Issues and Trends of International Students in the United States

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Abstract

The United States has been a global leader in educating students from other countries around the world for a long time. Whereas some of these international or foreign students return to their countries of origin or move on to other countries to seek employment upon completion of their studies, a large proportion of international students remain in the U.S. after their studies, gain employment, adjust their immigration statuses, and eventually gain U.S. citizenship. While most of these students have contributed immensely to the U.S. economy and the overall building of this nation, it may also be argued that their presence limits opportunities for Americans in terms of scholarships or fellowship grants, and employment opportunities. In this literature review article, the trends, as well as the pros and cons of international students in the United States are discussed.

U.S. higher institutions of learning have welcomed an ever-increasing number of foreign students since the Second World War. In the mid-20th century following World War II, a major aspect of U.S. foreign policy involved strengthening relations with other countries around the world by bolstering education in foreign countries, strengthening international educational relations, assisting countries liberated during World War II in reconstructing their educational systems, offering technical assistance to developing countries, and sharing U.S. culture and educational achievements with the rest of the world (Sarkodie-Mensah, 1998). Such a perspective opened doors for more international students to enroll at U.S. schools. This new outlook on U.S. foreign policy resulted in three key acts enacted in 1961, namely: The Fulbright–Hays or the Mutual Educational and Cultural Exchange Act; the Foreign Assistance Act; and the Peace Corps Act. These three acts all aimed at strengthening U.S. international relations and helping liberated nations.

The Fulbright–Hays or the Mutual Educational and Cultural Exchange Act of 1961 in Sec. 2451 states as follows:

> The purpose of this chapter is to enable the Government of the United States to increase mutual understanding between the people of the United States and the people of other countries by means of educational and cultural exchange; to strengthen the ties which unite us with other nations by demonstrating the educational and cultural interests, developments, and achievements of the people of the United States and other nations, and the contributions being made toward a peaceful and more fruitful life for people throughout the world; to promote international cooperation for educational and cultural advancement; and thus to assist in the development of friendly, sympathetic, and peaceful relations between the United States and the other countries of the world. (Mutual Educational and Cultural Exchange Act of 1961)

First conceived immediately after the end of World War II by J. William Fulbright (1946) and established as the Fulbright Act (before being later administered under the Mutual Educational and Cultural Exchange Act of 1961), this legislation allowed Americans to study, teach, or conduct research abroad. On the other hand, foreign students likewise benefitted from the program by obtaining Fulbright scholarships to study at U.S. schools. Over 100,000 nationals have benefitted from the Fulbright program since 1949 (Fulbright, 2004). By the time of William Fulbright's demise in 1995, over 250,000 scholarships had been awarded to U.S. citizens and foreign nationals under the Fulbright Program (Johnson & Colligan, 1965). Moreover, by 2006, the U.S. government had financed more than 158,000 foreigners studying in the U.S. through this program (Spilimbergo, 2006). The Fulbright program continues to bring in large numbers of international students to the US.

The Foreign Assistance Act, enacted on September 4, 1961, saw the creation of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and was charged with the administration of non-military related aid to foreign countries, as well as other economic assistance programs in those countries. This Act has since undergone a number of amendments (U.S. House & Senate, 2003) and contributed to aiding foreign students in obtaining education in their home countries or in the United States. The USAID has evolved over the years to cover many spheres of aid to foreign countries in such areas as food and nutrition, population planning, health, education, human resources development, and sustainability. The Peace Corps Act, also enacted in 1961, sought to assist foreign countries in training their workforce and exported American culture to participating nations and promoted American understanding of foreign cultures. To date, some 220,000 Americans have volunteered service to 140 nations through the Peace Corps program (Coverdell, 2014). Although no study appears to have investigated the impact of the Peace Corps Act on foreign student presence at U.S. institutions of learning, it is very likely that there are international students in the U.S. whose awareness of, and interest in, pursuing studies in the U.S. might have developed through interaction with U.S. Peace Corps volunteers serving in their countries of origin.

