



WORLD EDUCATION SERVICES

# COVID-19 and Fall 2020

## Impacts on U.S. International Higher Education

A WES Survey of Prospective Students  
World Education Services | November 2020

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Part I:

# Executive Summary



# Executive Summary

**World Education Services (WES) is a non-profit social enterprise dedicated to helping international students and professionals achieve their educational and workplace goals in the United States and Canada. Since 1974, we have provided credential evaluation reports to nearly three million people worldwide. Our evaluations are recognized by more than 2,500 educational, business, and governmental institutions throughout the U.S. and Canada.**

In any given year, WES interacts with many thousands of internationally educated students who are hoping to enroll in public and private higher education institutions across the U.S.; WES also interacts with the institutions themselves. The COVID-19 pandemic, as well as social, political, and policy factors, have shaped the fall term on campuses nationwide.

To assess the impact of these developments, WES conducted student surveys in April, June, and August. These surveys captured the views of prospective students – both international students who study on temporary student visas and internationally educated immigrants with more permanent status in the U.S. We refer to these two categories of students as “international students” and “internationally educated immigrants” (or sometimes simply “immigrant students” or “immigrants”) throughout this report.

This report focuses on results from June and August. We released the findings of the April survey and one additional survey, which examined the views of international higher education professionals, in [a report](#) issued earlier this year.

This report addresses our findings about the varying perspectives of the two groups of prospective students:

- International students are individuals who require a student visa, typically an F-1 or J-1 visa, to pursue education in the U.S.
- Internationally educated immigrant students are those who (a) are looking to pursue a U.S. education, (b) have attained other educational credentials abroad, and (c) have obtained any form of permanent or immigrant status in the U.S. This includes permanent residents, U.S. citizens, refugees and asylees, and those holding immigrant visas. All of these students were residing in the U.S. at the time of the survey.

The distinction between these two groups of students is important.

The views of immigrant students are easily lost in the international education conversation, as these students are typically classified as domestic students for the purpose of enrollment, though they often hold educational credentials from another country and have grown up or spent a significant amount of time abroad. They are an important segment of students, particularly given the decline in enrollments among domestic students that began a decade ago. As of 2018, immigrant students and second-generation U.S. citizens represented [nearly 28 percent](#) of all U.S. higher education enrollment.

# Key Findings

**As of August, over half of prospective international students and around two-thirds of prospective internationally educated immigrant students indicated that COVID-19 would not impact their intent to enroll at U.S. institutions.**

Among international students whose plans were affected, by far the most considered option was delaying enrollment at a U.S. institution. In June, 52% of international students saw delay as an option. In August, that percentage had risen to 63%. Internationally educated immigrants, however, were strongly considering fully online U.S. degree programs – 71% in August – and were less likely to consider options outside of the U.S. This likely reflects the significantly fewer barriers to studying in the U.S. that this group encounters relative to those on student visas.

**Visa and travel restrictions and risks were a concern for international students.**

International students expressed concern that they would not be able to obtain a U.S. visa in time for the fall term nor be permitted to travel to the U.S. They also expressed concerns about travel-related health risks.

**The current U.S. political climate has different impacts on prospective international student views.**

In the months since we began our surveys, the U.S. has experienced highly publicized incidents of racial violence, widespread protests and demonstrations against police brutality and systemic racism, and a deeply divisive presidential election. This turmoil has had an uneven impact on student attitudes. About 40% of August survey respondents said the political climate made them less interested in the U.S., while 27% said the current environment had no impact on their thinking.





Part II:

