

Student Voices Drive International Enrollment

The Power of Student Ambassadors

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Southern District Chair, NAFSA Region XII

About Study in the USA

For nearly 50 years, Study in the USA has helped international students explore educational opportunities in the United States and helped schools connect with students around the world. In 2027, we'll mark our 50th anniversary. Today, we bring that experience to every partnership through student-centered content, multilingual school profiles, targeted outreach, and mobile-first strategies.

4.5M+
unique visitors to StudyUSA.com every year

800K+
social media followers worldwide

190+
countries & territories reached

Our mission: help international students find the gift of a U.S. education — and help your campus reach them.

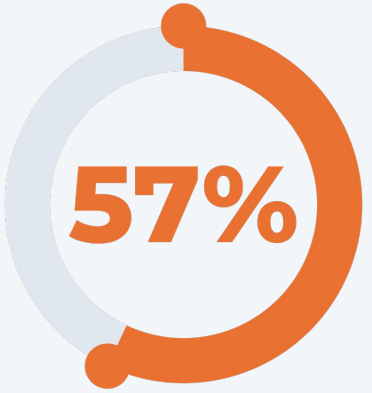
Students trust other students — two surveys agree



Peers help them decide

Prospective students interested in the U.S. say connecting with current international students is useful when deciding where to study.

QS International Student Survey



Above friends & family

A current student ambassador is their most helpful resource — ahead of friends & family (47%).

Intead + Unibuddy

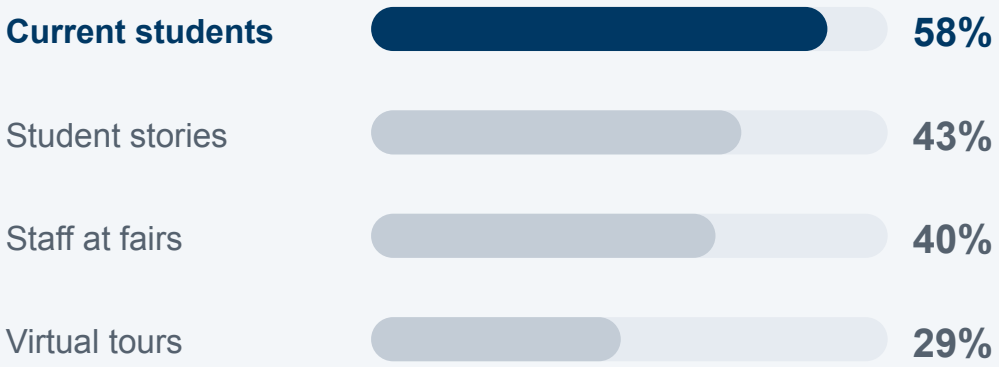
Two surveys, one clear answer: students trust other students first — above websites, brochures, agents, even friends and family.

Source: QS International Student Survey; Intead + Unibuddy peer-to-peer study (57 countries).

What the two surveys actually measured

QS International Student Survey

% who rated each “most useful” when choosing where to study



Intead

% who rated each “most helpful” when deciding where to apply



And it drives action: up to 75% of students in Africa and Asia (71% in Europe) applied after chatting with a current ambassador.

Students could choose more than one answer, so the numbers don’t add up to 100%. What matters is that student voices ranked highly in both surveys.

Sources: QS International Student Survey; Intead + Unibuddy (57 countries).

Where this starts

Students don’t choose the school with the best message.

They choose the one they believe.

And more and more, belief comes from other students — not from us.

