

# How International Education's Golden Age Lost Its Sheen

By Karin Fischer

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Photo illustration/animation by Julia Schmalz

On a Sunday in May 2014, 140 students from 49 countries, some in hijabs, some with hair tinted purple to match their graduation robes, walked across the stage to collect the first diplomas awarded at New York University Abu Dhabi.

Former President Bill Clinton was the keynote speaker. But the day really belonged to John E. Sexton, NYU's president. He greeted every student – many of whom he knew from the 14,000-mile round trip he made from New York every other week to teach – with a fist bump or a hug.

In a way, Sexton was celebrating his achievement as much as theirs. He had shepherded NYU's Emirati outpost from pie-in-the-sky vision to anchor in a network of global campuses. Another branch campus, in Shanghai, had opened in the fall of 2013. [Speaking](#) to an audience of graduates, parents, and assorted sheikhs, he argued for the importance of internationalizing education. "The world you have entered has become miniaturized," Sexton said. "Events around the globe affect us all, no matter how isolated we seek to be."

In hindsight, that commencement, held on NYU's campus, not far from the Abu Dhabi branch of the Louvre, came at the height of what was a golden moment for international education – and one that would soon dim.

It was an era in which higher education found ways to export its prestige, assert itself as a vehicle for American soft power, and facilitate the exchange of people and ideas across borders. American universities joined NYU in opening campuses abroad, including Yale in Singapore and Duke in China. Colleges hired senior administrators to manage their burgeoning overseas portfolios, including student exchanges, faculty research, and joint degrees.

First Lady Michelle Obama declared study abroad a “key component of this administration’s foreign policy” as the White House rolled out a [plan](#) to send 100,000 young Americans to China. And Chinese students led a surge of international students onto American campuses. Their numbers would increase nearly 90 percent, to 1.1 million, an influx welcomed not least because of the tuition dollars they paid.

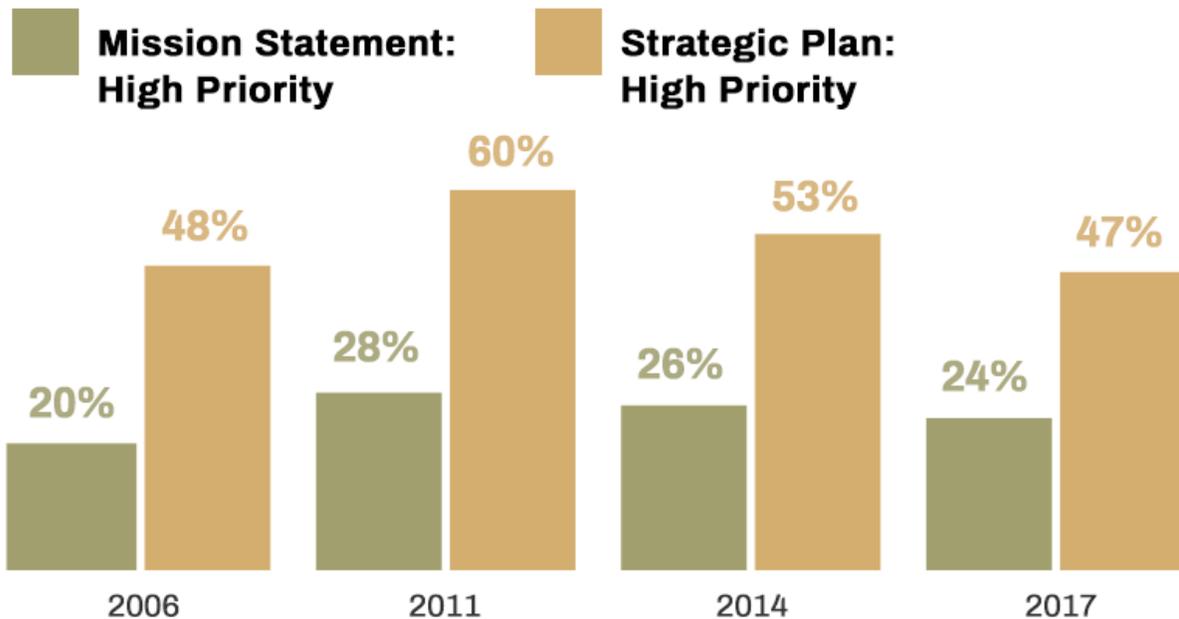
That golden era was born out of the grimmest of events: the September 11 terrorist attacks and the conviction that the violence – whose perpetrators were erroneously said to have been in the United States on student visas – called for greater engagement with the world, not less. Its end date came a decade and a half later, signaled by the election of Donald J. Trump, on a platform of America First.

