NEW SURVEY INDICATES APPARENT DECLINE IN NEW ENROLLMENTS OF INTERNATIONAL GRADUATE STUDENTS AT U.S. UNIVERSITIES

UNDERGRADUATE ENROLLMENTS APPEAR LEVEL

New enrollments of international graduate students declined this fall from a year ago at nearly half of the universities with graduate programs responding to a new survey released today. Just under one-fourth of responding institutions experienced increases in new foreign graduate students.

However, among schools with the greatest foreign enrollments – some two dozen schools each with over 2,500 students from abroad – nearly two-thirds reported declines in new graduate enrollments, according to the five U.S. higher education and international education associations that conducted the survey.

The survey also indicates that 37 percent of all responding institutions experienced a decline in continuing international graduate students, with 14 percent reporting an increase, while 56 percent of the institutions with the largest foreign enrollments saw declining numbers, compared to increases on 25 percent of such campuses.

The survey, which tracked both graduate and undergraduate students at U.S. colleges and universities, was carried out by NAFSA: Association of International Educators in cooperation with the Association of American Universities (AAU), the National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges (NASULGC), the Institute of International Education (IIE), and the Council of Graduate Schools (CGS). A summary of the survey is attached or will be available on the associations’ Web sites on November 10.

A total of 480 institutions responded to the survey, including 262 with graduate programs.

With respect to new undergraduates from abroad, the number of campuses reporting increases was about equal to those reporting losses, but 44 percent of institutions reported a decline in continuing undergraduates, while only 16 percent reported an increase. For the universities with the largest foreign enrollments, the figures for continuing undergraduates were 54 percent showing a decline and 32 percent reporting an increase.

Of the 244 institutions responding to a question about start dates missed by students on account of delays in the visa process, about one-third reported an increase in new international undergraduate students missing their start dates for this reason, slightly more than the 27 percent reporting a decrease. However, more than two-thirds of the institutions with the largest foreign enrollments reporting on this issue
experienced a decrease in missed start dates, and generally more large institutions experienced a decrease than an increase for other categories of students.

Forty percent of campuses experiencing a decline in new or continuing international graduate students cited visa delays and denials as the most important reason for the decline, making it the leading cause, but campuses with the largest foreign enrollments cited visa delays considerably less, pointing to international competition and the drop in applications as equally important.

For undergraduates, more institutions reported declines than increases in the number of students from several countries, including India, Indonesia, Pakistan, and Saudi Arabia. South Korea was the only country for which the number of campuses showing increases significantly exceeded those with losses.

With respect to graduate students, more institutions reported decreases than reported increases for most countries. For example, 33 percent of institutions reported fewer Chinese students compared to 23 percent reporting increases; for India, the numbers were 36 percent and 23 percent.

However, because the actual numbers of both graduate and undergraduate students are not noted in the survey, it is not possible to determine whether there have been meaningful gains or losses from any specific country.

With respect to fields of study, many of the universities with the largest foreign enrollments noted declines in new engineering and business graduate students, with 40 percent reporting engineering declines compared to 18 percent showing increases, and 37 percent experiencing declines in business and 20 percent showing gains.

Reduced graduate enrollments were expected following an earlier survey by some of the same associations in which three out of five research universities reported a decrease in graduate school applications by international students, with some of the largest experiencing a decline of 30 percent or more (see http://www.aau.edu/homeland/Survey2.25.04.pdf).

While expressing relief that enrollments had not declined as significantly as applications, the associations noted that a continuing decline in applications would likely lead to greater losses of graduate students from abroad.

"The good news is that the administration has become aware of the seriousness of the problem and has begun to take steps to address some of the obstacles that are discouraging or preventing legitimate students and scholars from coming to the United States, said Marlene M. Johnson, Executive Director and CEO of NAFSA.

"The bad news is that, despite some positive signs, overall the numbers are still discouraging. We have to remember that losing this market is like losing a forest to a fire: It happens very quickly. But winning back the market is like re-growing the forest: It takes time and effort. Much remains to be done. We must not relent in our efforts to achieve a visa policy that serves our strong national interest in educational, cultural, and scientific exchange."

"This survey confirms, as we have suspected for some time, that most of the nation’s leading research universities are experiencing declines in international graduate enrollment,” said Nils Hasselmo, President of AAU. “The major factors are U.S. visa policy, increased international competition, and perceptions that the United States is no longer a welcoming country. Each of these areas needs attention. The Departments of State and Homeland Security have worked closely with the higher education community to address visa policy concerns, and those efforts are yielding results; however, the work clearly is not
finished. We will continue to address all of these issues to ensure that the United States remains the top choice of the world's top international students and scholars.”

“These numbers provide some context for the CGS study that found a 6% decline in first time international graduate enrollment,” said CGS President Debra W. Stewart. “While these numbers are distressing, the declines are not nearly as great as some had feared. It is encouraging that the graduate schools are battling declines by streamlining the admissions processes, enhancing their use of technology, and forming important international partnerships.”

The associations indicated that some actions by the State Department and Department of Homeland Security, combined with proactive measures by universities, had been responsible for the reduction in significant visa delays. However, they said, the persistence of a significant number of problems confirmed the need for actions they have called for keeping the visa process secure while also making it more efficient and transparent.

The five associations are among the more than 30 higher education and scientific associations, led by AAU and the American Association for the Advancement of Science, that have endorsed a statement issued on May 12 calling on the Departments of State and Homeland Security to take six practical steps to reduce unnecessary barriers to international students, scientists, and scholars who have been accepted or hired to study, teach, and conduct research at U.S. colleges and universities.

These proposals include extending the duration of a Visas Mantis clearance from its current one-year limit to the length of the individual’s planned studies or research, providing greater flexibility in the renewal of visas to reduce or eliminate unnecessary gaps between visas, and providing adequate funding to the Departments of State and Homeland Security to manage the visa process efficiently.

"Since 9/11, the academic community and the federal government have undertaken efforts to enhance the Nation's security needs while strengthening and protecting its academic and scientific enterprise," said NASULGC President C. Peter Magrath. "While the survey indicates that we have seen positive results in the past year, it also shows that further improvements can be made on this front. We continue to believe that enhancing national security and promoting international academic and scientific activities are not mutually exclusive."

“The number of international students from key world regions should be a matter of national concern, even as enrollment figures vary widely from institution to institution", said Allan Goodman, President and CEO of IIE. "At the federal, state and campus level, we are still trying to find the right balance between secure borders and open doors. Improved and streamlined procedures at all levels are helping to improve the situation, and Fall 2004 enrollment data indicates that we are making progress. But continued perception abroad that America does not welcome foreign students, that our tuition fees are higher than other competitors countries, or that visa approval is hard to come by remain a challenge, and underscore the need for continued efforts at all levels, to ensure that America remains the destination of choice for the best and brightest students from around the world.”