



SURVEY ON A NATIONAL STRATEGY FOR INTERNATIONAL EDUCATION IN THE U.S.

Key Findings



PRESIDENTS' ALLIANCE



ON HIGHER EDUCATION AND IMMIGRATION

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BACKGROUND

What is a national strategy for international education?

The United States is among the most popular destinations for international education and yet is the only one lacking a centralized national strategy. Instead, a network of federal agencies, state governments, higher education institutions (HEIs), and private organizations work asymmetrically to promote and support international education activities.

Other destination countries, including the United Kingdom, Australia, Canada, Germany, and France, have more coordinated and comprehensive national strategies for international education, which typically include goals and targets for international student enrollment, the quality and diversity of education offerings, partnerships and collaborations with other countries, and intercultural competencies among students and educators. Some also have dedicated agencies or ministries to oversee and implement international education policies, such as the British Council, Universities Australia, and EduCanada.

What is a national strategy for international education?

A working definition is a coordinated plan that sets out a country's objectives, policies, and initiatives to enhance global higher education engagement with an emphasis on optimizing participation and diversity in student exchanges, setting benchmarks for colleges and universities, fostering campus internationalization, facilitating overseas partnerships, and developing initiatives to attract international students.

SURVEY ORIGINS AND DEVELOPMENT

This survey was created in consultation with the following organizations: AACRAO, ACCT, ACE, AIEA, AIRC, IIE, NACAC, NAFSA, The Presidents' Alliance on Higher Education and Immigration, the U.S. for Success Coalition, EnglishUSA and others. The idea for this survey originated from IDP's 2023 Think Tank event, "[Destination 2030: Reimagining the Future of Student Mobility](#)." All consulting organizations provided important input on the survey purpose, content, and design. The survey was administered and executed by IDP at no cost.

PURPOSE

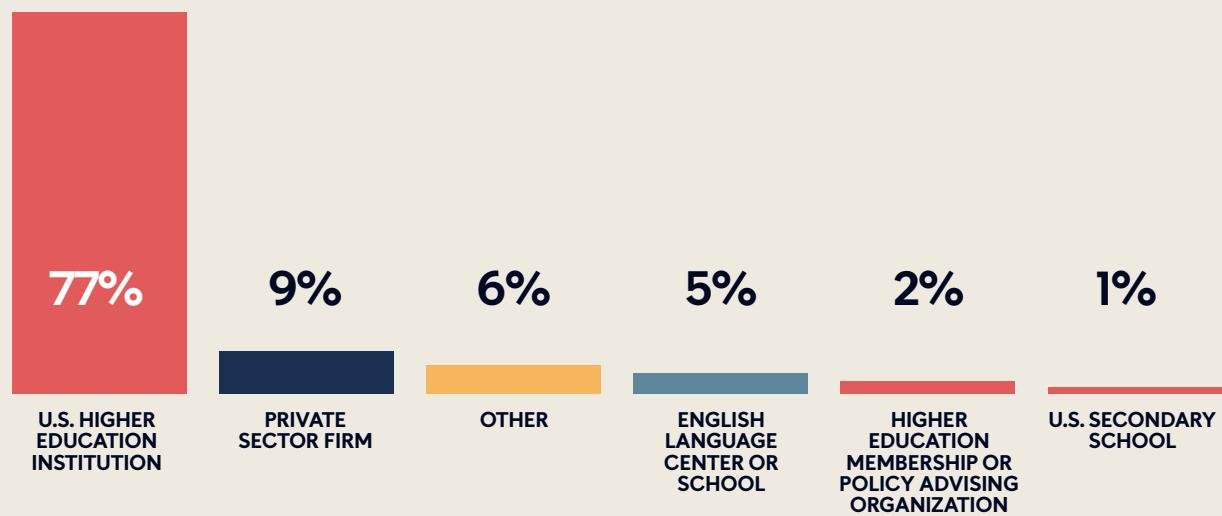
The purpose of the survey was to identify collective strategic priorities for international education in the U.S. among higher education leaders and stakeholders. The survey explores the value of a national strategy from both a country level and institutional/organizational level, setting targets for international student enrollment in the U.S. and participation of U.S. students in global education programs, and organization and role expectations in developing and sustaining a national strategy.

METHODOLOGY

Research Context

The Survey on a National Strategy for U.S. International Education was a 15-minute online survey executed and managed by IDP and distributed by multiple international education sector bodies, membership organizations, and state consortia. The survey was out in the field between November 28 - December 22, 2023. This survey was designed for leaders in higher education who possess influence, perspective, and vested interest in the strategic integration of international education in the United States and was open to any professionals actively engaged in the field of international education.

RESPONDENT PROFILE: 405 TOTAL RESPONDENTS



The survey engaged a diverse group of over 400 professionals from various organization types within the field of international education. The majority—more than 75% of respondents—were affiliated with U.S. higher education institutions. This was followed by a smaller representation from Private Sector Firms at 9%, English Language Centers or Schools at 5%, and Higher Education Membership or Policy Advising Organizations at 2%. An additional 6% fell under the ‘Other’ category, which encompassed a range of different organizations and institutions.

In terms of roles within these organizations, the survey captured a wide range of responsibility and experience. Executive leadership roles comprised 7% of the respondents. Senior management positions, including Vice Presidents, Executive Directors, and Deans, accounted for 26%. The largest group was those in management roles, like Managers and Directors, making up 46% of the participants. Practitioners and professionals, including Officers, Coordinators, and Counselors, represented 17%, while a final 4% chose not to specify their role.

Notably, of those in higher education institutions, 30% identified themselves as the Senior International Officer (SIO).

