Chapter 5

The International Dimension of U.S. Higher Education: Trends and New Perspectives

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Introduction

Most people are not very mobile. And the vast majority of the roughly 40 million who are do so because they are forced to become refugees. Most people undertaking higher education also live and study only inside their own countries, and today of the 192 sovereign states who are members of the United Nations, in only twenty does the enrollment of international students exceed 1 percent. For the United States, that proportion is just under 4 percent and yet the United States is and has been the leading destination for international students and scholars for half a century.

At the turn of the twentieth century, the first pathways for students and scholars from other countries to enter the United States were created with the support of the U.S. government, and pioneering academic institutions and nonprofit organizations, including the Institute of International Education (IIE) that saw the benefit to progress in science, learning, diplomacy, and commerce.

Almost 100 years later, the dynamics of student and scholar mobility are still shifting. Along with new paths of academic mobility being carved out in international education come opportunities and challenges that the United States will need to address if global competitiveness and security remain equally important national goals. As international students and
scholars play a key role in the internationalization of U.S. higher education, so also do U.S. students who are increasingly pursuing their studies abroad. Mobility is a two-way street.

This chapter will focus on exploring higher education mobility from the U.S. perspective, with an analysis of the current picture of flows of students based on trend data from *Open Doors*, IIE’s longstanding annual publication on student and scholar mobility statistics, supported by the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs at the U.S. Department of State. We will also examine the key drivers of mobility into and out of the United States and highlight the impact of scholar mobility and exchange and its relation to internationalization efforts on U.S. campuses. Finally, we will address implications of mobility and its new forms, as these will no doubt play a vital role in the way higher education is delivered across borders and how they influence the mobility of students and scholars worldwide. Their movement around the globe and the innovations in research and teaching that result from their work are creating the twenty-first-century Silk Road, multidirectional and more diffuse, but with no less profound an impact on cultures, economies, and international relations.

### Student and Scholar Mobility
#### Trends across U.S. Borders

In terms of absolute numbers, growth in the international student population in the United States has increased almost constantly (figure 5.1). Although there were slight declines in the two years following September 11, the number rose by more than 80 percent over the past two decades to more than 671,000 students in 2008/2009, outpacing the 40 percent growth in overall total enrollment in the U.S. higher education subsector (Bhandari and Chow 2009). Compared to other leading host countries, the United States remains the top destination for international students, hosting approximately 21 percent of all international students worldwide, followed by the United Kingdom, France, Germany, Australia, China, Canada, and Japan (Atlas of Student Mobility 2009).

Although international students contribute substantially to the diversity of the student body at many U.S. institutions, on a national level they represented only 3.7 percent of total U.S. higher education enrollment in 2009. However, this aggregate figure fails to convey their uneven distribution across institutions—with roughly over half of all international students (54 percent) in the country located within only 150 U.S. institutions, mostly large research universities. Among these institutions, the proportion of the student body