U.S. aid to foreign nations in the area of education has an inherent two-fold goal. On the one hand, it seeks to export U.S. education to other countries. On the other hand, it seeks to bring the world into U.S. education by way of encouraging foreign students to study at U.S. schools. The need to internationalize the U.S. educational system as much as possible by encouraging diversity has since been enunciated by scholars such as Burn (1980) and Vestal (1994). Mindful

of globalization trends, most U.S. institutions of learning have increasingly seen a need to encourage international studies and various exchange programs. Most U.S. colleges and universities now have Mission and Vision Statements that involve multicultural or intercultural educational goals (Sheppard, 2004; Stromquist, 2007).

The impetus for these changes in the educational goals of U.S. schools is a major shift in U.S. policy on education with respect to the view of education as a tool for understanding other cultural groups and for fostering relations with other nations. The 2002 edition of the United States Code (i.e., 22 U.S.C. titled "Foreign Relations and Intercourse") states in its 57th chapter addressing a scholarship program for developing countries as follows:

> It is in the national interest for the United States Government to provide a stable source of financial support to give students in developing countries the opportunity to study in the United States, in order to improve the range and quality of educational alternatives, increase mutual understanding, and build lasting links between those countries and the United States; providing scholarships to foreign students to study in the United States has proven over time to be an effective means of creating strong bonds between the United States and the future leadership of developing countries and, at the same time, assists countries substantially in their development efforts; study in United States institutions by foreign students enhances trade and economic relationships by providing strong English language skills and establishing professional and business contacts. (Code, 2002)

These views led to increased funding for the education sector, which enabled the enrollment of foreign students through scholarships. Such funding came largely from the Federal government through its numerous funding agencies such as the National Science Foundation; the Department of Energy; the Agency for International Development, Education and Universities Department; the Department Of Agriculture, Cooperative State Research, Education and Extension Service; and the Department Of Commerce, Grant Opportunities. These funding opportunities encouraged academic research as well as the enrollment of international students in ever increasing numbers.

Despite the generally accepted view on the importance of cultural diversity or the internalization of U.S. higher education institutions (HEIs) and the overall drive in this regard, Hawawini (2011) has recently criticized these efforts, declaring the ambition of transforming U.S. HEIs into global HEIs as bleak due to existential historical and organizational barriers. He proposes alternative internationalization models for HEIs in which these institutions should develop mission statements with a goal to learn from the world rather than teach the world; import-export models aimed at transforming curricula, create faculty and student exchange programs, and develop research and academic partnerships across national borders.

Despite such critical views as held by Hawawini (2011), the thrust for internationalization of U.S. HEIs continues to gain momentum and the international student population in the US has steadily increased from the 1940s until present. During the 2013-2014 academic year, the international student population in the US increased by 66,408 to a record high of 886,052 (Witherell & Clayton, 2014). Figure 1 depicts a model for this growth.
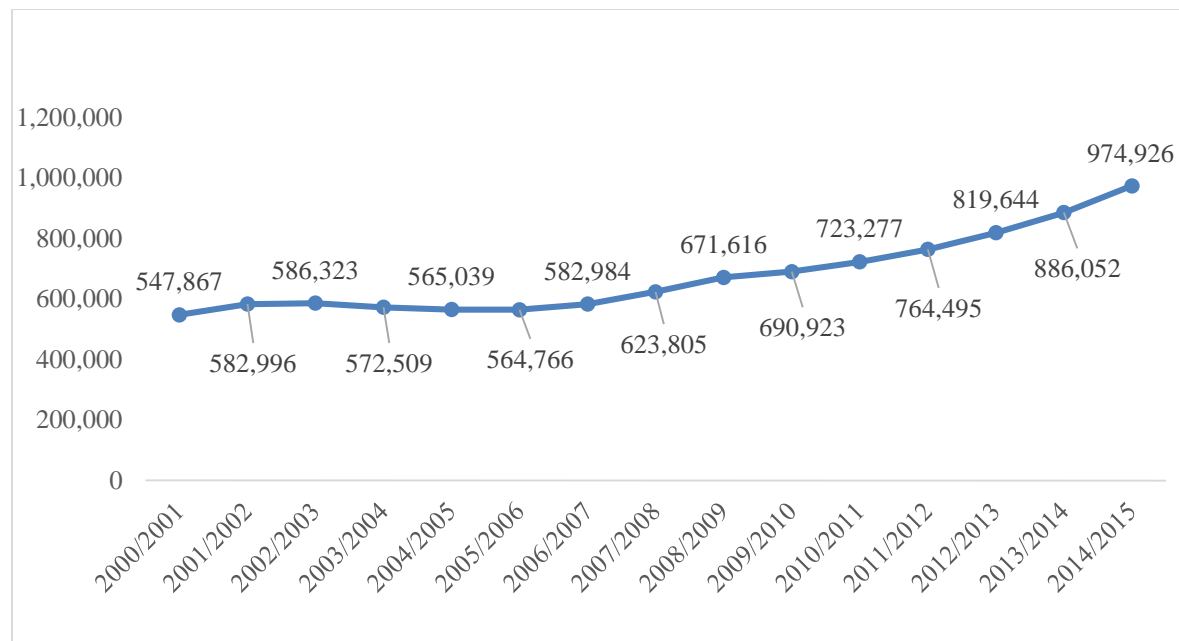
Figure 1. Trends of international students in the US from 2000/2001 to 2014/2015. Data from the National Center for Education Statistics.

