-degree enrollments offset the overall decline in undergraduates, resulting in total enrollment on par with Fall 2019. Intensive English and short-term programs were hit particularly hard by the pandemic. Enrollment was paused for the University's GO Minnesota program for visiting international students. The Minnesota English Language Program enrollments were slightly up in Fall 2021, with continued interest in their programs.

	International Enrollment	% Change Over 2020	Total UMN Enrollment	% of UMN Enrollment
Undergraduate	2,032	-15.1%	30,734	6.6%
Graduate	3,126	+7.9%	11,883	24.4%
Professional	262	+43.9%	3,885	4.7%
Non-Degree	167	+15.3%	5,342	1.2%
<b>Total</b>	<b>5,538</b>	<b>+0.1%</b>	<b>51,844</b>	<b>10.7%</b>



Source: UMN Office of Institutional Research website, 1/10/22

### Big 10 Undergraduate Benchmarking

Reports from our Big 10 peers indicate new freshmen enrollment is rebounding, while transfers continue to decline. Of the 13 institutions replying to our survey, nine reported increases in new freshmen (ranging from 2% to 25%), with the rest showing declines (-3.5% to -32%). Minnesota was at the lower end of the rebound, with a 2% increase. On the transfer side, eight institutions saw decreases (-1% to -43%), with others reporting increases (3% to 50%). Minnesota was down 10% in international transfers. Only three universities showed increases in new freshmen, new transfers, and overall enrollment, while two were down in all areas.

# A Challenging Environment Continues: Top Factors Affecting International Recruitment

## COVID-19 Pandemic

As we approach two years of living with the pandemic, COVID-19 continues to have a major impact on recruitment and enrollment of international students. The biggest impact on our traditional recruitment process continued to be our inability to travel to meet families, counselors, and prospective students in person to connect a friendly face to our large institution. We continued to rely on virtual methods of engagement, refining our practices to reach students at all stages in the enrollment process.

On the enrollment side, we faced two major challenges. First, the U.S. generally has been perceived worldwide to have mishandled the initial COVID response. The U.S., and specifically Minnesota, have since shown improvements with vaccination rates and other public health efforts. Second, international students continued to face many logistical challenges in Spring 2020 and to a lesser degree in Fall 2020, including travel restrictions, inability to obtain visas from closed U.S. embassies, lack of access to vaccines, and greatly increased airfare. Despite these challenges, most students persevered and were able to arrive on campus for the first time even as the Delta variant became dominant.

## U.S. Support of International Education

In July 2021, the U.S. Departments of State and Education released a “Joint Statement of Principles in Support of International Education,” highlighting that government policies and practices must ensure the United States remains the destination of choice for international students and scholars. The coordinated policy will include study in the United States by international students, researchers, and scholars; study abroad for Americans; international research collaboration; and the internationalization of U.S. campuses and classrooms. Time will tell if any concrete impact comes from this announcement, but it serves as an inspiration and a welcome ray of sunlight during this challenging time.

**“The robust exchange of students, researchers, scholars, and educators, along with broader international education efforts between the United States and other countries, strengthens relationships between current and future leaders. These relationships are necessary to address shared challenges, enhance American prosperity, and contribute to global peace and security.”**

– Joint Statement of Principles in Support of International Education

## Variable Enrollment Trends

Fall 2021 saw an overall rebound of international enrollments, but the trends differ at the graduate and undergraduate levels. It's important to remember the Fall 2020 decline in international enrollments was the largest drop in the 72-year history that the Institute of International Education has been compiling its annual international student census. According to data from the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, while graduate enrollments rebounded sharply in 2021 (+12.7%), undergraduate enrollments continued to slide (-3.1%). The two-year combined 22% decline in undergraduates is especially troubling. Data also shows that public, four-year institutions fared worse (reporting declines of 7.9%) compared to private college counterparts, which showed increases at the undergraduate level.

## U.S.-China Tensions

Political tensions remain high between China and the United States, including complicated issues such as trade and the economy, human rights, treatment of Hong Kong and Taiwan, intellectual property, and espionage. While these tensions don't directly impact international students or enrollment, it does cast a chill on friendship between the U.S. and China in many ways. As Chinese students are the largest population of international students on campus, any impact on enrollment will be felt.

## Other Factors

A new factor has emerged from the QS Global International Student Survey 2021 of over 100,000 students. The survey showed 68% of international students cite cost of living as their top concern. Other concerns included safety, availability of scholarships, employment prospects, housing options, and mental health support.

This year showed a slight improvement in the yield of admitted undergraduate international students, which increased from 8.9% in Fall 2020 to 10.3% in Fall 2021.

Other factors listed in previous annual reports are still valid and of concern to prospective students and parents, including:

- Gun Violence and Personal Safety Concerns
- Competition from Other Countries
- Lack of Work Opportunities
- UMN Rankings

# Program-Specific Impacts and Trends

## International Undergraduate Recruitment

- With students facing Zoom fatigue, we developed a successful new approach to online yield events that connected admitted students with currently enrolled students from their country or region. International Student Ambassadors played a key role in making this connection through a talk-show type approach.
- UMN continued to offer flexible admission policies, such as the ability to defer enrollment to spring and test optional for ACT/SAT.
- In Fall 2021, the ISSS recruitment team implemented a digital marketing campaign to reach prospective undergraduate students in India and Brazil. While it is too early to know final impacts on enrollment, early data points to a successful campaign. Visits to the undergraduate admissions website from Brazil increased 17x and India 30x during the campaign. Applications from India and Brazil in total were up 36%. The campaign also yielded prospects for future years, as well as for English language and graduate programs.

