

Schools struggle to combat foreign student drop

Educators encourage active recruitment, hope numbers will climb back up

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Five years after the terrorist attacks of 9/11, U.S. colleges and universities are fighting to reverse what some consider an alarming decline in foreign student enrollment.

Despite a tightening of visa regulations in the months immediately following the attacks, foreign student enrollment actually increased in 2001, in part because of students who already had applied or enrolled. But since then numbers have steadily declined.

Foreign student enrollment slid 2.4 percent in 2003-04 and another 1.3 percent last year, even as overall student enrollments rose, according to the Institute of International Education. The decline marks the first decrease in foreign student numbers in three decades.

The possible cause for the slump is still being debated in academic circles and among U.S. policy-makers who are looking for ways to bring the numbers back up. This is because many universities depend on foreign graduate students for research and teaching assistance — particularly in engineering and sciences. Majority of these students contribute to technological and scientific research projects on and off-campus while some go on to take up teaching positions in American colleges and universities.

“Globalization is not just a term anymore. It is a reality on our campus,” said Catharine R. Stimpson, dean of the graduate school at New York University.

“We live in an interdependent world and people should learn to respect each other and gain new and broader perspective. A good deal of American science and math health depends on international student numbers,” she said.

She stressed the importance of good faculty to help attract students from all over the world as well as increased scholarships to draw foreign students.

After all, America has played host to more than half a million foreign students over the past six years, and the Department of Commerce describes higher education as the nation’s fifth-largest service sector export.

Foreign students pump money into the national economy and provide revenue to their host states for living expenses, including room and board, books and health insurance. Most of this revenue, nearly 72 percent, comes from funding sources outside the United States as most international students, especially at the undergraduate level, do not get scholarships or tuition waivers. Foreign students contributed \$13.3 billion to the U.S. economy in 2004-5, according to the National Association of International Educators.

But, it’s not just the financial aspect that is making educators nervous.

Loss of 'brainpower'

Richard Wheeler, dean of graduate colleges at University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, is concerned about the loss of “brainpower” for his science and engineering departments, especially at the graduate level, where foreign students are a key component and comprise 1/3 of the total graduate student population. Wheeler was disappointed when his university saw a 30 percent decline in graduate student applications after 9/11.

“Our university has a very large and reputable engineering and science programs. This is what attracts most international students — mostly from China, India and South Korea — and they are a big piece of our talent pool,” Wheeler said. “These students are very important to our research operations, and what’s alarming is the possibility that we may be losing access to these very smart people,” he added.

For example, majority of the 36.5 percent of the 9,188 international graduate students at the University of Illinois gravitated toward programs in engineering and the sciences in fall of 2005.

"Now we are in a modest recovery mode, and our graduate application and enrollment numbers have risen a little bit this year," he said.

Deeper issues

While 9/11 was definitely the flashpoint, there are other deeper concerns that need to be addressed about the state of health of higher education in the United States, says Debra Stewart, head of the Council of Graduate Schools.

Her organization, which specifically tracks graduate student mobility, shows international applications were up about 11 percent in fall 2005 after a cumulative decline of 32 percent over the previous two years, according to CGS. But it is hard to predict if this increase in applications will translate into actual enrollment. A previous CGS report found that enrollment rose 1 percent last fall after three successive years of declines.

As of now, hard numbers show that total international grad applications are still down 23 percent from 2003. With the exception of the humanities, all major fields showed declines in enrollment of international graduate students. The largest declines were in business and education, which lost 8 percent each, followed by engineering at 6 percent.

Competition from other countries

"Not every aspect of the declining number of international students can be pinned to 9/11," says Stewart. She points to increased competition from United Kingdom, Australia, Canada and even China for international students as these countries step up recruitment.

"Most of this competition has modeled itself after the U.S. system — which still remains the best in the world — but we have to acknowledge that we may no longer be the *only* education destination for students anymore," she says.

European universities have launched massive efforts to streamline their doctoral degrees so they can be completed in three or four years, rather than the five or six generally required at U.S. universities. As China and India have emerged to be economic powerhouses, they have expanded their higher education offerings. Stewart points to the 44 percent increase in undergraduate enrollments in China's Shanghai region over the past few years.

As educational opportunities improve in less-developed countries, they become more attractive to international students, especially given the far lower costs of tuition, room and board.

But Stewart is optimistic about the future of international student education in the United States.

"Our surveys show international applications are increasing again," she says. Even though the U.S. may be losing market share to other countries, Stewart predicts that in the next three years U.S. will get back to pre-9/11 levels simply because the pool of international applicants is growing.

The more critical question, she says, is whether "we can attract the quality that we have attracted in the past and in sufficient numbers."

Policy-makers appear to be noticing the increased competition for international students. The U.S. government has launched an active PR campaign and launched [a redesigned Web site](#) that offers overseas students a one-stop shop to answer visa and admissions-related questions. It links to a global network of more than 450 advising centers and encourages students to connect to their local center while offering an easy-to-navigate site. Many foreign students complained previous Web offerings were perplexing at best.

Then there is the Protecting America's Competitive Edge Act introduced in January 2006 and aimed at bolstering U.S. competitiveness in science and technology. The proposal, which has backing from senators in both parties, was based on a report by the National Academy of Science. One of the key

recommendations of this report is to “develop, recruit and retain top students, scientists and engineers from both the U.S. and abroad.”

Visa processing time has also improved after the post-9/11 slowdown, and the government has boosted staffing in some consulates.

Creative strategy

Some universities are even getting creative in the ways they attract foreign students.

“Earlier the strategy was 'open your mail,' because we had an abundance of talented applicants to choose from, but we've realized this doesn't work anymore,” said Stuart Heiser, manager of government relations & public affairs at the Council of Graduate Schools.

He talks about how many universities have allocated resources in terms of staffing and are pursuing active recruitment policies. Some campuses have dedicated admission counselors who work only with international students and understand the admission and visa process very thoroughly. Others offer overnight staffing to account for global time differences, and yet others have set up call centers that offer international toll-free calls.

“Our colleges and universities have been proactive in reaching out to international students to let them know that they are welcome here,” said Allan E. Goodman, president and chief executive of the Institute of International Education.

He said educators and policy-makers need to continue efforts to get the word out that America's doors are open to international students.

Goodman suggests colleges actively recruit abroad and not “just depend on students to find you.” He wants deans and provosts to collaborate with foreign universities and harness the power of alumni goodwill. He also advocates using technology to spread the word via message boards, networking sites and e-mails.

“Our students are our best marketers,” agrees Wheeler.

“They go back and talk about our programs and promote it to their countrymen. You may not know this, but most foreign students have this amazing network and sense of connectivity with their culture,” he said.

Wheeler advocates campus cross-collaboration and points to a partnership that was started three years ago between the chemical engineering department at the University of Illinois and the National University of Singapore.

“It has reaped us rich rewards,” he said.

Campus diversity

Kerry Bolognese, vice president of international programs at the National Association of State Universities and Land Grant Colleges, agrees.

“I have heard from so many students about the benefits of international classmates and how they lower cultural barriers and foster a less parochial understanding of the world, which is so important in this globalized economy,” he said.

“It gives us such a well-rounded perspective, especially if local colleges cannot afford to host exchange programs and send their students abroad for a different cultural experience, at least they can allow for cultural interaction within the college campuses and let students benefit from the interaction.”

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