

The Power of Educational Exchanges in Strengthening U.S.-LAC Relations

By Romina Bandura and Mirka Martel

Introduction

U.S. foreign policy has long aimed to foster stable and secure relationships across the Western Hemisphere. Built on a foundation of close collaboration, the ties between the United States and Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) are rooted not only in shared history, language, and familial connections, but also in educational exchanges, that is, **programs** that foster the movement of students among educational institutions abroad.

For decades, educational exchanges have served as a cornerstone of U.S. diplomacy, building human capital and promoting goodwill, cross-cultural understanding, and enduring international relationships. Through educational exchanges, the United States has cultivated generations of global leaders and trained numerous professionals, strengthening its influence through shared knowledge and trust. In recent years, more than **80,000 students** from LAC pursued studies in the United States (2023-24 academic year), and more than **30,000** U.S. students studied in LAC (2022-23 academic year), bringing home critical workforce skills, social connections, and a greater understanding of the region.

In an era of strategic competition, prioritizing U.S.-LAC educational exchanges should remain a key foreign policy tool that yields long-term benefits for the entire hemisphere. Building on the findings of CSIS and the Institute of International Education (IIE) case studies, this policy brief highlights the value of educational exchanges, examines current trends in student mobility and the barriers students face, and offers strategies to revitalize and expand these exchanges in today's evolving landscape.¹

1 For case studies, see Julie Baer, Juliana Rubio, and Eitan Casaverde, "A Partnership for Progress: Expanding U.S.-Brazil Student Exchange," CSIS, *CSIS Briefs*, April 4, 2025, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/partnership-progress-expanding-us-brazil-student-exchange>; Juliana Rubio, Julie Baer, and Eitan Casaverde, "Educational Exchange as a Strategic Priority in U.S.-Mexico Relations," CSIS, *Commentary*, May 29, 2025, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/educational-exchange-strategic-priority-us-mexico-relations>; and Julie Baer, Ju-

At a time of global competition for talent and influence, educational exchange remains a powerful and indispensable instrument of diplomacy, which can strengthen partnerships and economic competitiveness as well as deepen the ties that continue to unite the hemisphere.

The Role of Educational Exchanges in U.S.-Latin American Relations

For many years, academic mobility between the United States and LAC has delivered significant economic, political, and diplomatic benefits for both sides. Educational exchanges advance **U.S. policy** in the region—namely by strengthening economic ties, improving human capital, and countering Chinese influence—laying the groundwork for more stable, resilient, and cooperative relationships. Additionally, these programs have played a vital role in shaping positive public opinion toward the United States across LAC, fostering mutual understanding, soft-power influence, and long-term goodwill.

DELIVERING ECONOMIC BENEFITS

Studying in the United States opens doors for students to immerse themselves in the U.S. way of life and develop workforce skills. At the same time, international students deliver concrete economic benefits to college communities and to the overall economy of the United States. During the 2023-2024 school year, 1.1 million international students pursued higher education in the United States, contributing nearly **\$44 billion to the U.S. economy** and supporting more than 378,000 jobs. Beyond the private benefits they provide to higher education institutions, international students benefit the **local economy**, including the housing market, the food and beverage industry, and local retail. Specifically, students from LAC contributed over **\$4.4 billion to the U.S. economy** in 2024.

This economic benefit has been noted by numerous policymakers, such as former World Bank official and current Dean of the School of Global Policy and Strategy at UC San Diego Caroline Freund, who **noted** in a recent op-ed that “attracting international students is perhaps the only U.S. foreign policy tool that on net expands domestic innovation and the U.S. economy while costing nothing to American taxpayers.” Furthermore, **researchers** have demonstrated that international students do not take seats away from U.S. students; instead, as **international students often pay full tuition**, they likely subsidize the education of many U.S. students.

Notably, the economics of educational exchange also benefit countries across LAC where U.S. students choose to study. In 2024, the U.S. Department of Commerce estimated that U.S. students contributed **\$3 billion** to the region through tuition, housing, travel, dining, and other related services.

ADVANCING HUMAN CAPITAL AND ENTREPRENEURSHIP

Beyond the dollars and cents in spending power, educational exchanges also contribute to the development of human capital and innovation, which are essential components to drive economic growth. U.S. colleges and universities provide students with technical knowledge and critical skills while equipping them with practical experience to enhance their employability. After graduation, some international students choose to work in the United States, **filling critical** skill gaps across industries and making meaningful contributions to the U.S. economy. Most students, however, go back to their home countries, where they play a vital role in advancing the local workforce. Their experience likely

Iliana Rubio, and Jessie Hu, “The Importance of Educational Exchange with the Dominican Republic,” CSIS, *Commentary*, August 18, 2025, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/importance-educational-exchange-dominican-republic>.

contributes to potential future business connections and may also help foster goodwill and positively shape public perception of the United States across the region.

Moreover, many international students start their own companies, leveraging the business acumen and technical skills—such as in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM)—they acquire in the United States as well as the networks they build along the way. For example, a **2016 report** found that 21 of the 87 “**unicorns**”—startups valued at \$1 billion or more—in the United States included a founder who was an international student. This entrepreneurial spirit is also evident in international students who create startups in their home countries. An analysis of **Brazilian startups** found that a majority of companies receiving seed capital in 2021 and 2022 included a founder who had studied in the United States and was now working to build Brazil’s growing startup ecosystem.

Educational exchanges can also play a crucial role in supporting nearshoring and the development of regional value chains that benefit countries across LAC and the United States. Programs that provide training in green skills, digital services, and remote work are aligning workforce capabilities with the demands of modern industries. In the **Northern Triangle**—El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras—collaborations between educational institutions and industries are fostering workforce readiness. For example, a **partnership** between the Honduran Universidad Tecnológica Centroamericana (UNITEC) and North Carolina State University’s Wilson College of Textiles aims to develop training programs tailored to the textile industry’s needs. Institutions have also worked together to benefit technical priority areas of growth, such as Arizona State University’s **collaboration** with Mexican institutions to deliver professional development seminars and an online course in microelectronics and nanoelectronics, directly supporting North America’s semiconductor supply chain. Such initiatives ensure that graduates possess the specific skills demanded by employers, facilitating smoother transitions into the workforce. By aligning education with industry needs and fostering collaborations across sectors, these programs can integrate the region into global supply networks.

U.S. students studying and training abroad also benefit from these exchange programs, including from the knowledge and skills they acquire and foreign culture exposure. Beyond the technical skills and language training gained, studying abroad also equips U.S. students with **soft skills** that are equally important for entering the labor market and preparing them for leadership positions. These capabilities include teamwork, problem solving, communication, leadership, and time management. **Research confirms** that international mobility is one of the most effective ways to cultivate these skills: Employers consistently view students with study abroad experience as more adaptable, better prepared for international assignments, and stronger in intercultural communication, independence, and stress management.