The majority of these students originate from China, India, and South Korea (Benson, 2015). Slight irregularities were observed in this growth after the 9/11 terrorist attack related to visa restrictions imposed after this tragedy (March, Zeman, & Adrian, 2005). In Figure 2, the decrease of international students in the US at this time is illustrated.
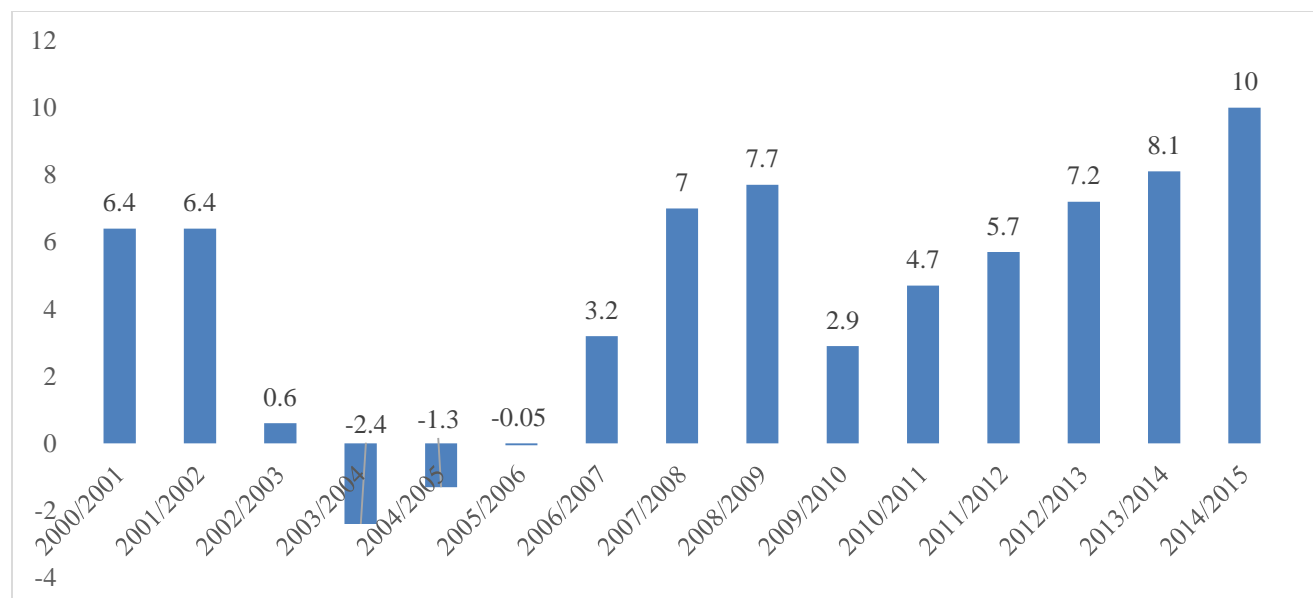

Figure 2. Yearly percentage change in population of international students in the US from 2000/2001 to 2014/2015. Data from the National Center for Education Statistics.

