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Editorial

Imported Brains

On one side, there's the risk: one of the plotters in the first World Trade Center bombing was on a student visa. On the other, there's the benefit: last year, 565,039 foreign students contributed about \$13.3 billion to the United States economy.

For every 100 foreign students who got American Ph.D.'s in engineering or the physical sciences, according to one study, the United States got 62 patent applications. As for the students who returned home, many probably took with them warm feelings toward America, democracy and free enterprise. Do the math.

International students play an enormously important role in American science and business. That's why it is disturbing that for the second year in a row, the Institute of International Education has reported a drop in the number of foreign students on American campuses. Clearly, the tightening of security and visa rules since 9/11 is part of the problem. Not surprising, the biggest drop in the number of foreign students has been from the Middle East. But difficulty in getting visas is not the whole story.

The fact is that the competition for foreign students has become far more intense. While American campuses are still by far the favorite destination, they have been steadily losing market share for years, especially to Canada, Australia and Europe. Now the European Union is considering offering citizenship to foreign students who complete their doctorates at European universities. That's a powerful incentive, even if it does smack of actively encouraging a brain drain from developing countries. But then, Rajiv Gandhi's famed formulation still holds: "Better brain drain than brain in the drain."

Indeed, the competition for brains and ideas is where the battle for global influence should be waged. After so many years of America's near-hegemony in this field, it is good for the United States to be reminded that those people banging at the door have ever more other addresses to try if they are rebuffed. The State and Homeland Security Departments should accelerate their efforts to make their procedures less cumbersome and off-putting. Just as important, they must abandon the presumption that denying a visa is the default position.

Nobody denies the importance of barring entry to terrorists, but nobody should be oblivious to the danger of excluding another Einstein.