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International Rebound

The graduate student population in the years ahead is likely to increase in size — and to have many more Asian engineers.

Data being released today by the Council of Graduate Schools show a continued rebound of foreign enrollments in American graduate education. While enrollment for the next academic year won't be clear for a few months, the total number of foreign applications for graduate school in the United States was up 12 percent for the year, and the number of offers of admission was also up 12 percent. Last year, applications were down by 3 percent and admissions were up by 3 percent, as graduate schools struggled to deal with increased competition from other countries' universities and from the impact of tighter visa rules for those wishing to study in the United States.

This year's substantial increase in both applications and admissions was encouraging to college officials. Graduate schools responding to the council's survey indicated that they had been able to attract more applicants and extend more offers of admission without altering selectivity. About 24 percent of foreign applicants were admitted this year, the same percentage as last year.

While the overall numbers were strong, there was considerable variation from country to country and for field of study, with notable increases coming from China and India, while admissions offers fell to those from the Middle East. This year marks the first time in three years that admissions offers have increased to those from China or decreased to those from the Middle East. In field of study, the council's survey of graduate schools found the most dramatic increase in offers of admission to engineering students, while offers in the arts and humanities fell slightly — even though applications were up.

Debra W. Stewart, president of the graduate school council, said the figures are good news for graduate schools and their universities. "There's no question that we are seeing a real turnaround," she said. At the same time, however, she noted that even if there are similar increases in actual enrollments this fall of new graduate students, total foreign enrollments are unlikely to reach 2003 levels.

With many universities in other countries going after top graduate students, Stewart said it was crucial for American institutions to regain enrollment levels now. Long term, she said it was likely that the United States would lose some market share for foreign students, but that if its institutions make up for lost ground now, they can stay competitive for the best foreign students.

While Stewart said that some of the progress is due to improvements in the visa system, she noted that the survey found that many graduate schools have taken new steps to recruit foreign students in recent years — in terms of organization, marketing and funding.

Kenneth J. Gerhardt, interim graduate dean at the University of Florida, said that his institution was back to "near normal" levels of foreign enrollments because of such activity. He said that the university had streamlined its application process, made it possible for foreign students to more easily pay in-state tuition rates (making their scholarships more affordable for departments), bolstered scholarship funds for master's programs, added staff members to help international applicants, and opened an office in Beijing.

Together, these moves have had "a tremendous impact," he said.

Many other graduate schools are reporting impressive gains this year. The University of California at Los Angeles is expecting to see its number of new international students this fall be 60 percent higher than the total

two years ago. "It's looking like a very good year," said Claudia Mitchell-Kernan, dean of the graduate school. While international students make up only around 16 percent of the total graduate population, they are a majority in some engineering and physical sciences departments, so the post-9/11 decreases were of great concern, she said.

In some cases where numbers are down, factors out of the control of American institutions may be at play.

Josephine Griffin, a senior program officer at Amideast, which promotes educational exchanges with Middle Eastern countries, said that interest remains very high among American universities in recruiting there and among students there in enrolling in the United States. At the most competitive level — Fulbright fellowships, for example — there is no shortage of outstanding applicants, she said.

But Griffin said that she wasn't surprised that overall acceptance figures aren't going up.

Students in the Middle East don't have a lot of experience with standardized tests and their GRE and other scores tend, on average, to be lower than those sought by top graduate programs. She also said that the "statement of purpose" for graduate applications is difficult for students who have not had a Western-style education. Griffin stressed that many of these students have great potential and intelligence, but have difficulty in the application process.

In China and other parts of Asia, Griffin added, there is much more of an emphasis in preparing students for an American-style graduate education, so it's not surprising that enrollments are surging from those parts of the world. "I worry for some of the students who may miss out," she said.

— *Scott Jaschik*

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