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## US universities still a top draw for international students

**Around the globe, many say that the Virginia Tech shootings won't affect their plans to study in the US.**

By [Peter Ford](#) | Staff writer of The Christian Science Monitor

Nikhil Mantrawadi, a 28-year-old Indian computer engineering student from Pune, is burning the midnight oil these days, hunching his tall frame over preparations for the Graduate Record Examination he is scheduled to take on May 30.

A good score will be his ticket to grad school at a top US university – Stanford, he hopes – and to his dream of a career as a scientist there. The massacre at Virginia Tech has not deterred him in the slightest.

Indeed, he is considering applying to Virginia Tech because of its reputation. "That was an isolated incident," he says of Cho Seung-hui's shooting spree that left 32 people dead on Monday. "The massacre was committed by a student, not a terrorist. It could have happened anywhere."

The campus tragedy has caught the world's attention, but interviews around the globe suggest that it has dissuaded very few from pursuing their dreams of studying at some of the most revered universities in the world.

Today's internationally mobile students "go wherever they need to go to do what they need to do," says Rolf Hoffmann, head of the Fulbright Commission in Berlin, which advises students on study in the US. "They are not guided by emotion."

They are not universally sanguine, however. In Seoul, where Mr. Cho was born, fourth-year Korea University student Kim Min Wook says that after he graduates in June, he will continue his studies in England because "America is more dangerous."

"Now people hesitate to go to the US," he adds.

But most students' worries are outweighed by the career prospects that a US education opens up and the sense that "this was an exceptional affair ... a personal problem, not the fault of an educational system," as an international relations official at a leading Chinese university put it.

"This will not discourage students," says Albert Kim, a former UN official from South Korea who studied in the US. "They know study in the States is the only way to a really good education. Everybody wants to go to the US."

That will reassure American educators and university administrators who have been aggressively seeking to carve out a larger share of the lucrative and growing international education market.

More than 564,000 foreign students are enrolled at US universities – more than twice the number in Britain, the second-largest host. International students contribute \$13.5 billion a year to the US economy and higher education is the fifth-largest service-sector export, according to the Department of Commerce.

And the outlook is promising: A 2004 report by British and Australian universities predicted that 5.8 million students will be studying abroad by 2020, up from 2.1 million in 2003.

Though efforts to grow the US share of that market appear unlikely to suffer significantly from the Virginia attack, they do not help burnish America's international image among young people.

"I've thought about going to study in America but now that I see the problems there, I'm not sure I want to," says Tanya Kovaleva, a language student at Moscow State University in Russia. "It seems like anyone can get a gun and just go kill people. The thought of that really scares me. I will think twice before going to the US."

US gun laws have drawn particular criticism in Europe, where the press and public debate have focused on the ease with which Cho acquired two handguns.

"Perhaps of all the elements of American exceptionalism ... it is the gun culture that foreigners find so hard to understand," wrote British commentator Gerard Baker in *The Times*.

"Last night, French (TV) news showed a guy who wanted to buy a gun ... going to a store and buying one" in the US, says Gaelle, a cosmetics saleswoman at a Paris market. "That's something we can't imagine."

America's international reputation as a gun-slinging society dashed one Chinese woman's hopes of studying there several years ago. Qi Wei wanted to do her master's in engineering in the United States, but recalls that "my family were very against me going."

"They thought everyone has guns; they didn't want to see me in this kind of dangerous environment," she says. Her parents forbade her to study in the US, so she went to a British university.

Parents are more worried than their student offspring by the sort of news they have heard from America this week, says the Chinese university administrator, who asked not to be identified. "They have not had much opportunity to go abroad, and get their information from the media," she says. "And they don't report peaceful things, only the security problems."

That leads "some Korean parents not to let their kids go to certain universities" in US cities with a reputation for violence, says Frank Plantan, a US visiting fellow at Kyunghee University.

Such worries will now be compounded by fears of an anti-Korean backlash, say some students in Seoul. "Some Korean moms are reluctant to send boys to the States and even more reluctant to send girls," says Kim Woo-Ree, a third-year student at Korea University.

In Pune, the staff of an academy coaching Indian students for US grad-school entrance exams were quick to phone parents when they heard of the shooting. Most parents saw it as "a stray incident," says Dilip Oak, head of the academy; none of his students have yet changed their plans, he adds, in contrast to 9/11, which caused a two-year drop in his student numbers.

Viewed from some regions like the Middle East, Monday's death toll of 32 was tragic, but hardly more shocking than the daily news stream of violence. And the opportunities held out by a US education far outweigh any fears of violence, especially when the risks of being caught in it are more remote than at home, says Joseph Phillips, Morocco country director of America-Mideast Educational and Training Services, which brings students to the US.

Morocco, for example, has seen a spate of suicide bombings over the past month, Mr. Phillips says. "Throughout the whole region, we have seen these things happen. A student is not going to run away from studying in the US because of this."

Especially when the prospects are so enticing. "The quality of the education and scholarship has a reputation for being much better than it is here, and students have much more individual freedom to pursue projects that interest them," says Mr. Hoffmann, who says he gets five times more high-quality applications for German Fulbright scholarships than he can accommodate.

That is the attraction for Shi Xia, who is doing her master's at Peking University, and who wants to continue her studies of Chinese women's history in the US. "In the field of women's history, American universities do a much better job than other countries," Ms. Shi says.

"Students are seeking knowledge," says Pan Wei, a Peking University professor who studied and taught at Berkeley. "Chinese students know quite well that the US is still one of the safest countries with an abundance of knowledge."

When he was studying in California, 20 years ago, he was warned not to carry more than \$20 and to give it up if mugged, Mr. Pan recalls. "People understand it is not as safe as China.... But it is not a problem that will stop people going to study."

Sergei Oznobishchev, a professor of journalism in Moscow, agrees. "My students think the shooting was tragic, but it wouldn't stop them from going to America.... They say that many things happen everywhere, and if they go to America they will try to be careful."

• *Mark Rice-Oxley in London, Robert Marquand in Paris, Mariah Blake in Hamburg, Anuj Chopra in Pune, India, Donald Kirk in Seoul, Jill Carroll in Cairo, and Fred Weir in Moscow contributed. Peter Ford wrote the story from*

*Beijing.*

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