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Education

U.S. Feels Heat As China Moves To Boost Education

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Experts hold that countries such as China have dramatically focused attention on improving education while the United States is not doing as well as it should.

Debra Stewart, president of the Council on Graduate Schools, said there have been multiple reports noting drastic differences between the numbers of U.S. and Chinese undergraduate degrees in science, technology, engineering and math, or STEM. The United States reportedly graduated 70,000 engineers in 2004, compared with 600,000 in China.

However, it is not useful to discuss the numbers in detail "because it is very hard at this stage" to confirm China's numbers, Stewart said. "We don't have a huge amount of confidence in what the China numbers are. What we do know is that higher education in China is growing," with a renewed emphasis in STEM graduate studies.

"In China, numbers range from 50 [percent] to 70 percent in STEM fields," she said. "In the U.S. it has never broken 20 percent."

Robert Thach, a graduate school dean at Washington University, and Richard Wheeler, a graduate dean at the University of Illinois, agree that China has placed a significant amount of energy into improving its education and producing a higher percentage of STEM graduates. However, Wheeler said that while graduate programs in China have skyrocketed, "the size has probably outpaced the quality."

Thach, a regular visitor to China, said the United States remains the world's focal point for graduate education, adding that China has encouraged its brightest students to study abroad. "I don't think it is a danger that [China is] doing better, but it is a danger that we are not doing as well as we could be doing," he said.

According to Stewart, a U.S. policy window has been emerging, with Congress and industry showing increased concern about U.S. education competitiveness. Four bills currently in the Senate address those issues.

Experts concur that the American competitiveness initiative proposed by President Bush to encourage national innovation is positive. But Wheeler said it needs to be accompanied by funds and focus in the right areas.

Wheeler traveled to China in October because his university had been experiencing a drastic drop in applications from Chinese students and "needed to find out what was going on." The dean believes the fall was a result of a number of factors, including a booming Chinese economy, the affects of U.S. policies following the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks and a market correction.

"The baseline need in graduate programs that have ambitious research programs for highly talented students right now cannot be met by the domestic talent pool," he said.

According to Thach, education in China is more affordable -- not taking into consideration scholarships -- than in the United States. Stewart noted that much of the core funding in China for graduate schools thus far has been government funded.

This year, the Chinese government announced it would make rural education free from kindergarten through the ninth grade by the end of 2007.