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Cover Story

Degree of Uncertainty: How anti-immigrant rhetoric may be hurting Oregon universities

International student enrollment at Oregon colleges is declining and some higher education leaders think anti-immigrant rhetoric and policies are at least partly to blame.

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Vinaya Bharam has had a dynamic relationship with the United States throughout her life.

Growing up in a suburban valley outside of Mumbai, India, where her parents work as farmers, Bharam's understanding of the United States took on almost archetypal quality: it was a progressive, developed country where she could access an unmatched education and opportunities.

But her views changed when she moved to an international school in Maastricht, Netherlands, for her last two years of high school. There, in conversation with peers from around the world, she learned that the "land of opportunity" was also plagued by social inequities and racism.



JACQUELINE HO

The number of foreign students attending Oregon colleges is declining, prompting concern from administrators and some students, including Lewis & Clark College's Vinaya Bharam, who believe anti-immigrant rhetoric from the Trump administration is partly to blame. We explain what it means for universities and the region's workforce.

She thought perhaps she didn't want to attend university in the U.S. after all. But when she was offered a scholarship to attend Lewis & Clark College, she decided to keep an open mind.

For her first year, things were better than expected. She felt welcomed and safe at Lewis & Clark and on what she saw as the more progressive West Coast.

"But then the 2016 election happened, and everything I had thought about the U.S. in the first place became a reality."

This year, throughout Oregon, there are fewer students like Bharam.

The number of international students enrolled at Oregon universities during the 2016-17 school year declined 8.2 percent from the previous year, according to the most recent report from the Institute of International Education. The year before, the decline was just 0.28 percent, after nine years of steady growth in international enrollment. And across the country, 45 percent of higher education institutions reported a drop in international enrollment – an average of 6.9 percent – in fall 2017.

Many worry that international enrollment will continue dropping.

The biggest decline at any one school during the current school year was at Oregon's largest higher education institution, Portland Community College, which has nearly 100 fewer full-time equivalent international students this year. International student enrollment at many of the local university-level English learning programs, including University of Oregon's American English Institute (down 70 from last fall and 750 from the previous fall) and the Academic English Studies program at Lewis and Clark (down 72 over two years, as of fall 2017), has declined significantly, in line with national trends. And early application numbers for the fall haven't suggested a coming rebound.

It's not just Oregon; international enrollment is falling across the country. In fact, Oregon has one of the smaller rates of decline – in the Southwestern states, IIE reports, international enrollment dropped 20 percent on average in 2017-18.

Fluctuations in international enrollment are not abnormal, and it's often hard to pinpoint a single reason for a decline, which can also be a result of political or other factors in foreign countries. But there are some who think that the Trump

administration, whether through its anti-immigrant rhetoric or lack of clarity on visa programs or stance on a host of other issues, has something to do with it.

“Obviously, we’ve been very concerned and pretty outspoken about the political climate and the travel bans and the messaging coming from the Trump administration,” Portland State University Provost Margaret Everett said. “I do think that has an impact, but it's hard to say just how much of what we’re seeing is coming from that.”

Higher education leaders in Oregon are watching the drop closely, because a decline in the number of international students has implications not only in the classroom, but also for university budgets and the state’s economy.

“Higher education is one of the biggest exports in the U.S., and we’re clearly seeing that we’re losing competitiveness,” Everett said. “We will see economic consequences.”

'Not just a nice thing'

During the 2016-17 school year, foreign students in Oregon spent \$471 million in the state, enough to support more than 5,000 jobs. Nationally, the financial contribution of international students hit nearly \$37 billion.

Far from simply paying tuition, international students also spend money on rent, groceries, clothes, cars and entertainment. And typically, these things are paid for with money coming in from outside of the country – to get a student visa, international students have to certify that they have independent funds sufficient to cover the cost of living and studying in the U.S. The student visa program almost never allows international students to work full-time or off campus.

In terms of tuition, too, these students pay more at state schools than Oregon residents. They, like other out-of-state students pay several thousand dollars more in tuition each year — at PSU, for example, non-resident tuition is \$26,130, compared to Oregon student tuition of \$8,784. This makes them significant contributors to university budgets that are already strapped as the state’s funding for higher education has declined.

Even at private schools, where all students technically see the same price tag, Lewis and Clark President Wim Wiewel said institutional scholarships and other aid

generally goes to domestic students.

PCC's head of International Student Services Allison Blizzard agreed that concern about foreign students taking services away from their U.S.-born counterparts is unwarranted.

"When people are worried about international students taking seats (in classrooms) or worried about foreigners, it can help if they take a step back and see that it's positive culturally and financially for the entire state, it's mutually beneficial."