SURVEY RESULTS

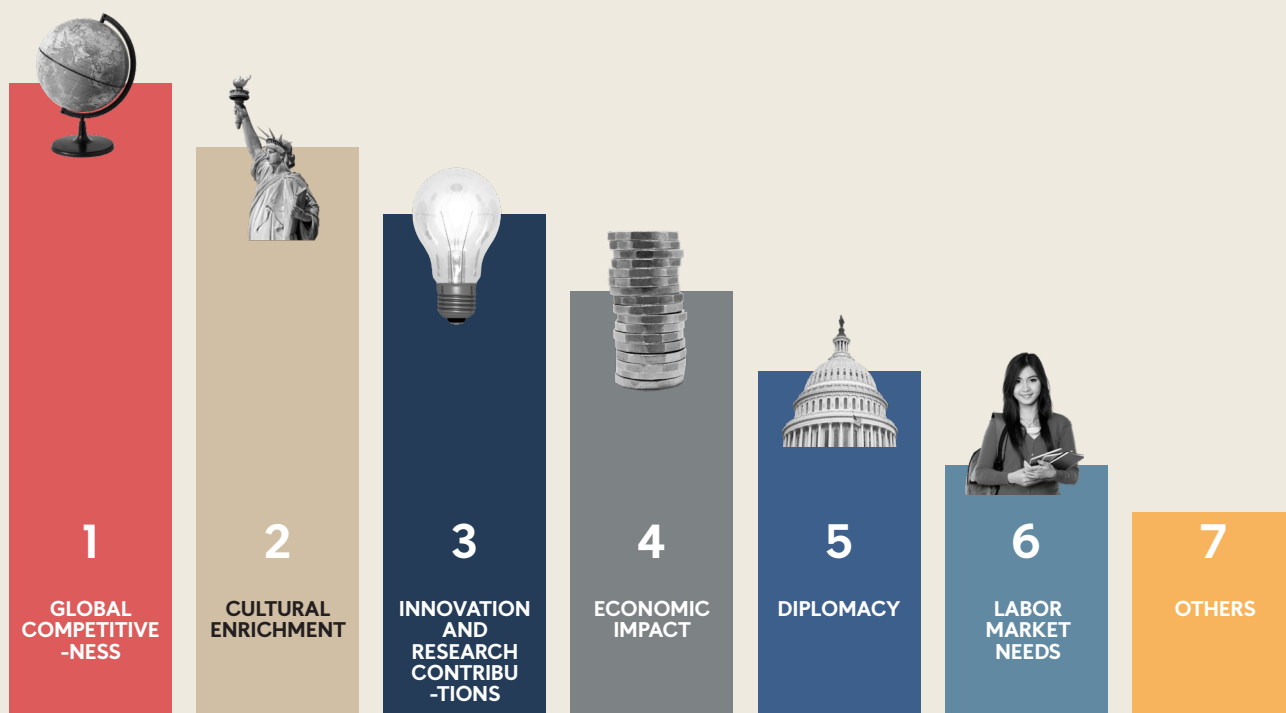
Value of a national strategy

The first section of the survey explored opinions on the value of a national strategy from both a broad, country-level perspective and an institutional/organizational-level perspective.

Country level

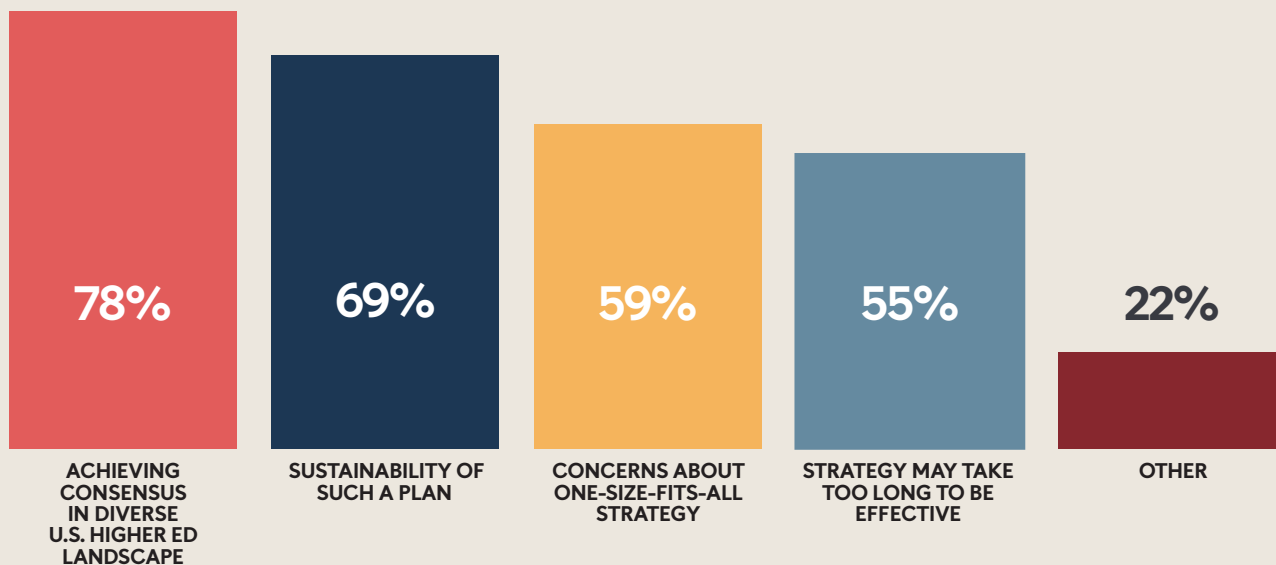
When asked to consider the country-level importance of a national strategy, respondents prioritized global competition and cultural enrichment of U.S. citizens.

Thinking of the country as a whole (rather than your own organization or institution), why do you think such a strategy might be important to the United States?



Participants were then asked if they anticipate any concerns or limitations in executing a strategy across the country. Forty-seven percent of respondents indicated they do have concerns, with the most cited reasons including doubts about achieving consensus across the diverse U.S. higher education landscape and the sustainability of a plan amid changing administrations, geopolitical trends, and resource availability.