## Graduate School

- Enrollment increased significantly in 2021 partly due to deferred students starting their programs. Trends are showing a decrease in interest from China and an increase from India.
- Applications are slightly ahead of last year, and it's starting to feel like a normal admissions cycle.
- Admissions flexibility continues with an increase in length of deferral to 2 years from 1 year, and drastic changes in test requirements with many departments removing a requirement for the GRE.

## Minnesota English Language Program (MELP)

- Intensive English language programs are usually the first ones to see enrollment declines during difficult times, and often see trends earlier. The freeze in interest in ESL programs is starting to thaw, but at a slower recovery than in degree programs. Students in degree programs have been more willing to deal with the challenges of visas and travel compared to the "study abroad" nature of ESL students. Some incoming students also had trouble accessing a WHO-approved vaccine.
- Scholarship programs (sponsored students) have been putting their programs on hold, including the Omani program that is one of our largest. This compounds the pre-COVID trends of general unpredictability of funding programs, budget issues, and changing requirements.

## Law School's LL.M Program

- Enrollment was lower than pre-pandemic but still a good number considering the many challenges at hand. Applications are down significantly for Fall 2022 at this time.
- In Zoom interviews with applicants, many ask about whether classes at the Law School are in person or remote; nearly all who inquire are happy to hear that they are in-person.

## UMN China Office in Beijing

- Recruitment across China has returned to in-person events, recruitment fairs, and school visits.
- The China Office took a new approach with high school counselors by connecting through a WeChat counselor group to provide information and gather feedback.
- A trend in China is continued growth in university recruitment via digital marketing.



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<b>#9</b>	<b>#68</b>	<b>26</b>	<b>40%</b>
Best Public US Research University <i>Academic Ranking of World Universities</i>	National Universities <i>U.S. News &amp; World Report</i>	Nobel Prize Recipients <i>Won by faculty and alumni</i>	Estimated Tuition Savings <i>Compared to top-ranked US institutions</i>



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## Forecasting the Future

As we turn our attention to a post-pandemic reality, much remains uncertain in the field of international student recruitment. As outlined in this report, we have faced an unimaginable number of challenges over the past two years.

At present, University of Minnesota senior leadership has shown a desire to increase the percentage of undergraduate international students to 10% of the class. With appropriate timelines and support, we are optimistic this is a goal that can be met.

IDP, which holds one of the largest datasets on international student pre-enrollment behavior, shared in an October 2021 webinar that they are seeing increasing numbers of online searches for study in the U.S. ApplyBoard, a well-known online global university data platform, also reports that applications to the U.S. have increased from March to October 2021 compared to the same time in 2020. This continues to support the predictions for a rebound in the interest to study in the U.S.

Certainly the pandemic has accelerated changes to recruitment, especially in the virtual space. Reporter Karen Fischer, in her weekly *Latitudes* newsletter,\* asked international education professionals in January 2022 to predict big trends moving forward. Top responses, both encouraging and sobering, included:

- "Using technology to connect students, faculty, and administrators internationally and across institutions will become 'normal.'"
- "2022 is a year that calls for more creative collaborations and innovative ways to reach and recruit international students."
- "The number of colleges in non-English speaking countries offering degree programs in English will continue to increase – increased competition for U.S. colleges."
- "U.S. education's attractiveness will continue to decline with family-funded international students. American policymakers and universities will finally agree that family-funded Chinese students are assets, not liabilities, and start to make a plan for the school year 2024-2025."
- "Enrollment management leaders will lean into internationalization efforts that offer extreme flexibility and rapid responses to fluctuating global markets rather than long-term commitments/investments."

\*Read the article at: [z.umn.edu/recruit-future](https://z.umn.edu/recruit-future)

## Financial Impact of International Students

In the 2020-21 academic year, international student enrollment generated **more than \$110 million in tuition revenue\*** for the Twin Cities campus:

- Undergraduate Students: \$61,835,220
- Graduate Students: \$40,865,163
- Professional Degree Students: \$7,739,991
- MELP Intensive English Program: \$379,703

\*tuition and program fees only; does not include student fees, housing, health insurance, etc.

In 2020-21, international students on the Twin Cities campus **contributed \$354.3 million to the Minnesota economy** and supported 3,199 jobs. Source: NAFSA Association of International Educators

## About the International Recruitment Committee

### Mission

The International Recruitment Committee provides expertise, shares information, and brings constituents together to ensure the Twin Cities campus enrolls a diverse and academically strong international student body. Under the auspices of the Global Programs and Strategy Alliance, the International Recruitment Committee includes key representatives from across the Twin Cities campus to provide visibility and ensure a collaborative recruitment strategy.

### Committee Members

- **College of Continuing and Professional Studies:** Michael Anderson
- **GPS Alliance:** Jennifer Schulz, Sara Ludtke
- **International Student & Scholar Services (GPS):** Aimee Thostenson (chair), Barbara Kappler, Chelsea Keeney, Sarah Krueger
- **Office of Admissions:** Jenny Mealey
- **Graduate School:** Jim Rowan, Dean Tsantir
- **China Center (GPS):** Fran Liu, Haiyan Wang
- **Law School:** Kara Galvin

### Contact the Committee

The International Recruitment Committee invites opportunities to engage with the campus community. Please contact Aimee Thostenson with inquiries or requests at [thos0005@umn.edu](mailto:thos0005@umn.edu).

[global.umn.edu/about/irc.html](https://global.umn.edu/about/irc.html)