This international student group has contributed positively to the U.S. economy in multiple ways as will be shown in this review. Although some studies have documented the negative effects of international students in the US, the volume of research revealing their importance outweighs the negative effects of international student presence in the US. In the next subsection, the trends, importance, and concerns about international student presence in the United States are reviewed. Meanwhile, the concluding subsection summarizes the review and includes recommendations.

Trends of International Students

According to Cora Du Bois (1956), one of the earliest scholars to have documented the history of international students in the United States:

> The pursuit of learning beyond the boundaries of one's own community, nation, or culture is as old as learning itself…and reflects the ability of human beings to communicate with each other at varying levels and with varying sophistication across the barriers of social particularities. (p. 1)

Since the mid-20th century, international student mobility has seen steady increases. The international student population has increased globally over the past decades. The mobility of overseas students is arguably a strong indicator of the globalization or internationalization of higher education (Kehm, 2005). Over 90% of these international students study in nations within the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), with the US, UK, Germany, France, and Australia absorbing at least 70% of them. The US is the leading destination of these international students, followed by the UK, and then Australia (Verbik & Lasanowski, 2007). In 2012, there were at least 4 million international students worldwide, doubling the number in 2000. Central Asia supplied the largest number of international students, with the number of its citizens studying abroad nearly tripling from 67,300 in 2003 to 156,600 in 2012 (UNESCO, 2014).

Although the United States does not possess a uniform national strategy for recruiting international students, it remains the main destination for these international students (Chow, 2015). Between 1970 and 2010, these student populations in the U.S. grew from 130,000 to 720,000, much more than the growth in immigration, which was only four-fold within this period (Shih, 2015). Despite being the leading recipient of international students, the US was found to lag behind Israel, Japan, Canada, and the Russian Federation in its percentage of 25-64 year-olds with tertiary education between the years 2010 to 2012, and additionally has experienced a lower increase in the number of that educated population in comparison to nations such as Luxembourg, Switzerland, and Poland (OECD, 2014).

Although all countries involved in this study had experienced growth in their educated population in the considered age range with at least one in three adults within OECD countries holding a tertiary qualification by 2012, the statistics nevertheless suggest that the U.S. was not a global leader in tertiary education between the years 2010 to 2012, despite absorbing the largest fraction of international students. Since the bulk of international students pursue a tertiary degree (Shih, 2015), mostly a STEM degree in the case of international students in the U.S. (Ung, 2015), the Education at a Glance study (OECD, 2014) may suggest slower growth rates of U.S. citizens and/or immigrants (compared to countries like Switzerland, Japan, and Canada) pursuing

tertiary degrees relative to international students between 2010 to 2012. It should be noted that an Open Doors Report in 2012 observed a 6% increase in international student enrollment at U.S. schools within this period (Open Doors, 2012). Meanwhile, current trends suggest that international student enrollment at the Bachelor's level in the U.S. may overtake tertiary enrollment in the next few years (Choudaha & Chang, 2012).

Forces Determining International Student Mobility

With the influx of international students into U.S. colleges and universities, the question arises as to what attracts the largest proportion of these foreign students to the U.S. In general, students are driven from their home countries to obtain education abroad by a number of economic and social forces. The choice of which countries and then which college/university to study in is often also driven by a number of factors. The decision as to which host country they will select is dependent on a variety of "pull" factors. Mazzarol and Soutar (2002) describe these factors by a so-called push-pull model, where "push" represents factors forcing students out of the home countries, and "pull" represents factors attracting students to host countries where they pursue an education. The bulk of international students hail from developing countries. Although rising incomes in those countries imply increasing demands for higher education, the insufficient supply and poor quality of education in these nations tend to push their citizens to seek education overseas (Chevalier, 2014). Demographic characteristics such as age, marital status, nationality, and source of financial support influence the choices of international students and their travel activities (Varasteh, Marzuki, & Rasoolimanesh, 2014).

