SURVEY DETAILS IMPACT OF RESTRICTIVE GOVERNMENT ACTIONS ON FLOW OF INTERNATIONAL SCHOLARS AND STUDENTS

Delays in research projects, difficulties in enrolling, and cancelled classes have resulted from new visa restrictions and other steps taken by the federal government to tighten scrutiny of foreign students, scholars and researchers seeking to enter the country, according to a new survey of colleges and universities by three higher education associations.

The Association of American Universities (AAU), NAFSA: Association of International Educators, and the National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges (NASULGC) conducted the survey on fall 2003 enrollment, application, and visa delay trends for international students and scholars. The survey data suggest that government actions are beginning to have an appreciable impact on the international presence on campuses and point to a potentially significant slowdown or halt in the steady, decades-long increase in international students and faculty on U.S. campuses.

While emphasizing the importance of homeland security, the heads of the three associations voiced concerns about the potential long-term effects of an overly restrictive atmosphere, including the possibility that perceptions abroad that the United States does not welcome international students and scholars could threaten the nation’s global leadership in education and research, and also harm the economy and national security.

They praised the State Department for taking a number of steps to ease the impact of new visa restrictions, including a department cable sent October 7 that permits all those who have been approved through the Visas Mantis process, through which the government screens visa applicants whose work or studies involve sensitive technologies, to leave the country and return without undergoing a new Mantis review for a period of one year.

They also made a number of recommendations for ensuring that the federal government fully responds to homeland security needs without harming the economy or national security by blocking needed research or hindering the flow of international students and scholars.

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The October survey, to which 331 higher education institutions responded, presents a complex picture of the fall 2003 semester. Almost half of the responding institutions have experienced a reduced presence of international students, but most large research universities have seen either a slight increase or no change in the number of students from abroad. The number of applications, in general, has remained about the same.

The number of international scholars and researchers appears to be holding steady, with the amount of schools of all sizes reporting increases about the same as those reporting losses.

However, there is a significant increase from the fall 2002 semester among schools responding to the survey in the numbers of students and scholars and researchers who missed their academic start dates as a result of delays in the visa issuance process.

“International exchange of students and scholars helps our nation maintain leadership in research, the strength of our economy, and strong diplomatic and cultural ties to the rest of the world,” said AAU president Nils Hasselmo. “Our national security is paramount, yet a key element of our security is the research performed at American universities, to a significant degree by international scientists and students. We can and must maintain our security without pulling in the welcome mat that has brought so many benefits to our country. Unfortunately, this survey suggests the welcome mat may already be disappearing, which should be cause for considerable concern, especially when there is increasing competition from other nations for international scientists and students.”

Marlene Johnson, executive director and CEO of NAFSA, added, "There are alarming signs in the survey that the United States may be starting to lose its appeal and its accessibility for international students and scholars. I worry that what we're seeing is more than just another short-term response to an economic downturn. The survey suggests that, for the first time, U.S. government policies are having the effect--although not the intent--of keeping legitimate students and scholars from accessing our schools. This hurts, rather than helps, long-term U.S. security interests. These policies must be fine tuned."

“We are concerned about the rising numbers of students missing the beginning of classes and vital research projects being delayed, and we don’t believe it is necessary,” said NASULGC president Peter Magrath. “Our security and our strong and vital tradition of encouraging academic and scientific exchange are not mutually exclusive. We need to consider how the visa process and other procedures can be adjusted to avoid these kinds of disruptions.”

The survey results were compiled in three different groupings. The overall results can be found on the NAFSA Web site at www.nafsa.org/press. The results for AAU’s major research institutions can be read at www.aau.edu. NASULGC compiled results for its members, all of which are public institutions. Those results are on the association’s Web site, www.nasulgc.org.

Recommendations and other materials on the issue of restrictions for international students and scholars can also be found on the associations’ Web sites.

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