While it might be tempting to pin internationalization’s current challenges on President Trump and the nativist environment he has fomented, that explanation also seems insufficient. The president, after all, wasn’t the one that [decimated](#) college foreign language programs, shutting down 650 in just three years. His policies have little bearing on the [drop-off](#) in the share of institutions reporting that internationalization is a high priority in their strategic plans, from 60 percent, in 2011, to 47 percent in 2017.

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## Global Emphasis on the Decline

The share of colleges reporting that internationalization is a high priority in their strategic plans and mission statements rose and then dropped between 2006 and 2017.



SOURCE: Association of International Education Administrators

Some colleges are retrenching, while others try to sustain a global footprint. If the past era was one of empire building, internationalization's adherents today are playing defense.

"The landscape is changing," says Philip G. Altbach, founding director of the Center for International Higher Education at Boston College. "The era of internationalization might be over, or on life support."

That American higher education is at this juncture raises difficult questions: Was the work of giving students a global education stymied because it failed to get buy-in beyond the true believers? Was internationalization championed out of convenience – international students contributed [\\$39 billion](#) to the American economy and shored up the budgets of many recession-pressed colleges – more than conviction? Was the rhetoric impassioned but the embrace only lukewarm?



President John Sexton of New York U. (far left) celebrated the first commencement at NYU Abu Dhabi, in May 2014. It is one of a number of American campuses that opened overseas during the past decade. (Philip Cheung)

## A Fractured Consensus

Trump's election revealed an uncomfortable truth: What many people – especially the well-educated within and beyond academe – took to be consensus views are not shared by all Americans.

That everyone should go to college, that national borders were being erased thanks to technology and trade, these developments were seen as “an unmitigated good, like Mom and apple pie,” says Kevin Kinser, head of education-policy studies at Pennsylvania State University. One of internationalization's core principles, along with post-9/11 openness, is that if graduates are going to live and work in a globalized economy, it is higher education's responsibility to prepare them.

It turns out a wide swath of the electorate, Trump's America, did not agree.

Among voters today, there is little accord about [America's role in the world](#), or if the country should even have one. While globalization was once viewed as a force that would expand

opportunity around the world, it is now seen as a source of economic dislocation, scattering winners and losers in its wake.

Goodbye to *The World Is Flat*, Thomas Friedman's paean to globalization. We're now in the era of J.D. Vance's *Hillbilly Elegy*, an evocation of those it left behind.

Internationalization isn't synonymous with globalization, of course – it's about equipping people to understand and adapt to a more tightly interdependent world, and embedding that global perspective throughout all that colleges do. Nonetheless, globalization and international education have absorbed some of the same skepticism.

Educating global citizens, as many institutions pledge to do, may not play well with the America First crowd. "We can say that international education is part of living in a diverse world today," says Madeleine F. Green, a senior fellow at the International Association of Universities. "Of course, if you don't want to live in a diverse world, that's not a very compelling argument."