COUNTERING CHINESE INFLUENCE

As it stands, current U.S. foreign policy toward Latin America is being shaped increasingly by **great power competition** with China. Both powers are **competing for economic influence** in the region, leveraging educational exchanges as a strategic tool. However, the region has evolved significantly since the first exchange programs were introduced. It is now more educated, economically developed, and technologically advanced, and is increasingly driven by the goals of sustained economic growth and human development.

However, each great power takes a different approach to educational exchanges. The United States' **appeal** is its high standard of education, equitable recruitment, and civic-focused curriculum. These programs help dismantle global stereotypes about the United States by giving international students a deeper, firsthand **understanding** of U.S. culture and values, while exposing them to the dynamics of a pluralistic society. U.S. values often emphasize individualism, freedom of expression, and civic participation—reflected in the diversity and openness of exchange programs.

In contrast, China's **approach** to global education support is to “spend big, with little attention to national context or need, with preference to elites, and with little to no transparency or accountability,” per a previous CSIS report. Chinese values tend to prioritize collectivism, social harmony, and respect for authority. While this approach has been highlighted in certain cases **across LAC** in the backsliding of democracy, it has also offered up thousands of educational opportunities focused on subjects that benefit the state and society at large.

This difference can shape participants' experiences and perspectives, highlighting the unique qualities of each culture. Although the United States remains the preferred destination for LAC students, China has been stepping up efforts to attract international students. Some of the strategies include guaranteeing spots for **students** in Chinese higher education institutions and offering generous scholarships and **stipends** for member countries of the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC).² In addition, China has opened over **40 Confucius Institutes** at universities across LAC since 2006.

SHAPING PUBLIC OPINION TOWARD THE UNITED STATES AND LAC

Educational exchange programs can also play a vital role in shaping positive public opinion toward the United States across LAC. Numerous studies have shown that **educational and cultural exchanges** can significantly improve perceptions of the United States, especially among alumni who go on to become leaders in their home countries. Likewise, U.S. students who study in LAC countries gain valuable regional insight, language skills, and cultural competence, all of which contribute to more informed foreign policy perspectives and stronger interpersonal connections. These experiences not only enrich individual participants but also help cultivate a generation of U.S. citizens with a deeper appreciation for the shared interests and values between the regions.

In a region where **perceptions** of the United States are sometimes unfavorable, these programs serve as a valuable tool for shaping public sentiment. Since 1999, the State Department has carried out more than **100 evaluations** of exchange programs to assess whether programs met intended goals and to gather information about long-term impacts for communities in the United States and abroad. Beyond economic and foreign policy impacts, these **evaluations** indicate that exchange students foster more favorable views of the economic, governmental, and political structure of the United States. **Exchange programs** expose both U.S. and international students to each other's cultural values, languages, and national histories. When international students return home, their experiences can help dispel cultural misconceptions and stereotypes. Moreover, a study from the **American Economic Association**

² CELAC member countries include all the countries members of the Organization of American States including Cuba but not including the United States and Canada. See “Latin American and Caribbean regional organisations,” Australian Government Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, <https://www.dfat.gov.au/international-relations/regional-architecture/latin-american-regional-organisations#community>.

found that students from nondemocratic states who are educated in democratic countries can foster democracy once they return to their countries.

BUILDING LONG-TERM DIPLOMATIC RELATIONSHIPS

Educational exchanges also create an **environment** where students can network and connect with one another, building long-lasting relationships. This group of business, civil society, and political professionals and future leaders can help improve diplomatic relationships and create trade and investment ties between countries. For the United States, strong global networks of allies can offer valuable support both in times of peace and during crises or war.

In the political realm, an estimated **300 world leaders** as of 2012 had been educated in the United States, showcasing the enduring ties to international education. In LAC, this educational link to leadership has been invaluable, with at least 5 of the last 10 presidents in both **Mexico** and **Colombia** having studied in the United States. Some examples of prominent Latin American leaders and experts who studied or participated in an exchange programs in the United States include **Luis Abinader** (Dominican Republic), **Felipe Calderón** (Mexico), **René Favaloro** (Argentina), **Pedro Pablo Kuczynsky** (Peru), **Mauricio Macri** (Argentina), **Sebastián Piñera** (Chile), and **Juan Manuel Santos** (Colombia).

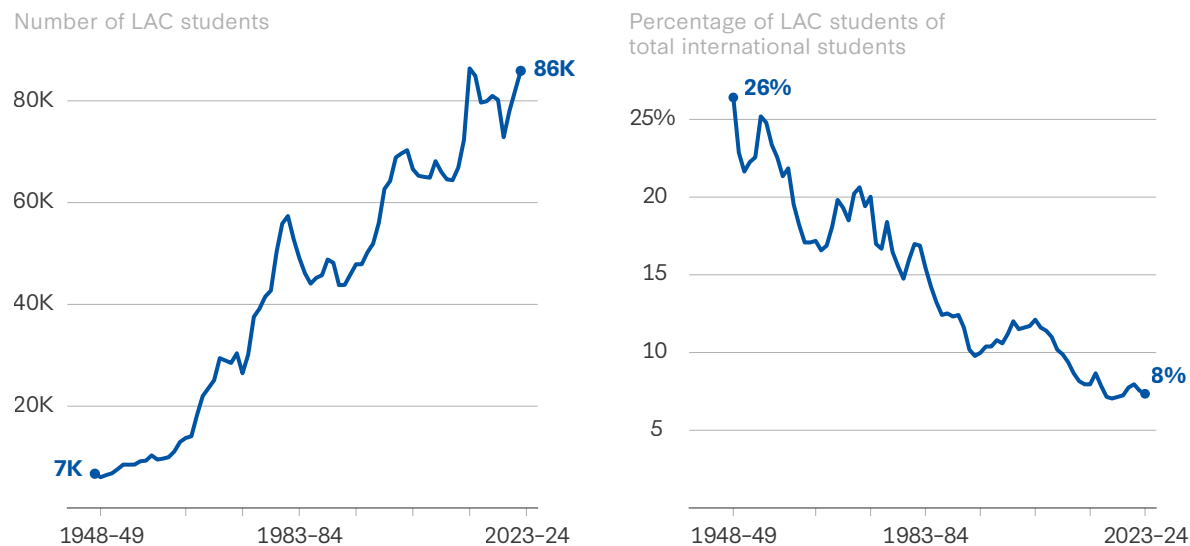
Educational Exchanges: Analysis of Historical Trends

To understand how to strategically plan for continuing student mobility that is mutually beneficial to the United States and LAC, it is important to understand the history and current state of educational exchanges. This section analyzes trends in LAC students pursuing higher education in the United States, as well as trends among Americans students undertaking studies in the LAC region.