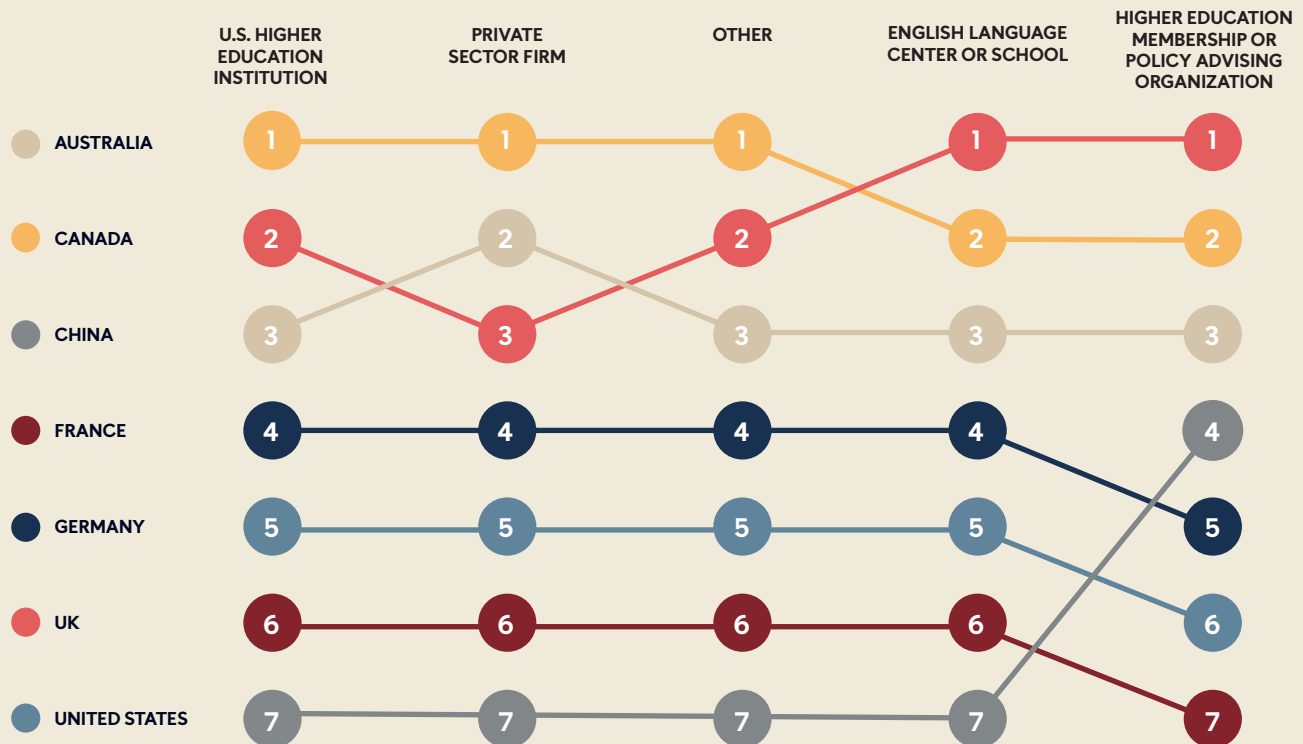
What concerns do you have about such a strategy?



Echoing these concerns, several free-text comments underlined the lack of political will or public support for bringing international students to the U.S. Lack of funding and resources to support this effort was also cited as a barrier. One commenter specified the importance of bandwidth and ownership of a national strategy, while others expressed the importance of educating higher education institutions about the benefits of cooperation versus competition, especially for institutions already succeeding in international engagement.

Regarding the strategic organization of competitor countries, Canada was selected as the most successful country by respondents, likely due to its surge in enrollments over the past several years. It is worth noting that many commenters indicated that they did not feel well-informed on this topic nor confident in their answer selection. Others pointed out that having a national policy did not buffer other nations from political winds or other obstacles, such as housing capacity shortages, and did not always yield long-term, sustainable results.

How do you think the U.S. compares to other leading destination countries in terms of having a successful, coordinated effort to support international education? (Ranking)



OBJECTIVES OF A STRATEGY

When asked about the most important objectives for a national strategy, respondents believe that the three most important objectives are to develop a globally aware, interculturally competent U.S. workforce (50%), to improve perception of the U.S. as a welcoming and accessible study destination (47%), and to secure the U.S.'s position as the leading study destination for international students (39%).

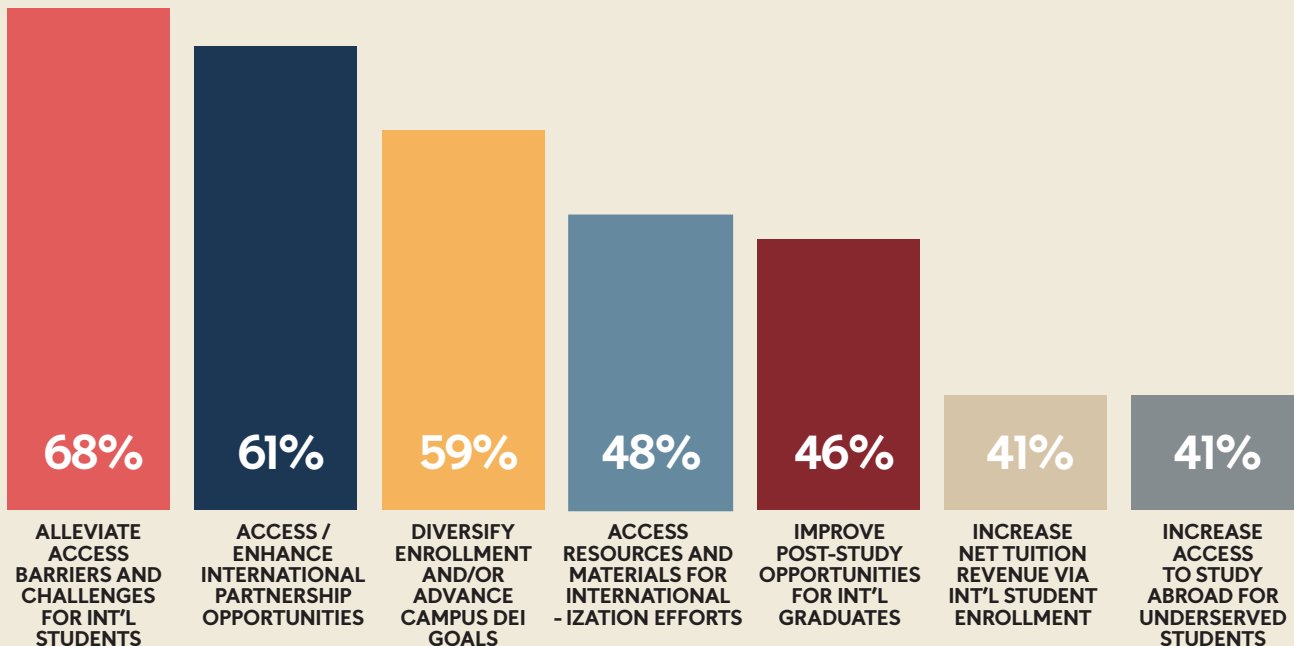
Thinking of the country as a whole, what do you believe to be the most important objectives for a national strategy?