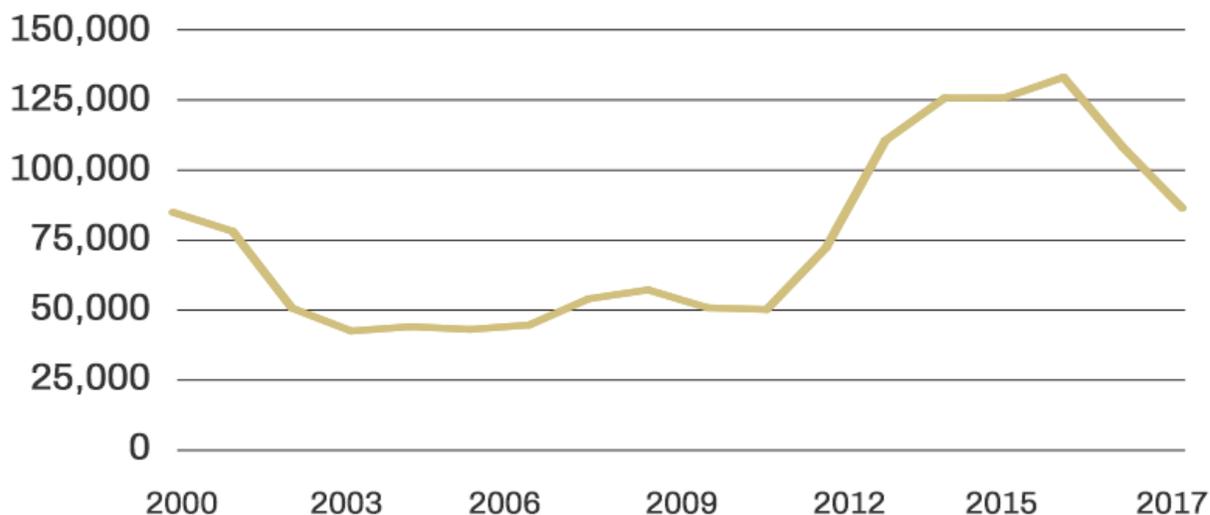
If the past administration championed global outreach, many universities now report regular visits from the FBI, amid fears foreign students could be [poaching research secrets](#). President Trump's travel ban and a series of real and threatened visa restrictions have made it more difficult for some foreign students and scholars to travel to the United States or discouraged them from trying. In 2016, for the first time since the attacks of September 11, the number of new international students fell, according to the Institute of International Education. They declined again the following fall.

The shift in internationalization's tides has been felt especially sharply in English-language programs designed for foreign students who come to the United States. Intensive English tends to be the leading edge of enrollment trends – many students need to improve their language skills before enrolling in degree programs, yet such courses can often be seen as discretionary – and their numbers fell first and fastest. Intensive English enrollments are down 35 percent from their 2015 high. Dozens of programs, including those at the College of New Jersey, California State University at Los Angeles, and the University of Houston's downtown campus, have closed.

## Foreign Students: Fewer Learn English

Intensive English-language programs, which are designed for foreign students coming to the United States, are often the leading edge of enrollment trends. They have shown a precipitous drop since 2015.

## Students in intensive English



SOURCE: Institute of International Education

It is not just incoming students who have been affected by contracting worldviews. In the decade leading up to Trump's election, American institutions opened 34 campuses overseas. Since then, they've opened five. Jason E. Lane, interim dean of education at the University at Albany, conducted the branch-campus survey with Kinser. Lane blames the "growing instability of global geopolitical dynamics" for a "wait-and-see approach" among American universities.

So far, no legislature has cut funds for international education or threatened to shut down overseas programming. But many international-office administrators — bracing themselves for increased scrutiny by lawmakers, boards of trustees, and the general public — have stepped up their advocacy efforts.

Trump tapped into a base angered by the "unfulfilled promises of globalization," says Jenny J. Lee, a professor of educational-policy studies and practice at the University of Arizona. But, she says, "real, serious

resistance to internationalization is not just coming from within the White House.”



International students, like those pictured here at Arizona State U., helped universities patch their budgets after the recession. (Maria J. Avila for The Chronicle)

## An Internal Critique

Some of the criticism, however, is coming from higher ed itself. Many of these internal skeptics don't see globalization as a bogeyman, or object on principle to overseas engagement. Rather, they don't like how colleges are going about it – or with whom.

Professors at Yale, for example, protested the university's decision to open a [new liberal-arts college](#) in 2013 with the National University of Singapore, arguing that it shouldn't be working in a country with such a poor track record on civil and human rights. At NYU, a faculty [no-confidence vote](#), also in 2013, was partly a referendum on Sexton's international ambitions, rising from concerns about academic quality, free expression, and the treatment of workers building the new campuses.

More recently, there has been a spate of closures of Confucius Institutes, [amid worries](#) that the Chinese government's sponsorship of the language and culture centers could chill speech on the American campuses that host them. And the murder of the journalist and Saudi government critic Jamal Khashoggi led several colleges, most prominently the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, to reconsider their relationships with Saudi Arabia. When MIT's president, L. Rafael Reif, decided not to sever ties, a faculty critic [opined](#) that the partnership was "driven not by intellectual content but by the money."

Indeed, detractors say American colleges have been far too willing to overlook the authoritarian tendencies of countries in which they work because many of those nations have funded research and other projects at times when there's been limited financial support at home. "Will universities get a little more careful in who they jump in bed with?" says Altbach, of Boston College. "I kind of doubt it."

