

# Saudi-American Forum

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## **Getting Back on Track: Saudi Study in the United States**

**By Grant F. Smith**

A February 2003 Institute of International Education (IIE) survey of the top ten American destination universities for international students revealed a disturbing trend. Twenty-four percent of surveyed universities indicated that their Saudi student base had declined. Eighty-three percent indicated that international students who were expected to arrive for the fall 2002 semester were delayed. The survey conclusions also worried that further deteriorating foreign enrollments "cannot be ruled out."

Obstacles to Saudi study in the United States identified in the IIE report included visa approval delays, political concerns, financial problems, and students choosing more attractive opportunities to study elsewhere. This trend compounds the damage to a critical nexus between Saudi Arabia and the United States that was forged over the course of many decades.

Many current members of the Saudi government and professional ranks were educated in the United States. Twenty-one of the 30 ministers of the Saudi government have American degrees, 16 of them doctorates. These same Saudis could now decide not to send their children to study in the United States. Since 65 percent of the 16 million Saudi nationals are under the age of 25, permanent damage could be done to U.S.-Saudi relations if this new generation of students becomes unwilling, or unable, to attend a U.S. university.

Saudis came to America to learn new skills in the 1950s and 1960s as Arabian-American Oil (Aramco) sent Saudis to U.S. universities. During petroleum boom years in the 1970s and 1980s, the Saudi government financed college educations in the United States for tens of thousands of Saudi students.

This massive investment in "intellectual capital" peaked at 30,000 Saudi students studying in the United States over a decade ago. Although many believe that the terrorist attacks of 9/11 were the cause of diminishing Saudi enrollment, in fact there were only 5,800 Saudi students studying in the United States in 2001 according to the Saudi Embassy. After the attacks, 300 students left the United States between September and December 2001. Current estimates place Saudi students studying in the United States at less than 3,500.

For the United States, this precipitous ten-year decline has had many negative impacts. The most

severe is the gradual reduction in relationships previously forged between Americans and Saudis in the most ideal of settings: academia. Most Saudis returned to Saudi Arabia to apply their skills toward infrastructure building. Compared to many other foreign students that represent an expensive "brain drain" to their home countries, Saudis as a group contributed much more toward the development of their country of origin.

Worryingly, as the United States loses training influence over engineers, doctors, and businesspeople, many will direct a career's worth of purchasing activity for industrial and consumer goods and services to non-U.S. suppliers. The economic impact on U.S. universities has been severe. In 2002, 582,996 foreign students contributed nearly \$12 billion to the U.S. economy, through their expenditure on tuition and living expenses. Unlike their American colleagues, foreign students typically pay full tuition and bear 84.3 percent of the total expense out of pocket rather than through packages of scholarships, loans and other aid. Education is the U.S. 's fifth largest service sector export according to the U.S. Department of Commerce. Anecdotally, Saudi students have been among the most lucrative students to U.S. universities generating gifts, endowments, chairs, and revenues beyond what their declining numbers would otherwise indicate.

U.S. international studies departments have begun looking for solutions. In June 2003, George Washington University began creating correspondence courses to serve half a dozen college-age members of the Saudi royal family. These members are wary of traveling to the United States in the current climate, stated school officials. The university will also bear the added costs of setting up an administrator in Riyadh to oversee studies. Other universities such as Marshall University in Huntington, West Virginia have stepped up international recruiting visits to counter falling enrollment.

Unfortunately, satellite and correspondent courses are usually designed for students that simply cannot travel and are generally an inferior substitute for the total immersion experience of foreign study. Substituting the correspondence experience for a market segment that is otherwise willing and able to travel and pursue real foreign study is likely to fail as country-bound students become frustrated and head for foreign universities that can guarantee their safety and educational needs.

The Saudi news media has accurately covered U.S. hate crimes against Muslims and stories of the return of Saudi students, who no longer feel welcome or comfortable continuing studies in the United States. This unprecedented environment of fear toward the United States most deeply harms the growing number of Saudi women who wish to study abroad.

