

Local News

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Foreign enrollment skyrockets for UW

Record numbers of international students enrolled in Washington universities and community colleges this fall, and the trend is especially pronounced at the UW, where freshmen students from foreign countries outnumber out-of-state freshmen for the first time.

By Katherine Long

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Record numbers of international students enrolled in Washington state universities and community colleges this fall, and the trend is especially pronounced at the UW, where freshmen students from foreign countries outnumber out-of-state freshmen for the first time.

Nearly 18 percent of the UW's freshman class is from another country, and more than half of those students are from China. It's a dramatic increase from six years ago, when only 2 percent of the school's freshmen came from other countries.

Last spring, 41 percent of international applicants said "yes" to the UW's acceptance letter — a percentage that was well above historical trends and caught the UW by surprise, said admissions director Phil Ballinger.

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Although many universities and community colleges recruit students from overseas, the UW does not. "No recruiting. Zippo," Ballinger said. "As near as I can tell, the common denominator is word-of-mouth."

International and out-of-state students pay almost three times as much in tuition as in-state students at the UW. At a time when the state has cut higher-education funding by about half in three years, nonresident tuition is seen as a way to maintain the quality of programs without further cutting the number of in-state students being admitted, Ballinger said. Residents pay \$10,575 in tuition and fees, while nonresidents pay \$28,059.

International students also bring money into the local economy. A new national report released Monday shows that overseas students contributed \$463 million to the state's economy in 2010.

While the number of international students is growing rapidly, Washington residents still make up about 80 percent of the UW's overall enrollment when Bothell and Tacoma branch campuses are included, Ballinger said.

"The University of Washington has gotten a reputation for being a place to go," said John Webster, director of writing for the UW's College of Arts & Sciences. Webster runs a late-summer writing program that serves many international students.

"These kids are a very entrepreneurial lot," Webster said. "The intensity of these kids, and the sacrifices people are making for them, and they're making, too — I'm impressed."

He added: "I see nothing but an upside to the U.S. for this."

In absolute numbers, the UW's count of international students is still fairly low compared with other major universities. A Chronicle of Higher Education survey in 2010-11 ranked it 29th among major U.S. universities in international enrollment; the list was topped by the University of Southern California, with more than 8,600 foreign students. That year the UW had 4,233.

Many foreign students come here to get a degree because they believe it will boost their careers when they go home.

"It makes me more competitive," said freshman Wen Fang, 19, from southern China. "When people see that — 'Oh, you finished your undergraduate degree in America?' — it's really helpful."

Fang called the UW a bargain compared with the cost of Boston University, his other top choice. He's studying engineering, and finds the math, physics and chemistry at the UW pretty easy, although the vocabulary occasionally stumps him.

Ballinger said the math SAT scores of international students are well above those of U.S. applicants, averaging 714. Fang said he scored a 790 (out of 800) on the math portion of the SAT.

Not everybody comes here solely to bolster a résumé, though. Max Chen, a sophomore from Shanghai, came to the UW because he considers studying in the U.S. a cultural experience "and a chance to broaden my horizons." Chen, who is majoring in English, joined the Kappa Sigma fraternity as a way to get to know more Americans.

The state's community colleges also do a brisk business internationally, and many recruit overseas to help sell the concept of a two-year school to foreign students.

"Community colleges are a mystery in other parts of the world, and it is my pleasant job to explain to them that getting into a very good state university is eminently possible" by starting out in a community college, said Ross Jennings, an associate vice president of international relations for Green River Community College.

This fall, about 13 percent of Green River's enrollment is international. Those 1,398 students each pay more than \$9,000 for three quarters — more than twice as much in tuition as Washington residents do, Jennings said. U.S. residents from out of state pay only slightly more than Washington residents.

Just as at the state universities, international students help boost community-college coffers and provide money to the local economy — in Auburn, Green River's international students provide about \$29 million a year, according to an analysis by the Institute of International Education.

Tuition paid by international students allows Seattle Central Community College to offer more courses, opening up classes that otherwise wouldn't be available, said Andrea Insley, executive dean for international education programs for the Seattle Community College District.

"As the state cuts and cuts, these are the kinds of things colleges need to be doing, or we would have to serve fewer local students," she said.

Insley said international students in community colleges usually graduate at much higher rates than U.S. students. "There's a lot of pressure to be successful," she said. "They're paying a lot of money. They have a lot of personal motivation."

Students aren't the only ones seeking out an American educational experience.

On Tuesday, Xin Lu, the vice minister of education for China and the country's second-highest-ranking education official, will tour Lake Washington Institute of Technology. The Kirkland school, which recently changed its name, is one of the state's 34 community and technical colleges.

Lin Zhou, associate dean of extended learning at Lake Washington, said the vice minister wants to learn how vocational training programs work with local industries to help guide the technical-college curriculum.

"They are very interested" in the way it's done here, she said.

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