# Findings



# Do Students Still Want to Enroll in U.S. HEIs?

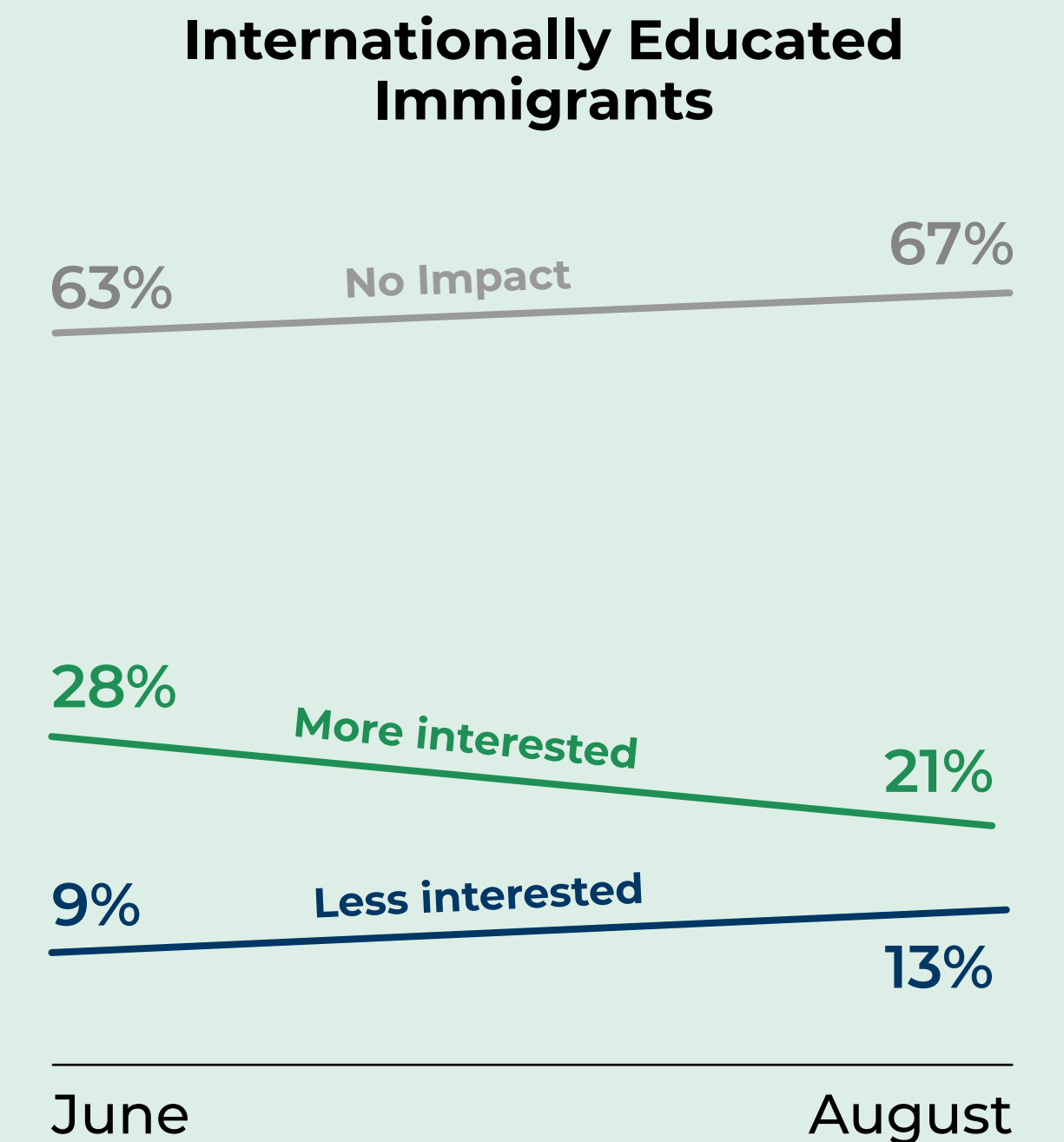
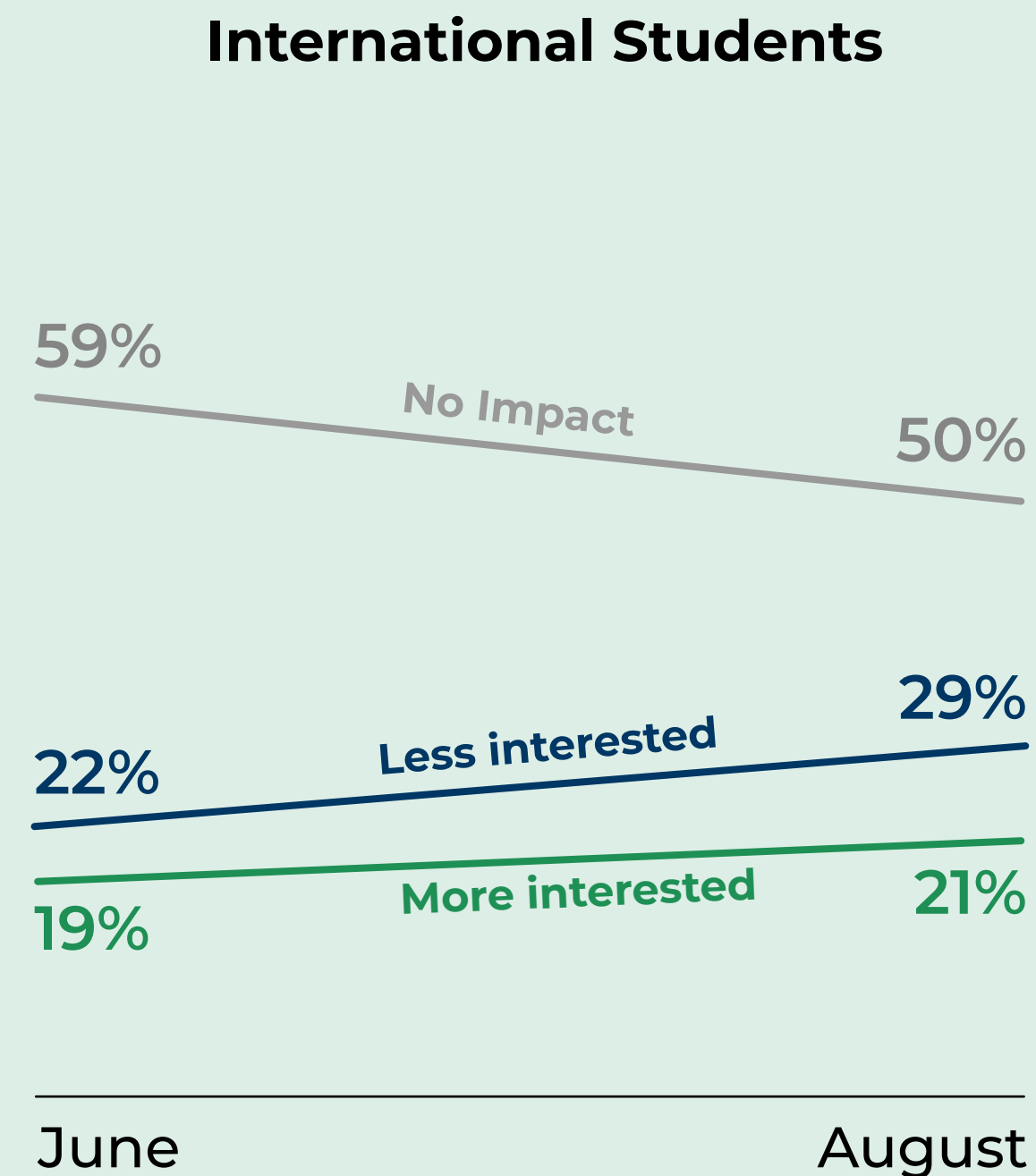
As of August, over half of prospective international students and around two-thirds of prospective immigrant students indicated that COVID-19 had not affected their intent to enroll at U.S. institutions.

However, we did see changes in both groups' enrollment interest between June and August. Specifically, a greater percentage of international students said that their interest in studying in the U.S. had declined (29% were less interested in August compared with 22% in June). The percentage of immigrants who reported less interest in enrolling at U.S. institutions ticked up marginally (from 9% to 13%).

