Since its founding in 1919, the Institute of International Education (IIE) has collected and disseminated information on international student exchange in the United States. Colleges, universities, higher education associations, governments and researchers throughout the world eagerly await the annual November release of IIE’s Open Doors® Report on International Educational Exchange, which the organization first created in 1955. The report has been supported by the U.S. Department of State’s Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs since 1972.

“Open Doors is designed to provide comprehensive information on international students and scholars in the United States, as well as American students studying abroad for academic credit,” says Julie Baer, Research Specialist with IIE. “We collect this data to benefit the international education field as a whole. Through the Open Doors publication, we endeavor to provide not only statistics, but also context and highlights each year.”

A quick look at one reported figure reveals how users can dig deep into the data. In 2017-2018, the number of international students in the U.S. reached a new high of 1,094,792. More granular data on those students provides a plethora of insight. For instance, China is the top place of origin for international students (33.2 percent), New York University hosts the most international students (17,552) and more than 20 percent of international students study engineering (215,290).
WAYS TO USE THE DATA

Results of the Open Doors report are available online, as well as via a robust 140-page printed report. So what can users actually do with the data?

“One of the big values of the Open Doors survey and report is that it serves as a national barometer for what is happening in international education,” says Rajika Bhandari, Senior Advisor of Research and Strategy and Director of the IIE Center for Academic Mobility Research & Impact. “It gives institutions a great deal of information on which to base their enrollment strategies, as well as their decision-making around internationalization.”

Consider these four ways to utilize the Open Doors Report:

- **Benchmarking**
  “The entire higher education sector can use the data to see how they are faring compared to similar institutions,” says Bhandari. “For example, community colleges can compare themselves to other community colleges. That benchmarking helps them determine how they are doing and what refinements they need to make in their efforts. They can learn what other institutions are doing to either attract more international students or send more students abroad.”

- **Program expansion**
  Institutions can examine the data for national trends that help them decide what programs to implement. For example, the 2018 report indicates an increase in international internships and applied learning. “Because we are able to document that through our data, that provides useful information for other institutions who are looking to expand their programs in similar ways,” says Bhandari.

- **Recruitment**
  “In terms of international students, the most significant way the data is used by institutions is to really look at where student demand is coming from around the world, what the ebbs and flows are for students from particular countries and by academic level, and how they should target their recruitment and enrollment strategies,” says Bhandari.

- **Internationalization advocacy**
  “Some institutions take the data and use it to advocate for internationalization, either on campus or in their communities,” says Baer. She adds that colleges and universities often point to the financial impact made by international students, who contributed $42.4 billion to the U.S. economy in 2017, according to the U.S. Department of Commerce. The NAFSA International Student Economic Value Tool uses Open Doors enrollment figures to calculate additional breakdowns of economic impact. “Colleges and universities can go to their campus leadership or community and show not only the excellent impact that international students have in the classroom, but also the financial impact in terms of dollars and jobs created,” says Baer.
TIPS FOR GETTING THE MOST FROM THE REPORT

Data for the Open Doors Report is collected from four separate surveys sent to approximately 3,000 accredited U.S. higher education institutions. The surveys include an international student census, a U.S. study abroad survey, an intensive English survey and an international scholar survey. To get the maximum benefit from the compilation of information, Bhandari and Baer offer the following advice:

- **Dive deep into the data**—"We always urge institutions to get beyond the headlines," says Bhandari. "There is a tendency to focus on the overall headline that numbers are up or down. It's easy to forget important nuances. All users should look at what the finer level of data is showing." For example, the 2018 report shows an overall slowdown in new international students. However, while the total number of international graduate students has declined for the first time in several years (-2.1 percent), the number of international undergraduates has remained steady (+0.8 percent).

- **Combine Open Doors with other reports**—Pull in additional campus-specific information for insight into your institution and other national reports to understand broader trends, urges Bhandari. "For example, even though we've seen a very nice uptick in the past few years in the number of U.S. students in STEM fields who are going abroad, we know it's much lower compared to the average level at which American students pursue STEM fields," she says.

OPEN DOORS® 2018 AT A GLANCE

Here are just a few of the facts presented in the latest IIE Open Doors Report:

- **332,700**

- **More than 25%**
  More than 25% of those students’ major fields of study were in science, technology engineering and math (STEM).

- **Top destination**
  The top destination for U.S. students studying abroad was the United Kingdom (12 percent).

- **Short-term program**
  Nearly 65 percent of U.S. students studying abroad participated in a short-term program (summer or eight weeks or less).

- **Number of international students**
  The number of international students in the U.S. increased by 1.5 percent in 2017-2018.

- **Top three states**
  The top three states hosting international students that year were California, New York and Texas.
Compare yourself with similar institutions
— A small liberal arts school in the Midwest shouldn’t compare itself to a large, private research university like the University of Southern California. “We actively work with different groups—such as community colleges and minority-serving institutions—to provide them special looks at the data so they can do the comparisons,” says Baer. (You can contact the research team at iieresearch@iie.org.)

Use the information to start meaningful conversations—The data can spur discussions within the international student and scholar office, as well as with broader campus leadership, about how to respond to internationalization trends and opportunities. For instance, one concerning trend is the widening gender gap in international students coming to the U.S. In 2008-2009, women comprised nearly half of all international students in the U.S. Over the past decade, that number has decreased. In 2017-2018, women represented 43.6 percent of international students. “That merits consideration,” says Bhandari. “Is it related to factors at the U.S. end or in the sending countries that are resulting in the gap once again widening?”

Get in-depth information from the printed report—“We have a lot of excellent data online, but each year in our print report we provide additional context around the trends we are seeing,” says Baer. “We include special analyses, world region trends and spotlight sections that can be very insightful for the field.” For example, the forthcoming 2018 publication will explore strong interest in STEM fields for international students and factors influencing the duration of intensive English programs (IEP), among other topics.

For institutions that invest time in studying IIE’s Open Doors Report and considering how it applies to them, the data can do just what the name suggests—open doors to new internationalization opportunities.