



Assessing a Year of International Graduate Admissions: Trends and Findings from the CGS International Graduate Admissions Survey

by Heath Brown, Director of Research and Policy Analysis; Peter Syverson, Vice President of Research and Information Services and Maria Doulis, Research Intern

Introduction

Thanks to the continued support of the CGS membership, we have been able to finalize our year-long International Graduate Admissions Survey. The three sections of the survey -- applications (March), admits (June), and enrollment (September) -- track the admissions cycle from start to finish for this critical year in international graduate student admissions. The findings of the second survey were summarized in the October 2004 issue of the *Communicator* ("Data Sources: Declines in International Graduate Students Applications and Admits: A Campus-Based View of the Issue"). The following article summarizes these trends with a particular focus on the latest findings from the third survey on final enrollments this fall. In addition, we gathered information on international graduate student exchange partnerships that can help inform the thinking of graduate deans on ways to engage the international graduate education community.

National Trends

In a survey of the roughly 450 CGS members, we received 127 responses, including 80 percent of institutions in the top 25 in terms of international student enrollment and greater than 60 percent of those in the top 50. This survey asked for the graduate school to report domestic and international admits, first-time enrollment, and total enrollment as of the same date in fall 2003 and fall 2004. The survey also included questions on country of origin and field of study for those same categories of admissions information.

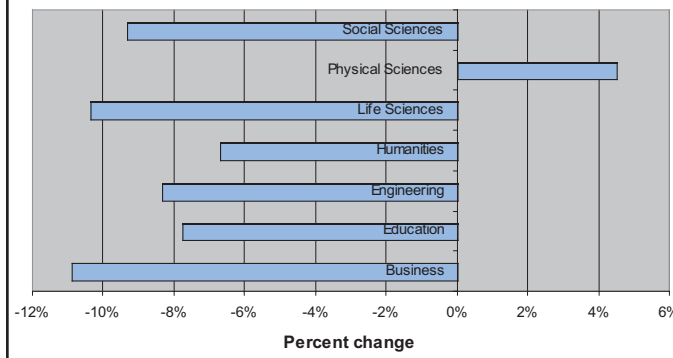
The focus of our analysis was first-time international enrollment, since total enrollment is less likely to change greatly from year to year. Our analysis revealed that 68 percent of responding institutions reported declines in first-time international graduate enrollment, translating to a 6 percent decline overall. Further, the fall 2004 cohort of first-time international graduate students is the group linked to the application class that had the 28 percent decline.

Given previously reported decreases in applications and admissions from China, India, Korea and the Middle East, it was not surprising to see that first-time enrollments from those countries also declined. First-time enrollment from China, the largest source of international students, decreased 8 percent; likewise, first-time enrollments from

India dipped by 4 percent, by 12 percent for Korea, and by 3 percent for the Middle East (See Figure 1). While these are disheartening numbers, given the widespread concern that enhanced visa security checks (like the Visas Mantis and Visas Condor) might disproportionately affect students from the Middle East, the finding on the Middle East may be taken as a small positive sign. This also follows the pattern of the earlier surveys that found graduate applications and admits from the Middle East were down, but not to the same extent as from other parts of the world.

Almost all fields of study saw a decline in first-time enrollment by international students. The fields of business, the life sciences/agriculture, and engineering saw the steepest declines, with losses in first-time enrollment of -12 percent, -10 percent and -8 percent, respectively. Education (-8 percent), humanities (-7 percent), and social sciences (-9 percent) all experienced declines as well, even though international enrollment in these fields is much smaller than the other fields. The only exception was the physical sciences, which

Figure 1: Percent Change in First-Time International Enrollment 2003-2004 (By Field)



showed an increase in first-time enrollment of 6 percent (See Figure 2). An interesting aspect of the finding on physical sciences is that the same number of respondents reported increases and decreases, but the relative size of the programs and magnitude of change for those with increases produced an aggregate 6 percent increase.

Eighty percent of institutions in the top 25 in terms of international student enrollment responded to the survey. For those institutions, the decline in first-time international enrollment was more acute: top 25 institutions showed a 9 percent decline compared to a decrease of only 4 percent for institutions outside the top 25. These more pronounced declines for institutions in the top 25 also held for the countries of origin: declines from China, Korea and the Middle East --but not India -- were greater for those institutions in the top 25 than for non-top 25 institutions.

