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Why Foreign Students Don't Crowd Out Americans

By Ben Wildavsky

At a time when global student mobility is expanding exponentially, the best graduate students around the world continue flocking to the United States, and foreign-born university grads contribute disproportionately to innovative, high-growth U.S. firms. Yet anxieties persist about the potential downside of international academic globetrotting, both in the United States and in these students' countries of origin. Are American students who might aspire to graduate studies, particularly in the sciences, being crowded out by international competitors? What about skilled foreign workers who receive H-1B temporary work visas – could their entrance into the U.S. labor force be discouraging native-born young people from entering the so-called STEM fields? And, turning from the United States to the countries foreign students come from, might the U.S. help poorer nations reverse brain drain by doing more to ensure that foreign grads of U.S. universities return to their countries of origin?

No, no, and no, says a new article in the September/October 2010 issue of *International Educator*, the magazine of Nafsa: Association of International Educators. In "Debunking Myths About International Students and Highly Skilled Immigrants," author Stuart Anderson, executive director of the **National Foundation for American Policy** and author of the recent book *Immigration*, nicely rebuts each of the three concerns cited above. He begins with the uneasy perception that the heavy representation of foreign-born students in certain fields (they make up 65 percent, 64 percent, and 56 percent, respectively, of PhDs in computer science, engineering, and physics) means that American students are being squeezed out. In fact, Anderson notes, citing research by Mark Regets of the National Science Foundation (NSF), growth in international student numbers in recent decades has been accompanied by higher enrollment of U.S. students. This observation, which is consistent with other findings (including those in the excellent edited volume on campus globalization that I reviewed recently), is a good reminder that it's a mistake to view student enrollment as a zero-sum game. This is true, incidentally, for women and minority applicants, whose enrollment patterns in STEM fields have been the source of much concern; NSF data cited by Anderson show that the share of blacks and women in science and engineering occupations increased significantly during the same period that saw a sharp rise in the percentage of foreign-born college grads in those occupations.

Discussing H-1B visa numbers, Anderson notes that there is no evidence at all to support the notion that American high-school or college students are somehow discouraged from entering high-tech fields by the presence in those professions of temporary visa holders

from other nations. In fact, he writes, "Given the innovations and productivity increases that can come from skilled professionals, foreign-born scientists and engineers are likely to complement the skills of Americans and increase employment opportunities. It is easy to forget that many of the jobs some argue should now be protected did not even exist 30 years ago."

As for the question of brain drain, it is certainly an ongoing worry for many developing countries – and even for advanced Western nations like France and Canada. Yet Anderson contends that, while there is nothing wrong with international students voluntarily returning home immediately after earning a U.S. degree, in some cases they may face limited opportunities in their home nations in the near term, particularly in countries plagued by corruption or simply misguided economic policies. He suggests that foreign-born grads of U.S. universities well be able to make a larger impact at home if they stay on in the United States and achieve professional success before returning to invest in a business or establish export ties.

Anderson might have added that old patterns of mobility from poorer to wealthier nations have already begun to change, with the term "brain circulation" beginning to replace brain drain to describe the increased tendency of students to hop from one country to another in pursuit of advanced degrees and then – particularly in fast-growing economies like India's and China's – to return home when they see better opportunities than in the past to use their education to get ahead. But whatever decisions about post-graduation mobility make the most sense to international students, the United States and other Western nations, which themselves are huge beneficiaries of foreign talent, would certainly be doing no favors to students from poor countries by presuming to alleviate brain drain with less hospitable work and immigration policies.

It's great to find a fairly short and straightforward article that provides lots of intellectual ammunition in a key debate; this one is well worth reading.