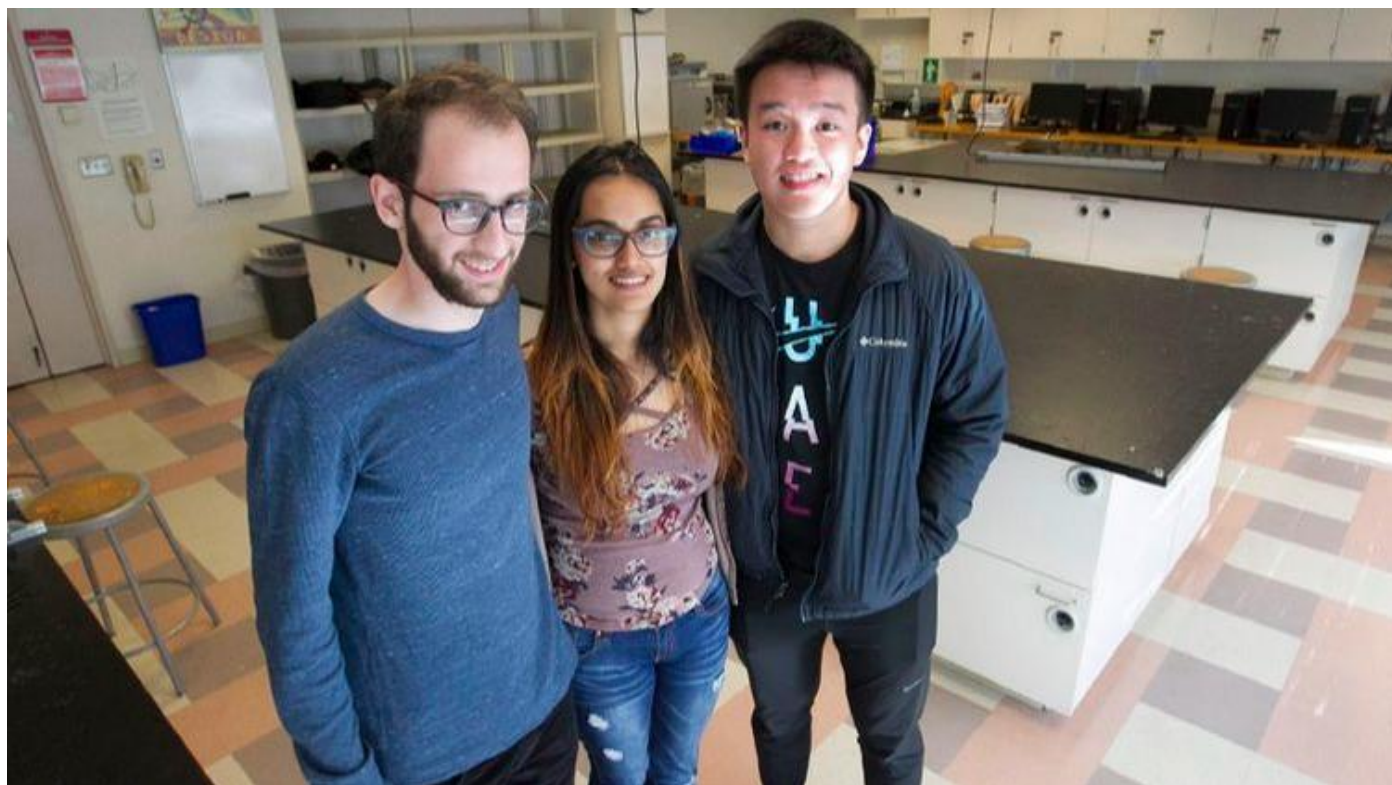


Huge surge in foreign students helping UC San Diego diversify and pay its bills



UC San Diego has added nearly 7,200 foreign students in the past decade. Engineering has attracted (left to right) such students as Mohammad Qubbaj of Jordan, Reem Mohanty of Qatar, and Kevin Monsanto of Indonesia. , (John Gibbins/Union-Tribune)

By **Gary Robbins**

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Yuan Gao was quick to say yes when a message arrived from UC San Diego offering him admission to a campus 7,000 miles from his home in southeast China.

“It has a supercomputer,” said Gao, a freshman who studies data science. “Not many schools have that. It’ll help me become what I want to be.”

Gao arrived in La Jolla last year as part of a huge, historic reshaping of the student body, one that favors the global over the parochial.

In the past decade, the number of international students has soared by almost 7,200 and now accounts for almost 25 percent of the school’s enrollment. The figure was 6 percent in 2008.

Reeling from reduced state funding, UC San Diego decided to heavily recruit international students, primarily because they pay at least twice as much as California residents in tuition and fees.

The university says the money helps subsidize the cost of educating Californians, bolsters research and eases the need for tuition increases. The influx of foreign students also broadens everyone's cultural experience.

UC San Diego also has added more California residents. But their overall share of the student body has dropped by 20 percent in 10 years.

School officials estimate that this fall, for the first time, the campus will collect more money from undergraduates who come from outside California than from the Golden State. The projected bounty: \$275 million.