The numbers of immigrant students who were more interested also declined: from 28% to 21%.

Recent data released by the [National Student Clearinghouse](#) shows that from Fall 2019 to Fall 2020, there was a decrease of nearly 14% for undergraduate international students\* and nearly 8% for graduate international students. (Overall, undergraduate enrollment nationwide decreased, while graduate enrollment modestly increased.)

## Impact of COVID-19 on Interest in Studying in the U.S.



Q: How has COVID-19 influenced your interest in studying in the U.S.?

\*The National Student Clearinghouse refers to international students as "non-resident aliens."

# Will Students Be Able to Travel to and Enter the U.S.?

Throughout the summer, the ability to secure a visa and enter the U.S. were top concerns of prospective international students outside of the U.S.

In June and August, international students expressed concerns about maintaining their health while traveling, but even more were concerned about obtaining visas.

The proportion of those who were “extremely concerned” about their health and that of their family while traveling went up from June (37%) to August (44%).

Recent events are unlikely to allay concerns. The U.S. continues to **restrict travel from several key countries and regions** because of the pandemic, as of late October: Brazil, China, Iran, Ireland, the United Kingdom, and the Schengen Area\* of Europe. The borders with Canada and Mexico also **remain closed** to all except to allow “essential travel.”

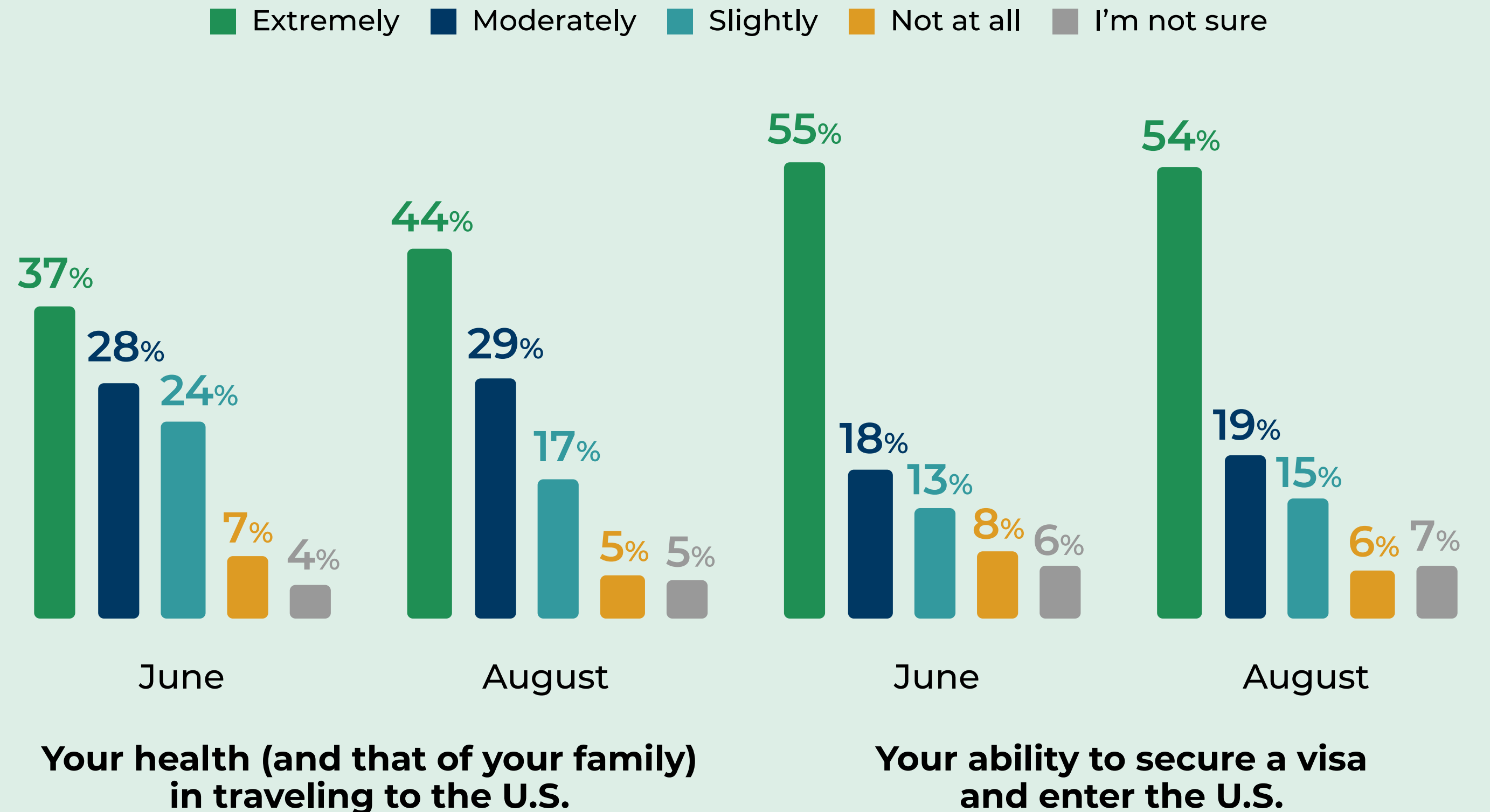
Meanwhile, many U.S. embassies and consulates around the world closed at the start of the pandemic and only began **gradually reopening**, often with limited functionality, starting around midsummer. Resurgence of the virus in hot spots around the globe may cause renewed delays.

June: n = 625, August: n = 478

\*The **Schengen Area** is the travel zone made up of all European Union member states with a few exceptions and four European non-member states.

Note: “Not applicable” responses were excluded from analysis. Percentages have been recalculated to reflect this change.

