On Campus

Is Post-9/11 Security Grounding Scholars?

Getting in to Columbia may be easier for international students than just getting into the country.

By
Marcus Tonti
|
Winter 2004-05

In November 2004, the Institute of International Education, a nonprofit organization that promotes international academic and professional exchanges, reported that overall foreign enrollment at U.S. universities fell 2.4 percent in the 2003–04 academic year, the first such decline in more than three decades. Columbia's numbers tell a slightly different story: the number of international students rose 2 percent in 2003–04, but fell about 2 percent for the current academic year (for which national numbers are not yet available).

It's impossible to say if these drops are the beginning of a trend or merely a blip — but administrators, faculty, and even students are concerned. What raw numbers do not reveal, says Rick Tudisco, associate provost and director of Columbia's International Students and Scholars Office (ISSO), "is how many people did not apply because they thought there would be a lack of a welcoming spirit" in a post-9/11 United States — "whether those folks have decided to remain in their own countries or go somewhere else that's put out the welcome mat in a way the U.S. hasn't."

The drop is especially pronounced for China and India, countries that have traditionally sent large numbers of students to the United States. According to the Council of Graduate Schools, a higher-education consortium, applications from Chinese and Indian residents for the 2003–04 school year fell 45 percent and 28 percent nationally — although enrollment dropped only 8 percent and 4 percent, respectively.

One factor is university expansion in those countries, which has enabled more students to remain at home for graduate study. But so, too, does increased competition from universities elsewhere in the world come when students may be more willing than in the past to consider options outside the United States.

On January 20, the Columbia Daily Spectator reported that international applications to General Studies and Journalism are rebounding from post-9/11 falloffs. Still, at GSAS, international applications fell about 16 percent from 2003 to 2004, mostly because of a 37 percent decrease in applications from China, says Assistant Dean Robert Furno. (Applications from India have not fallen, and in fact continue to rise each year.)

Furno notes that in fall 2003 Chinese students in particular encountered problems getting visas. Eight admitted students were unable to begin their programs on schedule — mostly, he says, because they could not prove to consular officials that they would return to China after completing their degree programs.

Faculty members even write letters to consular officials to try to help, but Furno says the success of such efforts varies by consulate: “It really depends on the consular office.” Most of the students in question persisted, however, and seven were able to get visas and enroll in 2004. An eighth, however, chose to study out of the U.S. “She just gave up and took the other offer [outside the U.S.] because the visa process was easier,” Furno says.

“Visa restrictions are cutting into the number of foreign students, and other students are afraid they won’t feel comfortable in the U.S.,” says Prof. Rashid Khalidi, Edward Said Professor of Arab Studies and director of the Middle East Institute. Whether South and East Asians, Arabs, or others, he adds, “It’s definitely a matter of concern. . . . Many of our good students have come from these areas.”

Furno concurs. Noting that GSAS always seeks to admit the very best students, he explains that the inability of students to enroll because of visa problems means “you’ve lost very good students through no fault of their own, and the faculty have fewer students to work with.”

Closed Doors

Students who enrolled at Columbia both before and after September 11, 2001, relate a range of experiences.

One fourth-year doctoral student from South Asia, who wished to remain anonymous, expresses dismay at the difficulty he has experienced traveling to the United States on several occasions. The student lived in the U.S. for several years, first as a college undergraduate and then as a diplomat, before enrolling at the University. But after spending the summer of 2003 at home, he said he was “almost stranded” in his own country, held up by visa problems.

A self-described “Muslim by birth, but not by practice,” the student said he thinks his background, including his name, is part of the problem. “Every time I go out of the country they ask so many questions at the U.S. port of entry. Last time they looked through my girlfriend’s bag. In the last year I left the country seven times, and each time it was the same thing.”

His sterling record, the student suggested, is apparently meaningless. “They have all the information,” he said. “I never overstayed my visa, never did anything.” Nor does studying at an Ivy League school, or traveling with the renowned faculty member with whom the student works as a research assistant, seem to matter. “You think they would understand, ‘OK, he’s definitely not a terrorist.’ But it doesn’t help.”

Noting that missing a week or two of class can jeopardize a student’s entire semester, he says that students from his home country who might have pursued higher education in the U.S. are now looking to nations like Sweden and Australia. “Traveling to the U.S. was always difficult,” he said, “but now it’s impossible.”