The quality of education, the tuition and living costs, and the job market are key determinants in shaping the choices of international students on where to engage in overseas studies (Beine, Noël, & Ragot, 2014). Other determinants of international students' choices on where to study revolve around health and safety. In general, cultural differences mediate for safety issues and most international students in the U.S. often find that safe behaviors in the United States differ from those in their home countries (Hafernik, Vandrick, & Messerschmitt, 2000). A survey conducted by the Institute of International Education (IIE) from 2009 to 2010 on prospective international students in Vietnam, India, Mexico, Thailand, Hong Kong, Brazil, Germany, Turkey, the United Kingdom, Nigeria and South Africa, and involving a total of 9,330 valid prospective international student responses, observed that: 76% of respondents regarded with high esteem the U.S. higher education system; 76% of respondents believed the U.S. possessed a broad range of schools and study programs to meet varied needs of international students; and 69% of respondents felt the U.S. would be quite welcoming to international students (Chow & IIE, 2011). The same study also found negative beliefs among 60% of the respondents citing study costs as being too high in the U.S., as well as 50% citing difficulties involved in obtaining a U.S. visa.

The need to learn a popular language such as English, for example, which is the global language for communication of scientific knowledge, is one key driving force pushing international students to study in English-speaking countries (Chevalier, 2014). This finding may explain the high presence of international students in the U.S., the U.K, Australia, and Canada. These countries do not only have large proportions of international students, they also have high percentages of students from China, India, and South Korea, which are non-English speaking countries. Political and demographic changes, which dictate government policies toward

international students, have also been known to affect their mobility. For example, some countries are enacting policies that encourage their citizens to remain and study in their home countries (Benson, 2015). To the contrary, a scholarship program in Saudi Arabia encouraging its citizens to study overseas has brought many Saudi students to pursue studies in the U.S. (Taylor & Albasri, 2014). Notably, International students' mobility has been recently influenced by government strategies recently (Benson, 2015).

Issues with International Students

Issues related to international students extend from their value or importance, to their impact on the host and home countries, as well as to the problems faced by these students. Attracting skilled immigrants as well as international students who might be educated to possibly join the host workforce are widely accepted as potential ways of expanding the skilled workforce (Chevalier, 2014). The current and future economic competitiveness of the U.S. depends on building a highly skilled workforce, consisting partly of international students who study in the U.S. and who stay to work (Douglass & Edelstein, 2009). The broad network of U.S. higher education institutions and U.S. openness to recruiting global talent have been critical ingredients in providing the impetus for U.S. economic and social strength. Recent years have seen greater numbers of U.S. citizens educated, as well as foreigners, who have boosting the U.S. skilled workforce (Douglass & Edelstein, 2009). In particular, international students are essential in enhancing U.S. global competitiveness, especially with regard to scientific research, technology, and innovation. Whereas most U.S. citizens prefer business fields and law, the majority of international students, especially from China and India, prefer STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) and related fields (Pandit, 2007). Although female stereotypes toward STEM fields are well known (Hill, Corbett, & St Rose, 2010), as demonstrated in the case of mathematics (Banjong, 2014); these stereotypes are very likely to be lessened among foreign students, since most of them switch to the STEM fields while in the US. Han (2014) found in a study that immigrants were more likely to switch to STEM fields from other fields than American citizens.

