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## **International college students face barriers as semester nears**

Eric Stirgus

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By some estimates, more than 23,000 students from other parts of the world took classes at Georgia's colleges and universities last school year.

Experts are bracing for a major decline this school year.

The potential enrollment drop worries educators and others because international students, on average, pay more for their tuition, assist in more research and work as teaching assistants.

"It seems like student enrollment may be the lowest in years for U.S. universities," said David Bier, a policy analyst at the Cato Institute, a prominent, Libertarian public policy organization that supports efforts to help international students study here.

The decline nationally could be up to 100,000 international students — five times greater than the decline during the 2018-19 school year — according to a recent analysis by the National Foundation for American Policy, a policy group that focuses on immigration, trade and other issues.

The federal government's delay in opening the student entry visa application process, many airlines not providing flights to the United States, and communication gaps between schools and students are among the impediments to international students planning to study at Georgia schools when the semester starts next month, advocates say.

Another development that could further reduce enrollment occurred Friday when federal Immigration and Customs Enforcement officials announced they intend to bar international students from the country who plan to take all of their courses online if this is the first time they are taking courses in the U.S. The federal government previously wanted to ban any international students from the U.S. if they were taking all of their classes online. Critics of that plan included U.S. Rep. John Lewis, who wrote a letter to the department outlining his concerns a week before he died.

Many students overseas feel isolated and confused.

"There's a lot of uncertainty," said Saurabh Parimal Doodhwala, 25, who is in India and a semester away from completing his master's degree in operations research from Georgia Tech.

Doodhwala wants to return here, but is having trouble doing so. He's waiting on a lottery system process with the embassy there before he can come back to America. He's also unsure of his fall class schedule.

"We are not clear about what classes will look like," he added.

More than 1,000 Georgia Tech students signed a petition earlier this month demanding administrators expand financial aid and scholarship opportunities for international students, and share plans for how those students can learn remotely. Georgia Tech has more than 10,000 students listed as "out-of-country," more than any public university in the state. More than 800 people signed a Change.org petition urging Emory, the state's largest private university, to allow international students to enroll for classes early.

Georgia's largest universities said they did not have data detailing how many international students will take courses here this fall. Housing options are still being developed. For instance, Morehouse College says it plans to have housing for about 40 international and other students with critical needs.

Some universities here have suggested options to international students like deferring enrollment for a semester or the entire school year, or taking classes online. For many overseas students, there's a 12-hour time difference, which they say is not conducive to learning online. Schools have recommended students discuss arrangements with their instructors.

Doodhwala and other students say they're getting mixed messages and want the schools to communicate more clearly. Georgia Tech has held frequent online briefings to update international students about its plans for the fall semester and to answer questions. Emory, like Georgia Tech, has posted information on its website for those students. The universities have said some decisions concerning housing and other resources for international students have been delayed along the way as they waited for direction from the federal government.

"We care. We are listening. We are advocating on your behalf each and every day," Tina Rousselot de Saint Céran, Georgia Tech's director of International Student and Scholar Services, said during one recent hourlong online meeting with international students.

About 20,000 fewer international students took courses in the U.S. during the 2018-19 school year, according to a report last year by the U.S. State Department and the Institute of International Education. The largest percentage of those students come from China, India and South Korea. The Trump administration has taken a tougher stance on immigration, particularly from China, which some experts say explains the enrollment decline. The Chinese government heavily censors the Internet, said Bier of the Cato Institute, which may make online learning from U.S. colleges more difficult. The institute wants those students to be able to study here.

Most students returned to their homelands when the pandemic prompted Georgia's colleges and universities to end in-person instruction in early March. Some could not afford to pay for return flights or their countries closed their airports.

U.S. State Department officials suspended routine visa services in March but began a phased resumption on July 14. The department typically begins processing entry visas for international students in some categories in May, said officials at NAFSA: Association of International Educators. The association is hoping the State Department will fast-track student applications.

“There’s going to be a lot of pent-up demand (for visas),” said Rachel Banks, the association’s senior director for public policy and legislative strategy.

For many students unable to return home in March, the experience has been somewhat lonely, said the Rev. Irene Wong, executive director of Atlanta Ministry with International Students, an organization founded in 1978 to ease the adjustment of those students to America by connecting them with local residents.

The students who stayed, and those overseas, enjoy studying here. Muhammad Zia ul Haq is one of them. Zia ul Haq, 27, a physician from Pakistan, received a Fulbright scholarship to pursue a master’s degree in public health at Emory.

Through AMIS, he met a family who invited him over for Christmas. Zia ul Haq, who is Muslim, learned more about Christianity, and America, through that visit and other encounters.

Zia ul Haq is uncertain about his educational plans for the fall. His July 25 flight to Atlanta was recently canceled. He wants to return to Emory, but he said it’s hard to fly here now, and many flights are twice as expensive than before the pandemic spread. There’s a nine-hour time difference between Atlanta and Pakistan, so taking classes online would be a challenge.

“I would want to be in the community because I made some wonderful friends,” he said.