The fate of international students in the US in the era of COVID-19

Sam Dalton
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Under the impact of the global COVID-19 pandemic, US higher education is facing a shakeout, with many colleges and universities expected to close whole departments or shutter entirely. This crisis makes the fate of the nearly 1.1 million international students attending US schools highly precarious.

The International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE), the youth and student wing of the Socialist Equality Party (SEP), believes that the highest quality education should be available at no cost to everyone, irrespective of the place or conditions of their birth. We unequivocally defend the right of students to study wherever in the world they choose.

Alongside the Trump administration's increasingly bellicose campaign to scapegoat China for its own criminal response to the pandemic, it is deliberately stoking up xenophobia against international students and workers throughout the US. Trump has recently escalated his anti-China campaign by considering a policy that would result in the expulsion of a significant portion of Chinese graduate students. Around 3,000 of the 360,000 Chinese students in the US would be affected by the policy.

For students, educators, and scientists, the ability to collaborate with international students is not just valuable, but essential to move humanity and knowledge forward. Principled diversity in ideas and approach are the cornerstone of the intellectual and technological development of mankind.

The treatment of these students by colleges in response to the pandemic has exposed the fact that they are primarily viewed as cash cows. Over 70 percent of US colleges expelled such students from university housing, with most under mandatory lockdowns and unable to fly home.

International students and the corporatization of higher education

There has been an explosion in the numbers of international students studying in the US over the past decade, rising from 2,540 newly-admitted students in 2009 to 18,304 in 2019. Foreign students now make up 5.5 percent of all students in the US.

This has been closely tied to the rise of exorbitant and highly exploitative tuition fees. The University of California (UC), for example, charges $13,226 for students from California, whereas out-of-state and international students pay $42,218 for the very same classes. UC's enrollment of 41,202 international students in 2019 generated $1.75 billion in tuition fees alone. In 2018, UC Irvine enrolled 6,615 international undergraduates, over double the number it accepted in 2013. Similarly, UC San Diego enrolled 8,473 in 2018, compared to 4,228 in 2013.

The UC system is not unique. State universities tend to have the biggest discrepancies in the rates of international students, with Michigan and Penn State also leading the way.

In other words, international students are an incredibly lucrative business. According to the US Department of Commerce, these students contributed $44.7 billion to the national economy in 2018 alone, a rise of 5.5 percent from the previous year.

Tuition rates alone are not the only financial motivator for colleges and universities. Even at private universities where there is only a difference of a few thousand dollars between the cost for international and in-state students, international students are still preferred because they are forced to pay cash. Most domestic students depend on federal, state or university financial aid.

Take, for example, New York University (NYU), which has over 17,000 international students. At least 5,386 of these are undergraduates who pay $54,000 per year in tuition. Many of these students are also charged an average of $18,000 per year for university housing, $6,000 for university-provided food, and $4,000 for the university's health insurance. Only counting tuition for undergraduates, NYU receives $300 million from international students. The total revenue generated from all international students is undoubtedly much higher.

Colleges from across the spectrum of US education have come to rely on increasingly large numbers of international students in recent years. Arizona State's Tempe Campus has 4,692 international undergraduates paying $31,200 per year for tuition, while Fort Hays State in Kansas has 4,159, each paying $24,036.

In 2018, 94,562 international students were enrolled at community colleges throughout the country. Even smaller specialized colleges rely on high numbers of international students. For example, 12 percent of Pomona College's student body is international, each paying $54,380.

In an interview with *New York* magazine, Scott Galloway, a professor at NYU's Stern School of business, describes the incredible mark up on these fees: "I'll have 170 kids in my brand-strategy class in the fall. We charge them $7,000 per student. That's $1.2 million that we get for 12 nights of me in a classroom. $100,000 a night. The gross margins on that offering are somewhere between 92 and 96 points [cost over price charged]."

Galloway goes on to explain how this compares to other luxury products. "There is no other product in the world that's been able to sustain 90-plus points of margin for this long at this high of a price point. Ferrari can't do it. Hermès can't do it. Apple can't do it. Apple's gross margins are 38 points. Hermès and luxury goods are somewhere between 50 and 60 points."

While mark-ups of these proportions are more prevalent at "elite" colleges, the underlying logic persists throughout the entire higher education system.

Conditions facing international students

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While it is surely the case that the exorbitant fees for international students serve to restrict access to higher education in the US to more affluent families, there are also many international students who come from working-class families that are forced to take out crushing loans to enable their child to attend a US college. Universities have exploited this bargaining chip for all it has been worth in recent years.

Working-class international students who were able to attend US colleges due to scholarships or other sources of funding now find themselves trapped with little support in the US.

Despite the high fees to attend these colleges, the conditions facing international students, like all working-class students, are quite dire. The profits from increased enrollment are rarely used to improve the lives of students or to improve the quality of education. Last year, NYU spent over $9 million on "client entertainment." Other typical expenses include huge research initiatives in partnership with the intelligence and state apparatus, and expanding real estate empires.

As income from international students and other sources has vastly increased universities' endowments in recent years, enrollment fees have continued to increase, while both graduate student workers and adjunct professors have seen their standards of living systematically attacked.

Before the pandemic, international students were disproportionately affected by the social crisis. According to one 2018 study, 37.6 percent of international students at the University of Florida reported being food insecure, compared to 30 percent for US nationals. A study of students at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill also found international students had a higher prevalence of food insecurity.