## International Students Outside of the U.S.: How concerned are you about the impact of COVID-19 on the following items?





# Will Students Take Online-Only Courses?

A growing number of prospective international students said they would not be willing to attend online-only courses.

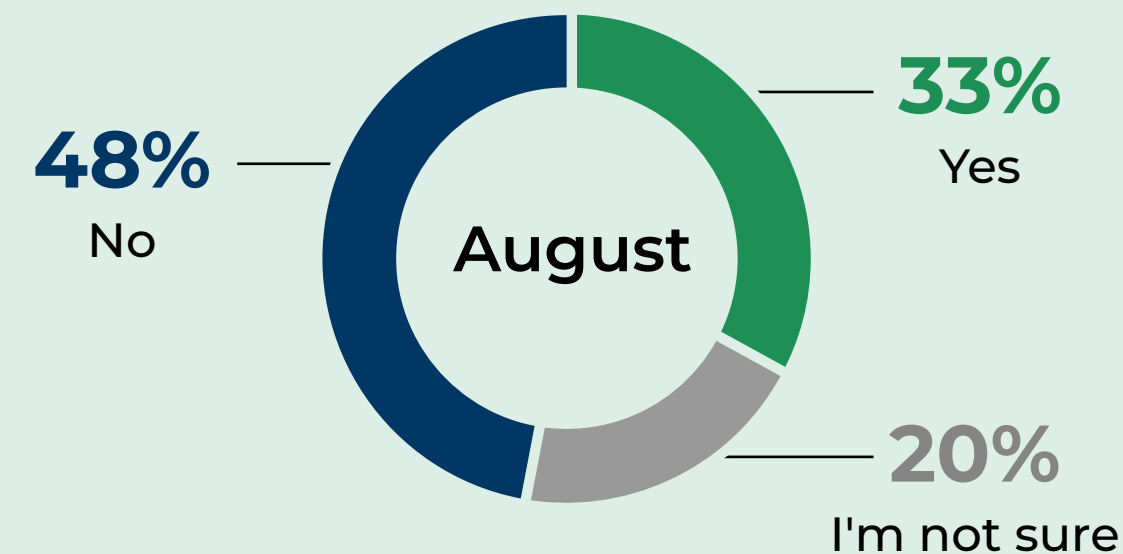
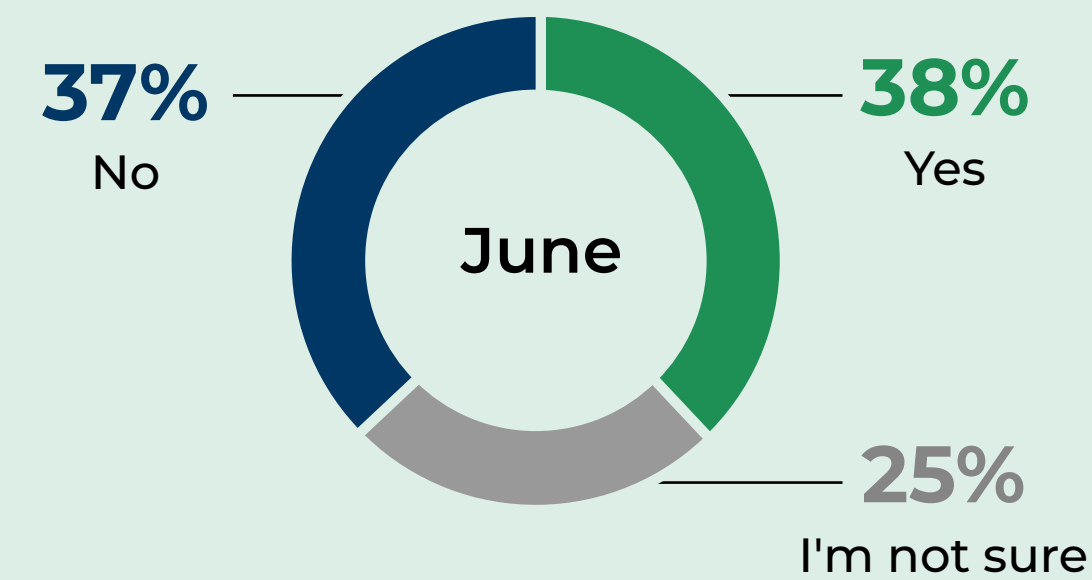
In August, nearly half of all such students surveyed said they would not be willing to attend such classes, up from only 32% [in April](#).

This decline in interest in online-only coursework tracks recent events: In July, the U.S. Department of Homeland Security's Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) division [issued a policy](#) restricting new international students from coming to the U.S. for online-only courses. Students staying in their home countries to take such courses face a number of challenges that may discourage enrollment. Those based in countries such as China and India may be required to [attend courses that meet live in the middle of the night](#) because of time zone differences; poor internet connections may affect delivery of classes; and the online experience is not conducive to the development of the social (and ultimately professional) networks that can be so crucial to students who come to the U.S. from abroad.