One reason for the sharper decline for those in the top 25 in terms of international student enrollment is that those institutions also enroll the most students in engineering where some of the largest declines were seen. In fact, 18 institutions are in the top 25 in both engineering and international student enrollment.

These findings follow from a 28 percent decline in international graduate applications and an 18 percent decline in international graduate admits reported in September. The primary reason that the 18 percent decline in admits did not translate into as large a decline in first-time enrollment was a notable increase in admissions yield. In 2003, 38 percent of admitted international graduate students enrolled in U.S. graduate schools, while in 2004 that figure was 43 percent.

First-year declines must also be viewed in the context of overall patterns of graduate enrollment. The survey found total international graduate enrollment (both first-time and continuing students) down only 3 percent and domestic first-time and total graduate enrollment down between 2 and 1 percent, respectively. This suggests other related factors, such as economic and labor market cycles, may be driving enrollment patterns. However, given the three consecutive years of first-year declines, total international graduate enrollment will soon decline further if substantial growth in first-time enrollment does not occur in the next few years.

Campus-Based View

International student issues are important from the national perspective and, as a result, the 6 percent decline has been widely quoted in the national news media. Another interesting perspective on these issues is at the campus level, where we have observed graduate deans taking an active role in addressing international student issues. The numbers show that international graduate students enroll at nearly all types and sizes of institutions, although they enroll in large numbers at a relatively small number of institutions, particularly those with large engineering programs. For this reason, an additional avenue of research is to examine the relationship between applications, admits, and enrollment at the campus-level: Did the declines in applications that occurred at nearly all institutions translate to declines in admits and enrollment? Do institutions with large international student populations experience the same pattern of declines across these categories as those with relatively few?

Only a handful of institutions that responded to the first survey on applications experienced increases over the last year. Over 90 percent of institutions saw declines in applications. For those institutions that had declines, 80 percent eventually had declines in graduate admits, while 20 percent were stable or increased in admits.

After admits, the next stage of the admissions process comes in September or October with fall enrollment, most importantly new or first-time enrollment. Of those institutions that had declines in admits, 65 percent also reported declines in first-time enrollment, while 35 percent reported increases in first-time enrollment. The magnitude of the decline differed greatly from campus to campus. Twenty-eight percent of those institutions with admit declines reported greater than 15 percent declines in first-time enrollment, a third reported moderate declines between 5 to 15 percent, and nearly a third reported essentially no change or small increases.

Another factor to consider is the relationship between institutional size in terms of international enrollment and the change in first-time enrollment over this past year. Large institutions, defined here as those institutions in the upper half in terms of international enrollment in 2004, also appear to have experienced the largest declines in first-time international enrollment. About 30 percent of large institutions had declines greater than 15 percent, while only 19 percent of small institutions had such declines. Around fifty percent of small insti-

tutions had declines between zero and 15 percent. An equal portion, about a quarter, of both large and small institutions had increases in first-time enrollment.

Graduate Institutions and International Relationships

Another aspect of our year-long research on international graduate student admissions has been an investigation of international activities within the graduate schools. Graduate schools have always been successful due to their adaptability to change and their leadership role in initiating best practices. We were pleased to find that this same tradition of innovation and engagement in policy change is occurring in the international arena.

One of the most interesting findings from the second survey was that three-quarters of responding institutions had initiated some policy or practice change to make the international admissions process easier or more efficient. These changes included streamlining the admissions

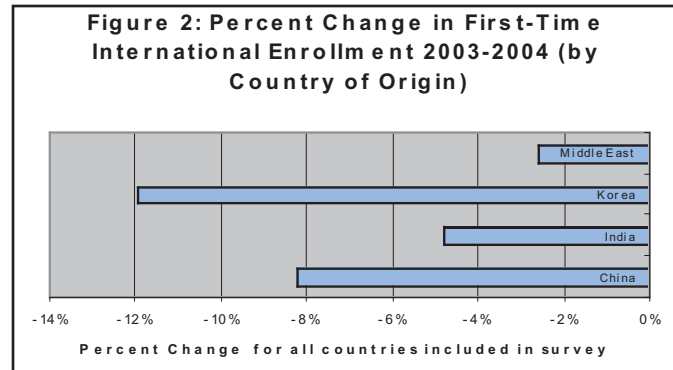
processes, enhancing use of technology, and changing admissions dates to make sure international students have sufficient time to file for a visa. Call centers, web-based applications, and seminars on the visa process were other ways that some graduate schools have begun to adapt to the changing atmosphere surrounding international admissions.