INSTITUTIONAL/ORGANIZATIONAL LEVEL

When exploring the value of a national strategy for their own institutions and organizations, respondents primarily identified its importance in alleviating barriers that prevent international students from accessing U.S. higher education and in creating opportunities for international partnerships.

Why do you think such a strategy might be important for your institution or organization?



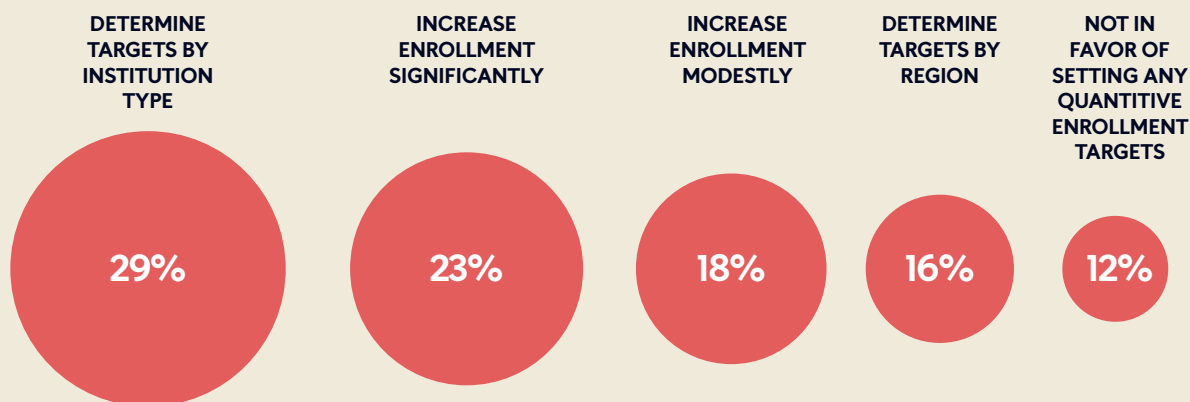
A substantial 69% of participants viewed a national strategy as an unmitigated benefit for their institutions, indicating they have no concerns. However, of those respondents who expressed concerns, 45% feared a strategy may constrain their institution. Forty percent of those with concerns noted they lack the resources to support internationalization. A notable 22% of those with concerns cited local or state restrictions that could impede their ability to engage more deeply in international efforts. Several comments warned that a national strategy could exacerbate the divide between well-established R1/flagship schools and smaller, lesser-known HEIs, including community colleges.

SETTING TARGETS

Next, participants were asked if they think targets should be set, and if so how, for international student enrollment in the U.S. and for U.S. student participation in education abroad.

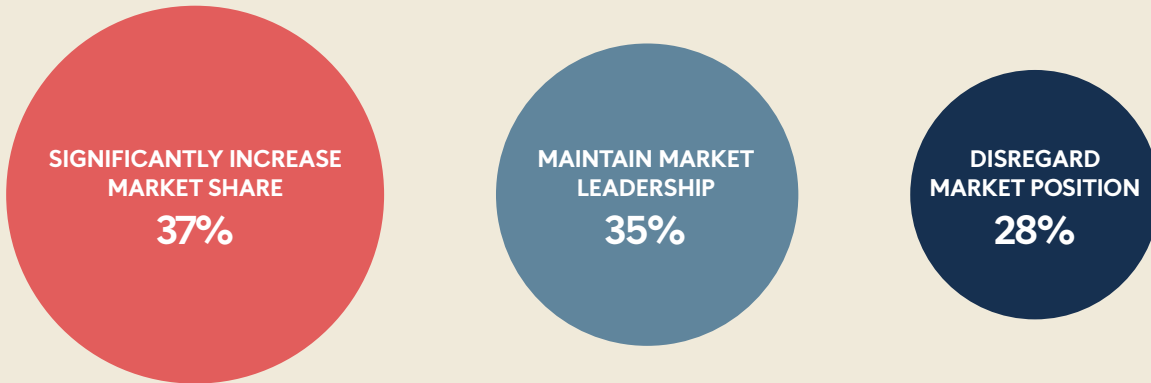
When it comes to international student enrollment targets, 29% of respondents believe that targets are best determined by type of institution rather than a single, national-level goal. The next most popular answer was to increase international student enrollment in the U.S. “significantly.”

What, in your opinion, is the most appropriate and achievable international student enrollment target for the United States to set over the next decade?



In terms of the country’s global market share of international students, respondents were almost evenly divided between maintaining market leadership or increasing market share, with a sizable 28% preferring to disregard market share altogether in favor of other metrics such as quality, access, and student support.

What is the ideal market position for the United States over the next 10 years?



