



Highlights of [GAO-07-135SP](#).

Why GAO Convened This Forum

The United States has long been one of the most desired higher education destinations for international students. Students from other countries bring needed skills to the increasingly knowledge-based U.S. economy, build bridges between the United States and their own countries, and make other valuable contributions. Yet recent trends and changes after September 11, 2001, have raised concerns about whether the United States will continue to attract an appropriate share of talented international students to its universities and to its workforce after they graduate.

In order to better understand issues related to global competitiveness and international students, the Comptroller General convened selected national leaders and experts in September 2006 to discuss current trends in international student enrollment in the United States and abroad. Participants were asked to explore (1) what is known about the potential impact of these trends, (2) challenges the United States faces in attracting international students, and (3) policies and strategies the country can pursue to compete for international students while also maintaining the nation's security. Invitees to the forum included experts from government, universities, research institutions, higher education organizations, and industry.

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HIGHLIGHTS OF A GAO FORUM

Global Competitiveness: Implications for the Nation's Higher Education System

What Participants Said

Despite concerns about slowing international student enrollment after September 11, participants generally said enrollments appeared to be rebounding, and the United States remains a highly desirable destination for higher education. However, the U.S. share of international students worldwide has declined, partly because of expanding higher education options abroad and growing competition from countries with coordinated recruiting strategies. Participants expressed concern that the country may face increased challenges attracting international students in the future.

Participants said that in addition to facing challenges from abroad, the United States faces a number of internal issues that could pose challenges in recruiting talented students. They noted that the United States is disadvantaged because it lacks an integrated, strategic approach to recruiting and retaining international students. They also said high tuition costs and growing costs for universities related to recruiting international students may make it more difficult to attract students. In addition, they identified real and perceived barriers created by U.S. immigration policy, saying that neither the nonimmigrant visa process nor the permanent immigration system adequately serves U.S. efforts to attract international students and high-skill workers.

Participants stated that the country needs to take the following steps to ensure that U.S. higher education continues to attract talented international students:

- *Develop a national strategic plan:* They generally agreed that the United States should work to develop a national strategic plan for recruiting international students and should improve coordination and communication among the federal government and other organizations as well as with international students.
- *Consider changes to the U.S. immigration system:* Many recommended a reevaluation of the U.S. immigration system to remove barriers for talented international students, for example, by reconsidering the requirement that student visa applicants indicate an intent to return to their home countries after completing their studies.
- *Explore new sources of international students:* A number of participants suggested that the United States explore new sources of international students, such as in developing countries.

Participants also said the country should cultivate its domestic capacity to strengthen its global competitiveness. For example, it could improve access to higher education for U.S. students, promote studying abroad, and encourage U.S. students to study in science and technology fields.