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A Decline in Foreign Students Is Reversed

By KAREN W. ARENSON

The number of new foreign students coming to the United States grew this school year, after several years of weakness that followed the terrorist attacks of 2001, according to a survey to be released today by the Institute of International Education.

The institute, in a separate report, also found that the number of American students studying abroad hit a record 205,983 in 2004-5, an 8 percent increase over the previous year and more than double the number in the 1994-95 school year.

According to the survey, conducted by the institute and other education groups, the number of new international students at American colleges and universities increased 8 percent this fall over last, to 142,923.

Another sign of a turnaround was a sharp upturn in student visas, said Allan E. Goodman, president of the institute. Dr. Goodman said the State Department issued a record 591,050 student and exchange visas in the 12 months ending in September, a 14 percent increase over the previous year and 6 percent more than in the year leading up to the 2001 attacks.

More than half of the approximately 900 campuses that participated in the survey said they had seen increases in the number of foreign students this fall.

Dr. Goodman attributed the increase to the easing of visa restrictions imposed after the terrorist attacks and to greater efforts by colleges to attract foreign students.

“We’ve been worried for three years that there would be a slow and steady decline in the number of international students studying here,” Dr. Goodman said. “But it looks like the decline is ending.”

Educators have long argued that being able to attract the best students from around the world is mutually beneficial to universities and students, and helps strengthen American research programs.

Dr. Goodman said another reason for the decline after the 2001 attacks was the heightened competition from universities in other countries, like Britain and Australia.

“Before, our approach was, ‘We built it and they will come,’ ” he said. “But the post-9/11 period has changed all that. We have to be proactive now.”

Catharine R. Stimpson, dean of the Graduate School of Arts and Science at New York University, said N.Y.U. was reaching out more than it had.

“With the rise of global competition, which is really acute,” Dr. Stimpson said, “we can no longer assume that we are the primary destination for international students.”

She added that this year the graduate school sent a vice dean to a recruitment fair in Shanghai.

“In my eight years as graduate dean at N.Y.U.,” she said, “this was the first time we have sent a graduate school official outside of the United States and its territories explicitly for recruiting.”

Officials at the institute, which has conducted college recruitment fairs overseas for more than 25 years, many of them in partnership with the State Department, reported big increases in interest in the past year, from American colleges and from potential foreign students. The institute reported record attendance at college fairs in Ho Chi Minh City and Hanoi in Vietnam, and conducted its first community-college fair in Ho Chi Minh City this year.

Today, the institute will also release its annual report on international student enrollment and on Americans studying abroad. The report, called Open Doors 2006, reflects the slowdown in international enrollment in the years before this one. The total number of foreign students in American colleges last year was 564,766, it says, or 273 students fewer than in the previous year. That followed two years of larger declines.

The number of American students studying abroad is smaller than the number of foreign students who come to the United States but has been rising. Some universities, like Harvard and Yale, which had not promoted foreign study, have begun to encourage it. Other universities that have previously encouraged foreign study have expanded their offerings.

Michigan State University, for example, which offers more than 230 programs in 62 countries, has added a program in Ireland to study disability services. It has also added direct enrollment for its students who want to attend universities in China, Hong Kong and Taiwan, and summer seminars for incoming freshmen before they go abroad. During the 2004-5 academic year, 2,385 Michigan State students studied abroad.

Western Europe remained the top destination for American students, with the United Kingdom, Italy, Spain and France leading the list, the institute said. But countries outside Western Europe became increasingly popular.

China, for example, drew 6,389 students, a 35 percent increase from the previous year, making it the eighth most popular destination for American students studying abroad. Argentina, Brazil and India also saw large gains that pushed them into the 20 most popular destinations.

For the fifth consecutive year, the University of Southern California led the United States in attracting international students, enrolling 6,881 in 2005-6. More than 140 campuses reported having at least 1,000 foreign students. Columbia, Purdue, N.Y.U. and the University of Texas at Austin were the other leaders.

India continued to send the most students to the United States, though its number declined by 5 percent, to 76,503. China remained second, with 62,582 students studying in the United States last year. Korea, Japan and Canada were also in the top five, although Japan registered a decline of 8 percent. Countries showing strong growth included Korea, Mexico, Nepal, Saudi Arabia, Taiwan and Vietnam.