

The Coming Crisis in International Education in the United States

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If the 21st century is to be the global era, then American universities will need to be international institutions. A central part of this profile is made up of the foreign students studying in American universities. However, the news on the foreign student front is not good. According to figures just released from the Institute of International Education's *Open Doors* study, the increase for this year is just 0.3 percent—the smallest increase in the 26 years that the IIE has been tracking flows. This follows last year's 0.6 percent increase. If something is not done, the United States will lose its standing as the preeminent place of study for the world's students. At present, 453,787 foreign students study in the United States. This constitutes almost half of the world's total number of foreign students, and indicates not only the size but also the reputation of America's colleges and universities. In addition to foreign students, 59,074 foreign scholars chose to study in the United States—an increase of 2.3 percent over 1994–95 numbers. The changes this year reflect a leveling off in scholar flows following two consecutive years of falling numbers. Foreign scholars—who are often senior researchers or scientists—seem to find the United States less attractive as a place to pursue advanced research or study.

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These changes will affect American higher education significantly. American colleges and universities will not benefit from the infusion of new ideas from abroad. American students and faculty will not have direct contact with foreign colleagues. These contacts are especially important, since so few Americans study overseas. This year,

84,403 American students went abroad—about one-half of one percent of the student population in the United States. The presence of a half million foreign students and scholars from virtually every country in the world is the most important single element of globalism on American campuses. We can interpret this decline in popularity as an indication of the decline in the status of American higher education—considered for decades as the best academic system in the world.

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A combination of government policies and current conditions in higher education also contribute to the present decline. New immigration rules that are soon to come into effect will have a chilling effect on foreign student numbers. A hefty fee will soon be imposed on people coming to the United States on student or scholar visas. Other “loop-holes” are being plugged. Most damaging, perhaps, is that colleges and universities are being forced to police foreign students and scholars for immigration violations. Declines in research funds and other fiscal problems in higher education have also had a negative impact on foreign student flows, as 16.5 percent of foreign students are funded by American colleges and universities.

At the same time that the United States is making it more difficult to gain access to its higher education institutions, other countries are opening their doors. They see the importance of internationalization—recognizing also that foreign students contribute to the local economy—since the vast majority of them fund their own education. In the United States, for example, 67.8 percent of all foreign students list personal or family funds as the primary source for their study, and contribute more than \$7 billion to the American economy. The European Union has several major programs to encourage intra-European study, and additional funds have been allocated to attract students from Russia and other Eastern European countries. Japan has a goal of attracting 100,000 foreign students by the year 2000, and is closing on that figure. Australia is aggressively and successfully recruiting students from Asia as a means of making up for budget cuts at home. British universities have long been active in attracting students world-

wide as a means of making up for budget shortfalls. Only the United States seems to be turning its back on foreign students and scholars.

Foreign students and scholars contribute an immense amount to American higher education.

- Two-thirds pay for their education in the United States.
- Foreign students earn about one-third of the doctoral degrees awarded annually. They serve as research and teaching assistants in fields that attract few Americans at the doctoral level.
- Foreign scholars provide their (modestly paid) expertise to the laboratories and research projects in which they are located.
- Foreign students and scholars lend a multicultural and multiethnic presence to American campuses.
- When foreign students return home, they often maintain close relationships with the United States.
- The small proportion of foreign students who remain in the United States after finishing their studies play a useful role in the American economy and academic system.

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Current trends are alarming. American higher education needs foreign students and scholars. United States policy is aimed precisely in the wrong direction and will result in future declines—much to the detriment of the nation's colleges and universities. The following initiatives should be implemented to ready higher education for the global imperatives of the 21st century.

- The newly implemented and more restrictive immigration rules must be changed to make it easier—not more difficult—for legitimate students and scholars to enter the United States for study and research.
- More American colleges and universities should recruit students and scholars from overseas—recognizing not only the economic benefits but also the curricular advantages of having foreigners on campus.
- These institutions should at the same time make sure that the foreign students on campus are provided with

the best possible academic experience and are fully integrated into the American student population.

- Programs such as the highly respected Fulbright scholarships and others that receive funding from American governmental sources should be adequately funded—current budgets for many of these programs have been slashed in Washington.
- More American students should be encouraged to study abroad. American participation in overseas study is very limited. Most Americans studying abroad choose to go to Western Europe. For example, only 2,212 Americans study in Japan, while 45,571 Japanese study in the United States—and the American numbers are down from last year. Worse still, hardly any students travel to developing countries.

Current American policy will have two highly negative results. The United States will no longer be the most attractive destination for foreign study, and at the same time American higher education will find it much more difficult to internationalize. If the United States is to maintain its worldwide academic leadership, it will need to reverse this trend.

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