Survey III probed this issue further by focusing on the topics of international student exchange partnerships. There is surprisingly little comprehensive research about these types of partnerships at the graduate level, and we hoped to gain some insights into the prevalence and structure of these relationships. Out of the 127 institutions that responded to Survey III, more than half -- 67 institutions -- responded that they have formal relationships that facilitate the exchange of students with institutions abroad. These formal relationships include exchange programs, joint degree programs, formal agreements and partnerships with foreign universities. For most universities, these relationships are a proactive way to attract international graduate students to their universities.

The most common of these formal relationships are exchange programs. Thirty institutions reported having formal exchange programs with foreign universities in which graduate student flows are reciprocal: American graduate students study at foreign institutions and foreign graduate students study in American graduate schools for specified amounts of time.

Also common were formal agreements and memoranda of understanding between institutions in the United States and universities abroad; twenty institutions reported participating in such agreements. These agreements include partnerships with foreign universities that result in the enrollment of international students in American institutions (without necessarily the reciprocation of American students to foreign universities), formalized opportunities for and promises of research and other support for students, and faculty arrangements allowing foreign professionals to enroll in American professional schools.

American universities have also established a number of joint degree programs with foreign universities. Eleven schools reported having such programs in place, mostly in the field of business. Nine schools reported other types of formal relationships with foreign universities, including study abroad programs, joint online courses, summer institutes, mentoring for foreign students, and relationships with sponsoring organizations (as opposed to foreign universities), such as AMIDEAST.



For the most part, these relationships have been forged with institutions in Western Europe, particularly with universities in France and Germany. Twenty-five institutions reported relationships with French universities and twenty reported relationships with German universities. Surprisingly, there were significantly fewer institutions reporting relationships with China (6), Korea (4) and India (2), the nations that send the greatest number of international students to American universities.

These relationships span disciplines, but have been greatest in business and engineering, with eleven schools reporting relationships rooted in these fields. The fewest were in the life sciences (2) and in education (3).

Universities that take steps to forge these relationships with universities abroad have been active in cultivating these relationships. On average, universities reporting the existence of formal relationships with institutions abroad maintain 7-8 relationships that have resulted in graduate student exchanges over the past three years.

Discussion

The CGS International Graduate Admissions Survey was our first attempt to collect statistical data on a topic of immediate concern to U.S. graduate education. The survey series was successful because of the excellent response of the CGS membership. The availability of up-to-date information on this important topic allowed CGS to speak with authority to policy makers in Washington and press reporters around the country. The findings of substantial declines in international student applications, admissions, and first-time enrollment drew the attention of national associations, Congressional members, federal policy makers, and the press. We found that graduate education is of interest to the national press and to congressional delegations and that, when equipped with the latest quantitative data from its members, CGS can be highly effective in representing its membership in Washington policy circles.

Clearly, the issue of international graduate student flows will remain an important priority for graduate education in the future. In the coming years, global competition can only become stronger as investments in capacity are made across the world at the graduate level. The Bologna Process, the topic of a plenary at this year's CGS

Annual Meeting, is likely to make European graduate education stronger, more transparent, and a more attractive option to larger numbers of students from around the world. Perhaps the most encouraging finding from this year's set of surveys is that 75 percent of institutions appear to be aware of and engaged in addressing declines in international student admissions and more than half have already formed international student exchange partnerships. It seems likely that continued engagement in these issues in the future will insure open doors to international graduate students and the U.S. as the destination of choice for graduate education worldwide.

Highlighting International Student Exchange Programs

The University of Central Florida has a partnership with the University of Bordeaux. Students from both universities can pursue doctoral research, and faculty from each university sit on joint dissertation committees at the other. Both universities award the final degree. The University of Central Florida also has a relationship with the Universidad del Bio-Bio in Chile. Students from the Universidad del Bio-Bio take early online course work at the University of Central Florida, and then transfer to programs at UCF to complete the degree.

The University of Kansas has a long history of international exchange partnerships. For over 50 years, UK has offered a Graduate Direct Exchange Program with partner institutions in England, France, Germany, and Switzerland. The program offers competitive funding for graduating seniors and graduate students from the University of Kansas. The scholarships provide a tuition waiver and stipend for basic living expenses from the host institution. Students from Kansas and the European universities then enroll full-time in graduate level courses at the partner institution. Graduate students at the University of Kansas are also eligible to participate in any of the more than 30 reciprocal student exchange programs that are coordinated by the Office of Study Abroad.