FEWER INTERNATIONAL GRADUATE STUDENTS APPLYING TO STUDY IN THE UNITED STATES

Survey indicates substantial declines in applications to the 25 research institutions that enroll the most international students

WASHINGTON, February 25, 2004 – Many of the nation’s top academic destinations for international students and scholars are experiencing significant declines in the number of applications by prospective graduate international students when compared with last year, according to a survey conducted jointly by NAFSA: Association of International Educators, the Association of American Universities (AAU), the National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges (NASULGC), the Council of Graduate Schools (CGS), and the American Council on Education (ACE).

Declines in international graduate student applications appear to be particularly acute at the nation’s doctoral and research institutions, and among the 25 research institutions that enroll the most international students. Nineteen institutions in the latter category responded to the survey. All reported a decline in international graduate applications; 15 reported that the number of international graduate applications had declined by more than 10%. Of the 130 respondents (including those 19) from doctoral and research institutions, nearly 60% indicated a decline in applications from international graduate students, and 28% indicated no change in application rates. While the survey results suggest that declines in applications from international graduate students are occurring overall, survey results also indicate that the problem is especially serious for Chinese applicants to U.S. graduate programs.
These results suggest that an increasing number of internationally mobile students at the highest levels – those seeking advanced study and research in the sciences, medicine, technology, business, and other fields – are looking for academic opportunities outside the United States. A reliable analysis of the reasons for declines in applications would require a separate survey of potential applicants. However, the perception of the survey respondents appears to be that these declines reflect an impression on the part of potential applicants that an unwelcoming climate for international students now exists in the United States, and that this is demonstrated most visibly by the difficulty they face in securing a visa in a timely manner. This is consistent with substantial anecdotal evidence from higher education institutions across the country about the impact of current security policies and procedures on graduate international applicants, particularly those pursuing study in the sciences. Visa applications from students in these categories are now frequently forwarded to Washington, DC, for review, and delays can stretch from a few weeks to several months.

The organizations that sponsored the survey suggested that the results again raise the concern that international educational exchanges may be headed toward – or are already experiencing – a period of stagnation and decline. They reiterated the strong support of the higher education community for the implementation of security measures that protect the safety of Americans. Such measures, they added, must take into account the enormous security benefit that accrues to the United States from its position of global leadership in education and research. In comments on February 23 about the war on terrorism, Secretary of Homeland Security Tom Ridge said that “science and technology [are] key to winning this new kind of war.” U.S. leadership in these critical areas cannot be sustained without the contributions of international educational and scientific collaboration, the higher education organizations noted.

They called for decisive action to avert a serious decline in international educational, scientific, and research exchanges to the United States. The organizations urged Congress and the Department of Homeland Security to establish a balanced visa processing system that serves the long-term U.S. interest in not only preventing entry to those who would do harm but also welcoming legitimate visitors who contribute to our national security, economy, and global leadership.

Such a policy, they said, must include:

- Providing the necessary resources to the agencies charged with carrying out visa policy, and managing within those resources
- Focusing efforts on applicants who require special screening, and providing more expeditious service for those who present no special risk
- Creating a timely, transparent and predictable visa process that includes specific, effective time guidelines

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