

Global Downturn Is Not All Bad News for International Educators

By BETH MCMURTRIE

Atlanta

Worldwide, economies are grinding to a halt. Property values are plummeting. And stock markets are in the tank. Bad news, you might think, for American colleges searching abroad for students.

Not necessarily. At a meeting of senior international-education administrators, several participants said that the declining world economy, combined with ever-increasing demand for higher education, may actually lead to international-enrollment increases at American colleges. And anecdotally, at least, several universities reported that applications from foreign students are up for the fall.

"This is not the time to throw in the towel," said John Hudzik, vice president for global engagement at Michigan State University, who moderated a session on the impact of the recession on international education. "We need to be alert to changes in sending and receiving countries, and to sources of funding."

The session was part of the annual conference of the Association of International Education Administrators, which drew about 400 people here last week.

Mr. Hudzik described the bleak economic conditions facing many nations while noting the unprecedented growth of the middle class worldwide. By one estimate, the number of students seeking higher education will double, to 200 million, by 2025. The question, he said, is, How badly do their parents want to send them overseas for a degree?

Noted Rise in Interest

Right now, many seem to be still willing to pony up the money. In the session and in hallway conversations, a number of educators and independent agents said they had seen increases, both large and small, in international applications.

At the State University of New York at Buffalo, undergraduate applications from international students are up by 15 percent. At the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, said William Brustein, associate provost for international affairs, international applications over all are up "significantly."

"We're not alone here," he said. "This is what I've heard from colleagues throughout the Big Ten."

World Education Services, a nonprofit organization that evaluates international credentials, reported that the number of students who have requested its services is up about 10 percent from last year, to 60,000.

Stephen C. Dunnett, vice provost for international education at Buffalo, said applications from China and India — the top two sending countries to the United States — are still strong because universities in those countries lack both the capacity to absorb all of the students who want higher education and the academic quality to satisfy them. Student recruiters in China have also reported continued strong interest in overseas study ([The Chronicle](#), February 18).

"In China," Mr. Dunnett noted, "affluent parents would still prefer to send their children overseas."

Rahul Choudaha, associate director of development and innovation at World Education Services, said another factor is in play. As industries, like information technology in India and manufacturing in China, slow down, people get laid off.

Many of the unemployed are college graduates who went straight into the work force when times were good. Now, he said, they're looking for something that will help them compete in a tighter job market. And a foreign degree often holds more cachet than one they can get at home.

Lingering Uncertainties

Still, educators were mindful of a number of challenges that could tamp down interest from students abroad. For one, most students submitted their applications when things weren't quite as bad as they are today. So they may still pull out before the fall.

Also, work-force issues can play both ways. One Australian educator noted that many international students need part-time work to help pay expenses. Many students also choose Australia, in part, with an eye toward immigration. But as the government there has started limiting job opportunities for foreigners because of the bad economy, future students may think twice before applying.

International students who want to study in New York face a different kind of deterrent. SUNY has raised tuition for out-of-state students by 21 percent to help deal with budget shortfalls. H. Stephen Straight, vice provost for undergraduate education and international affairs at SUNY at Binghamton, said he is worried that students from countries with devalued currencies, like Turkey, may not be able to handle the increase.

Institutions are already seeing some of the good and bad sides of the economic turmoil.

One administrator said he saved \$40,000 in expenses on his university's spring study-abroad programs because of the rising value of the dollar.

Meanwhile, Stephen E. Hanson, vice provost for global affairs at the University of Washington, said the state Legislature last week banned all travel for state employees. He wondered how that would affect the ability of faculty members to lead overseas study or recruitment trips. Faculty members may already feel that leading study-abroad trips is a luxury they can no longer afford, he said.

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