

Tourist Towns Around Yellowstone Rely on International Students to Survive Record-Breaking Summer

Yellowstone's gateway communities rely on international students to stay afloat during record-breaking summer surge.

BILLINGS, MT, UNITED STATES, August 22, 2025 /EINPresswire.com/ -- Yellowstone's gateway communities are welcoming record-breaking numbers of tourists this summer, but behind the bustling shops, hotels, and restaurants is a group that many guests never see: international students on cultural exchange programs.

With Yellowstone National Park drawing 1,690,922 recreational visits in the first half of the year—a 4% increase over 2024—the surrounding towns are struggling to keep pace. In rural areas like Big Sky, Gardiner, and West Yellowstone, where local populations remain low, the surge in visitors creates an annual labor gap that businesses augment with the help of the U.S. Department of State's [Summer Work Travel \(SWT\)](#) program.

"We don't have the population to draw from," says Anna Johnson, Director of Community Engagement at Lone Mountain Land Company in Big Sky, MT. "There just is not the local workforce available."

She adds that the program benefits the entire community: "People in Big Sky, or who are visiting Big Sky, might never have the opportunity to travel to Bulgaria or Jamaica or Taiwan, but—especially when they're working together and living together—they become lifelong friends."

The SWT program, created under the Mutual Educational and Cultural Exchange Act of 1961 (also



International students help businesses in Yellowstone's gateway communities keep up with the annual influx of summer visitors.

known as the Fulbright-Hays Act), allows international university students to work seasonally in the U.S. while experiencing American culture firsthand. Many of those students are sponsored through [InterExchange](#), a New York-based nonprofit designated by the U.S. Department of State to sponsor J-1 Visas and support these important cultural exchange programs.

Beyond facilitating visa sponsorship, InterExchange also provides ongoing support and cultural resources to help students engage more deeply with their host communities.

“My best experience was meeting people from other countries, getting to know their cultures, and also meeting many American friends,” says María, a former SWT participant from Colombia, sponsored by InterExchange. “And the magical place where I lived, it was an unforgettable experience that left me with incredible friends.”

Businesses say the program doesn’t just provide much-needed seasonal help—it also contributes directly to the local economy. According to a study by the Alliance for International Exchange, SWT participants spend approximately \$353 million annually in the U.S. during their stays.

“The Summer Work Travel program not only provides a benefit to American businesses,” says Casey Slamin, Senior Vice President of Programs at InterExchange, “but it also bolsters the U.S. economy while fulfilling the diplomatic mission of increasing mutual understanding between Americans and young people from abroad.”

Through its sponsorship of students placed in parks, coastal resorts, and rural towns across the U.S., InterExchange plays a vital role in strengthening both local economies and cross-cultural ties, thus creating a safer, stronger, more prosperous America.

For more information about InterExchange and its cultural exchange programs, visit



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