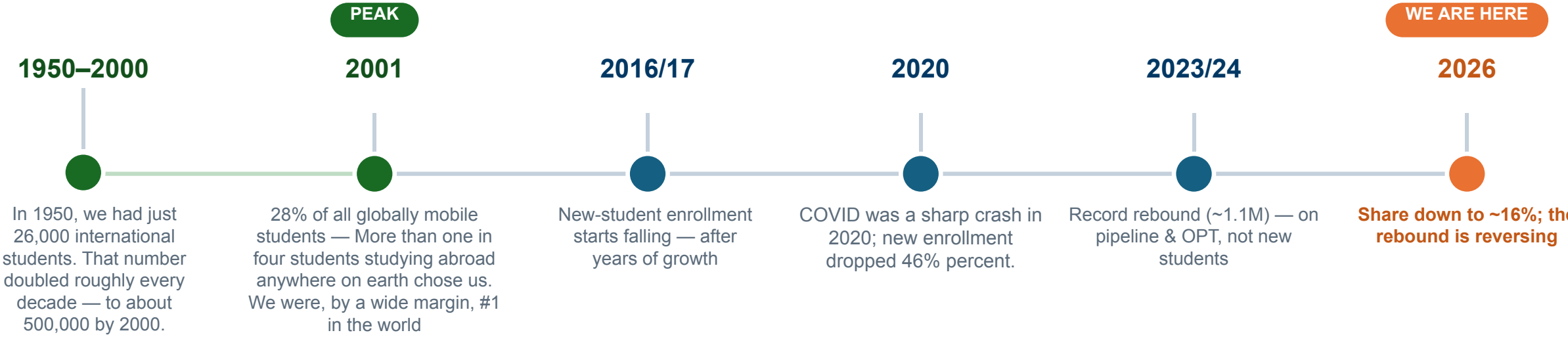
Everything I’ll share today—the data, the shift in the enrollment funnel, and the ambassador strategy—comes back to this idea. Our role is to earn students’ trust. One powerful way to do that is to let current students share their experiences in their own words.

The 2026 recruitment landscape

Why now

Why now (rise, peak, and slip)

Let's look at the longer trend — **America built the world's #1 destination, peaked in 2001, and has been slipping since.**



We didn't stumble into being number one — we built it, on purpose, over fifty years.

What we built on purpose, we can defend on purpose — starting with the students already on your campus.

Sources: IIE Open Doors & Project Atlas; Migration Policy Institute; Shorelight; Inside Higher Ed.

What's changing in 2026

–17%

new international student enrollment is down, fall 2025 vs. 2024

–12%

graduate enrollment — while OPT rose +14%

$1.1B

estimated lost revenue; ~23,000 U.S. jobs

International students still contribute nearly $43B a year and 1.18M strong — but new enrollment is shrinking, and the students who come are deciding differently.

India — 31% of all intl students

China — 23%, and falling

Visa uncertainty & 'will I belong?'

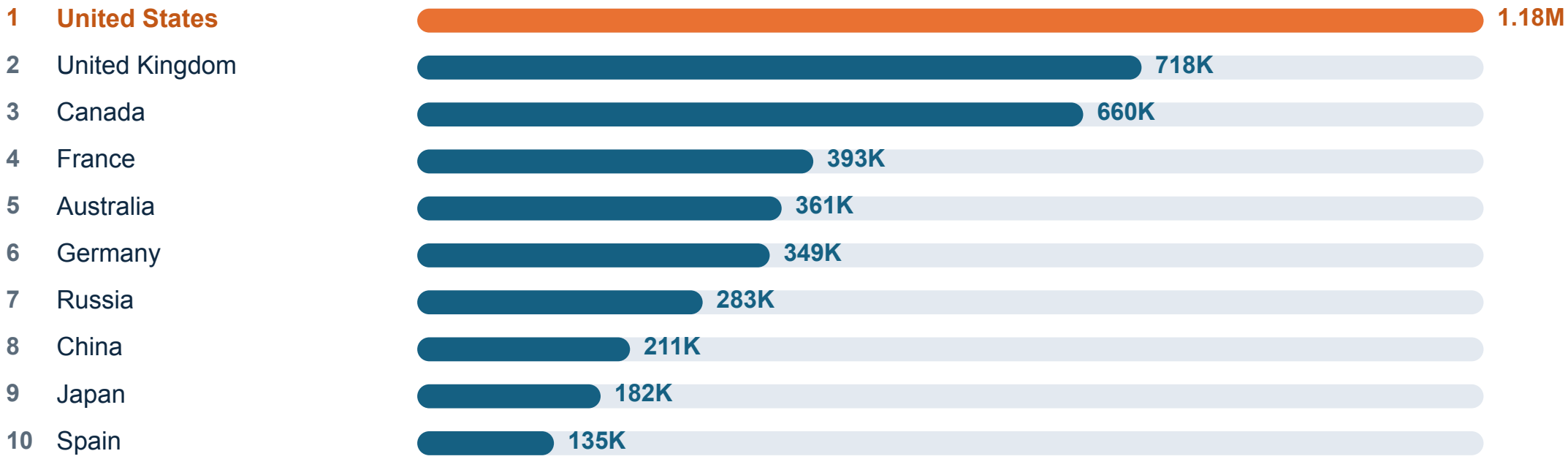
woven through all of it is uncertainty — visa questions, shifting policy, and a very human worry: *'Will I actually belong there?'*