LAC STUDENTS IN THE UNITED STATES

International mobility of students and scholars to the United States has been well documented since the first edition of the ***Open Doors Report on International Educational Exchange*** was published in 1949 (see Figure 1). In 1949, 6,726 international students from Latin America pursued studies in the United States, representing 26 percent of all international students. By 2024, the United States hosted 85,891 international students from Latin America, a 13-fold increase. While the number of students has increased significantly over the past 75 years, students from LAC only comprised 8 percent of the total international student population in 2023-2024, which is down significantly from when the *Open Doors Report* was first published (approximately 26 percent). This indicates that there may be opportunities to expand mobility in the future through sustained institutional engagement.

Figure 1: Number and Percentage of Latin American Students Studying at Higher Education Institutions in the United States, 1948–1949 to 2023–2024



Note: K=1,000.

Source: Open Doors, “All Places of Origin,” Institute of International Education, <https://opendoorsdata.org/data/international-students/all-places-of-origin/>.

In examining the history of international student exchange from the region and *Open Doors* data, the number of international students from LAC has had an upward trajectory, with notable periods of growth and stabilization. During the late 1970s and in the 1990s and 2010s, significant increases took place primarily coinciding with periods of economic growth and scholarship programs specifically targeted at the higher education sector. For example, **Fundacion Gran Mariscal de Ayacucho** led to significant growth in the number of international students from Venezuela in the late 1970s, as the foundation worked to send roughly **15,000 Venezuelan students** to the United States to gain technical and graduate-level education in areas the government deemed critical, such as agriculture, education, and engineering. Moreover, in the 2010s, several large-scale governmental initiatives led to increased mobility from countries throughout the region, such as the Brazilian government’s **Brazil Scientific Mobility Program** (BSMP), the Mexican government’s **Proyecto 100,000**, and the U.S.-led **100,000 Strong in the Americas** (see Box 1).

Conversely, periods of **economic recession and currency devaluation** in the region (e.g., in the 1980s and 2000s), the ending of large scholarship programs in the late 2010s, and the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020–2022, all contributed to the periods of decline (see Figure 1). Despite these fluctuations, the number of students from the region has nearly reached an all-time high as of 2023–2024, showcasing both the enduring interest in the United States and the U.S. higher education sector’s commitment to attracting more students from the region.

BOX 1

Scholarship Initiatives

Brazil Scientific Mobility Program: Between 2011 and 2016, **BSMP** funded over 25,000 Brazilian students for one-year exchange and intensive English programs in the United States, particularly in STEM fields. BSMP significantly boosted enrollment in STEM, even after the program concluded.

Proyecto 100,000: There was a notable increase in the number of Mexican students enrolled at higher education institutions in the United States in the mid-2010s, driven by the **Proyecto 100,000** initiative and the 100,000 Strong in the Americas program—with a particularly strong uptick in students studying intensive English.

Ministry of Higher Education, Science and Technology Scholarships: There has been steady growth in the number of students from the Dominican Republic studying abroad in the United States, with two periods of strong growth in the late 1960s and the late 2000s. Recently, several initiatives, such as scholarships from the Ministry of Higher Education, Science and Technology, caused the number of Dominican students studying in the United States to double between 2005–2006 and 2012–2013.

100,000 Strong in the Americas: In order to expand institutional partnerships, collaboration, and mobility opportunities for the Western Hemisphere, the **100,000 Strong in the Americas** program led by the U.S. Department of State has strengthened higher education partnerships and short-term training and exchange opportunities between U.S. and LAC institutions and encouraged student exchanges in key fields such as health and nutrition, engineering, mining innovation, data analytics, AI, and urban sustainability. Notably, this program leverages public-private funding from both the U.S. Department of State as well as corporations and foundations that support student exchange throughout the region.

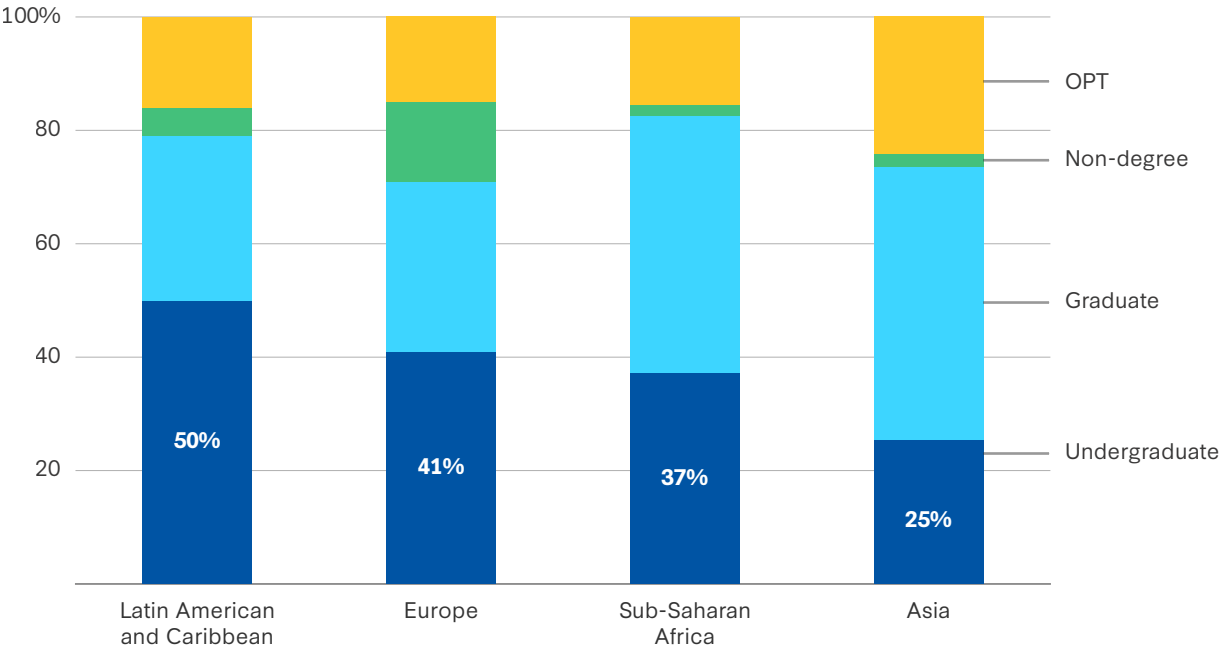
Source: Rubio, Baer, and Casaverde, “Educational Exchange as a Strategic Priority in U.S.-Mexico Relations”; Baer, Rubio, and Casaverde, “A Partnership for Progress: Expanding U.S.-Brazil Student Exchange”; and Baer, Rubio, and Hu, “The Importance of Educational Exchange with the Dominican Republic.”