While some students experience similar frustrations, others report smooth sailing. For Mbongiseni Buthelezi of South Africa, a doctoral student in English and comparative literature, the process of securing a visa “went relatively smoothly.” And Jakob Kubitzky, a German and Polish national who is an LLM student at the Law School, said that the po-tential pitfalls of travel to the U.S. had been greatly exaggerated. “I was surprised how easy it was,” he said.

But even students who came to the U.S. with relatively little difficulty — in fact the vast majority at Columbia, according to ISSO — have stories. “I know people who have had to defer their program for a year because they couldn’t get their visas approved,” Buthelezi said. Zelalem Asmamaw of Ethiopia, who is enrolled in the master’s program in electrical engineering, has not traveled home for several years,

in part because of concerns that he will be unable to get back into the U.S. “I knew one or two people who were unable to come back,” he said. “It’s not worth the risk.”

Even faculty members are not immune. As reported in SIPA’s *Communiqué* student newsletter, Peter Danchin, a lecturer and the director of the school’s human rights concentration, was delayed when returning to the U.S. from his native Australia earlier this year owing to visa difficulties. Danchin ended up missing the first two classes scheduled for the spring 2004 semester.

Renewing his visa, Danchin told *Communiqué*, took much longer than expected, and the process was made more difficult by consular officials’ insistence that he correspond only by mail for security purposes. Although Danchin acknowledged that it was the first time he had left the U.S. since Sept. 11, 2001, he nevertheless said he was “quite shocked.”

“Australia is an ally of the U.S., and they treat me like this,” he said. Imagine “if it were a person from the Middle East or somewhere hostile to the U.S.”

Process Makes Perfect

It’s true that government officials treat foreign visitors far more rigorously today than in the past, says ISSO’s Tudisco. In the months immediately following September 11, 2001, he explains, “a torrent of new regulations, requirements, and protocols washed over the federal bureaucracies, which were scrambling to try to comply.” As a result, government agencies — “understaffed, underfunded, and underresourced” at first, Tudisco says — were unable to process international students as quickly as in years past.

Three years later, however, he says that both the government and universities have made the necessary adjustments. “We have in effect developed the systems that didn’t exist and were needed to avoid bottlenecks.

“We get the blame, and we get the credit,” Tudisco says, but “it’s been on the consular side that most of the improvements have been made. And when problems arise, Tudisco adds, “we’ve worked with the schools to contact various authorities to ensure the problems weren’t due to incomplete data or misapplied procedures.”

In many regards, the process has clearly improved. According to figures compiled by ISSO, about 87 percent of entering inter-national students reported receiving entry visas fewer than four weeks after applying — more than half in a week or less, and nearly a third within just two days.

Students arriving at U.S. ports of entry are being processed faster than ever, says Russ Knocke, director of public affairs for U.S. Immigrations and Customs Enforcement (ICE). He explains that a new Web-based system known as SEVIS (Student Exchange and Visitor Information System) was first put into place in August 2003. “I don’t think anyone would argue there weren’t kinks that had to be worked through,” Knocke said. Still, he added, great strides had been made by January 2004, and by August the system was running smoothly.

“In 1993 and again on 9/11 we saw how terrorists utilized the former student-immigration system to gain access, and once they were here they fell below the radar screen.” Today, SEVIS helps “weed out those it is intended to weed out and welcome those it is intended to welcome,” Knocke said. “There is very much a homeland-security element to the SEVIS program, but it is without question intended to facilitate foreign student enrollment in America.”

Open Borders, Open Minds

However much the process has been stream- lined at U.S. ports of entry, the initial decision to issue nonimmigrant visas remains in the hands of the State Department. And it’s indisputable that some citizens of other countries are finding it more difficult to travel to the U.S., whether for long-term study or brief visits. It’s inevitable, some say, that this will impede the free flow of ideas across international borders, and perhaps encourage foreign nationals to study elsewhere.

“Scholars, visitors, people who might be speaking — they are generally finding some difficulty traveling to the U.S.,” says Khalidi. “I cannot tell you how many Europeans have told me how humiliating it is to come to the U.S. now.”

Such international communication and travel, Khalidi adds, “enriches the academic environment. That’s one of the great things about Columbia, that everyone comes to New York. [The city is] a big attraction to people in many fields.” But, he says, “There’s an incompatibility between open scholarly discourse and a completely

closed-down society, if that’s the direction we’re going. If we have a certain vision of security, then it might be impossible to have any kind of openness to the world.”

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