When fewer students are coming, every single student who's already on your campus matters more. They're not just enrolled — they're your most credible recruiters for the next one.

Source: IIE Open Doors 2025 Fall Snapshot; NAFSA economic analysis, Nov 2025.

Still #1 in the world

The U.S. remains a leading choice—but our responsibility is to make students who come here feel welcomed, supported, and inspired to say “yes.”



The world still chooses us first — now let's make the students who come the reason the next ones say yes.

Source: IIE Project Atlas — common comparison year (2022/23); Russia & China via UNESCO. Latest U.S. total: ~1.18M (Open Doors 2024/25).

What’s working in 2026

Everything we’ve covered points to four things that are actually

Meet students where they are

Social, Reddit, reviews, and AI — not just your website.

Lead with belonging + value

Answer ‘will I belong?’ and ‘can I afford it?’ first.

Diversify markets with data

Target by region, program, and goals.

Amplify student voices

Let your current students carry the message.

The thread through all of it: **students trust other students. That’s where the rest of this session goes.**

Meet students where they are

Nearly **6 in 10** prospective international students say social media shapes where they study — but **where they look depends on who they are.**

Where U.S.-bound students research

% of U.S.-bound students — platforms vary by country (next slide)



Chinese students use a different map

A separate ecosystem — English-only content never reaches them.

- **WeChat & Weibo**
  Long-established research channels — WeChat (~75%), Weibo (~61%).
- **Xiaohongshu (RedNote)**
  The fast-rising study-abroad hub — visual, peer-driven.
- **Baidu + agents**
  Search and agents still carry heavy weight in the funnel.

#留学 (“study abroad”) pulls 5M+ in engagement on RedNote.

AND IT ALL COMES BACK TO PEERS

9 in 10 read student reviews | **Current students = #1 voice** (57%) | **They expect a real, fast reply** (70%)

Sources: QS International Student Survey; Keystone 2025; INTO 2025; iFans 2026.

Where students research — by country

Every number is **each country's TikTok reach — the platform that varies most by market.**

TikTok use: low → high

ASIA-PACIFIC

Also uses **YouTube · WhatsApp / LINE / KakaoTalk · Facebook · Instagram**

TikTok reach by country (share of adults on TikTok — deeper = higher)

- India **banned**
- China **WeChat / RedNote**
- South Korea **35%**
- Japan **37%**
- Vietnam **n/a**
- Nepal **n/a**
- Bangladesh **25%**
- Pakistan **52%**
- Sri Lanka **35%**
- Indonesia **62%**
- Philippines **58%**
- Malaysia **81%**
- Thailand **68%**
- Singapore **61%**

AFRICA

WhatsApp · Facebook · YouTube

TikTok reach ↓

- Nigeria **57%**
- Kenya **58%**
- Ghana **65%**
- South Africa **59%**

LATIN AMERICA

WhatsApp · Instagram · Facebook

TikTok reach ↓

- Brazil **51%**
- Mexico **62%**
- Colombia **66%**
- Argentina **55%**
- Chile **66%**
- Peru **72%**

MIDDLE EAST

WhatsApp · Instagram · Facebook

TikTok reach ↓

- Israel **47%**
- Turkey **30%**
- West Bank **72%**

TikTok % = adults using TikTok (Pew Research Center, 2026). India bans TikTok · China uses a separate ecosystem · YouTube & WhatsApp are near-universal everywhere.