Currently, there are students from **all 47 countries and areas in the region** pursuing higher education in the United States. The countries that send the most students include Brazil, Mexico, Colombia, Peru, and Venezuela, comprising 60 percent of all foreign students from the region. **Brazil, Mexico, and Colombia** were the three origins of the most students from LAC to the United States, sending 16,877, 15,474, and 10,120 international students in 2023–2024, respectively, and all three countries are among the top 25 countries worldwide for international students sent to the United States.

Most Latin American students choose to study at colleges and universities in states that border Mexico or in states with **large diaspora populations** that can offer familial and cultural connections. Through multiple “**great migration**” waves, many Latinos arrived to the United States in search of better economic opportunities, establishing these communities with strong roots. As a result of this history, the **top states** where LAC students study include (in order) Florida, Texas, and New York.

In terms of academic levels, half of Latin American exchange students pursue undergraduate degrees, a much larger percentage than students from other regions (see Figure 2). The large number of LAC students in undergraduate studies provides opportunities to host these students at the start of their academic journey and for these students to potentially return for graduate studies, which currently account for 29 percent of studies by LAC exchange students in the United States.

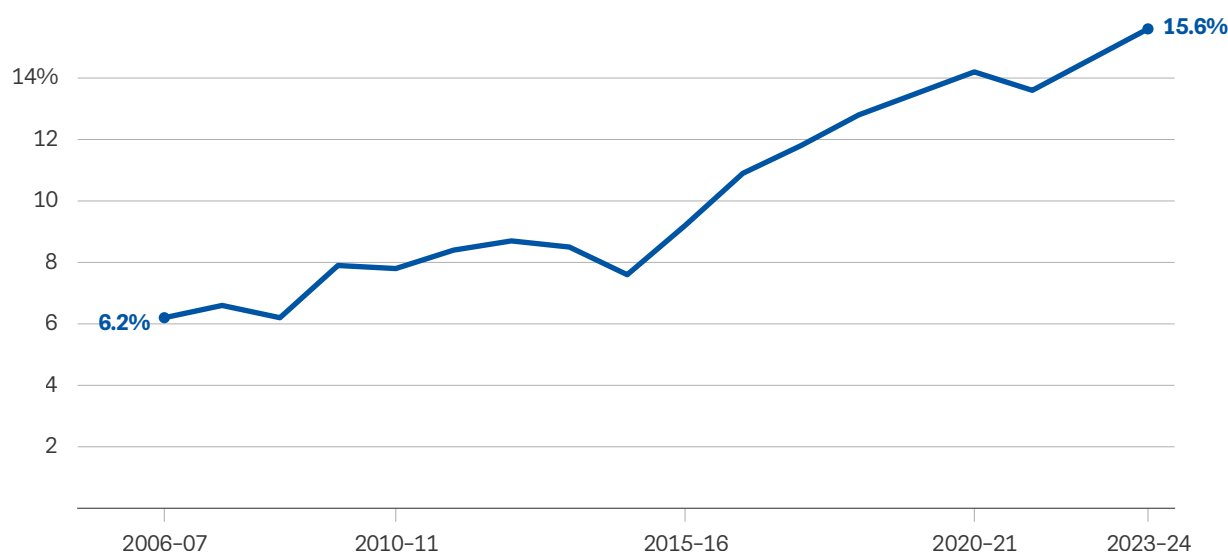
Figure 2: Proportions of International Students by Academic Level Studying at Higher Education Institutions in the United States, By Region of Origin, 2023-2024



Source: Open Doors, “Academic Level and Places of Origin,” Institute of International Education, <https://opendoorsdata.org/data/international-students/academic-level-and-places-of-origin/>.

Among the important trends by academic level has been the growth in the number of LAC students pursuing optional practical training (OPT), or short-term work opportunities, to gain hands-on experience in their field of study after graduation (see Figure 3). On OPT, international students at the undergraduate or graduate level can remain in the United States for 12 to 36 months, depending on their field of study. In 2023-2024, for example, close to **16 percent of all LAC students** in the United States pursued OPT, compared to 6 percent nearly 20 years ago in 2006-2007. This growth shows the sustained interest among LAC students to gain practical work experiences in the United States. However, there is room for continued expansion, as this figure remains below the national average of **22 percent** of international students participating in OPT experiences.

Figure 3: Percentage of International Students from Latin America Pursuing OPT in the United States, 2006–2007 to 2023–2024



Source: Open Doors, “Academic Level and Places of Origin,” Institute of International Education, <https://opendoorsdata.org/data/international-students/academic-level-and-places-of-origin/>.

International students from LAC pursue a wide array of academic fields in the United States, including business and management, engineering, and physical and life sciences. Over the past several years, there has been an increased focus on international students studying in fields that are mutually beneficial for workforce development in both countries. In Brazil and other countries throughout the region, joint projects under initiatives like 100,000 Strong in the Americas connect universities in fields such as engineering, data analytics, and mining innovation. Another example from the Dominican Republic showcases how partnerships have also expanded into advanced fields, including a collaboration between Western Michigan University and Universidad Iberoamericana to launch the country’s first doctoral program, as well as a **memorandum of understanding** (MOU) between Purdue University and the Dominican government to build academic exchanges in microchips and microelectronics.

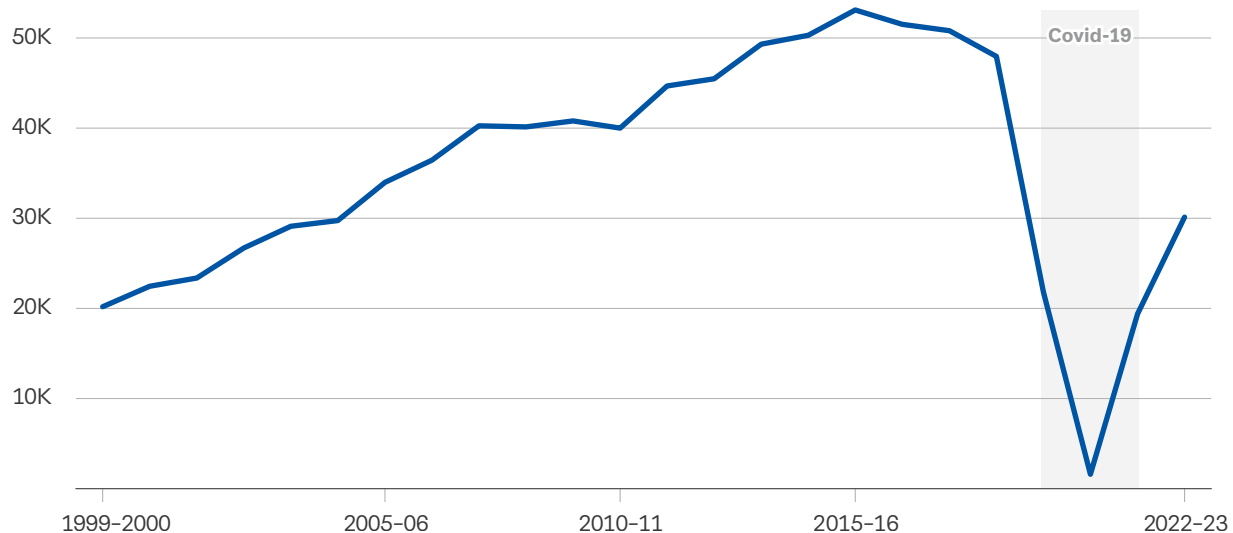
U.S. STUDENTS STUDYING IN LAC

When analyzing trends in educational exchange, it is also important to examine the number of U.S. students studying abroad in LAC. Based on data from *Open Doors and Project Atlas*, there were 63,713 U.S. students studying in LAC on three types of experiences: (1) study abroad for academic credit from their U.S. colleges and universities, (2) non-credit study abroad from U.S. colleges and universities, and (3) direct enrollment in higher education institutions in LAC.