STUDY ABROAD PARTICIPATION RATE

When asked about the most appropriate goal for the United States regarding study abroad participation rates of American undergraduates in the next decade, 56% believe that it should increase significantly, followed by 25% who believe it should increase only modestly to resume pre-pandemic levels. A group of 18% disregarded setting a target in favor of other metrics such as quality, access, and student support.

In your opinion, what is the most appropriate goal for the United States to set regarding study abroad participation rates of American undergraduates over the next decade?



SIGNIFICANTLY INCREASE PARTICIPATION: EXCEED PRE-PANDEMIC LEVELS

56%



MODESTLY INCREASE PARTICIPATION: RESUME PRE-PANDEMIC LEVELS

25%



DISREGARD PARTICIPATION RATE

18%



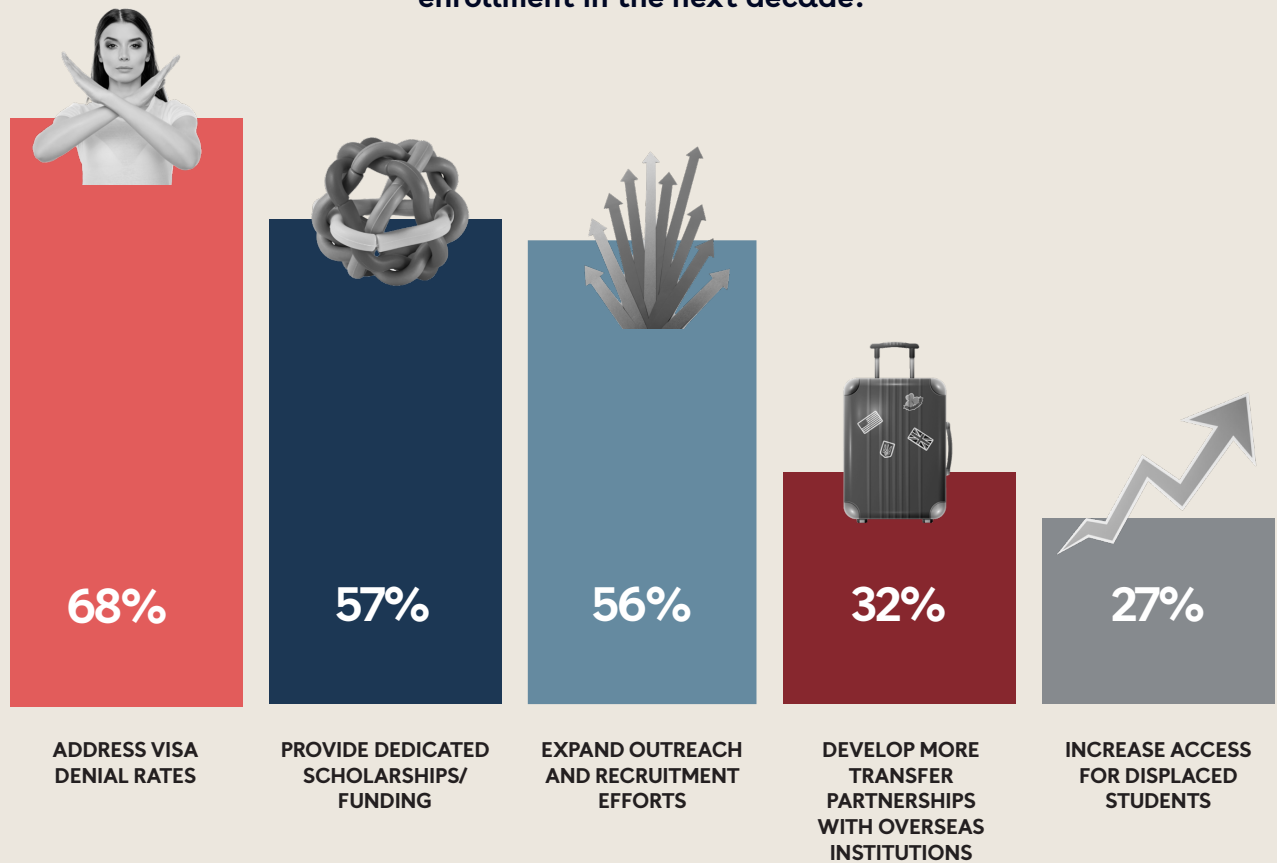
MAINTAIN CURRENT PARTICIPATION RATE

1%

DIVERSITY

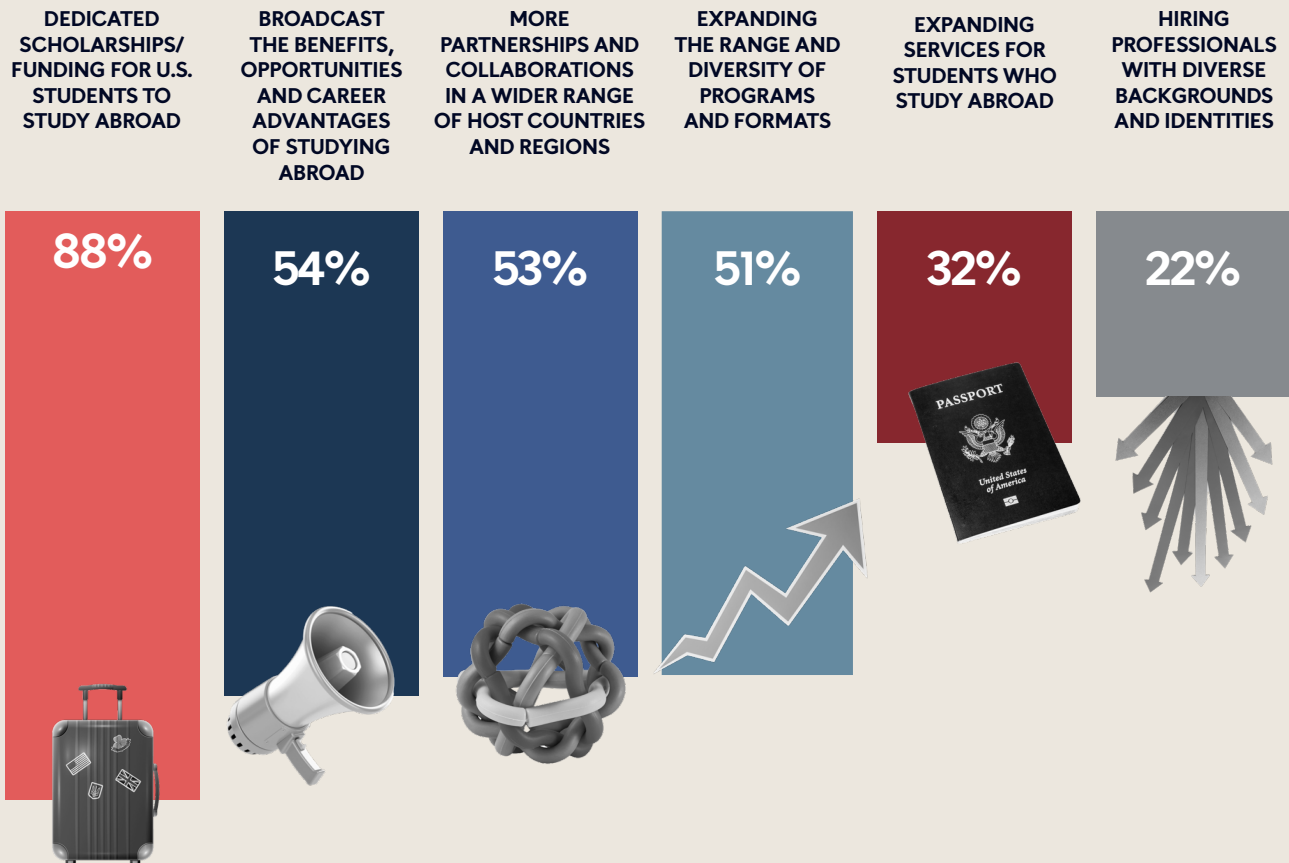
The top strategies cited for diversifying international student enrollment in the U.S. were addressing visa denial rates from underrepresented countries and regions, dedicated scholarships/funding for students in underrepresented countries and regions, and expansion of outreach efforts to attract international students from a wider range of countries and regions, especially those currently underrepresented in the U.S.

How should the U.S. aim to increase the diversity of international student enrollment in the next decade?



In the effort to diversify education abroad, 88% of respondents pointed to the need for dedicated scholarships/funding for Americans to study abroad, especially those from low-income families, underrepresented groups, or non-traditional backgrounds. Over 50% of respondents also pointed to the need to better promote education abroad to underrepresented groups, offer a more diverse list of study destinations, and expand the range and format of study away options to increase access and participation.