Lead with belonging + value

Before students hear your pitch, they're already asking three questions — **answer these first.**

“Can I afford it?”

77%

rank affordable tuition as their #1 factor. 55% expect to work part-time to afford their program.

ApplyBoard Student Pulse, Spring 2025

“Will it pay off?”

44%

now weigh graduate-employment outcomes when choosing a course — up from 36% in 2020. Nearly half expect study abroad to boost their careers.

QS International Student Survey, 2026

“Will I belong?”

~57%

say being able to connect with current international students would help them decide where to study.

QS Destination: U.S. & Canada

Lead with belonging, affordability, and outcomes — rankings come later.

Sources: ApplyBoard Student Pulse (Spring 2025); QS International Student Survey 2026; QS Destination: U.S. & Canada.

Diversify markets with data

The map is shifting fast — **spread your pipeline and let the data point you to the next market.**

The #1 source flipped

363K

international students now come from India (+10%) — overtaking China (266K, −4%). Don't build your pipeline on one market.

Open Doors 2025 (IIE)

Emerging markets are surging

+41%

U.S. enrollment growth from Peru over five years — with Colombia +27%. Nigeria is now a top-7 U.S. source; Bangladesh, Ghana, Nepal & Vietnam hit record highs.

NAFSA IE Mag. · Open Doors 2025

Target the program, not just the place

57%

of international students pursue STEM. OPT work training is up 21% and community colleges grew fastest (+8%) — students choose the outcome.

Open Doors 2025 (IIE)

Target by region, program, and goal — and don't bet everything on one country.

Sources: Open Doors 2025 (IIE); five-year growth (Peru, Colombia) per NAFSA IE Magazine.

Amplify student voices

Your most persuasive recruiters are already enrolled — **the proof is in the numbers.**

Peer contact converts

up to 75%

of prospective students in Africa — and 71% in Europe — applied after chatting with a current student.

Intead

The most useful voice

57%

rank current student ambassadors as their most useful source — ahead of friends & family.

Intead

They're already looking

9 in 10

consult student review sites, and 82% say peer reviews shaped their choice.

Keystone

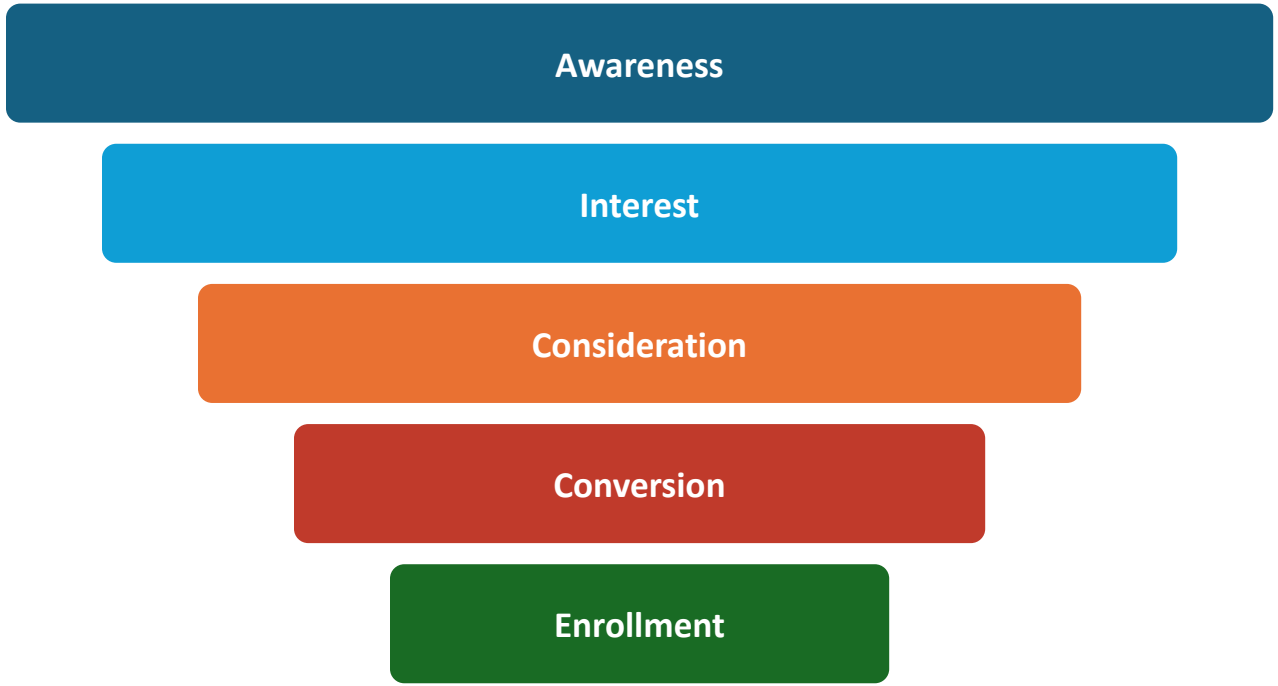
Your current students are your best channel — next, how to activate them.

