New Survey Suggests Growth in New Enrollments of International Students at U.S. Colleges and Universities

New enrollments of international students increased this fall from a year ago at 40% (388 institutions) of U.S. colleges and universities responding to a new survey released today. Twenty-six percent (245) of the nearly 1,000 responding institutions experienced declines in newly enrolled international students, and 34% (328) report that new enrollments stayed about the same as last year.

Among responding institutions with the largest foreign enrollment – over 100 U.S. campuses that host more than 1,000 international students – more than half (51%) of the respondents reported increases, while 26% reported declines, according to the seven U.S. higher education and international education associations that conducted the survey. The reported increases by these institutions may point to an overall increase in the numbers of newly enrolled international students nationally.

Regarding overall international student enrollments, the survey indicates that 34% of responding institutions reported that they experienced an increase in overall international student enrollments for Fall 2005, while 33% reported a decline. Among the responding institutions with more than 1,000 international students, 43% reported a decline in total international student enrollments for Fall 2005, while 33% reported an increase.

Responses varied depending on institutional type. Among responding two-year colleges, 36% reported declines in total international student enrollments, while 30% reported increases. Among four-year colleges and universities, more of them (36%) reported increases than reported declines (33%) in their total number of international students for Fall 2005.
The survey – which was conducted online in October 2005 to provide a timely “snapshot” of international students at U.S. colleges and universities for the current semester – was carried out by the Institute of International Education (IIE) in cooperation with American Association of Community Colleges (AACC), American Council on Education (ACE), Association of American Universities (AAU), Council of Graduate Schools (CGS), NAFSA: Association of International Educators, and National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges (NASULGC).

A total of 980 institutions responded to the survey, including 392 universities, 192 four-year colleges, 321 two-year colleges, 27 professional schools, and 45 other institutions. Among these respondents were over 100 institutions that enroll more than 1,000 international students.

The Fall 2005 survey asked educators to indicate whether they had seen a change in enrollments from selected major sending countries or countries with large Islamic populations. The results indicate that enrollments from most of these countries are relatively stable, with respondents reporting increases and decreases at similar levels or indicating that there was no noticeable change from Fall 2004. However, more institutions reported increases than declines in the number of students from China (29% reporting increases vs. 20% reporting declines) and Korea (36% reporting increases vs. 17% reporting declines). On the other hand, for students from certain Islamic countries more institutions reported a decline than an increase: Indonesia (20% reporting a decline vs. 13% reporting an increase), Malaysia (18% reporting a decline vs. 10% reporting an increase), and Pakistan (20% reporting a decline vs. 14% reporting an increase). Because the actual numbers of students are not provided in the survey, it is not possible to determine whether there have been meaningful gains or losses from any specific country.

Of the institutions that reported a decline in their international student enrollments, those that enroll both graduate and undergraduate students indicated that the declines were more evident at the undergraduate level. Forty-seven percent of the institutions that responded to that question said that declines were more evident at the undergraduate level, while 29% reported more graduate level declines, and 24% reported that graduate and undergraduate levels declines were about the same.

Responses from 17 of the 20 institutions that host the highest numbers of international students echo the survey’s overall findings. Ten of these institutions report increases in the number of newly enrolled international students on their campuses this year, while six institutions report declines, and one campus noted level enrollments. Looking at overall international student enrollments (not just newly enrolled international students), eight of the 17 institutions reported a decline, while five reported an increase, and four reported no change.

