

# International Students in the United States

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**Abstract** This essay examines the experience of international students in American universities, providing basic data on their numbers and economic impact. Accompanying photographs document international students' participation in Globalfest, an annual event that celebrates their enrollment at Michigan State University.

**Keywords** International migration · Higher education · International students · Visual sociology

Anti-immigrant rhetoric has been strewn far and wide in the recent political season. In the spirit of defending immigrants (and visitors) and to acknowledge our nation's immigrant origins, this piece focuses on a group who both benefits from and contributes to US society: international students. The US is the world's number one destination for international college and university students, hosting nearly a million during the 2014–2015 school year (SY).

International students are willing to engage in the often difficult and costly endeavor of coming to the US to pursue higher education. To do so, they must master English, deal with a complex visa process, and contend with unfamiliar food and strange social practices. Yet they are willing because of the reputation of American universities. International students contributed more than \$30.5 billion to the US economy in SY 2014–15. Only a small minority are funded by host institutions.

During the SY 2014–2015, 72% of all international students received the majority of their funds from sources outside the United States: 64% from personal and family resources and another 8% from foreign governments or universities.

As they study at American colleges and universities, international students teach their classmates, professors and communities about their lives back home. These lessons are valuable politically, economically and culturally. They help Americans to learn about, communicate with and do business with other countries. Upon graduation or completing their semester abroad, some international students return home or travel elsewhere where they apply the skills and insights they acquired during their American stay.

However, not all international students depart upon graduation. Many take advantage of special visas that allow them to extend their stay. This choice results in their involvement in the US economy. The skills they have are quite beneficial. Since relatively few US-born students major in challenging but economically necessary STEM fields (science, technology, engineering and mathematics), international students play a central role in fulfilling America's insatiable demand for engineers, chemists, mathematicians, geologists, computer experts and other scientific and technical specialists. In fact, upon graduation, between 70 and 96% of foreign-born students earning a PhD stay on to work in the US for at least five years.

Research reported by the US Small Business Administration (SBA) reveals that foreign-born, US-educated graduates are more likely than either US-born, US-educated or foreign-born, foreign-educated graduates to engage in STEM entrepreneurship. Accordingly, planners representing both the US government and private industrial interests recommend increasing the retention of such educated immigrants to foster economic growth. Of course all of US immigration policy cannot be evaluated through this single example. However, it does demonstrate the benefits provided

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by one category closely related to migrant populations – international students – to the US.

The accompanying photos document Globalfest, an event which makes visible international students attending Michigan State, the nation's 8th largest university. During Globalfest, students representing several nationalities exhibit information and cultural artifacts about their countries while wearing national costumes. They also perform national songs and dances. In the mean time, the campus cafeteria serves up traditional foods and sells donated international souvenirs – articles of Japanese clothing, Turkish coffee pots, African masks, Pakistani metal work – to raise funds for the university's international programming.

The event's audience includes the international students themselves, the larger campus community, and local elementary school students. The latter receive keepsake notebooks (identified as passports) which include a number of fill-ins about language, geography and culture. These provide a basis for the children's interactions with members of the various nationality groups.

Large universities such as Michigan State typically include thousands of international students, faculty and visitors. Under routine circumstances, differences between international groups are minimized. Campus life is organized around academic majors, residential locations and leisure activities. Not so during Globalfest. Representatives of different nationalities answer questions about customs and invite attendees to try on traditional clothing, to attempt a national game, or to be quizzed about their knowledge of the country in question.

While the idea of Globalfest suggests that student participants have significant and ongoing connections with their country of origin, many of the national representatives have lived in the US for extended periods of time. Accordingly, they are not international students in the formal sense, but rather immigrant students or the children of immigrants. Many national representatives are much more familiar with the cultural practices and ways of life of their Midwestern classmates than they are those of their homelands.

Having presented a welcoming display of the university's national diversity, the festival comes to an end. Booths are disassembled and artifacts are put away. International students return costumes to the dormitory closet and attire themselves in jeans and hoodies indistinguishable from those worn by their native-born classmates. Done with the task of representing their homelands, they join their erstwhile audience in class work and research. Having acknowledged and celebrated its international character for a day, the university resumes a more restrained approach to dealing with national diversity for another year.

Globalfest is a fitting site for photographic documentation of immigrant students' experiences in that the central themes around which the event is organized are highly visual. Ethnic costumes, iconic objects, maps, displays of national typography, and performances of dance, sport, music and other activities are easily observed and readily photographed in a manner that is quite satisfying to organizers, presenters and attendees who come together to stage the event.

I hope that these images of students representing their countries of origin on a Midwestern campus offer an antidote of sorts to the pervasive and negative depictions of immigrants that we confront in political speech and media exposés. Even in a region of the US not associated with high rates of migration, international students are vital parts of American life. Not only do these students benefit from their education in the US, they also help Americans to become familiar with their own views, values and ways of life. Finally, because many such students remain in the US to establish careers, the skills that they acquire contribute to America's sustained growth in academic fields that US students avoid. Rather than being a threat to US society, the real challenge they pose for US policy makers is how to insure that more are willing to stay on and have access to the legal means to do so.