Sources: Intead student-ambassador research; Keystone Student Study Report 2025.

The old marketing funnel is broken

Part 1

How we thought it worked



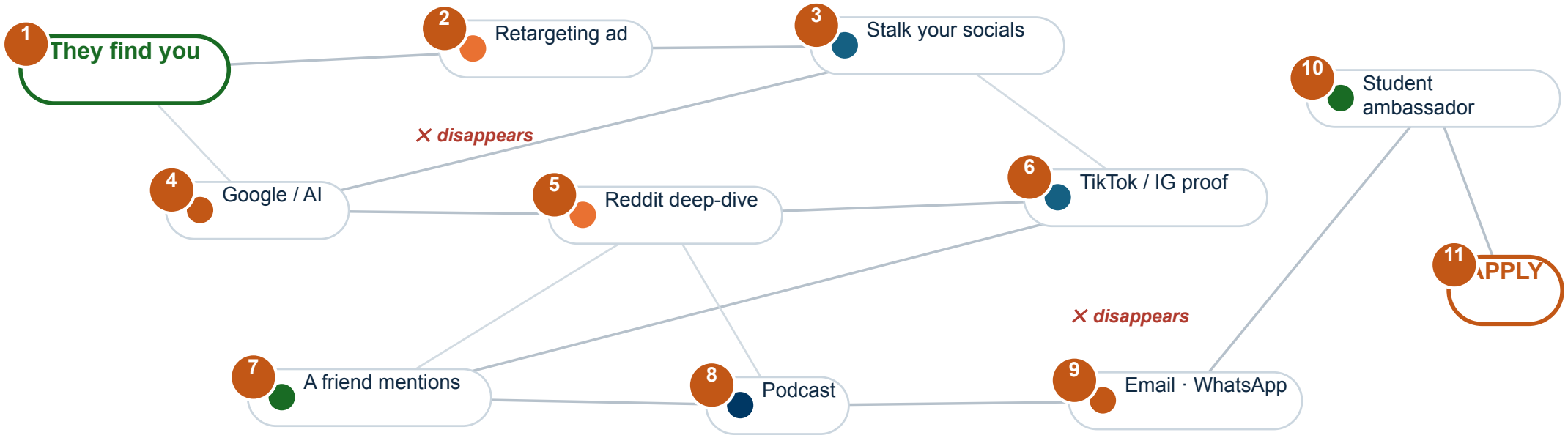
One message. One direction.

We pushed prospective students down a straight path — brochures, the website, ads, and agents carried our message in one direction.

It assumed we controlled the message, and that students moved neatly from one stage to the next.