In the 2022–2023 academic year, 280,716 U.S. students studied abroad for academic credit from their U.S. colleges or universities, with LAC remaining a popular destination, accounting for **30,126 students**, or 11 percent of all U.S. students studying abroad (see Figure 4). Throughout the 2000s and most of the 2010s, the number of U.S. students studying abroad in LAC steadily increased, reflecting a growing enthusiasm for global learning and cross-cultural exploration in the region. Similar to global trends, the numbers fell during the Covid-19 pandemic but have since strongly rebounded. Within the

region, Costa Rica is the leading destination, hosting 6,558 U.S. students. In addition, Mexico, Ecuador, and Argentina are among the top 25 destinations for U.S. students studying abroad.

Figure 4: U.S. Students Studying Abroad in Latin America, Academic Years 1999–2000 to 2022–2023



Note: K=1,000.

Source: Open Doors, “All Destinations,” Institute of International Education, <https://opendoorsdata.org/data/us-study-abroad/all-destinations/>.

Moreover, to gain experience and language skills, U.S. students also go abroad on non-credit opportunities, such as pursuing non-credit work, internships, or volunteer experiences. These experiences provide students with valuable skills to bolster **career readiness** and to enable beneficial work and research connections. LAC is the most popular region for U.S. students pursuing **non-credit study abroad**, representing 23 percent in 2022–2023. Mexico ranked as the fourth most popular destination globally for U.S. students seeking non-credit experiences, and the Dominican Republic was the twelfth, with 1,278 and 596 students, respectively.

Finally, *Project Atlas* partners in Argentina, Chile, and Mexico reported that another **27,790 U.S. students** were pursuing full degrees in the region in 2024. A vast majority—over 25,000—of these U.S. students are directly enrolled in **Mexican colleges or universities**, which is likely due to strong familial ties, dual and joint degree programs, and Mexican institutions’ participation in the U.S. Federal Student Loan Program.

Barriers to Educational Exchanges

Despite the well-documented benefits of educational exchanges and the United States’ continued position among the leading destinations for Latin American students, the ties between the United States and the region have **weakened over time**. This shift underscores the urgent need to address the growing barriers that students from Latin America face in accessing international education, as well as the potential obstacles U.S. students face in studying abroad in LAC. While some obstacles are shared globally, many are shaped by the region’s specific economic and structural realities.

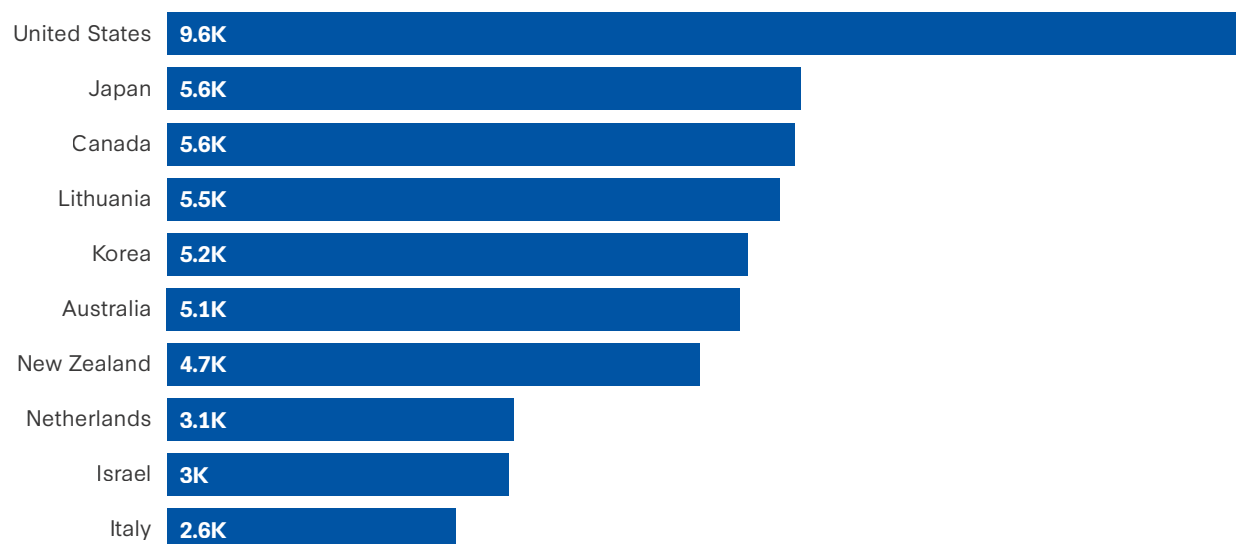
Among the most pressing challenges for students are the high costs of education, restrictive visa policies, increased competition from other countries, weak accreditation, and language barriers. Without meaningful efforts to lower these barriers, the promise of educational exchange risks becoming out of reach for many students.

HIGH FINANCIAL COSTS

One of the strongest barriers is the high price of tuition and living expenses associated with U.S. higher education; the United States has become one of the most expensive countries in which to study (see Figure 5). In comparison to domestic higher education options, enrolling in U.S. colleges and universities carries significant costs. This is a deterrent for many young people from economically disadvantaged families who do not have the financial means to afford the tuition along with the costs of travel, housing, and associated expenses of living abroad.

Figure 5: Average Tuition Rate by Country, 2023

Average cost of annual tuition for bachelor's programs in 2023 USD



Note: K=1,000.

Source: "Average Cost of College By Country," Education Data Initiative, last updated January 21, 2021, <https://educationdata.org/average-cost-of-college-by-country>.

Economies in Latin America have grown, and so have their **middle classes**, but international study can still seem like an option for only the chosen few, particularly families of wealthy backgrounds who can afford a hefty price tag for their education.