The pandemic has only exacerbated this issue. Many students who worked on campus before the pandemic to help cover costs lost this income when US campuses shut down. Furthermore, as they are not US citizens, international students have been unable to access any federal aid or unemployment programs.

International students, without family in the country, were often unable to find adequate accommodations. On May 28, the WSWS reported that students in the UK are also being threatened with eviction from housing in the midst of the pandemic. In the US, many students who would have preferred to return home to be with their families remained in the country due to uncertainty over their ability to be readmitted to the US after they left.

Indeed, this uncertainty remains.

The future of international students in the era of COVID-19

At this early stage of the crisis, it is estimated that international enrollments could fall as much as 25 percent for the 2020-21 academic year. This is likely an underestimation. As the crisis deepens, parents and students will become increasingly aware of the precariousness of travel to the US, the lack of post-graduate job opportunities, and the severe hit to the quality of education due to massive budget cuts.

Even if only 25 percent of incoming international students disenroll in the coming year, this will leave NYU a deficit of $73 million for tuition alone. For UC, the loss would be $435 million. These are conservative estimates that do not include the various other fees paid by students to universities or the income they bring to local economies.

Reflecting the mood of many in higher education, Karen Fischer wrote in *The Chronicle for Higher Education*, "Retaining foreign students is crucial. Not only do they compose a significant share of enrollments in science and engineering programs … but their tuition dollars have become an essential source of revenue for many colleges." The provost of the Illinois Institute of Technology stated succinctly, "International students are our biggest concern this fall."

Due to the delays caused by the closure of US consulates around the world, many students who have been accepted may be unable to travel to the US even if travel restrictions are lifted. Universities are scrambling to find alternatives that will allow them to retain income from these students. For example, NYU is considering plans to have international students "go local" by studying at its international branches close to or in applicants' country of origin. Other universities, such as Lehigh University in Pennsylvania, will allow students to take pre-approved courses at partnered institutions around the world.

More concerning for colleges is that this crisis is intersecting with other huge hits to revenues. According to *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, the budget deficits produced by the loss of sales and income tax revenues during the pandemic have already caused 48,086 higher education employee layoffs. These figures are growing by the hour. The City University of New York is expecting spending cuts of at least $95.3 million and began laying off staff in May.

While Chinese students have been targeted by the xenophobia of the Trump administration, other international students are not yet facing such explicit threats against their immigration status. However, this could change very quickly depending on the development of geopolitical tensions.

There are other obstacles that will become more difficult as a result of this crisis as well. One of the restrictions of the Optional Practical Training (OPT) period is that students qualifying for the extension must find employment within 90 days of receiving their work permit. Post-graduate employment was difficult to find before the outbreak, but the intensifying economic crisis means many students have lost or have been unable to find jobs and internships. For international students, these positions are their only means to stay in the US.

Another justification for the expulsion of international students is the claim that they take jobs away from natural-born US citizens. This zero-sum view of the employment market, as it always has been, is false. The motivation for such measures is actually the desire of the ruling class to cultivate divisions in the working class and amongst students, while also appealing to its narrow fascistic base. A report by the University of Maryland's Interindustry Forecasting Project points out that, "scaling back OPT would cause the unemployment rate to rise 0.15 percentage points by 2028." The report adds, "A total of 443,000 jobs would be lost in the economy by 2028, resulting in 255,000 fewer positions for native-born workers."

Over 223,000 international students used OPTs in 2018-19, a figure that is likely to decrease as many students have already decided to return to their home country in the midst of the pandemic. Nonetheless, with the current unemployment level of 14.8 percent in the US, and with the economic crisis set to deepen further, job prospects for international students will only continue to diminish. Many international students who only a few months ago were looking forward to starting new jobs or internships have had their positions canceled in light of the pandemic.

A graduating Indian international student at NYU, Vrinda, told the WSWS, "On March 9, I was offered a job for 24 months and I was expecting to start in August. The day before graduation, on May 19, the firm called me to tell me the position had been canceled. I think I will have to return home. I am trying to find another job, but everything is bleak. There just aren't many entry-level jobs in most industries because of the pandemic, so the chances are really slim. I've tried to reach out to the university for advice but so far they haven't emailed me back."

Another graduating Iranian international student at Borough of Manhattan Community College told the WSWS, "If I cannot find a job in a timely manner, my visa expires, and I have to go back to my country. This is my biggest concern right now. I don't want to go back because I came here to pursue my dreams."

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As the COVID-19 and economic crisis intensifies, international students will find themselves in an increasingly perilous situation.

The way forward for all students

Developments in communication and transportation technology in recent decades have made international education a tangible possibility for millions of students. The potential for an international approach to education and research, as well as the fruits this will bear for humanity, are clear for all to see. Nonetheless, insofar as the education system is subordinated to the profit drive of the capitalist class, access to these opportunities will become increasingly restricted to the wealthiest in society. This will be accompanied by an ever sharper decline in the level of academia as a whole.

The fight for a high-quality, free and all-inclusive higher education system cannot be divorced from a struggle against the capitalist system. The COVID-19 crisis has only made the necessity of this struggle more salient for millions of workers and students, which has been reflected in the increasing number of strikes by education workers and the mass participation of students in the wave of international protests sparked by the police murder of George Floyd. The urgent necessity is building a revolutionary socialist leadership in the working class, to inculcate the developing protest movement with a socialist program and perspective. International and American students who wish to take up this struggle should join the IYSSE today.

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