

Competition Worries Graduate Programs

By Valerie Strauss

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Tuesday, April 18, 2006; A06

On one level, the numbers look positive:

- More than 1.5 million students are enrolled in university graduate programs in the United States -- more than in any other country in the world.
- Enrollment in graduate schools has been growing at an annual rate of between 2 and 3 percent for the past 30 years.
- After a few years of decline, international applications to U.S. graduate schools were up 11 percent this school year.

But Debra W. Stewart is concerned about the future of graduate education in the United States. She heads the Council of Graduate Schools, a nonprofit organization made up of institutions that annually award more than 95 percent of all U.S. doctorates and about 85 percent of all U.S. master's degrees.

Looking beyond the statistics, Stewart said, there are plenty of reasons to be concerned, including international competition modeling itself after the U.S. system -- and getting stronger -- and high dropout rates in some graduate programs.

What's more, there aren't enough PhD-qualified teachers in some fields, including business, nursing, some areas of engineering, speech pathology and communication science, according to educators, a problem for schools whose accreditation agencies require that a certain percentage of faculty have doctorates.

Then there is the issue of international applications. Relief swept the world of graduate education when the council recently released a report showing an increase in international applications. But what got lost in the excitement, Stewart said, was that the increase still doesn't make up for the decline in the past decade.

International applications are still down 23 percent from 2003, she said, at a time when foreign students receive most of the degrees in several fields. Twenty-five years ago, U.S. students made up about 78 percent of students receiving science and engineering graduate degrees. Today, it is about half. And foreign students who do come to study at U.S. universities no longer remain: Twenty-five years ago, 70 to 80 percent of foreign students stayed in the United States after receiving their graduate degrees, but now only 50 percent do.

"I really believe that it is highly unlikely that we will ever return to the point where we will have anything like the share of the international student population that we have today, or that we've had over the last years," Stewart said.

That is why she and other educators are calling for initiatives to appeal to foreign students and get more Americans to enter U.S. graduate schools -- and stay in the pipeline.

"As long as we can attract the best, domestically and internationally, we don't need to worry about the competition," Stewart said. "And we have a head start. So if we lose this, we deserve to lose this."