There are, however, options available for international students to obtain scholarships. The **Florida Institute of Technology**, the **George Washington University**, the **University of Nevada, Las Vegas**, and others offer merit scholarships to students regardless of citizenship, and the **Florida-Caribbean Institute** at Florida International University provides out-of-state tuition waivers to citizens of the Caribbean who are studying at any Florida university. While these and other similar scholarships are available, students and their families may not be aware of all the options available to them, which keeps that barrier in place for students with greater financial need. There have been great strides made toward providing **better access to higher education opportunities** for LAC students with domestically

funded subsidies and economic support, but this is only a partial fix and has not—and often cannot—be made available to all who need it.

Then there is the question of the rate of return on education, or whether studying in the United States is of the best value for families and individuals. While U.S. colleges and universities are known for providing quality education and prestige, regional education has evolved. Higher education institutions in Latin America have been growing in number and improving their degree and research offerings. They also have cheaper tuition rates than their U.S. counterparts. Therefore, they are becoming attractive alternatives for LAC students.

The high costs of education in the United States also serve as a barrier to U.S. students pursuing study abroad during their degree programs, as many short-term study abroad programs incur additional costs on top of tuition costs. A [recent study](#) found that 80 percent of students cited financial barriers as the primary reason that would prevent them from studying abroad.

CUMBERSOME ENTRY REQUIREMENTS

Beyond financial considerations, barriers to entry to the United States are considerable, including the significant time that applicants need to spend filling out forms and visa applications, translating degrees and college transcripts, and fulfilling the added academic and security requirements. These conditions can be difficult to navigate and overwhelming for students who may be pursuing overseas study as first-generation students in their families.

In a recent survey of administrators at U.S. colleges and universities, respondents cited [visa concerns](#) as one of the primary reasons for a decline in new international student enrollment. With increased regulations, limitations on U.S. student visa appointments, and additional security checks, the visa process can prove to be difficult and lengthy, leading many students to abandon their dream. Recent political debates in the United States over migration and border security may further deter students in the future, with [temporary pauses](#) in visa processing and heightened scrutiny at consulates contributing to uncertainty and discouraging prospective applicants from choosing the United States.

For U.S. students studying abroad, a key step in entering another country is obtaining a U.S. passport. Only approximately [half of the U.S. population](#) has a passport, and some college students may not even consider studying abroad in the region due to not having this documentation. While passport drives and special initiatives, such as IIE's American Passport Project, aim to cover the costs and demystify the process for the students, gaining this documentation remains an initial barrier.

LIMITED ACCREDITATION AND CAREERS PROSPECTS

While the United States offers abundant opportunities across a wide variety of institutions and fields of study, prospective students from LAC must carefully assess how a U.S. degree fits into their long-term professional goals. A key concern is the accreditation and recognition of foreign degrees. Many international students who earn degrees in the United States may have [broader career opportunities](#) in their home countries due to the prestige of holding a degree from a U.S. higher education institution. However, in countries such as Peru, there are restrictions on which U.S. institutions are recognized and how [credentials are evaluated](#) upon return.

Moreover, although U.S. colleges and universities are known for their quality and innovation, not all degrees or courses are easily transferable. Certain fields such as law and accounting are tied closely to local legal and regulatory systems, limiting their applicability across borders. When degree recognition is uncertain, students may choose regional or domestic options to reduce the risk and cost.

The experiences of students from Brazil, Mexico, and the Dominican Republic highlighted in the case studies noted above showcase that technical and workforce-oriented fields are generally less affected by these credentialing challenges and are often more highly valued by employers. Degrees in engineering, applied sciences, and technical training tend to translate more directly into job opportunities, both in home countries and in the United States. In these fields, partnerships between U.S. and regional universities have created pathways where credits transfer more easily, training aligns with employer needs, and graduates gain practical skills that carry weight across borders. This makes technical education a key avenue for students to ensure their international experience delivers a strong professional return.

Students considering study in the United States and LAC are increasingly weighing not only academic requirements and credentials, but also the career prospects available to them upon returning home. As academic fields continue to evolve, students increasingly seek assurance that their degrees will hold value in their home countries. In professions like education and health sciences, labor market conditions—such as wages, benefits, and opportunities for advancement—play a critical role in determining the return on investment. In some cases, the long-term benefits of studying abroad may not justify the financial and professional risks involved. However, there are short-term study abroad opportunities offered to students. Regional governments, for example, have programs in place to send **local teachers** abroad to bolster their language and pedagogical skills. Additionally, partnerships between U.S. and LAC higher education institutions—often via faculty exchanges, research or internship programs, and group study abroad—allow for mutual exchange and for students to earn dual or joint degrees. Short-term programming or joint institution partnerships may be seen as a more accessible option compared to the potential risks of full-time study in the United States.

LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY LIMITATIONS

Another important barrier for academic mobility in both directions is language proficiency. In LAC, the predominant languages are Spanish and Portuguese. U.S. students looking to study abroad may not find a wide array of programs in English, as might be the case in other popular study abroad destinations.

Likewise, academic study in the United States is conducted in English, and students from LAC may not have the **English credentials**. Poor levels of **English and foreign language learning** in primary and secondary schools can create barriers, as students do not develop the language skills necessary to move beyond their own countries or cultures, leaving opportunities unrealized.

There are larger opportunities for intraregional exchange, as Mexico and other countries have been growing their university hubs for **Spanish-speaking higher education opportunities**. Educational exchange in Spanish and Portuguese is also possible with programs specifically in Spain and Portugal, respectively.

There are, of course, also possibilities to focus on English-language acquisition, and intensive English programs are one such pathway for students to enroll in intensive English study, especially in

preparation for longer-term degree programs. Yet these are big investments in terms of the financial resources and time required to learn the language. Countries that have strong English-language programs also offer opportunities for English-language testing, ensuring that students are well prepared for their studies and can excel in their courses.

INCREASED COMPETITION FROM OTHER GEOGRAPHIES

Finally, competition for globally mobile talent has expanded in the last two decades and continues to grow. As a result, students have more choices than ever to pursue their studies and weigh the economic, political, and social costs and benefits of each destination. The four major hosts of international students—the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, and Australia—aim to increase their inbound student totals, as they recognize the economic and political benefits of hosting more international students (Figure 6).