In general, studying overseas has many benefits for the international students themselves, the host, and perhaps their home countries. Studying abroad enhances self-awareness, builds self-confidence and independence, expands one's worldview, enhances cross-cultural competence, improves socialization, increases career opportunities, and may improve language skills or lead one to learning a foreign language (Berdan, Goodman, & Taylor, 2013). International students impact their host countries in numerous ways and have been known to enhance cultural diversity in U.S. institutions of learning (Zhao, Kuh, & Carini, 2005). Through mutual social interaction between Americans and international students, U.S. students are exposed to foreign culture and foreign students likewise learn western U.S. culture. Such socialization also involves interactions of international students from different foreign countries, and the end result is a mix of multiple cultures or the enhancement of cultural diversity (Trice, 2004). Increases in the numbers of international students coming to the US have placed new challenges on college counselors, who must become more culturally sensitive to the differing needs of these students in building rewarding social relationships (Hayes & Lin, 1994). As international students encounter new cultures, they are faced with culture shock, the struggle for social acceptance, and the likelihood of compromising even some of their previously-held

cultural values. International students are very likely to misunderstand students and professors in the host country and to be misunderstood themselves (Mellon, 2013).

The benefits of international students on their host countries transcend cultural diversity to impacting the economies of those countries, because they bring financial gains to their host countries. A 2015 World Education Services report observed that International students brought nearly $27 billion dollars into the U.S. economy in 2014, compared to $24 billion in 2013, a 12% increase (Ortiz, Chang, & Fang, 2015). Such growth was explained, in part, to increases in the numbers of international students from upper-middle-income economies and nations with scholarship programs, which enable their citizens to study abroad. In 2013, at least two-thirds of international students in the U.S. paid tuition with personal funds (Groden, 2015). Sending students to study abroad is costly for home countries, because funds are sent to foreign economies to sponsor International students' education. Yet another impact on home countries is that the skilled workforce shrinks related to such mobility (Chevalier, 2014).

There have been debates on international students' mobility leading to international brain drain, and certain countries have tried to address this problem by formulating policies which restrict the exodus of their students to foreign countries (Maru, 2008; Sriskandarajah, 2005). Concerns about brain drain are thought to be mitigated by the transfer of skills to home countries of international students, facilitated by advancing modern technology and an increasingly globalized economy (Han, Stocking, Gebbie, & Appelbaum, 2015). Most returning international students are often more innovative and entrepreneurial than their peers in their home countries. Studies on the impact of returned emigrants on their home countries have found that overseas savings, and the duration of stay overseas, positively impact entrepreneurship and aid development (McCormick & Wahba, 2001). Nonetheless, Sun (2013) found returned migrants, commonly known as "Sea Turtles" in China, to be less productive than their peers in terms of bringing innovative projects and/or providing value-added services to their home country.

Besides contributing financially to the economy while studying in the U.S., most international students persist in the United States after graduation to seek jobs and to contribute their acquired skills to building the economy. International students wishing to stay back and contribute to the workforce of their host countries have been reported for the U.S., the UK, and Canada (She & Wotherspoon, 2013). Approximately 90% of immigrant visa beneficiaries for employment purposes already live in the U.S., and most are international students on Optional Practical Training (OPT) or H-1B visas (Dunnett, 2010). This fact notwithstanding, the U.S. immigration system has been highly criticized as broken and harsh on international students (Groden, 2015). Rather than hurt U.S. employment, immigrants with advanced degrees pay higher taxes and boost the employment of U.S. citizens (Zavodny, 2011). Despite these findings, Matloff (2013) contends that skilled-foreign-worker programs cause internal brain drain in the U.S., and that employed foreigners either possess inferior or equal skills to their U.S. peers.

International students must surmount numerous problems during their studies in foreign lands. Adapting to a new environment is often challenging, and international students are known to face many difficulties as they move to their host countries in pursuit of education (Banjong, 2015). Problems commonly encountered by these students include loneliness and homesickness, financial stress, culture shock, discrimination or racism, and language difficulties, as well as anxiety and depression (Zhao, Jindal-Snape, Topping, & Todman, 2008; Faleel, Tam, Lee, Har, & Foo, 2012). Not only do challenges faced by international students lead to anxiety and depression, these problems also affect their academic outcomes. Although international students are thought to be optimistic and resilient (Sabouripour & Roslan, 2015; Wang, 2008), Adrian-

Taylor, Noels, & Tischler (2007) found problems faced by international students to not only contribute to psychological problems, but also to affect international student-advisor/supervisor relationships. Most U.S. schools receiving international students have since developed strategies and established campus resources aimed at helping international students overcome or alleviate their challenges (Banjong, 2015).