Now it’s a messy loop, not a funnel

No straight line anymore. They find you, disappear, validate on their own, forget you, come back — **dozens of times — before they ever apply.**



30–50 touchpoints · **over a year or more**

No single touchpoint converts — the loop does.

Source: Google / Think with Google — “The Messy Middle”; non-linear buyer-journey framing, 2026.

A new generation rewrote the journey

Part 2

Gen Z, Millennials & Alpha changed the rules

Millennials

Reviews & ratings first. Grew up with Google, YouTube, and word-of-mouth online.

Gen Z

Creator- and peer-driven. Skip the ad, trust the person. Default to video and social proof.

Gen Alpha

Fully native to short video. Learn, shop, and decide through people they follow.

86% of online users say user-generated content — real people's posts and reviews — is a reliable signal of quality. Roughly 8 in 10 read others' opinions before deciding.

Sources: ComScore; Association for Research of Media.

How international students actually decide

Part 3

They’re researching through each other

20,000+

students surveyed across 195+ countries (Keystone)

9 in 10

consult student review sites when researching schools

#1

what they want: real student experiences of studying abroad

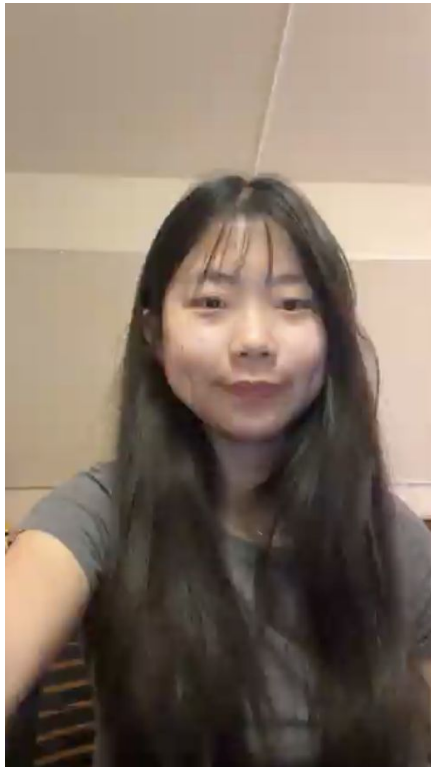
They’re no longer relying only on Google, the website, agents, and brochures — they go where the students are:

TikTok **Instagram** **YouTube** **Douyin** **Reddit**

They watch real, unscripted experiences — then head to places like Reddit to ask questions and validate what they see before they ever fill out a form.

Source: Keystone Education Group international student survey; Digital Marketing Institute.

Your message is no longer the most trusted







The power of student ambassadors

Part 4

Authentic beats polished

89%

felt more confident about attending after talking with a current student

+34.8%

higher likelihood to enroll after peer-to-peer engagement

#1

belonging is the top driver of where students choose to go

Students want unfiltered, non-scripted experiences — a real person they can picture themselves as. **A current student answering one honest question can do what a brochure never could: make the choice feel safe.**

Source: Unibuddy platform research (incl. Queen Mary University of London).

Your ambassadors are already on campus

Student workers

At the front desk and in your office every day

Orientation leaders

Already comfortable welcoming newcomers

Quiet / shy students

Often the most relatable — one-on-one or in writing

Current international students

Living the journey your prospects are weighing

Recent graduates

Proof of the outcome and the ‘after’

Club, RA & peer leaders

Natural storytellers with built-in audiences

You don’t need the most outgoing student — you need a real one. Everyone has a story worth sharing.

Share Your Student-Athlete & Business Journey at MC!

Hi Victoria,

Happy Tuesday! I hope you're doing well.

I'm reaching out because we'd love to feature your story on the Study in the USA blog and social channels. As a Business Administration student at Mississippi College, a collegiate tennis player, and someone gaining hands-on experience in both athletic operations and international program support, your journey would be incredibly valuable to share with prospective students.