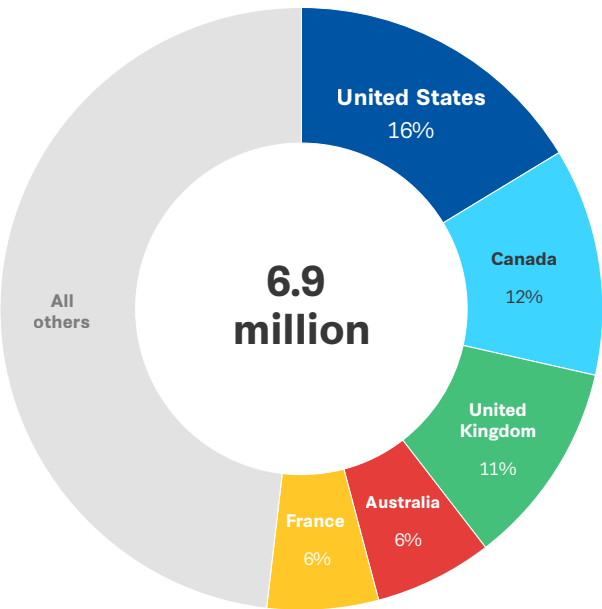
Beyond the United States, many other countries boast opportunities for post-study work, which can be attractive for students who want to remain abroad and pursue global careers. There are also opportunities for greater financial benefits in the chance to work abroad, contributing to their families in their home countries.

More broadly, in the European Union, the [Erasmus](#) program allows for international educational exchange between higher education institutions, so students can study at other colleges and universities on the continent. While mainly focused on European students, students from outside

EU countries are eligible for certain aspects of the program, including several countries from LAC. In France, a new [Choose France for Science](#) program, launched by Agence nationale de la recherche, aims to bring international researchers into the country in priority fields such as health, sustainability studies, agriculture, and digital technologies. This program will offer co-funding from the French government for universities, schools, and research entities that support incoming international researchers.

In China, the [Belt and Road Initiative](#) also has a keen eye on academic and research mobility, investing in education initiatives in over 150 countries and organizations, 22 of which are in [LAC](#). The aim is to bolster educational efforts in participating countries, foster educational exchange between LAC and China as well as spreading friendly [narratives](#) and views about China throughout the region. The emphasis on [scholarship opportunities](#) is especially attractive to

Figure 6: Top Destination for International Students, 2024



Source: Project Atlas, “A Quick Look at Global Mobility Trends,” Institute of International Education, https://www.iie.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/Project-Atlas_Infographic_2024-1.pdf.

economically disadvantaged students, for whom studying in the United States may otherwise be financially out of reach.

Finally, LAC has also grown as an increasingly more attractive destination for international students. According to *Project Atlas*, there were more than 191,000 international students pursuing a **full degree abroad** in LAC in 2024. Argentina was the top host country, with 117,820 international students. Moreover, the vast majority of international students studying in Argentina, Mexico, and Chile are from the region (67 percent), showing the significant growth in intraregional mobility.

Policy Recommendations: Strengthening Educational Exchanges

Educational exchanges have long been a powerful instrument for fostering goodwill, mutual understanding, and long-term partnerships. However, the United States now faces growing competition for global talent from other regions that are investing heavily in international education and offering attractive alternatives. At the same time, a shifting political climate marked by a more inward-looking posture and reduced investment in foreign assistance has weakened the country's traditional leadership in this space. In this new landscape, maintaining strong educational ties with LAC is not only a strategic advantage but a necessary step to remain competitive and globally engaged.

The following section outlines concrete recommendations for how the United States can build stronger, more resilient educational partnerships in a shifting political landscape, ensuring that international exchange remains a vital pillar of diplomacy and mutual growth. In an era of constrained funding, both the United States and countries in LAC must pursue more innovative and economically sustainable strategies to strengthen educational exchanges. This changing context calls for creative approaches that leverage public-private partnerships, regional collaboration, and institutional linkages.

- 1. Increase institutional partnerships.** One of the clearest ways to sustain this leadership is through bilateral initiatives that benefit both sides.
 - **University Partnerships:** University partnerships—such as the Arizona State University collaboration with Mexican institutions on semiconductor training, Western Michigan University's doctoral program launched with Universidad Iberoamericana in the Dominican Republic, or joint projects between the United States and Brazil in engineering and health sciences—demonstrate how exchanges can be tailored to national priorities while expanding access for students. In addition, working through existing higher education associations in the United States (e.g., NAFSA: Association of International Educators, the Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities, and the Conference of the Americas on International Education) to partner with existing higher education associations in the region (e.g., Colombia Challenge Your Knowledge) could result in more institutional partnerships. Furthermore, the continuation of resources, such as **EducationUSA**, the **Study State Consortia**, and the **Western Hemisphere Higher Education Institutions Partnership Board**, are critical to assisting institutions in developing partnerships.
 - **Faculty Exchanges and Joint Research:** These types of academic exchange also play a central role in strengthening academic ecosystems, creating durable networks that extend beyond student mobility and translate into innovation, knowledge transfer, and shared problem solving. Institutions can promote research-based partnership opportunities by

facilitating exchanges, particularly among doctoral candidates, postdoctoral researchers, and faculty members. These exchanges should focus on collaborative research, academic development, and long-term institutional ties that enhance knowledge sharing and capacity building across borders.

2. Leverage regional wealth and capacity. As most countries in LAC are classified as upper-middle income or high income by the World Bank, they have the potential to help co-fund exchange programs. These countries need to engage in a more dynamic co-investment approach to educational exchanges and promote their country brand, to offer students more learning opportunities abroad.

- **Government Scholarships:** National governments, such as Brazil through BSMP, have successfully funded large-scale exchange programs. **Becas Chile** is a government-funded scholarship program in Chile that finances master's and PhD degrees in all areas of knowledge. Similar public investment models should be encouraged across the region.
- **Soft Loan Programs:** Governments—both in the region and in the United States—could offer low-interest educational loans to students pursuing study and training abroad, expanding access to education without relying solely on grants. For example, the **Rowe Fund program** of the Organization of American States provides loans of up to \$15,000 per year interest-free, for two years, to students pursuing undergraduate or graduate degrees in the United States. Colombia has the **COLFUTURO** program, a collaborative project between leading corporations in Colombia and Colombia's Ministry of Science, Technology, and Innovation, which finances master's degree programs, PhD degrees, or a specialization in the area of health studies. The program finances full-time residential programs abroad with a duration ranging between 9 and 24 months through a loan of up to \$50,000, 80 percent of which may become a grant. Another example is Chile's **Crédito CORFO**, which provides lines of credit obtained through banks to cover expenses for graduate study abroad. **GuateFuturo** in Guatemala and **HonduFuturo** in Honduras offer scholarships and soft loans to students pursuing higher education abroad.
- **Private Sector Engagement:** Many LAC countries are home to thriving multinational corporations, high-net worth individuals, and philanthropic institutions. Similar to **initiatives** in the United States, these actors can be incentivized to invest in talent development through sponsorships, fellowships, and public-private partnerships. Some examples include the Amalia Fortabat Foundation in Argentina and the Carlos Slim Foundation and Televisa Foundation in Mexico. Moreover, models such as **100k Strong in the Americas** have leveraged the \$9.5 million in State Department public diplomacy funding to bring an additional \$25 million in funds from regional public, private, and academic sectors from 2013 to 2025.³ These 100K Strong exchanges and programs provide skills in STEM, AI, food sciences, agriculture, financial systems, health, and other sectors to prepare students to be workforce ready.

