The Brain Drain That Wasn't

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Articles & Testimony

Is there a foreign-student crisis in American higher education? Last November, the Institute of International Education reported "the first absolute decline in foreign enrollments" at American colleges and universities in more than three decades. Overnight, the 2.4 percent one-year drop in foreign students became a national cause clbre, and America's tougher, post-9/11 visa requirements were cast as public enemy number one.

"Security restrictions lead foreign students to snub U.S. universities," ran a headline in the influential scientific journal Nature. "The facts are plain," declared a Newsweek columnist. "U.S. visa procedures have become far too cumbersome, and bureaucrats are turning down far more applicants than ever before." The result, he wrote, is a "dramatic decline of foreign students in the U.S." From faraway, foreign observers reveled in their good fortune. "Visa crackdown costs US cream of foreign students," chortled the London Times.

The facts, however, were anything but plain. New data supplied by the State Department combined with a close look at the IIE report suggest that the situation is not nearly as dire as some contend. Disturbing anecdotes aside, evidence pointing to a dramatic decline in foreign students -- or even a correlation between post-9/11 visa restrictions and last year's decrease -- is remarkably thin.

While most commentators focus on last year's decline as proof of a systemic problem, a different story emerges when the most recent data are viewed against a pre-9/11 baseline. If post-9/11 visa restrictions were such an impediment, it stands to reason that the high point of foreign student enrollment should have been the last full academic year before the al Qaeda attacks, 2000-2001. But it wasn't -- not by a long shot.

In fact, there were 4.5 percent more foreign students enrolled in the United States last year than there were before 9/11. Increases over that period were registered in almost every region of the world, from Latin America (9.5 percent) to South and Central Asia (20 percent) to Central Africa (25 percent). Of the six countries that send the most students to the United States, four showed moderate to strong increases, led by India's whopping 46 percent rise. The two that registered declines were Japan (12 percent) and Taiwan (8 percent) -- not countries whose citizens are usually associated with visa difficulties.

Most stunning was the fact that the region of the world with the greatest percentage increase since before 9/11 was largely Arab North Africa, which showed a 35 percent rise. Leading the pack was French-and Arabic-speaking Morocco, which had a phenomenal 126 percent jump (from 1,917 to 4,341). Indeed, among countries that send more than 1,000 students to the United States, Morocco had the highest percentage increase in the world.

Of the regions that suffered declines over this period, the most significant drop (19 percent) was, surprisingly, not the Middle East; it was southern Africa. By contrast, the Middle East had a 14 percent decrease, followed by Southeast Asia (12 percent) and Europe (8 percent).

Even a close look at the numbers for Middle Easterners reveals a much more complex story than one might have imagined. Of the sixteen countries that IIE includes in the region, five actually showed increases from before 9/11 -- Lebanon, the Palestinian Authority, Israel, Iran, and Turkey. And when one merges the Middle East and North Africa,

putting all Arab countries under a single heading, that expanded region suffered only a 7.6 percent drop from pre-9/11 levels.

Among Muslim countries more generally, some certainly had steep drops, but no single thread ties them together. On the one hand, numbers from the United Arab Emirates did fall by half and from Saudi Arabia by a third; on the other hand, countries like Pakistan and Senegal showed increases. The 60 percent rise from African superpower Nigeria, a country with a huge Muslim population, was especially heartening.

With a longer time frame, fluctuations in foreign student enrollment are even starker. After the oil price hikes of the 1970s, Gulf students flocked to America in droves, paying tuition with newfound petro-dollars. At one time, Saudi enrollment in U.S. colleges was up to 30,000; prior to the Khomeini revolution, there were more than 50,000 Iranian students here. The combination of political tensions and the long-term decline in real oil prices convinced these countries to invest in local higher education, so fewer of their students would go abroad. The result was that by the time 9/11 occurred, there were only about 5,300 Saudis and just 1,800 Iranians at American universities. In place of these Gulf countries, the Asian tigers had become the major players in the foreign student pool. A decade or two from now, this, too, may change.

As for the charge that State Department officials are rejecting more student visa applications now than ever before, the evidence suggests otherwise.

According to information provided by State's Bureau of Consular Affairs, refusal rates -- including for students -- are essentially unchanged since before September 11. Moreover, the bureau also reports that the absolute number of student visas issued is actually on the rise. This trend applies across the globe, from major foreign-student exporters China and South Korea to the politically sensitive Middle East. In fact, four-fifths of all Middle East countries saw an increase in the number of students issued visas in fiscal year 2004 over the previous year.

Last year's blip in foreign student enrollment attracted headlines, but it obscured the real success story of post-9/11 American higher education. What should have been news is the fact that foreign students came to the United States in ever larger numbers after the 9/11 attacks and that the vast majority still brave the campaign of rumor and exaggeration to take advantage of the opportunities of American colleges and universities today. That's the real story -- or, in this case, the nonstory.

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