Altbach is withering in his assessment of what he calls the commercialization of international education over the past decade, of the role that money plays in higher ed's overseas ventures and, most especially, in its recruitment of international students.

The period may have been a golden time for internationalization, but it was a gloomy one for college budgets. In fact, state support for higher education has yet to fully recover from the recession, remaining [\\$9 billion](#) below 2009 levels when adjusted for inflation.

In that context, international students were a godsend or a windfall or both, making up for plummeting budgets and falling demographics. Nearly 90 percent of the international-enrollment increases over the past decade came at the undergraduate- and master's-degree level, where students pay all or most of the cost of education.

Before the mid-2000s, relatively few American colleges actively recruited students from abroad. To attract students, they adopted practices from competitors like Britain and Australia, traveling overseas, hiring local

recruitment agents, and even setting up special backdoors to admissions for students whose language skills fell short.

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## Growth Rate of International Enrollment, by Destination

After a spike in 2014, the rate at which students come to the U.S. to study has slowed relative to the growth seen by many other countries.



SOURCE: Project Atlas

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Colleges' recruitment success may have contributed to the current financial challenges they face. At many institutions their tuition revenue has now

been baked into the budget, increasing pressure on those responsible for international recruitment. Ahmad Ezzeddine, associate vice president for educational outreach and international programs at Wayne State University, says discussions about international students can overshadow whatever else is on the agenda.

“If I say I’m traveling with faculty to a specific country or looking at a partnership for research, the question always is, Is it possible to recruit students, too?” Ezzeddine says. “Student recruitment becomes the first thing in the conversation.”

The sheer numbers also invited a [backlash](#) — from American students who complained that their international classmates changed the campus environment, from parents who worried that there would be fewer spots for their children, and from professors who struggled to cope with the newcomers’ different learning styles.

Just last month, in fact, cultural tensions came to a head at the University of Maryland after a professor [accused](#) a group of Chinese students of cheating. In response, the students filed a complaint against the professor, saying that he had unfairly targeted them because of their nationality. (He later resigned.)

Hans de Wit, director of the Center for International Higher Education, says such incidents are often amplified through social media. If students feel unwelcome on American campuses, or that they are being recruited as cash cows, it may be contributing to their decision to study elsewhere. “The drive has to be focused on creating community,” he says, “not just on revenue generation.”



Chinese students prepare for studying abroad. International-students surged on American campuses during the past decade, but recently their numbers have slowed. (Mark Leong for The Chronicle)

## Skin Deep

The golden era of international education was accompanied by grand aspirations, frequently evoked in college mission statements and strategic plans. It was supposed to be comprehensive, embedded in classroom learning, in faculty research, in the student experience. To a large extent, however, the focus has been on student mobility – bringing students from abroad to campus and, to a lesser extent, sending them out.

Has internationalization only been skin deep?

The attention to mobility is natural, says Joanna Regulska, vice provost and associate chancellor of global affairs at the University of California at Davis. Many people in the field went into it because they were once international students, as she was, or studied abroad.

It's also measurable. By law, colleges track all student visa holders. Each year, the Institute of International Education publishes lists of the

institutions that send the most students abroad or host the most foreign students on campus.

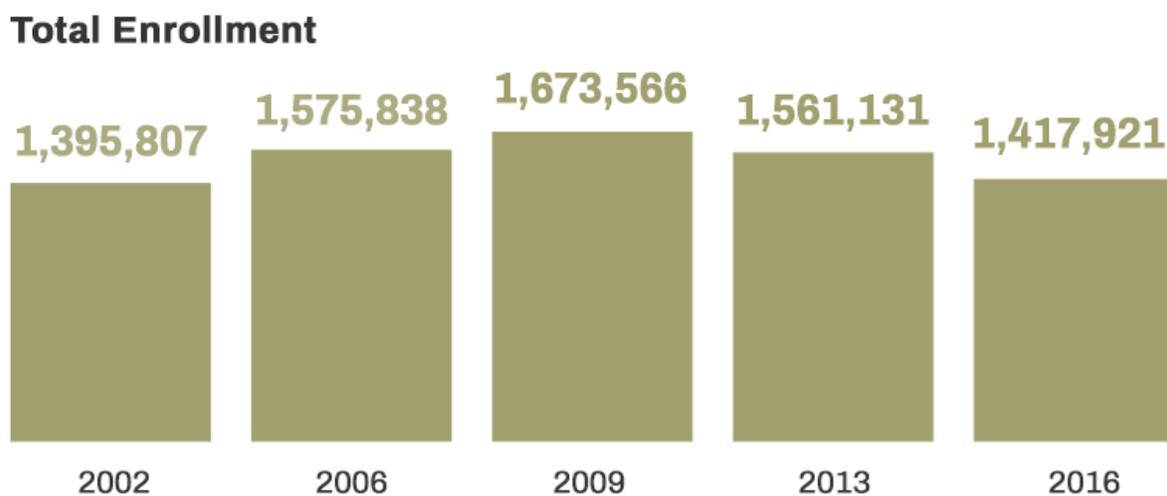
“Mobility is easy to quantify,” Regulska says, “while international knowledge, what students learn, is much more difficult to assess. So we end up privileging going abroad.”

