

Foreign-Student Enrollments Are Likely to Climb, but Trouble May Lie Ahead

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By Karin Fischer

Despite economic turmoil worldwide, the number of international students coming to the United States this fall is likely to show a modest increase, according to colleges contacted by *The Chronicle* and visa figures provided by the U.S. Department of State.

Still, some international educators said they are concerned that international enrollments could fall off in future years. They fear that shrinking budgets could reduce the amount of money for graduate-student stipends and that depleted savings could leave overseas families unable to afford American college tuition.

There are also troubling signs from India, which [sends more students](#) to the United States than does any other country. The number of student visas issued has plummeted 31 percent from last year, according to the U.S. Embassy in New Delhi. Analysts attribute the lessening interest to the United States' weak job market.

Over all, however, most colleges forecast stable enrollments or even increases in numbers of foreign undergraduates and graduate students this fall.

David Donahue, deputy assistant secretary for visa services at the U.S. Department of State, said embassies overseas suggest that student-visa figures will surpass last year's numbers, even as the number of visas issued to all travelers to the United States is down 14 percent this year.

"There's no water-cooler chat that numbers are down," said Laurie K. Cox, director of international-student services at the University of Wisconsin at Madison. "Instead, business is as booming as ever."

Canada, Britain, and Australia—the United States' three main competitors—are also expecting to see, or have seen, international enrollments rise this year.

To a large degree, this growth is the result of an increasingly mobile student population. American university officials also speculate that the global recession has spurred

students to seek a degree in the United States, not deterred them from it, on the premise that it will position them better for the job market.

China is perhaps the best illustration of that. Student visas from January through June of this year are up 43 percent over the same time last year, according to the U.S. Embassy in Beijing.

Educators and recruiters note that many Chinese students today come from families who have spent years saving money for college or who simply have the income to pay for an American education.

Newspapers in China are also filled with bleak reports about poor job prospects at home. The national unemployment rate for recent college graduates is estimated to be 12 percent. Going abroad for college is seen as a way to gain advantage over other job candidates.

Put Off by the U.S. Economy

The reverse seems to be true for Indian students. The 31-percent drop in visas reflects the period from October 2008 through June.

Recruiters in India say students are staying away from the United States because the job market here is so bad.

"The U.S. is looked at as a destination where people will go to study and then will get jobs. And now with jobs being so difficult to get, that is one main reason people are not going," said Bindu Chopra of the Bangalore-based Chopra Consultancy, which advises students who wish to study abroad.

Ms. Chopra also noted that many Indians come to the United States seeking master's degrees, and scholarship money from universities seems to be drying up.

"Aid has come down drastically. You have to be totally high caliber to get a scholarship," she said. "Earlier, most places gave some form of aid even if the student going wasn't top-notch. Not any more."

Anecdotally, enrollments from South Korean students, the third-ranking sending country, appear to be down, which could affect international enrollments in undergraduate and English-language programs, in which they disproportionately enroll.

At San Jose State University, where more than 80 percent of foreign students hail from India, offers of admission to international graduate students appear to be holding steady, or even growing slightly, said Helen Stevens, director of the university's international programs and services.

But Ms. Stevens said she worries that the cash-strapped California State University system will institute admissions caps for next year, squeezing out qualified international applicants.

Indeed, although a report this spring by the Council of Graduate Schools on applications hints at a slight uptick in international graduate-student numbers, Debra W. Stewart, the group's president, says she is concerned that a trio of trends could depress those figures.

Domestic applications to U.S. graduate schools have risen at a faster clip than foreign applications, Ms. Stewart says, citing preliminary results from a recent survey by the council on offers of admission, to be released in August.

At the same time, Ms. Stewart says, several large research universities have announced plans to reduce doctoral-student enrollments because of budget constraints.

Budget constraints also could mean less money for research, and from institutional coffers, the federal government, and even the private sector.

Michael J. Bustle, associate vice provost for international affairs at North Carolina State University, said that over the past five years, his institution has seen strong growth in foreign graduate-student numbers, in part because the university offers good benefits.

