

Declining international student enrollment amid coronavirus actually hurts American students

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The coronavirus crisis has caused widespread economic disruption and despair, but one of the virus's under-the-radar effects is a drastic drop in international enrollment at American colleges and universities. Some conservative tough-on-immigration hawks are lauding this development, but they've actually got it entirely backward.

The Center for Immigration Studies's Mark Krikorian remarked on this development, writing in a tweet that "more Americans are getting admitted off college waiting lists partly because fewer foreign students are coming. Faster, please." In doing so, the executive director of the prominent immigration restriction advocacy organization took a position that is widely shared in populist conservative circles: International students enter our university system to the detriment of young Americans. They "take a spot" away from a U.S. citizen.

But regardless of your general disposition on immigration, the facts simply don't support this narrative. In reality, international students usually pay sky-high tuition rates, effectively subsidizing their American peers, not crowding them out.

"International students pay 2 to 3 times as much for their education as American students do, which results in a substantial net subsidy for Americans pursuing higher education," Cato Institute Director of Immigration Studies [Alex Nowrasteh](#) told me. "In the same way that wealthy students paying near-full tuition helps subsidize poorer American students, foreign students paying even more to attend universities subsidizes all American students."

"Whatever problems there are with the foreign student programs, foreign students are subsidizing us — not the other way around," Nowrasteh concluded.

Ample research backs up these arguments.

For example, one [paper](#) from Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute economist Kevin Shih concluded that "overall, foreign students appear to increase domestic enrollment. This positive effect is linked to cross-subsidization, whereby high net tuition payments from foreign students help subsidize the cost of enrolling additional domestic students." On average, Shih showed that for every 10 international enrollees, eight additional domestic students are able to attend college as well.

This is just the data-driven, numerical argument. But there's also a personal argument to be made in favor of international enrollment in U.S. higher education. American students benefit from exposure to foreigners, new cultures, and new ideas. I sure did.

When I enrolled at the University of Massachusetts Amherst and befriended students from India and China, it expanded my worldview in a way that would've been unimaginable if I just had other white kids from Massachusetts as my classmates. (Oh, and it was also nice of them to subsidize my in-state tuition too.)

All in all, international students are a net positive for the United States. Even immigration skeptics should admit it — if their goal really is to put “America first.”