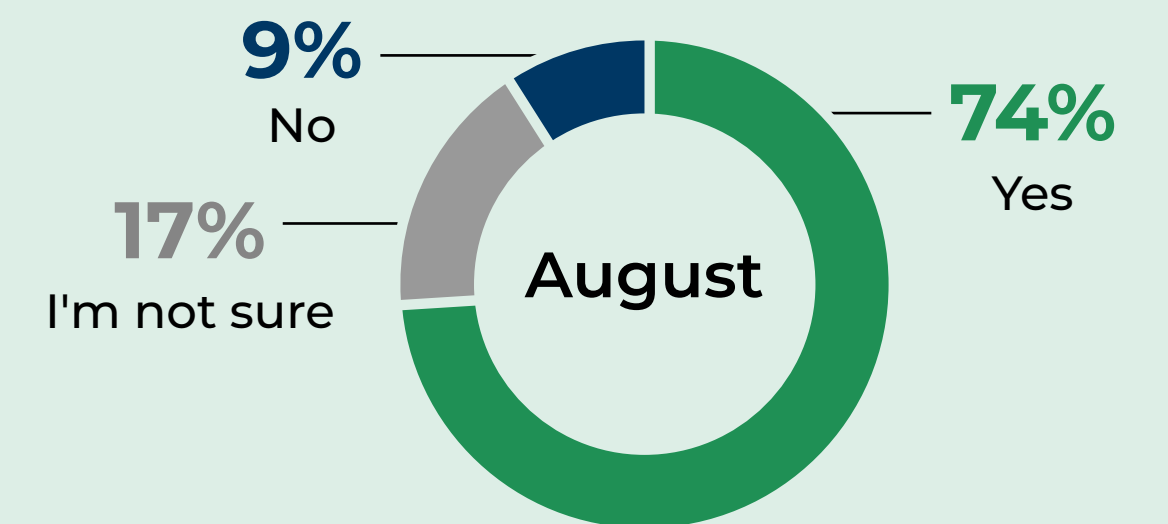
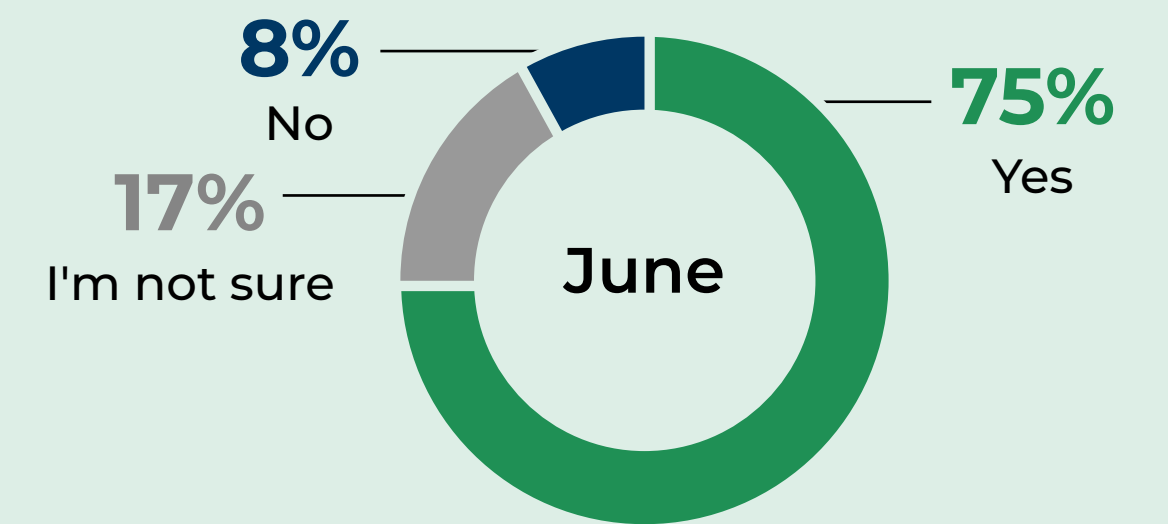
In contrast, most immigrant students remained willing to take online-only courses.

## Would you still consider enrolling at a U.S. higher education institution if the courses were only offered online for Fall 2020?

International Students



Internationally Educated Immigrants



Note: "Not applicable" responses were excluded from analysis. Percentages have been recalculated to reflect this change.

# What Other Options Are Students Considering?

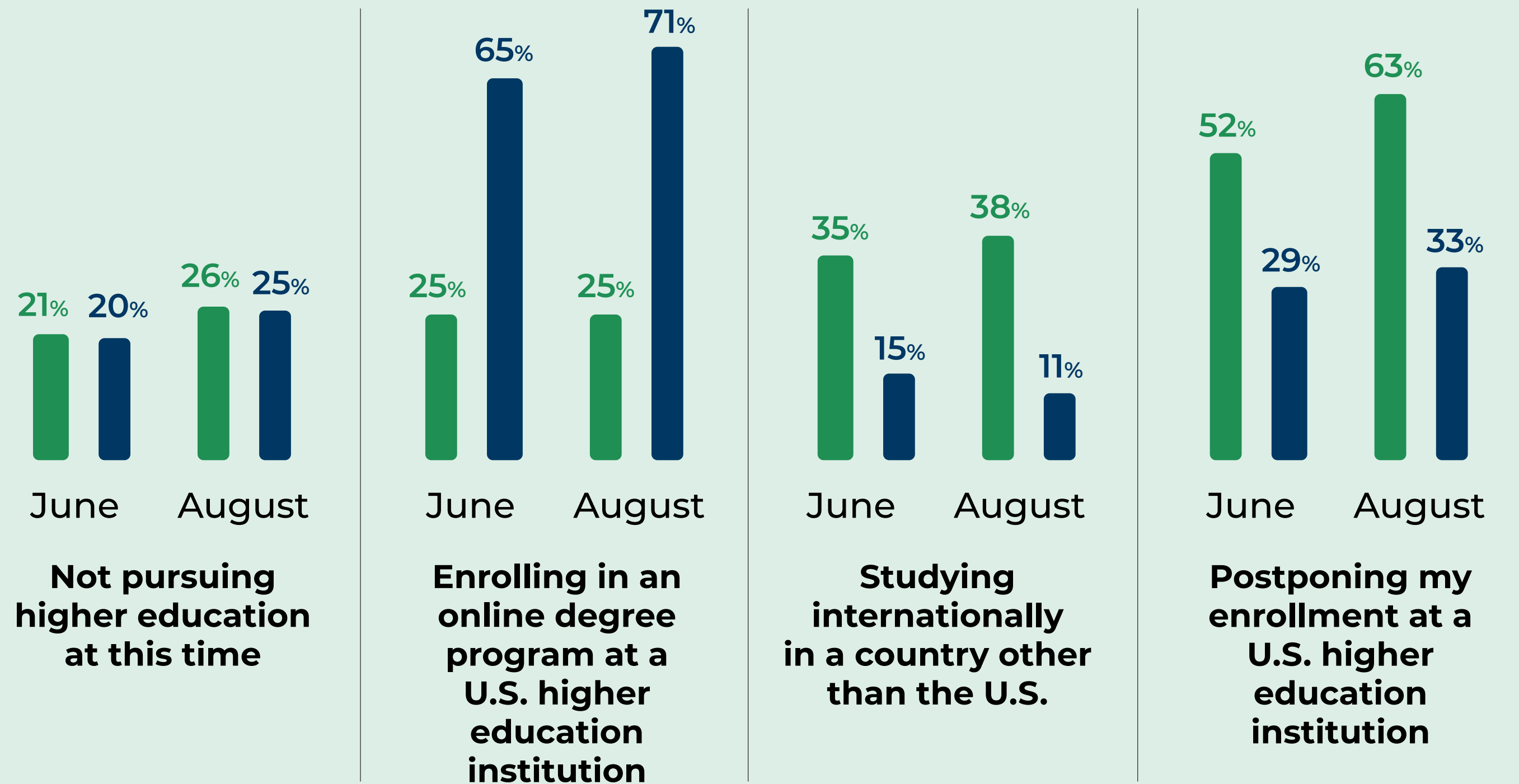
By far the most considered option for prospective international students is delaying enrollment at a U.S. institution, indicating that a U.S. education is still highly desirable for many.

