

## Massachusetts sees a decline in foreign students

*Study fuels concerns of engineer shortage*

By Robert Weisman, Globe Staff | July 11, 2007

The number of foreign students at Massachusetts colleges and universities dropped 7.2 percent between 2003 and 2006, according to a study being released today at a gathering of Bay State business leaders worried about the future pipeline of scientists and engineers.

The drop came as Texas and New York registered enrollment gains for international students in the same period, according to the study by consulting firms Mass Insight and Collegia. And while Florida and California also saw losses, the decline in Massachusetts was the steepest among states that are top destinations for foreign students.

Attracting international students, especially in fields like engineering, has become a growing priority of high-tech and industrial companies at a time when the population growth in Massachusetts is slowing, more state high school graduates are attending colleges elsewhere, and fewer are gravitating to science and engineering.

“If we don’t bring in immigrants, this engine’s going to slow down,” warned William Guenther, president of Mass Insight, a Boston research and consulting firm specializing in economic development.

The study is set to be released this morning at an Asia Connection breakfast forum sponsored by Mass Insight. At the forum, business and education leaders are expected to press their call for more university partnerships, trade missions, and aggressive recruitment campaigns to attract foreign students to schools in Massachusetts.

“We’re in a global talent competition,” said Jack Wilson, president of the University of Massachusetts, which recently forged a partnership with Tsinghua University in China. “In the global competition, the big companies will go where the talent is.”

Mass Insight’s study listed a total of 28,009 international students in the state for the 2005-2006 school year, down from 30,039 for the 2002-2003 year. The state colleges and universities with the most foreign students were Boston University, Harvard University, UMass, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and Northeastern University. The countries sending the most students here were China, India, South Korea, Canada, and Japan.

Among the factors cited for the declining international enrollment in Massachusetts were federal caps on foreign visas, better educational opportunities in Asia, and aggressive marketing campaigns by other US regions and other countries, especially England, Canada, Australia, and Singapore, to woo talented international students.

Massachusetts may have also suffered from a push by other large US public universities to attract foreign students and intensified competition for wealthy students from the Middle East who traditionally have sought to attend college in Massachusetts, suggested Todd Hoffman, president of Collegia in Wellesley, a consulting firm working with communities and universities.

For businesses, the drop in foreign college enrollment in Massachusetts is a troubling sign. Of the five summer interns at Advanced Electron Beams Inc. in Wilmington, one is from Zimbabwe and another from Argentina. The company recently lost a key research and development engineer from Italy who couldn’t get a work visa.

“There are twice as many people applying for these visas than getting them,” said Mitch Tyson, chief executive of Advanced Electron Beams, which makes devices that reduce energy consumption at manufacturing plants. “These people are an important supplement to the job pool here.”