Afghanistan 2009



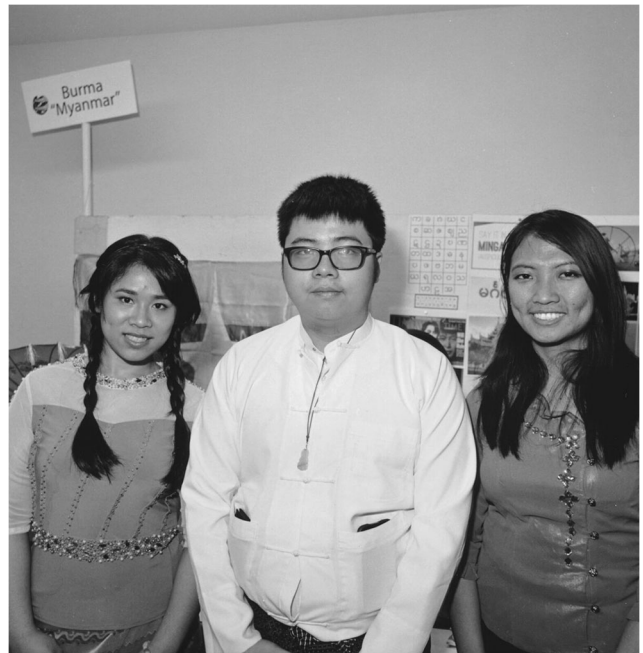
African Countries 2006



Brazil 2015



Bangladesh 2015



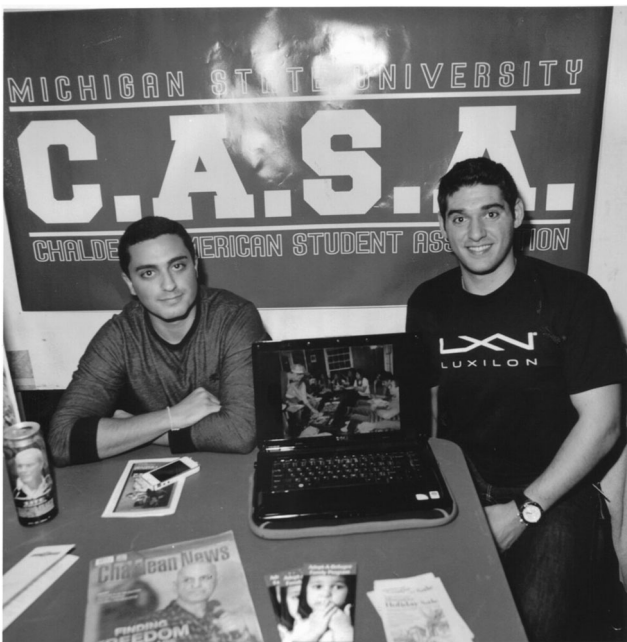
Burma 2014



Cameroun 2010



Dominican Republic 2014



Chaldean 2012



Jordan 2003



Kazakhstan 2012



Kyrgyzstan 2009



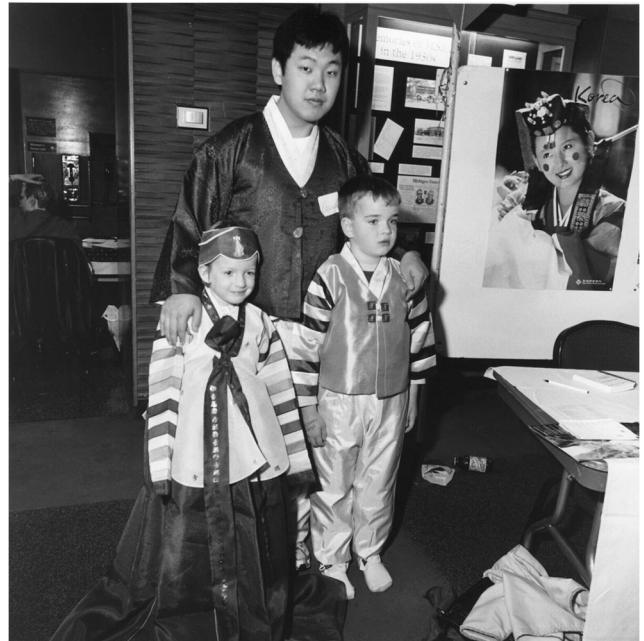
Kuwait 2010



Kyrgyzstan 2014



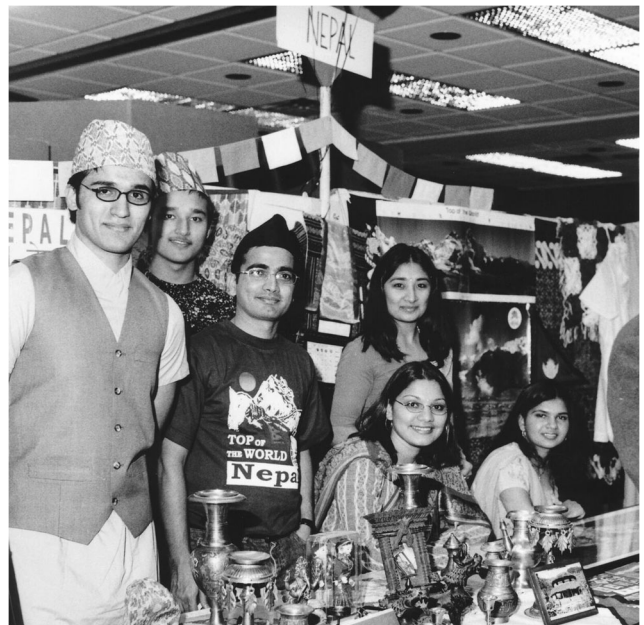
Libya 2012



Korea 2009



Malaysia 2013



Nepal 2009



Pakistan 2003



Somalia 2012



Saudi Arabia 2012



Sri Lanka 2012



Thailand 2012



Viet Nam 2012



Uzbekistan 2014

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