Relatively small numbers of international students are considering not pursuing higher education at this time, studying in their home countries,\* or enrolling in fully online degree programs from U.S. institutions.

Internationally educated immigrants, in contrast, are very interested in U.S. online degree programs. These students are much less likely to worry about legal status in the U.S., or the logistical challenges of studying online. Additionally, many are likely similar to non-traditional college students in that they have full-time jobs and families to support. Online options may be more attractive.

## Percentage Who Are Likely to Do the Following as a Result of COVID-19

■ International Students ■ Internationally Educated Immigrants



Q: As a result of COVID-19, how likely are you to consider the following: ...

\*Note: Not included in the chart.

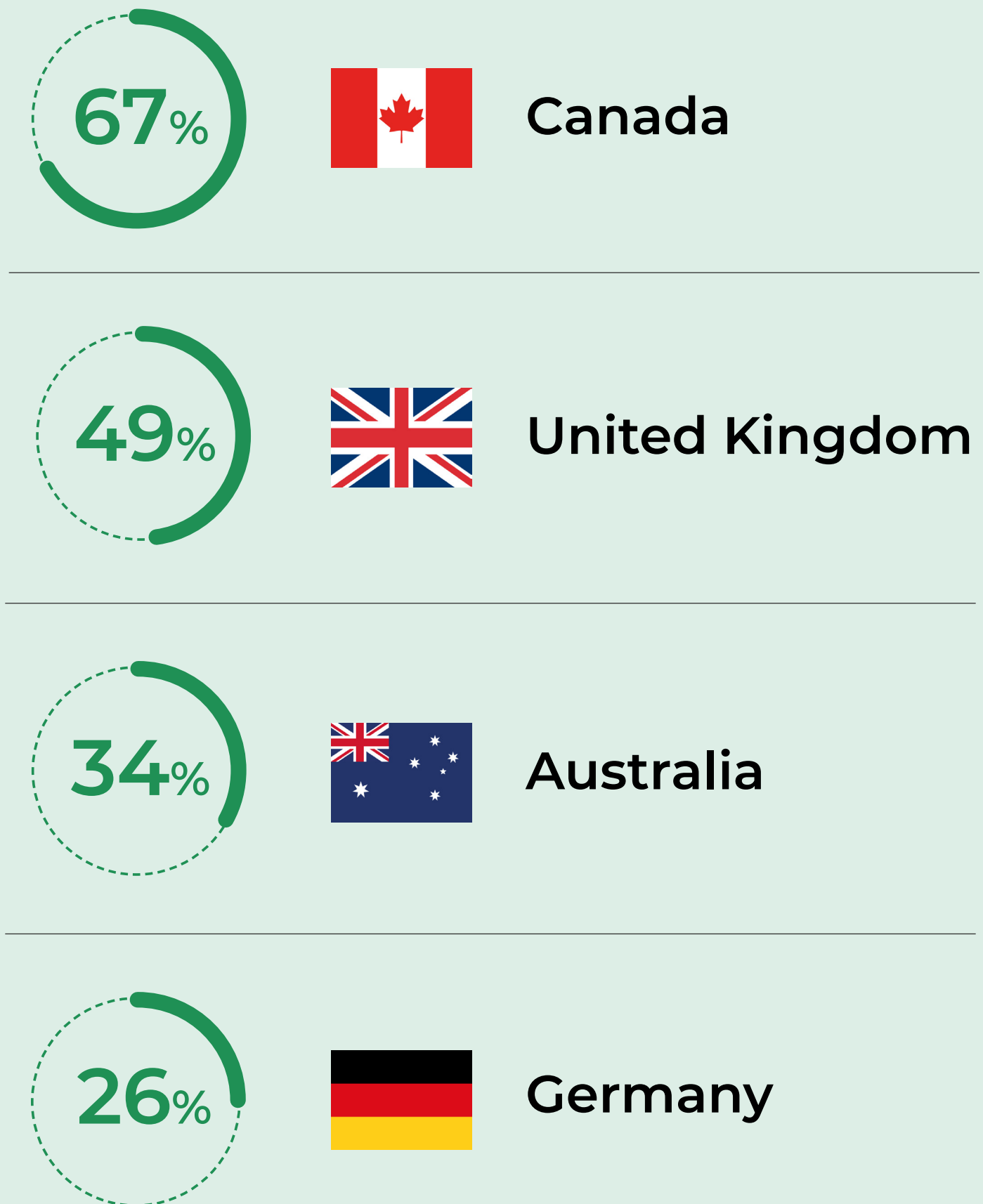
Note: "Not applicable" responses were excluded from analysis. Percentages have been recalculated to reflect this change.