In fact, international students help fill demand for skilled workers at area companies, many working on Optional Practical Training programs, which allow foreigners on student visas to stay an additional one to three years in the U.S. after graduation in their field of study. According to PSU, there are currently 77 former international students working at Intel Corp. as part of the OPT program.

When the first Trump Travel Ban was announced in January 2017, Intel CEO Brian Krzanich released a statement denouncing the ban and an internal note to employees highlighting the importance of immigrants to the company's success.

"As the grandson of immigrants and the CEO of a company that was co-founded by an immigrant, we believe that lawful immigration is critical to the future of our company and this nation," Krzanich wrote in the note to employees.

Other local companies, including Nike Inc., Adidas North America Inc. and Columbia Sportswear Co., also spoke out about the role immigrants play in their workforce.

"In a global company, most of us are used to working with people who may see the world a little differently than we do," Columbia CEO Tim Boyle said in a memo sent to employees. "In fact, one of the most enjoyable parts of working at a global company like Columbia Sportswear Company is that we get to work with individuals from over 100 countries who have unique perspectives, different religious beliefs and rich ethnic backgrounds."

And, of course, international students also bring diversity to college campuses. Bringing students from a wide variety of backgrounds together, educators say, gives them a broader understanding of the world and prepares them to interact with different cultures, languages and nationalities in the future.

"It's not just a nice thing," Wiewel said. "Knowing how to work with different kinds of people is a huge skill for whatever job you want to do. You don't have to work for an import/export company or the World Bank for an understanding of how different cultures relate to each other or how power dynamics work, or an awareness of systems of government, for that to be valuable."

For Lewis and Clark's Bharam, going to school with people of different nationalities has helped her recognize and unlearn stereotypes of other peoples, and inspired an interest in more deeply studying international affairs, which is now her major.

"When you only learn one side in school or from the media, you have stereotypes of other people, and those misconceptions can create hatred," Bharam, now a junior, said. "Having international students in an environment like this, you'll actually get to see people and interact with them, real people from other countries who can tell you, 'this is what we really think of the government,' or 'this is what we really like to eat,' anything. It's important that we actually learn from each other."

'A country like any other country'

When Donald Trump was elected president in Nov. 2016, Bhara's first thought was: "It's not the American dream anymore."

Though there's no way of drawing a direct link - changes in international enrollment can also be caused by political or currency valuation shifts in the foreign countries that send students to the U.S. - educators in Oregon and around the country suspect the new presidential administration may have something to do with fewer international students wanting to enroll in U.S. institutions. They cite Trump's anti-immigrant rhetoric and actions like the Travel Ban as likely deterrents for students who could also choose to study in countries like Canada or Australia.

The Travel Ban in its most recent iteration (Travel Ban 3.0) restricts entry to the U.S. from eight countries, six of which have majority Muslim populations. But the ban only bars non-immigrant student visas from North Korea and Syria, and subjects those from Somalia to additional scrutiny.

On Feb. 15, the Fourth Circuit Court of Appeals ruled the Travel Ban 3.0 unconstitutional, saying there is evidence of religious discrimination. However, that ruling will have no immediate effect because the Supreme Court is already set to

hear an appeal of a similar decision by the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals, likely in April.

Specific policy measures aside, 57 percent of respondents of the 2,000 colleges and universities the IIE surveyed across the country cited the “social and political environment” in the U.S. as a reason for declining international enrollment, a 41 percent increase from the previous year.

It’s a similar situation here at home: Wiewel visited India, Japan and Germany last year on international recruiting trips.

In India, he said, prospective students and parents asked about two recent incidents of racially fueled violence in Seattle and Kansas. They wondered whether their kids would be safe going to school in a country where hate crimes are on the rise for the second straight year, with an uptick in incidents motivated by bias against Jews, Muslims and LGBTQ people, among others, according to data from the FBI.

And in Germany, Wiewel was surprised to be greeted by a strong anti-American sentiment from students.

“I felt compelled at a certain point to tell them that Trump is not America and America is not Trump, it’s not like all of a sudden it has become this totally different place,” Wiewel said. “It doesn’t mean the world is coming to an end, but (the Trump administration’s rhetoric and policies) mean everyone has to work a little harder. I’m not at all despondent, but I do wish we had more hospitable policies.”

Other local educators have fielded questions about safety, too.

In that sense, Portland is in somewhat of a sweet spot – it’s relatively safe as U.S. cities go. But on campus, higher education leaders say that while students have expressed general concern for the futures or for friends and family, fears for personal, physical safety are rarely an issue.

However, Cheryl Ernst, who heads up Study Oregon, a local organization dedicated to promoting Oregon overseas as an education destination, and the University of Oregon’s American English Institute program, said that incidents like the stabbing on the MAX last May and repeated school shootings throughout the U.S. will understandably make the U.S. less appealing for foreign students.