³ Information provided to the authors directly by the U.S. State Department.

- **Regional and Country Promotion:** LAC countries could also do a better job at promoting the region as an attractive destination for study. [EducationUSA](#) promotes studying in the United States and provide information about different options. Similarly, across the region, universities and program designers could promote their academic and cultural offerings to position these countries as an affordable study abroad destination. There are already dedicated platforms, such as [Study in Costa Rica](#) and [Learn Chile](#), that advertise the benefits of studying in these countries.
3. **Expand more affordable offerings.** Given the high costs associated with studying in the United States, more flexible and affordable pathways to higher education could be further developed.
- **Semester Exchanges:** Instead of requiring relocating abroad for the duration of the program, students could increasingly participate in one-semester exchanges to experience a U.S. education without the financial burden of two to four years of tuition.
 - **Joint Degree Programs:** U.S. institutions can collaborate with LAC universities to offer dual or joint degrees, combining the strengths of both systems and thus reducing costs. Some examples include the dual degree between the [McCourt School of Public Policy](#) at Georgetown University and the Escola de Administração de Empresas de São Paulo of the Fundação Getúlio Vargas (EAESP-FGV) that combines Georgetown's Master in Policy Management with EASP-FGV's Professional Masters in Management and Public Policy. At the same time, U.S. universities can open campuses in LAC countries to offer a U.S.-style and U.S.-accredited education at a much lower cost. As an example of this model, [Texas Tech](#) has a campus in Costa Rica offering degree programs, executive education programs, and applied research in areas of local interest.
 - **Short-Term Programs:** Intensive programs, summer courses, and certificate programs can deliver targeted skills while being more accessible and cost-effective for both international students coming from LAC and U.S. students studying abroad. For example, data has shown an increasing trend of U.S. students pursuing [short-term and summer experiences](#) and [faculty-led](#) study abroad experiences.
 - **Financial Aid:** Scholarships, tuition waivers, and financial aid from universities and philanthropies in the region and the United States can be another tool used to increase exchange. For example, U.S. universities can offer in-state tuition to students from a particular country, such as in the partnership between [Kansas State and Paraguay](#). For outbound U.S. students studying abroad, institutions can work to provide information on opportunities for scholarships and financial aid or establish scholarship opportunities specifically for study in the region, such as the [University of Alabama](#) or the [University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill's](#) scholarship to study or research in Latin America.
 - **Online Learning:** For specific topics or courses, higher education institutions can also combine classroom learning with online platforms to reduce costs and provide more flexibility to students and educators. These Collaborative Online International Learning programs exists between the United States and other regions, such as the program between the [City University of New York](#) and universities in the Middle East.

4. **Improve credential recognition and curriculum alignment.** Streamlining the validation and mutual recognition of academic credentials will remove bureaucratic hurdles and allow students to move more seamlessly between institutions and countries. Joint curriculum development and credit transfers should be prioritized. Guatemala's [GuateFuturo Foundation](#) helps fund students' graduate study in the United States to earn their degree before returning to Guatemala, where they receive even more financial support should they seek employment in government or outside the capital city. This has the benefit of ensuring these credentials are recognized when students return home. Honduras and other countries in the region have also created a program following the same model, both of which benefit the students, the United States, and the home countries through these mutual partnerships. Developing agreements on transfers between colleges, like the ones mentioned, would also improve the chances of increasing these types of exchanges.
5. **Support work-based learning opportunities.** There is a growing misalignment between students' chosen majors and current workforce demands and universities and other higher education institutions play a critical role in guiding students toward academic programs that better align with employment opportunities. Moreover, as nearshoring becomes a strategic economic priority, education offerings must align with industry needs.
 - **University-Industry Partnerships:** Companies relocating to or expanding within Latin America should be encouraged to partner with universities and technical training centers to offer apprenticeships, internships, and on-the-job training. As mentioned, the [partnership](#) between UNITEC in Honduras and North Carolina State University' is an example of universities partnering to provide training and skills for youth pursuing careers in the textile industry. Another example is [Cisco Networking Academy](#), a global IT skills and career-building program. Cisco partnered with over 11,700 educational institutions, nongovernmental organizations, and community organizations across 190 countries to provide free, high-quality digital training in areas such as networking, cybersecurity, programming, and data analytics. In addition, Arizona State University has signed MOUs with [Costa Rica](#) and [Panama](#) to collaborate on semiconductor workforce initiatives.
 - **Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET):** Partnerships between U.S. companies and TVET programs in the region can also be pathway to ensure a skilled labor force ready to meet the demands of emerging industries, including manufacturing, logistics, and digital services.
 - **Work Experience:** Work experience acquired via internships or OPT is a valuable avenue for students or recent graduates to gain hands-on experience, contribute to the U.S. economy, and build lasting professional ties. The continuation of OPT and encouraging highly qualified individuals from LAC to pursue these opportunities would be mutually beneficial—to the United States and the origin country. [Internship opportunities](#) are also ways to foster global exchange and can help individuals gain valuable skills to be better prepared for careers in their respective fields.
6. **Address language barriers for long-term competitiveness.** In an age of globalization, mastering multiple languages is an important tool to unlock global work opportunities. For Latin American students to thrive in U.S. institutions (and international work environments),

English-language education must start early, in elementary school. As part of strengthening international engagement and ensuring global readiness, English proficiency should also be established as a high school graduation requirement, equipping graduates with the language skills necessary to participate effectively in cross-border academic and professional environments. Intensive English programs (IEPs) are also an opportunity for international students to bolster their English skills through both short- and long-term programs, and there is already a strong representation of students from LAC **studying at IEPs** in the United States. Institutions in the LAC region could also expand their options by offering programs that are conducted in English. This would benefit those U.S. students who do not possess strong command of Spanish or Portuguese language but that may be interested in studying in LAC.

Conclusion

Educational exchange programs are powerful tools for fostering long-term relationships between individuals and institutions across the Western Hemisphere. These exchanges contribute to regional stability and prosperity by promoting mutual understanding, trust, and collaboration. By educating and training future industry, sectoral, and political leaders, these programs cultivate a new generation of professionals equipped to address shared challenges. In addition, programs encourage cross-border innovation, academic collaboration, and entrepreneurship while promoting democratic values.

Given the deep historical, cultural, and economic ties between the United States and LAC, expanding educational exchanges reinforces the strategic importance of this region as a key diplomatic and business partner. In an era of strategic competition, investing in these programs remains one of the most effective ways to sustain long-term regional cooperation and influence. ■

***Romina Bandura** is a senior fellow with the Project on Prosperity and Development at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) in Washington, D.C. **Mirka Martel** is head of research, evaluation and learning at the Institute of International Education (IIE).*

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