# What Other Countries Are Students Considering?

One long-running concern, even prior to the pandemic, has been that the U.S. could lose a significant share of students to other host countries with **friendlier policies to international students**, particularly regarding work and residency opportunities. That concern has been **heightened during the pandemic**. Among prospective international student respondents, the number considering other countries has increased but only slightly, and overall the number is quite small. The top countries of interest are the other major predominantly English-speaking host countries: Canada, the United Kingdom, and Australia. While co-curricular and post-graduation work policies may be friendlier in these countries, many are also struggling with **outbreaks of COVID-19**, have not fully **returned to in-person classes**, and struggle to **issue student visas**.

## International Students: Top Destination Countries Considered Other than the U.S., in August



n = 190

Q: In which country or countries, aside from the U.S., are you considering earning your degree?

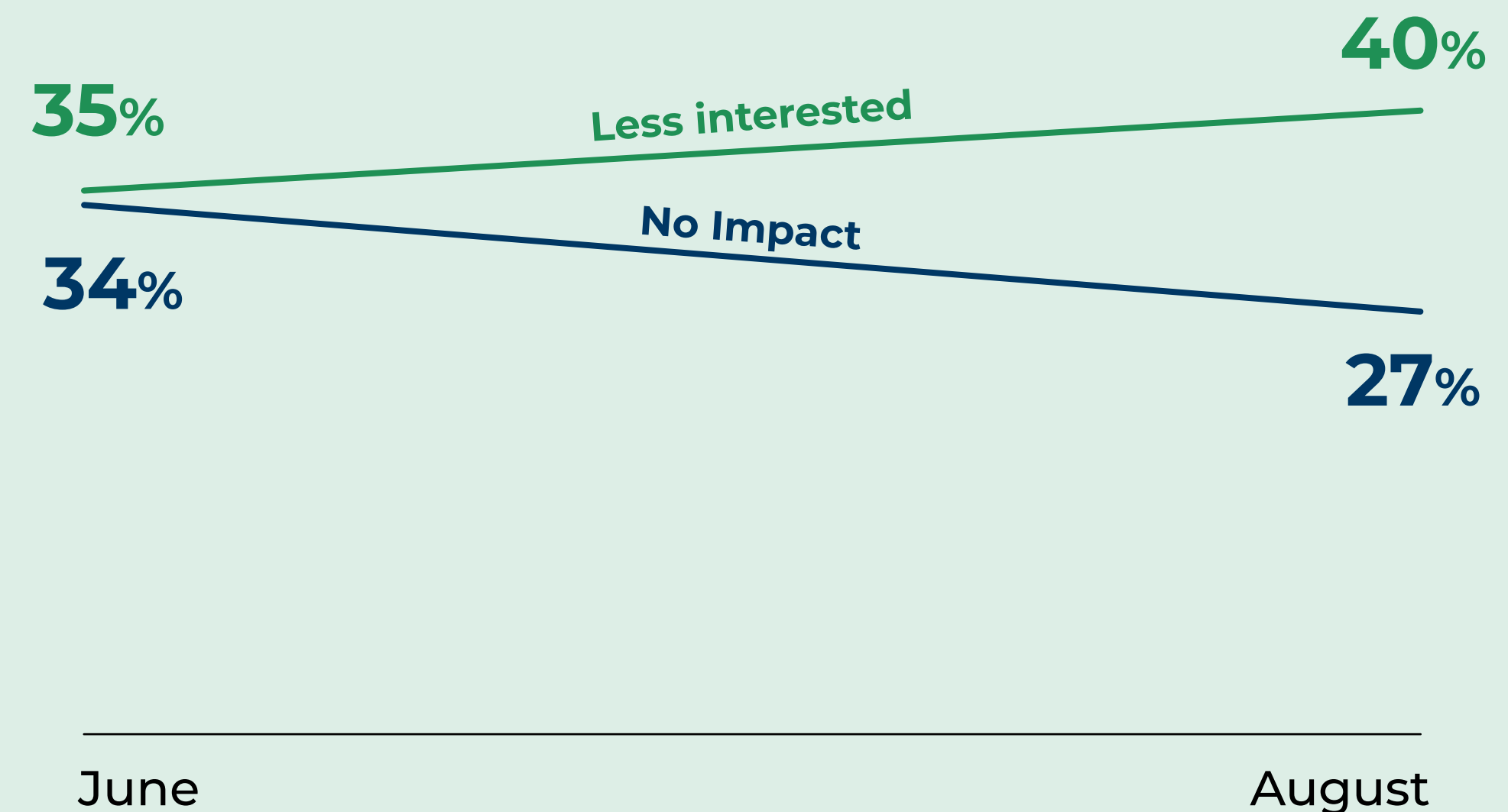
Note: Only those who answered “Likely” or “Very likely” to “Studying internationally in a country other than the U.S.” answered this question. “Not applicable” responses were excluded from analysis. Percentages have been recalculated to reflect this change.

# What Is the Impact of the Social and Political Climate?

A turbulent political and social environment combined with the pandemic is likely making the U.S. less desirable for study for some.

In August, 40% of prospective international students said they were less interested in studying in the U.S., up five percentage points from June. Meanwhile, the percentage who cited “no impact” declined from more than one-third to about one-quarter. We do not know, however, what aspects of the social and political environment are shaping student decision-making.