Your background really stands out, balancing academics, athletics, and professional experience through your roles as an International Institute Assistant and Athletic Event Staff. The combination of your leadership, teamwork, and time management skills, along with your interest in international business and sports management, offers a unique perspective that many students around the world would connect with.

We'd love to invite you to contribute a blog post about your experience. You could share your journey as a student-athlete, what it's like balancing tennis and academics, your experience working in international and athletic programs, or your goals in business and international career paths.

This is also a great opportunity to add **"Blog Contributor – Study in the USA"** to your résumé/CV and continue building your professional profile.

Here are a few sample student stories for inspiration:

- From New Student to Campus Leader: My Sinclair College Journey
  https://www.studyusa.com/en/blog/from-new-student-to-campus-leader-my-sinclair-college-journey
- Chasing Dreams Abroad: My Life as a Filipino Student at TMCC
  https://www.studyusa.com/en/blog/chasing-dreams-abroad-my-life-as-a-filipino-student-at-tmcc
- From Community College to Silicon Valley: My Journey into Tech
  https://www.studyusa.com/en/blog/olympic-college-to-silicon-valley
- From Peru to Reno: Student Blogger Danna
  https://www.studyusa.com/en/blog/introducing-student-blogger-danna-iguchi-finding-my-way-to-reno

If you enjoy being on camera, you also have the option to create a "Day in the Life" video—a fun and engaging way to showcase your experience as a student-athlete at MC.

Here are a few examples:

- https://www.instagram.com/p/DQEkKCSEaYg/
- https://www.instagram.com/p/DNyroojZN3T/
- https://www.instagram.com/p/DBrisdrC8Lw/

Let me know which option you'd prefer, and I'll send over the next steps and guidelines.

We'd love to feature your story, Victoria and it would be amazing to highlight your experience at Mississippi College!

Warmly,
Mildred

Share Your Student-Athlete & Business Journey at MC!

VG

VictoriaGarrido (student)<vgarrido@mc.edu>

To: Mildred Oriza-Stephens

Mon 4/20/2026 12:39 PM

You replied on Mon 4/20/2026 12:57 PM

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1 KB

Hi Mildred,

Thank you so much for reaching out!

I would be delighted to contribute a blog post sharing my experience at Mississippi College. I think this is a great opportunity, and I'd be happy to structure my story following the sample student stories you provided for inspiration.

Please let me know the next steps and any specific guidelines you'd like me to follow.

Looking forward to working with you!

Warm regards,
Victoria Garrido

Share Your Student-Athlete & Business Journey at MC!

Hi Victoria,

Thanks so much for your response. I'm so excited to hear you're interested in contributing! We'd love to feature your story!

Below are some guidelines to help you get started and please note, you're absolutely welcome to share any story or experience you'd like—these are just ideas to help guide you.

Feel free to make it your own and focus on what feels most meaningful to you.

Blog Post Guidelines

Length:

- 600–900 words or more if you like!

Tone & Style:

- Personal, authentic, and engaging
- Feel free to share real experiences, challenges, and advice

Suggested Structure (you can follow this or make it your own)

1. Introduction

- Briefly introduce yourself (name, country, major, Mississippi College)
- Share what brought you to the U.S. and Mississippi College

2. Your Journey

- Why you chose Mississippi College
- Your experience transitioning to the U.S.
- Any challenges you faced and how you overcame them

3. Student Life & Experience

- What it's like being a student-athlete (tennis)
- Balancing academics, athletics, and work
- Your experience working in the International Institute and athletic events

4. What Makes MC Special

- Professors, campus environment, support systems
- Opportunities (academics, athletics, leadership, etc.)

5. Your Goals & Future Plans

Share Your Student-Athlete & Business Journey at MC!

VG

VictoriaGarrido (student)<vgarrido@mc.edu>

To: Mildred Oriza-Stephens

Wed 4/22/2026 3:37 PM

You forwarded this message on Thu 4/23/2026 9:16 AM








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Show all 15 attachments (21 MB) Download all

Hi Mildred,

Thank you again for all the guidelines and support!