"So long as families in particular don't feel like their children are going to be safe, they're going to send their kids to one of the up-and-coming countries," Ernst said.

Bharam said she's heard a similar sentiment from younger friends she knew back at her international high school, many of whom she said are now looking to Canada for their higher education.

"America is now just a country like any other country, it's not the dream of America being so great and everyone wanting to be there and study there, it's not the same anymore," Bharam said. "You could get that education in another country, and you might be safer."

Bharam and others also say that uncertainty over whether international students will be able to get H1-B visas or OPT extensions once their studies are complete may be causing them to think twice about coming to school in the U.S.

The H1-B visa is a non-immigrant work document that allows U.S. companies to employ foreign workers in fields that require technical or theoretical expertise. The OPT program allows foreigners on student visas to stay an additional one to three years in the U.S. after graduation, while still technically sponsored by their university, to work in their field of study.

Last April, Trump released the "Buy American and Hire American" executive order that suggests H1-B visas should be harder to get, and his administration has slowed down the process to obtain an H1-B visa by requesting more paperwork from applicants — in the first 10 months of 2017 the U.S. Citizen and Immigration Services department sent out 40 percent more requests for additional paperwork than in all of 2016, data from the department shows. And Newsweek reported last month that Trump is considering an additional proposal that would block H1-B visa extensions.

There are increasingly good alternatives for international students who decide attending university in the U.S. is not worth the effort.

Higher education has long been one of the United States' most significant exports, accounting for as much as 5 percent of total U.S. exports.

But that also means foreign countries have long been watching and studying the U.S. as a model for their own higher education systems. Countries like China and

Canada have for years sent educators to the U.S. to learn the education system and have now set up competitive programs in their own countries. China, Ernst said, may be more appealing for students in neighboring Asian countries than the U.S. and Canada may draw students from all over the world because it's easier to get a visa than from the U.S.

Nationally, 54 percent of educators cited competition from other countries as a reason for declining international enrollment.

"For a long time countries sent their students to the U.S. because they didn't have capacity, they didn't have quality institutions, but countries all over the world have realized that education is valuable for the economy and have begun to act on that," Study Oregon's Ernst said.

"What is it that we do that makes us special and unique?"

Some of the decline may also be the result of factors outside of American control, like political or currency valuation shifts in foreign countries that can affect the number of students who have the opportunity or can afford to come to the U.S. to study.

Ramping up recruiting

If international enrollment jumps back up next year, many of Oregon's higher education leaders said this year's dip won't really be problematic. However, Ernst and others said "the word on the street is that we'll continue to see a decrease for a variety of reasons."

"The complicating factor is that one could argue that the students who are here this year, they had been planning to come to the U.S. for a while, they had probably been planning to apply before Trump had been elected," Wiewel said. "So we worried about the fact that maybe these people were already on a path and it would take something really big to take them off this path. What will happen the next year? And of course, we don't know that."

As a result, a number of the state's colleges and universities are in the process of ramping up recruiting, as is the statewide Study Oregon organization.

PCC is frequently listed as one of the top 40 community colleges in the country for international student enrollment, but Blizzard said she thinks there is still room for improvement. Last year, PCC representatives traveled to Japan, Nigeria and Ghana to attend college fairs; in April, they will visit Costa Rica and Honduras.

For PCC, a large focus of these trips is educating prospective students, as well as workers in local consular offices, about the role of community colleges. For international students, community college can fill much the same role as it does for domestic students by providing educational opportunities for students who might not meet the higher acceptance standards of other colleges or universities, or who need a more affordable alternative to a traditional four-year university.

Wiewel said Lewis and Clark is also in the process of increasing its presence at foreign college fairs, to grow its reach to students who don't find the college through one of the international scholarship programs it partners with.

Personal outreach through the recruitment process, he said, is an important part of mitigating false impressions foreign students may have of the U.S., though he still plans to sell, more than anything, the benefits of attending Lewis and Clark.

"I think the emphasis will still be on the fact that we have great academic programs, with a strong international focus, in a safe and beautiful and welcoming environment," Wiewel said. "It's not like we're going to lead with 'we are not the White House' or 'Washington DC is a long way from Portland.'"

And on campuses throughout Portland, students are also doing some of the work.

Bharam leads the Lewis and Clark international student government, which aims to provide entertaining and educational opportunities that bring international and domestic students together in conversation.

Members of the ISG are also asked each year to reach out to prospective international students to answer their questions about what life on campus is really like for non-Americans, a process Bharam said has become especially important in the last two years.

"A lot of people aren't sure if they want to come here, they have specific questions that they'd rather ask of students," Bharam said. "We are really honest with them. I still tell them that if there is something they want to study here, they should come

because it's still very safe, and it's still a huge opportunity. I can say that I am still glad to be here."

Clare Duffy

Staff Reporter

Portland Business Journal

