



Highlights of [GAO-09-379](#), a report to the Chairman, Subcommittee on International Organizations, Human Rights, and Oversight, Committee on Foreign Affairs, House of Representatives

## Why GAO Did This Study

Following September 11, 2001, the number of international students coming to the United States dropped for the first time in over 30 years. While enrollments have rebounded, the U.S. image has declined in the Muslim world and elsewhere. To improve global attitudes toward America, the U.S. government funds higher education for international students to facilitate exchanges, promote understanding among peoples in different countries, and build capacity in developing nations.

To provide insight on how higher education is used to advance public diplomacy and development assistance goals, we examined (1) the objectives the United States and selected peer governments seek to advance through higher education for international students and the approaches they employ to attract international students, and (2) the characteristics of major U.S. and peer government programs that fund higher education for international students to support public diplomacy and development goals. GAO collected information from the United States, Australia, China, the European Commission, Germany, and the United Kingdom.

## What GAO Recommends

This report does not contain recommendations. Technical comments from officials representing the programs discussed in this report were incorporated as appropriate.

[View GAO-09-379](#) or [key components](#). For more information, contact George Scott at (202) 512-7215 or [ScottG@gao.gov](mailto:ScottG@gao.gov).

## HIGHER EDUCATION

### Approaches to Attract and Fund International Students in the United States and Abroad

#### What GAO Found

The United States and peer governments we reviewed use higher education for international students to advance diplomatic, development assistance, economic, and other objectives, often concurrently. For example, German officials said that international students studying in science and technology help advance German research and innovation goals while also advancing public diplomacy goals by returning to their home countries as unofficial ambassadors for Germany. Germany as well as other governments we reviewed use a number of approaches to reach and attract overseas students, including marketing their higher education to the international community much as a business would promote a product. For example, many countries promote their higher education systems through national branding, using logos and slogans, such as Australia's "Study in Australia" and the United Kingdom's "Education UK" marketing campaigns. Several countries have also taken steps to improve the quality of the study abroad experience. China, for example, has invested significant resources to modernize its schools and added additional academic programs that are aligned with workforce needs.

The scholarship programs we reviewed that support public diplomacy and development assistance goals typically select recipients using merit-based criteria, offer graduate-level study, and cover the cost of tuition and other expenses, such as travel and living expenses. However, programs vary widely in the countries and regions they target, funding levels, and number of scholarships awarded. For example, scholarships for public diplomacy programs tended to be dispersed to a wider area to maximize their geographic reach. In contrast, development assistance programs tend to be more targeted to particular developing countries and regions. In administering and implementing these programs, government officials cited several strategies they believe facilitate program implementation and contribute to successful program outcomes. For example, some told us that offering preparatory courses or program orientation to all scholarship recipients enhances the students' chance of success at the host university, and is particularly useful for students who require additional language, cultural, or academic skills. For development assistance programs, some countries align the course of study paid for by their programs with the human resource and capacity-building needs of the sending country. For example, in Australia, officials work with sending governments to identify the most acute development needs and consider these with the applicant's proposed field of study when awarding scholarships.