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Op-Ed Contributor

America's Future Is Stuck Overseas

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ACCORDING to a recent survey, more foreign graduate students enrolled in American universities this year than last, but their numbers remain far lower than they were in 2002. That international graduate student enrollment is no longer declining is welcome news. But it should not distract us from the obstacles the United States still faces in attracting top talent to its shores.

Foreign graduate students, particularly those who study science or engineering, are a boon to the American economy and education system. They are critical to the United States' technological leadership in the world economy: according to a study by Keith Maskus, an economist at the University of Colorado, for every 100 international students who receive science or engineering Ph.D.'s from American universities, the nation gains 62 future patent applications. International students have founded many of America's most innovative companies, including Sun Microsystems and Intel.

Moreover, without international students, certain science and engineering programs could not be offered at many American universities, because the foreign students populate classes and serve as teaching assistants. They also go on to supply faculty for those programs. About one-third of America's engineering professors are foreign-born.

Although it's easy to blame tightened post-9/11 visa policies for stagnating or declining international student enrollment figures, other factors have contributed to this unfortunate trend. Among them are fierce competition for students with Britain, Japan and other countries; improvements in the economies and universities of China and India, the countries that send the largest number of students here; the cost of an American education; and a perception that the United States is not interested in attracting international students.

Finally, and perhaps most avoidably, the United States makes it exceedingly difficult for our foreign-born science and engineering doctorates to stay in the country, where they might work in our private sector, conduct research in our labs or teach at our universities. It can take two years or more to gain permanent residency, and there are significant backlogs in applications for employment-based green cards.

The good news is that relatively small changes in current policies can redress these problems. The recent Senate-passed budget bill is a step in the right direction: it expands

the number of employment-based green cards and temporary visas available to highly skilled foreigners. But the Bush administration should build on that by offering employers the option of paying a fee to expedite the processing of their employees' applications, bringing processing time down to 30 to 60 days rather than the current two to four years.

Furthermore, Congress should eliminate the requirement that visa-seekers pursuing advanced degrees in the United States demonstrate that they will return to their home country. And a single, accountable administration official should coordinate policy and act as an ombudsman on international student issues, balancing admissions and security needs.

American universities, meanwhile, need to step up marketing efforts abroad if they wish to lure more students to their programs. Working with industry and government, universities should develop a marketing strategy that conveys the message that America is the world's best place to study. The United States can even provide some of its assistance to developing countries in the form of need-based vouchers to qualified international students who wish to study at American universities.

We still have a chance to improve our policies and enhance our standing with prospective graduate students abroad. If we don't seize it, America may lose its place as the global leader in science and technology.

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