In Saudi Arabia, there are now many opportunities for Saudi women in higher education. All universities admit women, except for Imam Muhammad bin Saud. Although there were less than 100 Saudi female college students in the mid-1960s, this number grew to 140,000 by 1997. Now, more than half of the students in Saudi post-secondary institutions, and slightly more than half of the graduates, are women. Over the same period, interest in U.S. study opportunities in this segment also skyrocketed but now may be decimated as female students attempt to mitigate risks to their own personal safety by entirely avoiding U.S. studies.

In order to get back on track, U.S. universities and government officials need to take a number of steps to reposition the United States as an attractive education destination. Above all, security concerns of foreign students must be effectively addressed. Although the Department of Justice Civil Rights Division has pursued and prosecuted numerous anti-Muslim hate crimes in the United States, it must do more to publicize its efforts and effectiveness in targeting hate crimes. Campus police must also be more carefully coordinated to protect vulnerable international student populations from bias driven attacks.

University and higher education authorities also need to counteract other forces of xenophobia that are now targeting American international studies funding. Even as university recruiters and international program directors are struggling to retain a minimal representation of Saudi and other foreign students, their own departments face the possibility of losing U.S. government funding.

Title VI of the Higher Education Act authorizes funding for international education and foreign language studies, including grants used to establish area studies and foreign language centers. Though the purpose of such programs was to expand American understanding and appreciation of foreign cultures and languages, a narrow group of ideologues in the United States have charged that the programs are fundamentally biased and contain limited international perspectives, thereby stifling opportunities for open dialogue and learning.

As the Congress prepares to reauthorize these and other programs in the Higher Education Act, Education and the Workforce Committee members are being encouraged to divert funding from Title VI-funded centers. If Title VI programs are successfully derailed, many Middle Eastern Studies and Arabic language programs in the United States that previously acted as ambassadors and "welcome wagons" to Saudi and other foreign students could be discontinued. Indirectly, Title VI "de-funding" would damage the ability of many universities to recruit students in the Arab world over the long term.

In addition to retaining government funding commitments for Middle East studies centers, the U.S. government needs to proactively tackle visa and security issues. The U.S. Department of Homeland Security absorbed the Immigration and Naturalization Service, placing some of its functions into the Bureau of Citizenship and Immigration Services (BCIS). As this new agency moves forward, it must attempt to mitigate the clouds of uncertainty hanging over student visas and student reentry issues. Many Saudi and other foreign students do not leave the United States for vacations or home visits fearing that they would not be allowed to return. The BCIS must strive to communicate with foreign students. Students that have begun studies in the United States deserve to study and travel without the fear that studies will be interrupted by denial of reentry.

American universities can attract and serve more female Saudi students by appealing to their demonstrated academic program preferences. Female Saudi scholars are typically over represented in programs for advanced degrees in medicine and education in Saudi Arabia. U.S. universities should emphasize their strengths in these fields during regional recruitment campaigns.

Prospective Saudi students who no longer feel welcome in the United States will undoubtedly be recruited by top universities, many which are closer to home. As Europe , Australia , New Zealand , and even Canada step forward, America stands to lose students, business opportunities and irreplaceable relationships. By working to communicate that Saudi foreign students are valued, that crime and discrimination are being dealt with, and visa processes streamlined, America can continue to benefit from a robust U.S.-Saudi relationship.

Over the past decade, the United States has veered off course as an attractive destination for Saudi study. Getting back on track will reaffirm American dedication toward achieving the most vibrant and diverse student body in universities that are the envy of the world.

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### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

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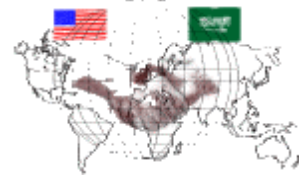
Preceding his tenure at Yankee Group, Smith taught graduate level finance and marketing courses for five years at Colombia's most prestigious business school, the Colegio de Estudios Superiores de Administración (CESA). He coordinated executive seminars, exchanges, simulations and programs between CESA and Harvard, Berkeley, and other U.S. universities. He also served as president of Smith & Sefair Zaher Ltda., a Bogota based technology and management consulting firm. While there, he consulted clients in the insurance, banking and industrial sectors on business process improvement, business planning and information systems technology strategies. Before that, he was marketing manager at American Express Financial Advisors corporate headquarters.

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