How should the U.S. aim to increase the diversity of education abroad in the next decade?



In the free-text response field for the diversity questions, several themes emerged. Many respondents emphasized the need for providing international students with work opportunities both before and after graduation. They also highlighted the crucial role of global and linguistic exposure for young people, alongside the advantages of targeted financial support for students from emerging economies, particularly in regions like India and parts of Africa. However, the most frequently cited topic was concern about the barriers to diverse student participation in international education: affordability gaps and visa denials. Some respondents advocated for the introduction of dual intent and clearer immigration pathways in the F-1 visa process. Additionally, one respondent brought attention to a critical concern: the potential contributions of international education to climate change and the disproportionate harm done to the global south. This observation highlighted a conflict between the goal of diversifying education and the consequence of causing environmental damage to the very communities we intend to serve.

From free-text responses:

“The U.S. should prioritize increasing student mobility flows from regions of political and economic importance, especially those with a growing youth population and significant gaps in their internal ability to deliver higher education to their demand (ie. Nigeria).”

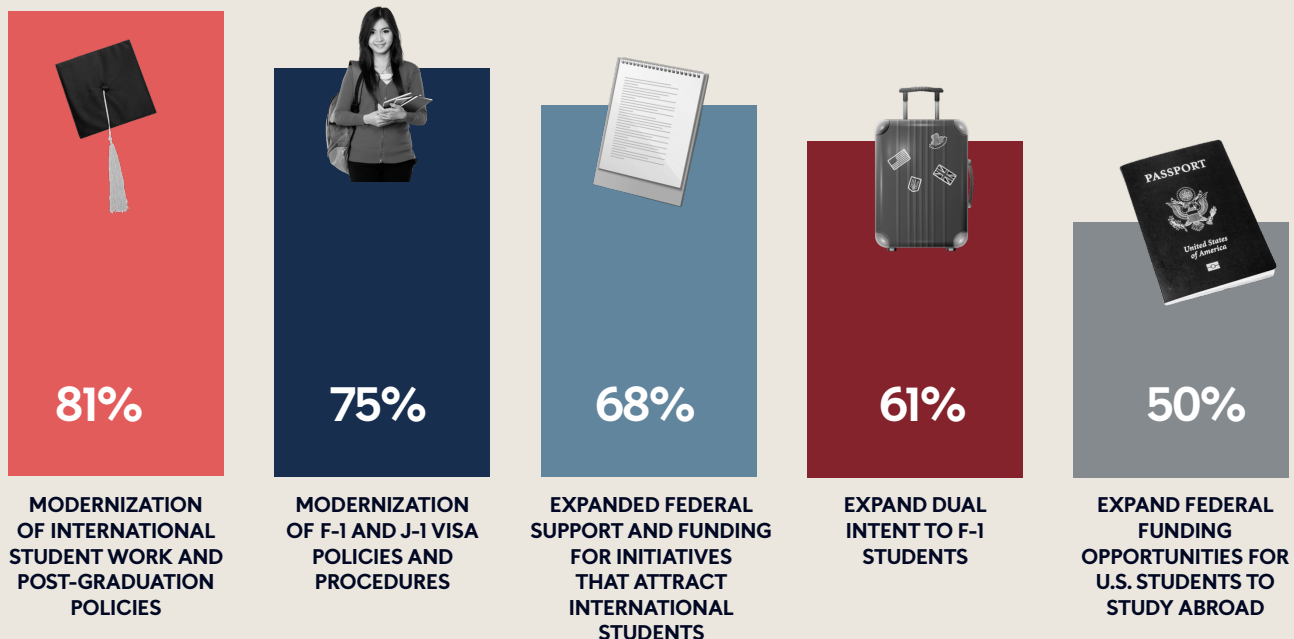
“The high rate of visa denials makes it difficult for U.S. universities to enroll international students from countries other than India and China.”