Now, he said, some academic departments are accepting more in-state students, for whom they pay lower tuition or offer reduced stipends.

While international graduate-student applications at the university were 19 percent higher than last year, offers of admission declined by 8 percent. That was due, in large part, to a 7 or 8 percent decline in admissions offers from the College of Engineering,

which enrolls more than half of North Carolina State's graduate students, Mr. Bustle said.

Ms. Stewart said the difficulty for foreign students is that they have to demonstrate that they have the money to pay for college in order to secure a visa. If colleges are reducing support or, because of more competition, taking a longer time to make financial-aid offers, that could slow international students in obtaining visas.

Parsing the Numbers

Many colleges have seen double-digit growth in international interest, particularly among undergraduates. At Bryant University, in Rhode Island, deposits from international students, all undergraduate, are up 30 percent over last year. The University at Buffalo, part of the State University of New York, saw undergraduate applications increase 35 percent.

Gigi Do, director of international initiatives at Houston Community College, said international enrollments have tracked the overall upswing in students.

Foreign students see community colleges "as a better bargain," she said.

But Ross Jennings, vice president for international programs at Green River Community College, in Washington State, said he anticipates international enrollments this fall will be down 15 to 20 percent from last year's highs. He cited budget cuts and the rebound in the dollar's value as being among the reasons for the drop.

If there's one unequivocal bright spot, it is the record numbers of Chinese students poised to enter the United States this fall, particularly at the undergraduate level.

At Indiana University at Bloomington, Stephen A. Johnson, senior associate director of international admissions, says the number of Chinese students is "jumping off the charts."

Undergraduate applications from international students were up 43 percent from last year, while the number who have already reserved a spot for freshmen orientation, a statistic he said closely correlates with enrollments, is 25 percent higher.

Other countries that support students through government scholarships, such as Chile and Saudi Arabia, are also likely to see an enrollment bump at American colleges. And the Iraqi government recently announced formal plans to eventually [send 10,000 students](#) to English-speaking countries.

Visa Problems, but Not Here

In a departure from previous years, few institutions surveyed suggested that U.S. visa policies were likely to play much of a role in their enrollments. The federal government recently announced efforts to [speed visa issuances](#) for students and scholars by streamlining procedures and adding extra personnel.

Visa regulations may have a greater impact in Australia and Britain, both of which have recently tightened immigration policy.

University officials in Britain raised alarms this spring after visa-denial rates for Chinese students shot up to over 80 percent. High visa-denial rates for students seeking to study in Britain were reported in other countries as well, prompting the British government to quickly deal with problems in the rollout of a tougher visa review system, similar to the United States', that is designed to prevent bogus students from entering the country. Visa-denial rates have dropped significantly since then, but educators worry that bad press abroad may have lasting damage.

In Australia, academics worry that tighter immigration rules put in place last December could hurt future recruitment efforts, as Australia has long appealed to students who wish to stay on and work after graduation. (International enrollments were up at universities by about [20 percent](#) in the academic year that started in March, compared with the previous year.)

Canadian universities are expecting modest to significant increases in international enrollments, which they attribute to better marketing of their universities and some generous scholarships.

"The interest in Canada is very strong," said Jennifer Humphries, a vice president of the Canadian Bureau for International Education. "The word is getting out that Canada clearly shows it values international students. The fact that students can work off campus while studying and then stay on to work after graduation is hugely attractive."

A number of American institutions that ramped up their overseas recruitment efforts to help ward off any potential enrollment downturns are reaping the benefits.

Northern Arizona University has worked more with third-party agents and built relationships with key countries, particularly in the Middle East. As a result, expected international enrollments for the fall are up 16 percent over last year, said Mandy D. Hansen, director of international admissions, with the number of Saudi Arabian students increasing 20 percent.

Indeed, one recruiter in China says the United States' particularly strong showing among students this year is due to an increased effort on the part of American colleges.

"They used to say, 'We're good universities, and we don't need to come to China.'" says Chen Luyi, head of Beijing-based recruiter JJL Education Consultancy. "Now they are at the big recruitment fairs."

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