Foreign Student Enrollment Up, but Paperwork Delays Lengthen Since 9/11, Survey of Public Universities Shows

Chicago, November 10--Despite concern that tighter visa regulations in the wake of 9/11 would drastically curtail the flow of international students to the United States, the number of foreign students enrolled at public research universities generally has increased slightly in the year since the terrorist attacks occurred, according to a survey by the National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges (NASULGC).

According to the survey, conducted earlier this fall by NASULGC’s Commission on International Programs, enrollment of international undergraduates this fall is up an average of 1.4 percent over fall 2001. Graduate student enrollments typically are up significantly more, by 7.1 percent. The results indicate, however, that institutions and students face lengthy delays in processing of visas and Social Security numbers, which can affect students’ ability to arrive on campus before a semester begins, as well as to receive paychecks, obtain driver’s licenses and rent apartments. Male students from Middle Eastern countries appeared most likely to face delays.

The survey provides a snapshot of fall enrollments of international students at 50 public universities, as well as information on numbers of foreign faculty members and scholars. At the responding institutions, the total number of foreign undergraduates enrolled climbed from 24,946 last fall to 25,302 this fall. The figures for international graduate students at these campuses climbed from 46,175 last fall to 49,453 this fall.

Half of the respondents reported a change in the male/female ratio of their international students, most often a decrease in male students and subsequent increase in the percentage of female students. Respondents attributed the shift to the additional scrutiny now given to male applicants for visas. In addition to being required to fill out an additional form, male students in many cases have faced lengthier delays and more denials of visas than have female students, campuses say.

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In addition to undergraduate and graduate enrollments, 34 universities provided data on the number of international faculty members on their campuses this fall. On average, the number increased by 4.2 percent, the data showed. The numbers went from 452 in 2001 to 471 this fall. One-third of respondents reported increased delays in securing visas for such faculty.

Based on responses from 40 institutions, the number of international scholars (non-teaching, generally in the U.S. for only a few weeks) increased as well, by an average 6.1 percent over 2001. On these campuses, the number of such scholars grew from 6,874 last year to 7,279 this fall.

Sixty-nine percent of respondents reported that they offer short, non-degree programs for professionals, such as English as a Second Language courses. Of these, 36 percent reported problems in securing visas for participants, particularly for Middle Eastern, Asian, Muslim, and/or male students.

Regional student trends. While 44 percent of respondents could identify regional trends in their international enrollment, much of their information was anecdotal. In general, however, respondents said they observed a decrease in the numbers of Middle Eastern and Asian students, particularly those from predominately Muslim countries and from China. This was largely attributed to severe visa-processing delays and eventual denials of visas.

One Midwestern campus reported that significant numbers of male prospective students from Middle Eastern countries, as well as individuals from Pakistan, Malaysia, and Indonesia, were unable to obtain student visas in July to begin degree programs in August this year. Most have deferred admission to January 2003 and hope to commence studies then. Another campus said its fall 2002 intake of Middle Eastern and Pakistani students was virtually nonexistent due to visa processing delays and denials. An Iranian faculty member at one Midwestern campus was stranded in Canada for three months waiting for clearance so that his visa stamp could be issued.

Some respondents also said they had had foreign students return home and then be unable to return to the U.S. to complete their studies. For example, 17 students from the Middle East could not return to one Midwestern campus this fall, despite being previously enrolled, due to delays in visa issuance. Most should be able to return for the Spring 2003 semester, however, the campus said.

Sixty-three percent of respondents reported problems in dealing with the Social Security Administration (SSA) over the past few months as the agency enforced its policy of not issuing Social Security numbers to international students until the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) verifies that the students are actually enrolled and all paperwork has been completed. This has caused delays of up to several months in issuing the numbers, creating complications for campus payroll offices as well as for international students and faculty needing to rent apartments and obtain driver’s licenses.

Respondents also reported delays and difficulties in achieving compliance with new INS and State Department regulations aimed at monitoring the visa process for foreign students and exchange visitors. The INS’s tracking system, known as the Student and Exchange Visitor Information System (SEVIS), is scheduled to take effect on January 31, 2003. Until then, the State Department has put in place an interim tracking system known as the Interim Student and Exchange Authentication System (ISEAS). Some respondents complained that officials were not giving out correct information, were not answering faxes, and weren’t processing forms in a timely fashion.

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The National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges has 214 members, which are located in all 50 states. Members enroll more than 3.55 million students and award more than a half million degrees annually.