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Our University: International Students

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Our University: International Students

Third in a series on who our students are and how they perform.

International students are a reliable predictor of U.S. institutional success in a global market for higher education.

I am not confident that American postsecondary institutions will retain their dominance in the global marketplace for long. When the perceived quality of a good or service declines and its price increases, Adam Smith's invisible hand is uncompromising. Unless U.S. postsecondary institutions improve the perceived quality of their research and teaching and contain their costs, their dominance in the global market will erode at an accelerating rate.

William Patrick Leonard, vice dean of SolBridge International School of Business in Daejeon, Republic of Korea.

In greater numbers than ever before international students attend U.S. universities. Evidently they expect excellence in US schools compared to those in other lands and their home countries.

They are right, but may not be for long.

If U.S. schools continue to treat the university experience as a property right rather than a foundation for intellectual growth, our quality will decrease and international interest will wane. In the next few years, decreasing international enrollment may represent the canary in the coal mine of higher education in the United States.

In a 2010 report, the National Center for Education Statistics data show that, since 1948, international enrollment at U.S. institutions grew in every year but four, and three of those occurred after September 11, 2001, fueled to some extent by the difficulty of obtaining a student visa. In 1967 a remarkable 21.2% increase was posted. During the intervening 60-year period, the number of international students has jumped from 25,464 to 690,923. The current U.S. student population, all groups, is 19,037,000.

Such contributions from abroad may not continue. Enrollment in many nations around the world is growing, and such growth internationally could lead to leveling-off of interest in U.S. institutions.

According to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, over the last 20 years, enrollment at French institutions of higher education has increased 72%. In England enrollments are up over 30%. In developing nations the numbers are more stunning. On the African continent enrollment in tertiary education increased nearly 70% from 1990 to 1997. During the same period U.S. enrollment grew at less than 3% according to John Aubrey Douglas of the University of California Berkeley.

India and China contribute to international student growth worldwide, but these nations are beginning to create universities that will compete favorably with their American counterparts should the governments and businesses remain focused on academic

excellence. Douglas reports that China has vowed to create 20 MIT's. These factors will moderate the historical dominance of U.S. higher education in the international market place. And we may be giving away our excellence for access and head counts.

Stuen, Mubarak, and Maskus studied the contribution of foreign science and engineering talent to the growth of new knowledge in U.S. doctoral institutions and found that a 10% drop in foreign students led to a 5 or 6% decrease in research output in these science and engineering disciplines. This suggests the U.S. research productivity is affected by international student enrollment.

The Institute of International Education claims that in 2010 the number of US institutions reporting decreases in international enrollment was 14%, while 58% posted gains, and the balance remained relatively flat. China continues to lead the pack in the numbers of students who enroll at U.S. institutions, but that will change as opportunities at home and abroad do.

Other countries traditionally have sent their best students to study at U.S. institutions, thereby raising the bar of excellence at our institutions. Now, with a pronounced shift from state funding to a greater reliance on tuition revenue, schools will feel pressure to import more students with lower academic qualifications in order to fund operations.

International students who have contributed to increased graduation and retention rates may become less a motivated, competitive resource and more a burden. In 2008 international students graduated at a rate of 93% while the whole population was 50%. No sub-group of students out performed international classmates in timely graduation.

Quality at U.S. institutions will falter if shaped by funding exigency and indecisiveness in mission, rather than the attainment of academic excellence for domestic and international students alike.