“Compete with Canada by offering a work permit to students who complete a degree in the States.”

CHOOSING TACTICS

Next, the survey delved into what international educators believe should be integral to a national strategy. The most frequently identified priority was the need for modernizing pathways for international students to work and gain residency post-graduation. This was closely followed by the necessity of updating F-1 and J-1 visa policies to broaden access. Respondents also emphasized the importance of increased federal support and funding as a means to attract more foreign students to the U.S. Once again, the concept of dual intent for F-1 visa students was identified as an area for development.

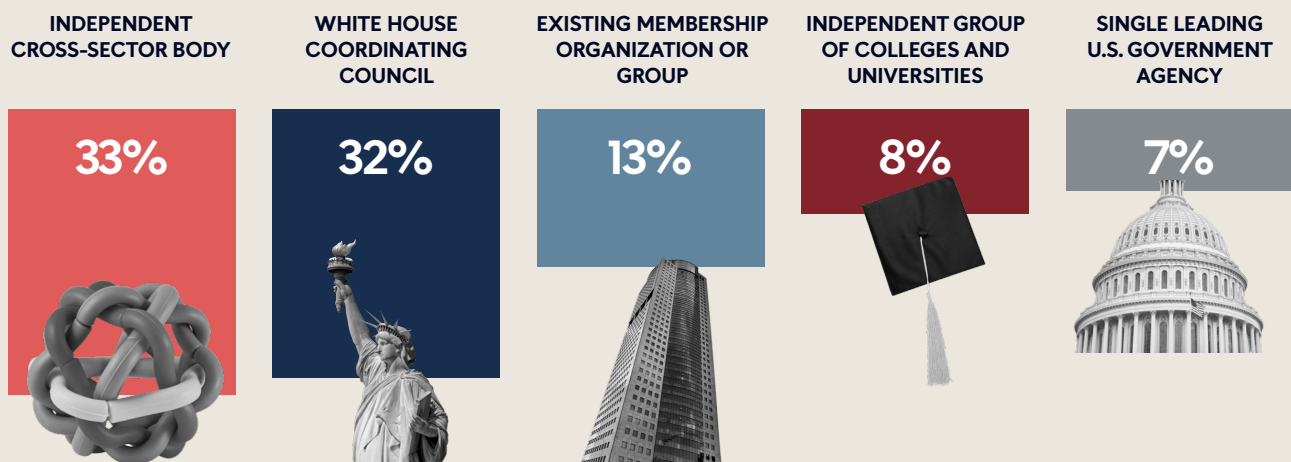
What are some of the items you think should be included in a national strategy for the United States?



ROLE ASSIGNMENT AND ORGANIZATION

Finally, the survey addressed questions about the management and execution of a national strategy. In deciding the ideal governance structure, opinions were evenly divided between the top two answers. Roughly a third of respondents favored an independent, cross-sector body that would include leaders from colleges and universities, international education professionals, NGOs, and business leaders. The other third supported the formation of a White House coordinating council, to be chaired by a senior White House official and comprised of representatives from key federal agencies like the Departments of State, Education, Commerce, and Homeland Security. A significant number of comments suggested a hybrid approach, combining elements of both models.

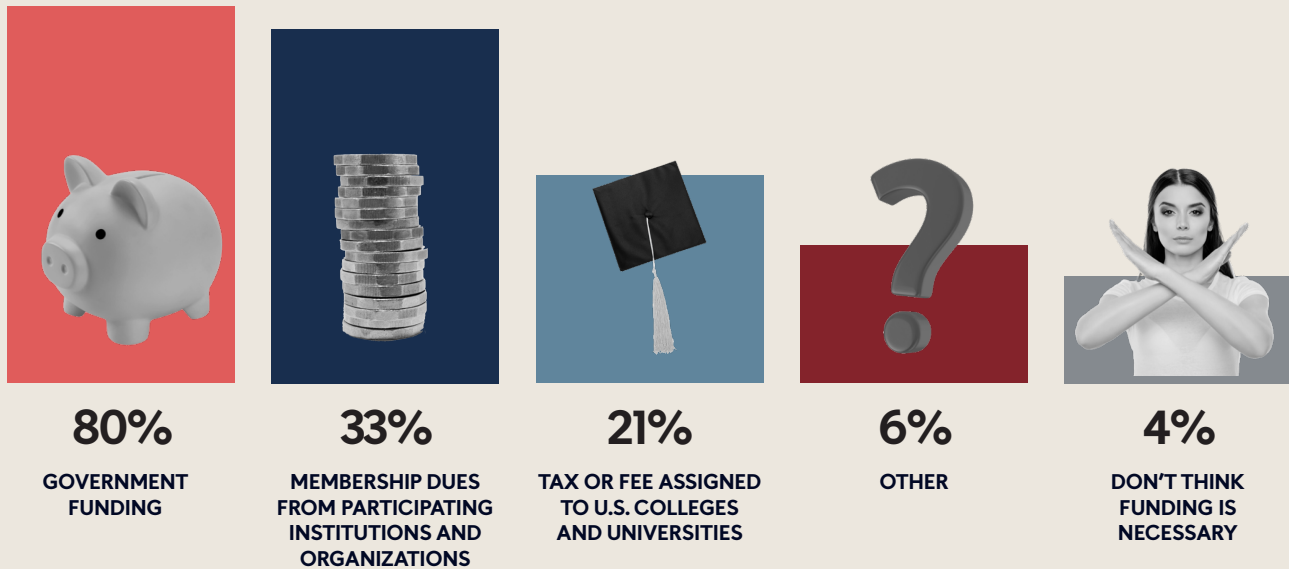
What organizational structure should oversee the development and implementation of a national strategy for the United States?