I've finished writing my story and I'm attaching it as a PDF, along with a few photos that reflect my experience at Mississippi College.

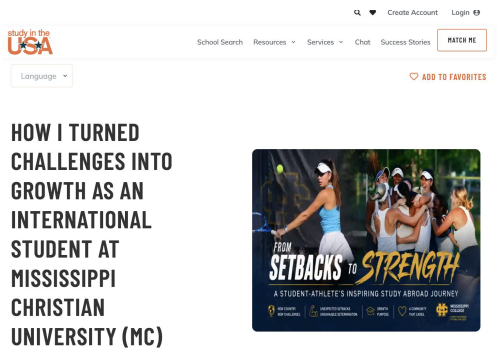
Please let me know if there's anything you'd like me to adjust or add. I'm happy to make any changes if needed.

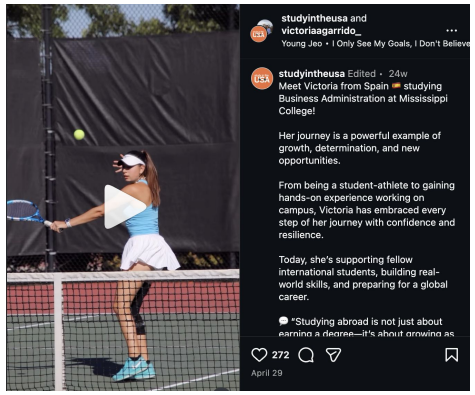
Looking forward to hearing your feedback!

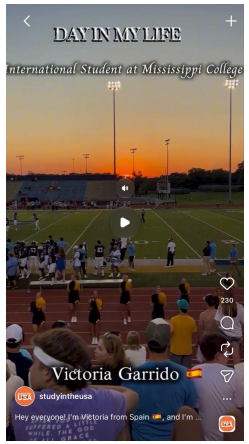
Best regards,
Victoria Garrido

One story. Everywhere.

Victoria asked once. We turned her blog — her journey as a student-athlete at Mississippi College — into **content on 10 channels.**







Campaign	Results	Reach
MS019 Mississippi Christian University Lead Gen ...	107 Leads	18,900

Instagram | Facebook | Facebook Reels | StudyUSA Blog | TikTok

YouTube Shorts | Twitter / X | Pinterest | Tumblr | Blogger

That's what a single student voice becomes when you give it a stage. Tap any platform to see it live.

Make it easy to share

Conversations

Peer chats, student panels, live Q&A, and ‘ask a student’ pages. Lowest effort, high trust.

Videos

Short, phone-shot, vertical. A day-in-the-life or one honest answer — no studio required.

Writing

Blogs, captions, and testimonials. Perfect for students who’d rather write than be on camera.

Give prompts, light guidance, and permission — not a script. A few starter questions and a deadline get you further than a polished brief. Authenticity is the point.

How Study in the USA helps

Select & support storytellers

We help you choose and coach a group of student ambassadors — the confident and the shy.

Create videos & blogs

We produce authentic videos and posts and publish them to millions on StudyUSA.com.

Train & guide end-to-end

We give students clear guidance at every step, so they feel confident and supported.

Feature them on all our site and channels

Showcase ambassadors on the StudyUSA Chat Page via Campus Community — no cost, no IT setup.

We handle it end to end — no extra meetings, no added workload for your team.

We meet students in every channel



LIVE SESSIONS



WEB SITE & MOBILE



SOCIAL MEDIA MARKETING



PODCAST



CONTENT MARKETING



EMAIL MESSAGING

Key takeaways

1

Peer influence now drives the decision.

International students weigh real student experiences over our messaging — the journey runs through each other.

2

Your ambassadors are already on campus.

Student workers, orientation leaders, and even the quiet students — everyone has a story worth sharing.

3

Make sharing simple.

Conversations, videos, and writing. Give prompts and permission, keep it authentic, and let students be believed.

Thank You!

Please complete the session evaluation.

Or SAVE LINK now and EVALUATE later!

bit.ly/nafsasessioneval



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REGION I, XII