**International Students:**  
U.S. Social and Political Environment’s  
Impact on Interest in Studying in the U.S.



Q: To what extent is the current social and political environment in the U.S. impacting your interest in moving to or remaining in the U.S.?  
Note: Two choices - "More interested" and "I'm not sure" - are not included in the chart.





Part III:

# Appendix

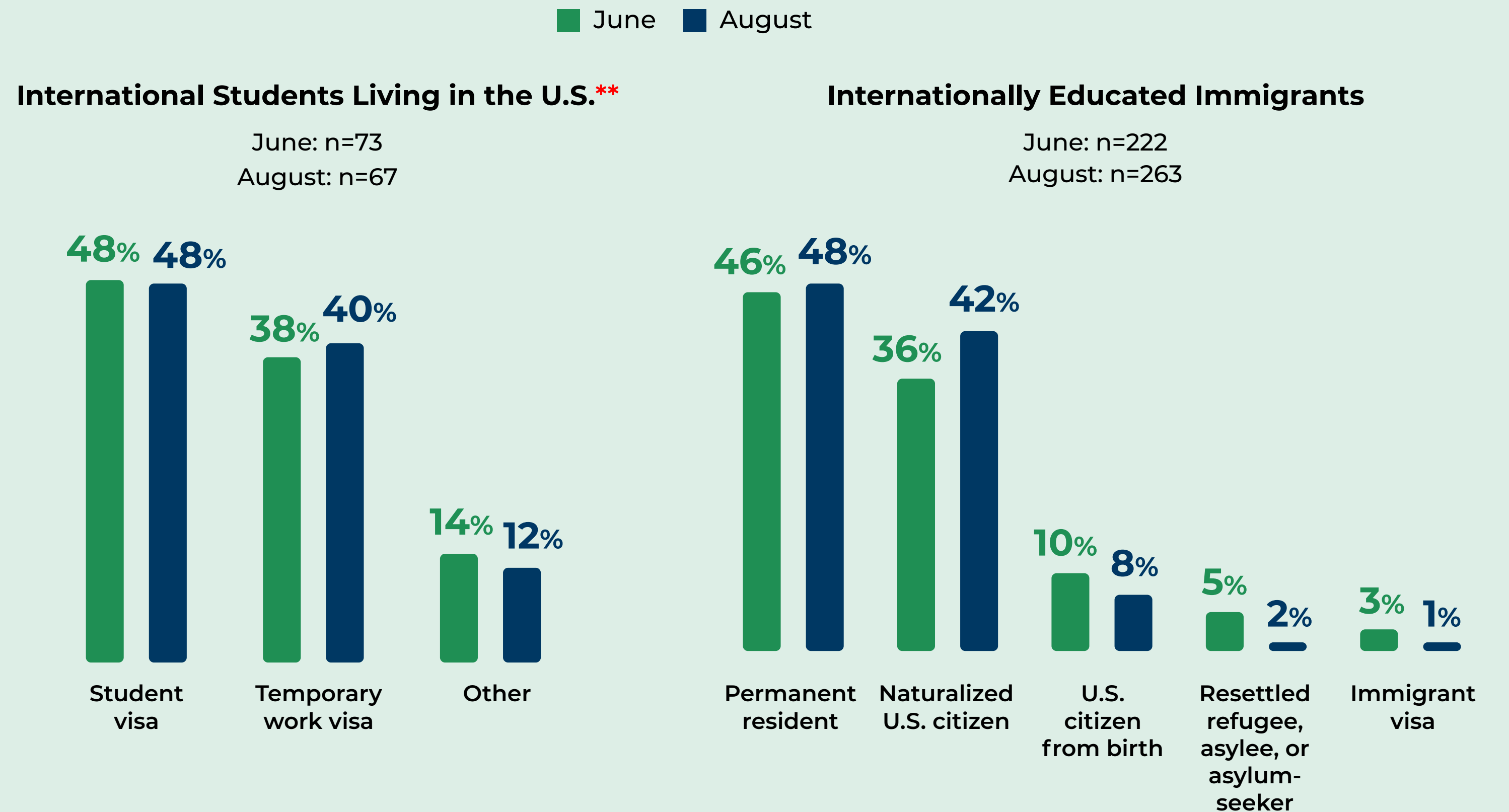


# Profile of Respondents

## Top Countries of Residence



## Current Status of U.S. Residents\*



\*Q: What is your current status in the United States?

\*\*Note: Reflects only prospective international students living in the U.S. at the time of the survey. (The full international student sample was 698 for June and 546 for August.)



# Survey Methodology

## **Sampling method:**

- Stratified random sampling
- U.S. WES applicants with applications submitted and evaluations completed from June 2019 to July 2020 for education purposes and WES applicant newsletter subscribers. The sample included some temporary residents (not on international student visas), permanent residents, and some U.S. citizens, both naturalized and native born. (Native-born citizens in this survey completed at least part of their previous education outside of the U.S. and in some cases may have spent significant lengths of time outside of the U.S.)

## **Data collection period:**

- June 15-21, 2020
- August 17-25, 2020

## **Reporting:**

- Only complete and qualified responses were included in the analysis. Students currently enrolled in U.S. higher education institutions were disqualified from the survey.
- Percentages may not add up to 100% due to rounding.
- For some questions, “Not applicable” responses were removed from the analysis and reporting. These are noted in each case.
- Sample size for each question is only noted where different from the overall sample size per group and distribution.

## **Number of questions:**

- 15 for international students
- 11 for internationally educated immigrants

# Survey Metrics

	June	August
<b>Total Invitations</b>	29,851	31,915
<b>Total Responses Collected</b>	1,448	1,467
<b>Response Rate</b>	4.8%	4.6%
<b>Total Complete Responses</b>	1,216	1,219
<b>Completion Rate</b>	84%	83%
<b>Complete and Qualified Responses</b>	920	808
<b>Prospective International Students</b>	698	545
<b>Prospective Internationally Educated Immigrant Students</b>	222	263



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