FUNDING

Regarding the funding of a national strategy, a vast majority (80%) believed that government funding should play a role. However, 33% also thought that higher education institutions and related organizations should contribute, possibly through membership dues. A minority of voices in the comments proposed student fees as a funding source, though others strongly opposed this, citing existing financial burdens on students. Alternative funding suggestions included imposing taxes on employers hiring non-U.S. employees and instituting a sliding scale of membership fees based on the type or size of the institution.

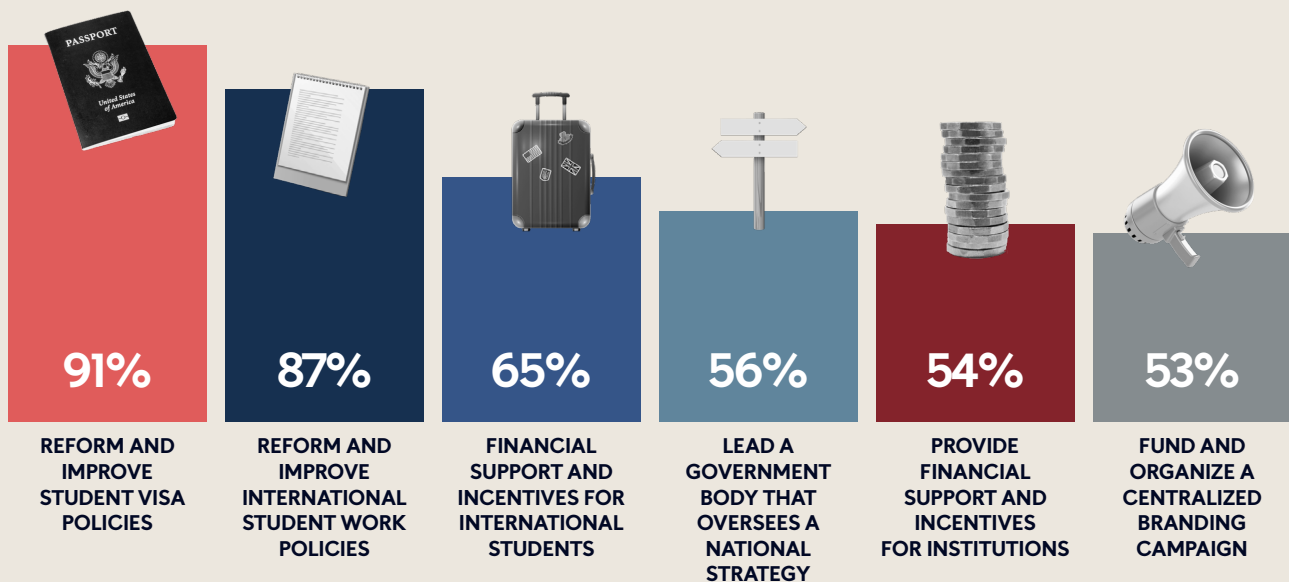
How should such an organization be funded?



GOVERNMENT ROLE

Regarding the U.S. government's role, there was a strong consensus on the need to reform and enhance student visa policies and procedures, making them more accessible, transparent, and consistent. This was closely followed by calls for improvements in international student work authorization policies, supported by 87% of respondents, to attract and retain global talent.

What role should the U.S. government play in support of a national strategy?



SUMMARY

The results of the survey underscored the importance and complexities of developing a comprehensive national strategy for international education in the United States.

Respondents noted the importance of such a strategy in fostering U.S. global competitiveness, innovation and research, enriching cultural diversity, reducing barriers, and increasing access. However, several concerns were also raised, including sustaining the plan amidst changing government support and geopolitical trends.

Several key areas of consensus also emerged in the survey results, laying the foundation for future advancement of U.S. international education. One of the strongest areas of consensus was around the need for modernization of work pathways, visa policies, and opportunities for residency post-graduation, with expanded federal support and dual intent for F-1 students. Respondents also highlighted the importance of increased funding and federal support to attract more international students to the U.S.

Diversity also emerged as a key theme, with strategies proposed to address visa denial rates, provide scholarships for underrepresented groups, and promote study abroad opportunities to a wider range of students. Respondents identified quality, access, and support as critical components to expanding education abroad opportunities.

In terms of organization and governance, opinions were split between establishing a White House coordinating council and creating an independent cross-sector body. Most respondents agreed on the need for government funding, while alternative funding suggestions included contributions from higher education institutions and related organizations.

While much work is yet to be done, the survey results identify key strategic priorities and action areas that will advance the national conversation and drive real progress in U.S. international education.

For more updates on these survey results and ongoing initiatives to advance U.S. international education, [join our mailing list](#).



ABOUT IDP

IDP is a global leader in international student placement and a proud co-owner of the world's most popular high-stakes English language test, IELTS.

IDP is listed on the Australian securities exchange (ASX:IEL) and has 6,800 employees across more than 30 countries. Its websites attract 100 million visits a year.

We specialize in combining human expertise with digital technology to help students get accepted into their ideal program and help institutions enroll the best-fit students. Our teams work side-by-side with students at every step, from online searches through to starting their dream program or career.

We partner with more than 890 quality universities and institutions across the United States, Australia, Canada, Ireland, New Zealand, and the United Kingdom. Our data insights are relied upon by organizations around the world to help ensure policies are informed by the diverse needs, challenges, and motivations of students.



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