Much of the revenue comes from the United States' chief economic and political rival — China. It sent the campus roughly 5,300 students last fall, close to the same number that was drawn from greater San Diego.

The majority of the students study engineering, science or mathematics, contributing to UC San Diego's rise as a mecca for STEM programs.

The same enrollment strategy is being used throughout the University of California system, which used to receive 25 percent of its revenue from the state. The figure is now 6 percent.

But the change is particularly noticeable at UC San Diego.

The school now has a total of 8,792 international students, more than any other UC campus. The university also shot on to the list of the 10 American universities with the most foreign students.

"UC San Diego has turbo-charged its international recruiting," said Walter Hutchens, a professor of global business at the University of Redlands.

"Some might view this as a diminution of what is essentially American — a changing of the California ethos. I do not. This is globalization, especially as it involves China.

"California is famous for being forward-looking. We're on the Pacific Rim. Students need to be prepared to deal with the world economy."

And the strategy makes financial sense, said Gaurav Khanna, an economics professor at UC San Diego's School of Global Policy and Strategy.

The tuition and fees "basically allow universities to recoup lost appropriations, preventing the need to cut expenditures on things like research and faculty," Khanna said.

The strategy has critics, notably the California State Auditor, who issued a [harsh critique](#) of the practice in 2016.

Auditor Elaine Howle said UC campuses pursued high-paying out-of-state and international students to the exclusion of California residents. She also said that the UC system relaxed admission standards for non-residents, making it harder for Californians to compete.

And Howle claimed in her audit that the UC system “could have taken additional steps to generate savings and revenue internally to mitigate the impact of its admissions and financial decisions on residents.”

The UC challenged the audit, saying Howle’s figures were wrong. But the university system later placed caps on non-resident undergraduates.

It hasn’t slowed UC San Diego’s growth.

The campus added 319 international students in September, and it could do the same this fall. The school has received more than 23,000 applications from foreigners who want to enroll as freshmen or transfers.

Out-of-state and international students who enroll as undergraduates will pay \$53,682 for tuition, fees, housing, food and related expenses. California residents will pay an estimated \$24,690, the campus says.

UC San Diego did not make admissions and enrollment officials available for interviews about the reshaping of the student body. But it’s long been obvious that the campus could mine Asia for enrollment.

Roughly one-third of the nearly 1.1 million foreigners enrolled in U.S. colleges are from China. The number has grown as China’s middle class has expanded, putting a pricey American education within reach of many.

“There’s an assumption among Chinese parents that they should send their children abroad for an education because there are so many great schools in the U.S.,” said Terry Crawford, co-founder of InitialView, a Beijing company that helps students seek college admissions.

“They know that UCSD is part of the UC system and is well-regarded in areas like the life sciences. They might not know much about UCSD’s name. But they know where it stands in the academic rankings. Many identify a school by its ranking number.”

Gao pored over the rankings last year from his home in Nanchang, a city of 5 million in southeastern China.

“Berkeley, UCLA, San Diego — I read about them all,” said Gao, 18. “I thought San Diego has what I wanted.”

Gao also turned his attention to the U.S. because he wasn’t sure he could get a spot in one of China’s top universities. The country has far fewer elite schools than the U.S., and getting into one requires passing the Gaokao, a mandatory entrance exam that’s famously difficult.

A student’s performance on the Gakoa determines which school they’ll get into, and greatly influences what they will be able to study.

Many Chinese students forego the Gaokao and follow the “international track,” preparing for entrance into schools in the United States, Canada, Great Britain and Australia.

Schools in the UC system hold special appeal.

“Other countries don’t fund their research facilities as well as they do here,” said Reem Mohanty, an engineering student from Doha, Qatar, who is in her senior year at UC San Diego.

“Here, people believe in project-based learning and experiencing things in the real world whereas in other countries its more theoretical.”

One of her classmates, Kevin Monsanto, a senior from Jakarta, Indonesia, has a similar outlook.

“My family works in the automotive industry and they wanted me to come here because, basically, everything comes from the United States,” Monsanto said.

“The work ethic here is so different from my culture. My mom wants me to understand how I can implement that back home.”

Gaining entrance to an American university can be relatively pain-free, even at a school as competitive as UC San Diego.

Dealing with culture shock can be an entirely different matter.

“I’ve been studying English since childhood, but I didn’t know American slang,” said Yulia Wilson, a graduate student in public policy from Kharkiv, Ukraine. “It was hard, overwhelming. But I got over it.

“UCSD really helps international students to integrate with the campus, to assimilate.”

There are unknowns for many of the U.S. schools as well, including future relations with China, given the current political tensions.

In 2017, the University of Illinois bought an insurance policy that would partially cover the loss of tuition if Chinese students were restricted from the U.S. due to some type of geopolitical event.

InsideHigherEd.com said the event could involve anything from visa restrictions to a major trade war.

Crawford hopes that the student pipeline between places like China and UC San Diego remains wide open.

“We attract the best and brightest of China’s students,” Crawford said. “They get a great education here and go back home and use it.”

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