Conclusions and Recommendations

In this literature review, the following topics were discussed: the history and trends related to international students studying in the United States.; the impact of international students on the U.S. economy as well as international students' home countries; and the problems encountered by international students. It was shown that the International student population in the U.S. increased significantly after the Second World War, followed by major shifts in U.S. foreign policy, which sought to rebuild foreign nations liberated during the war and to strengthen ties with other countries. The IS population continued to grow from the mid-20th century to date, albeit with slight irregularities experienced after the September 11, 2001 terrorist attack (i.e., stricter immigration laws, which made visa acquisition difficult for international students). Although the number of international students in the U.S. continues to grow, the U.S.'s share of globally mobile students declined overall during the past decade (Choudaha & Chang, 2012).

Numerous studies have documented the importance of international students to host countries, in particular. These students boost the economy through tuition and living expenses, whereas some of them persist in the U.S. after graduation to seek employment. Since international students are known to be attracted more to STEM and related subject areas, educators, employers, and policymakers argue that attracting and finding ways to retain international students in the U.S. is critical to sustaining technological advancement and U.S. global competitiveness. Conversely, some authors contend that foreigners take away jobs from U.S. citizens. This claim has been refuted by studies such as that conducted by Zavodny (2011). Although international students bring income into the U.S. economy (mostly by way of paying higher tuition), some of these students, mostly those pursuing tertiary degrees, may be thought to compete with native students for scholarships/fellowships, and tuition waivers. It should be noted, however, that many scholarships or fellowships are restrictive in nature and most international students do not qualify to apply for them (Scholarships for Development, 2015). Upon graduation, international students who return to their home countries have been known to bring overall positive returns to their home economies. Nonetheless, international brain drain remains a valid concern: one that is thought to hamper global development (Özden & Schiff, 2007).

International students experience numerous challenges in the course of pursuing their dreams in foreign lands. Although the U.S. is the option of choice for most international students and although U.S. institutions of learning provide a number of facilities that cater to the needs of international students and other minority groups, international students' problems are not eliminated in the U.S. Despite these challenges, the majority of international students are known to persist to graduation. Although most international students leave their countries with optimism and a resolve to achieve their academic and career dreams, making them prone to endurance or resilience, their retention in schools may be explained partly by the nature of U.S. immigration

law governing international students; this law dictates that they maintain their visa status only as long as they remain students. Whereas different studies have reported the benefits of encouraging student mobility across nations, other studies have highlighted negative consequences associated with this practice. Nonetheless, the bulk of the literature seems to favor policies that encourage global student and skill-worker migrations. Student migration plays a non-negligible role in cultural awareness, the expansion of worldview, globalization, and the strengthening of ties between nations. Mindful of these points, the authors recommend that:

1. The U.S. should seek ways of attracting more students from overseas to study here. This might be achieved by lowering tuition for international students, expanding scholarship programs, or expanding school curriculum to involve more relevant program areas.
2. The U.S. should make intensified efforts at fixing its immigration system to make it easier for international students to gain visas to pursue their academic/career dreams in the U.S. There have been cases of students abroad who gained admissions in U.S. schools, but were denied visas at U.S. consulates in their home countries.
3. More studies are needed on the diverse needs of international students and how to meet those needs. Such developments would enhance international student persistence at colleges and universities.
4. Studies are needed on the attitudes of female international students toward STEM subjects compared to native female students.
5. Policies governing the job market in the U.S. for international students need to be improved; for example, making the number of hours that international students are allowed to work more flexible and providing access to jobs off-campus.
6. Studies should be done on where international students who leave the U.S. upon graduation go. It is not obvious that they return to their home countries.

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