Many observers worry that colleges do what they measure and never really get much traction on other aspects of internationalization. A [2016 survey](#) on campus internationalization by the American Council on Education, for example, found that efforts at global learning took a back seat to student mobility.

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## Americans: Foreign Language Study Drops

After the Sept. 11 terror attacks, American students were encouraged to enroll in foreign-language courses. Since peaking in 2009, the number of students in these courses has dropped 15 percent. Total Enrollment.



SOURCE: Modern Language Association

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Meanwhile, campus foreign-language programs bore much of the brunt of recessionary cutbacks, a loss the Modern Language Association called “[stunning](#).” Even when it comes to study abroad, colleges haven’t made much progress. Although the number of students going overseas has increased, they still represent less than 2 percent of those studying at American colleges.

“If we’re all in on international education, how do you square that?” says Patti McGill Peterson, a former executive director of the Council for International Exchange of Scholars. “We have to be pretty honest with ourselves – we have not moved the needle.”

There’s often little incentive for faculty members to internationalize their curriculum or research or take students abroad, says Kinser, the Penn State professor. Few colleges specifically recognize international activities in tenure and promotion.

Investing in internationally oriented faculty development ranks even lower than curriculum integration as a focus of campus internationalization efforts. Just one in five colleges said it was a priority on the ACE survey.

Kinser says that even when faculty members are enthusiastic about international engagement, it can be unclear how their work is part of a broader institutional strategy. As a result, he says, “internationalization is in the mission statement, but closer to ground, in the classroom, I don’t know if it’s always there.”

## Losing Its Sheen

At this winter’s meeting of the Association of International Education Administrators, the mood was somber.

*We have to justify filing this position to the provost, one administrator said. There’ll be a lot of hand-wringing if we can’t get our numbers from India back up, said another.*

For these top international-education administrators, the initial shock – of the travel ban, of the drop-off in international enrollments – is over. Now they've got to figure out the strategy for the siege.

Among the attendees at AIEA, there seemed to be two camps. One group was hunkering down, curtailing international ambitions and even eliminating programs. But the other group, far larger, seemed determined to do more with fewer resources.

West Virginia University has expanded joint-degree programs with foreign universities, betting that an American credential still has cachet, even if students are less willing to come to the United States for a full degree. Yes, students will be on campus for only one or two years, says William I. Brustein, WVU's vice president for global strategies and international affairs, but "it's better that they're here for a short time than not at all."

#### ADVERTISEMENT

Necessity is leading to the adoption of new approaches. At the University of Colorado at Boulder, for example, the International English Center has started a program to provide English instruction to the university's own employees, workers mainly in the housekeeping and grounds staff who aren't native English speakers.

"Right now it's difficult to say no to anything," says Patricia Juza, the language-center director. "I always try to say yes."

Regulska, at UC-Davis, takes a similar view. Rather than talking about internationalization as a goal in itself, she sees it as a way of helping to achieve the university's mission. She casts international education as serving a goal that colleges are increasingly embracing: student success.

It could be a time for new directions in internationalization. "The end of an era," says Penn State's Kinser, "doesn't necessarily mean that things regress. Maybe they just change."

If international education is to move forward, it needs to take full measure of where it's been. Looking back, its golden era seems to lose some of its sheen.

Too often, colleges' eager embrace lacked attention to the basics, leaving it feeling more like an add-on, an extra, a thing to be handled by the office with "international" on the door. Commitment, on campus and off, could be shallow. It was a nice thing to do, yes, but rarely fundamental.

The elevation of international education blended high-minded ideals and bottom-line concerns. Ultimately, it satisfied neither.

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