

## DISRUPTIONS AND NEW PATHWAYS INTO STUDENT MOBILITY

# Leveraging the Power of the Indian Diaspora: US–India Higher Education Relations

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The growing Indian diaspora in the United States serves as a critical link for furthering US–India higher education relations, yet its role and potential are often overlooked. This article highlights the ways in which the diaspora on US campuses—from faculty to presidents and chancellors, to second-generation Indian American students—is furthering this critical relationship. The role of institutional partnerships and national policies is also discussed.

As global education landscapes shift and geopolitical alliances evolve, one enduring force continues to shape and strengthen the US–India relationship: the Indian diaspora. With over 5.2 million people of Indian origin in the United States—the largest such group outside India—the diaspora is not only significant demographically, but is also a diplomatic and intellectual bridge, especially within the higher education sector, where Indian Americans serve as connectors, champions, and catalysts for deeper bilateral cooperation.

From students and faculty to philanthropists, university leaders, and policy makers, members of the Indian diaspora have helped define and enrich the US–India higher education corridor.

### The Indian Diaspora on US Campuses

The Indian diaspora’s evolution in US higher education can be traced to the Immigration and Naturalization Act of 1965 which reopened the doors of US universities to Indian students, with subsequent waves arriving on graduate fellowships and research opportunities, particularly in STEM fields. Today, Indian students are the largest group of international students on US campuses, numbering 331,602.

Many Indian students remain in the United States as high-skilled immigrants, earning advanced degrees and taking up roles in academia, technology, medicine, and public service. Over time, this cohort has laid the foundation for an increasingly influential presence in US higher education. Yet others have returned home, establishing some of India’s most innovative universities—such as Ashoka University, the Indian School of Business (ISB), and Plaksha University—thus engaging in “brain circulation” by forging a higher education bridge between the two countries that facilitates a bidirectional flow of knowledge, talent, and people-to-people diplomacy.

Indian immigrants play an increasingly important role as faculty, deans, senior administrators, and university presidents and chancellors at US institutions, exemplifying how the diaspora is

reshaping university leadership in the United States. A 2024 report by the Presidents’ Alliance on Higher Education and Immigration found that India is the top country of origin of first-generation immigrant leaders of US campuses, accounting for 33 such individuals whose numbers continue to grow. However, despite their increasing presence and visibility, there is no similar estimate for the large numbers of Indians who occupy other leadership roles on campuses.

Accompanying the growth of the Indian diaspora on US campuses is the trend that Asian American first- and second-generation immigrants—including those of Indian heritage—constitute one of the largest groups of immigrant students on US campuses, accounting for almost a quarter of all immigrant students. Born and raised in the United States but with deep ties to India, this new generation of Indian American youth is actively engaged in study abroad programs, service-learning projects, and startup ventures that connect the two countries. Further, programs like the Young India Fellowship, Teach for India, and the American India Foundation’s Banyan Impact Fellowship attract second-generation Indian Americans eager to reconnect with their heritage while making meaningful contributions. These experiences often lead to academic or professional collaborations, further weaving the diaspora into the higher education fabric.

### A Multipronged Approach to Institutional Partnerships

The Indian diaspora’s leadership on US campuses enables familiarity with both countries’ education systems and cultures, allowing it to advocate effectively for bilateral programs, joint research, joint- and dual-degree programs, faculty exchanges, and short-term study abroad and internship programs in India for US students. Additionally, the diaspora’s deep networks in academia and industry and credibility in both countries has also helped overcome bureaucratic hurdles and cultural barriers.

At the institutional-level, US–India partnerships have been successfully forged by individual institutions partnering together but have also been propelled by various US–India delegations and taskforces in recent years, such as the Association of American Universities’ 2023 Task Force on Expanding United States–India University Partnerships.

Diaspora-driven cooperation is also reflected in the funding and support for India-focused centers at US universities such as the UCLA Center for India and South Asia, the Georgetown India Initiative, the Lakshmi Mittal and Family South Asia Institute at Harvard University, and the Gupta-Klinsky Institute at Johns Hopkins University that help advance research, teaching, and policy engagement between US and Indian universities.

Other diasporic initiatives to further US–India higher education relations have emerged from within the US nonprofit sector. The recently launched South Asia International Education Network (SouthAsia-IEN) is a first ever effort that leverages the diaspora model to bring together leaders, practitioners, scholars, and entrepreneurs in the US higher education space whose origins and/or work touch upon the countries of South Asia.

At the governmental level, both countries have flagship programs like the Fulbright-Nehru Fellowships, GIAN (Global Initiative of Academic Networks), SPARC (Scheme for Promotion of Academic and Research Collaboration), the Ramanujan Fellowship, and the VAJRA (Visiting Advanced Joint Research) Faculty Scheme that often attract Indian-origin scholars from the United States. In addition, the Indo-US Science and Technology Forum (IUSSTF) has acted as a key institutional platform, facilitated in part by diaspora engagement, to promote academic and scientific cooperation. Finally, at least three successive US State Department-funded efforts led by the University of Nebraska, Miami University, and the University of Denver have focused on US–India institutional partnerships, with a large part of the work spearheaded by Indian-origin faculty and experts in the United States.

During recent high-level dialogues—including Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s 2023 state visit to Washington—diaspora leaders have convened educational roundtables with university presidents and policy makers, thus reemphasizing higher education as a core pillar of the US–India strategic partnership.

A February 2025 US–India Joint Leaders’ Statement issued by the White House emphasizes the important role of student mobility and talent flows, the economic contributions of Indian students and immigrants, and higher education partnerships. At the India end, the National Education Policy 2020 is promising, as it highlights the importance of internationalizing Indian postsecondary education and provides several avenues for doing so, including permitting the establishment of US offshore campuses in India. Illinois Institute of Technology will be the first US institution to establish a brick-and-mortar campus (Illinois Tech Mumbai) in India. Two of its key institutional leaders who shaped this development are Indian Americans and former international students from India.

## Looking Ahead: Challenges and Strategic Opportunities

As India positions itself as a rising knowledge economy and seeks to globalize its higher education system, the Indian diaspora will remain a strategic asset in achieving these ambitions, yet one whose potential has not yet been fully tapped.

However, sustaining and expanding the US–India higher education relationship is not without challenges at both ends. Complicated regulations at the India end continue to be an issue, as do visa and immigration issues, primarily at the US end. Other aspects that affect the appeal of the United States for Indian students are also at risk, including the vulnerability of the Optional Practical Training (OPT) work-study program, the uncertainty surrounding the immigration pathway in the United States, and the overall decline in research funding for US universities. (Most Indian students pursue graduate-level studies in research-heavy STEM fields.) At the institutional level, extreme budget cuts, greater federal scrutiny of campus programming, and an overall precarious climate at many US institutions might limit their ability to engage globally with partner institutions. Finally, on the research front, there exists a significant gap in quantifying the exact academic and economic impact of Indian American faculty and administrators, understanding the role of second-generation Indian Americans in shaping higher education priorities, and developing case studies on diaspora-led institutions or initiatives.

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