Thirty-five percent of the responding institutions experiencing declines in international students enrollments cited visa application processes and concerns over delays/denials as the major reason for the decline, followed by cost of tuition/fees at U.S. institutions (18%) and decisions to enroll in another country’s institutions (13%). Several educators believe the declines reflect a combination of several factors, including competition from other host countries, increased capacity in students’ home countries, and increased competition for international students among U.S. institutions.
Fifty percent (475) of all responding institutions have taken special steps to ensure that the number of international students on their campuses does not decline. These steps generally involved expanded recruitment efforts (more recruitment trips, recruitment at both undergraduate and graduate level, full-time recruitment overseas, etc), increased marketing efforts (developing marketing or recruitment plans, analysis of competitor institutions), more grants and financial assistance to students and increased stipends to graduate assistants, enhanced communication with prospective and admitted international students (priority processing for international applicants, online chats with students from selected countries during the admission-decision making time period, etc.), and better coordination with admissions offices (including hiring new enrollment managers), as well as targeted efforts to improve the environment and support services to make international students feel more welcome on campus.

The full survey results are available for download at: http://opendoors.iienetwork.org/?p=Fall2005Survey

Several of the associations’ leadership expressed relief that new international student numbers are no longer declining, at least among the majority of responding institutions.

“It is encouraging to see the apparent growth this fall in new enrollments of international students on US campuses, as shown in this early survey response,” said Allan E. Goodman, president and CEO of the Institute of International Education. “Welcoming foreign students to our colleges and universities is vital to America’s economic well-being, public diplomacy, and national security. Colleges and universities have been proactive in reaching out to international students to let them know that they are welcome here. Strong recruitment, combined with more efficient and transparent student visa processes, have helped to stem the downturn in numbers reported in the past year. We need to continue these concerted efforts, and get the message out that America's doors are still open to international students, in order to attract the best and the brightest students from all over the world.”

"This survey supports the modest, 1% increase in first-time international graduate enrollment that a recent Council of Graduate Schools (CGS) report found," said CGS President Debra W. Stewart. "I am encouraged by these positive signs and hope this is an indication of a change in the downward trend since 2002. Continued efforts are needed by all stakeholders, to make sure we continue to attract the best and brightest students to our graduate schools."

"I'm heartened to see some positive signals that international students are returning to U.S. colleges and universities after several difficult years," said American Council on Education President David Ward. "We appreciate efforts made by the Departments of State, Homeland Security and other entities in making this happen. In a new era of heightened national security and increasing globalization, it is important for the higher education community to continue finding ways to welcome international students to our campuses. When international students come to the United States, they not only bring knowledge to our colleges and universities, but they also help to increase international understanding and everyone benefits from their contributions."
"It is encouraging to see a rebound in the numbers of international students enrolling in our nation's universities," said C. Peter Magrath, President of the National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges. "International students bring unique perspectives and ideas to our institutions. As the global economy grows, so does the importance of having a diverse student body. Universities must look for ways to continue to attract the best and brightest from across the globe if they are we are going to prepare our students for a modern workforce."

“I am very pleased to see the reported increases in new international student enrollments in America's community colleges, reversing a steep decline from last year. AACC and its member colleges work diligently to provide a welcoming environment for international students on our campuses. We believe that international students can greatly benefit by attending U.S. community colleges while at the same time American students gain knowledge about other cultures, customs and ways of life,” said George Boggs, President and CEO of the American Association of Community Colleges.

However, the associations also said that more steps need to be taken in order to continue to attract the best and brightest international students in the future.

"While this latest survey suggests some positive signs, the fact remains we have not yet been able to return to a situation of growth in the overall numbers," said NAFSA Executive Director and CEO Marlene M. Johnson. "For the sake of our ability to promote fundamental national interests, this must change. In order to lead in today's world, to compete successfully in the sciences and technology, and to engage the global community, we urgently need a national policy on international education."

“We hope this slight increase in first-time international student enrollments is a sign that we are making progress against the perception that the U.S. no longer welcomes students from abroad,” says Nils Hasselmo, President of the Association of American Universities. “However, U.S. universities still face declines in overall international student enrollments and applications for graduate study. Moreover, we face severe competition in the global marketplace for the best and brightest students. The Departments of State and Homeland Security have worked hard to address the severe problems in the visa process, but further improvements are needed. And we must all work to attract the best and brightest students and to combat the perception that they are not welcome here.”

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