

# THE OPPENHEIMER REPORT

## More Asians, fewer Latin Americans in U.S. colleges

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Here's a new statistic that should sound alarm bells in Latin America: The region is falling increasingly behind China, India and other Asian countries in the number of students it sends to U.S. universities, which are still ranked in international studies as the best in the world.

According to the newly released Open Doors report by the New York-based Institute of International Education (IIE), India remains the country that sends the most students to U.S. universities, with nearly 84,000 students, followed by China with 68,000 students - - 76,000 if one includes Hong Kong -- and South Korea with 62,000.

By comparison, Mexico has 14,000 students in U.S. universities; Brazil, 7,000; Colombia, 6,700; Venezuela, 4,500; Peru, 3,700; Argentina, 2,800; Ecuador, 2,200; and Chile, 1,570. While the number of Indian students in U.S. universities grew by 10 percent last year, and that of Chinese students by 8 percent, the number of Latin American students fell by 0.3 percent.

These are startling numbers: Even communist-ruled Vietnam, which until recently was in the stone ages in terms of its insertion in the world economy, has more than 6,000 students in U.S. universities -- twice the number of Argentina, whose economy is nearly three times bigger.

Why are there fewer Latin American than Asian students in U.S. universities? It's not because of economic reasons: While Latin America is not growing as fast as Asia, its economies have grown by an average of nearly 5 percent over the past four years, which is the region's best performance in 25 years.

And it's not because the governments of China, India, South Korea and other Asian countries are paying for the foreign studies.

To my surprise, when I asked Chinese education officials about this during a visit to Beijing two years ago, I was told that fewer than 5 percent of the Chinese students in the United States had government grants. Virtually all of the Chinese students' expenses are paid for by their families, they said.

### CULTURE OF EDUCATION

IIE officials say Asian families have a long-standing culture of investing in their children's education, a tradition that may date back to Confucius, the Chinese philosopher born in the 6th century B.C. who advocated focusing on education as a key pillar of social progress.

Peggy Blumenthal, a senior official of the IIE, told me Friday in a telephone interview that Asian students are also more likely than Latin American students to get financial help from their U.S. universities because they tend to come with part-time jobs as assistants to professors.

While nearly 70 percent of Asian students are graduate students, and nearly half of them can pay part of their tuition by working as assistants to professors, most Latin American students in U.S. universities are undergraduates who rarely get teaching jobs, she said.

What may be even more troubling for Latin America, Asian students tend to concentrate in business, science and technology.

"Overwhelmingly, Asians are graduate students and pick business, management and engineering," she said. "Among Latin American students, there are more undergraduates, and they tend to concentrate in humanities, communications and social sciences."

My opinion: This is a troubling trend for Latin America because in a knowledge-based world economy in which countries that produce sophisticated goods get the biggest income, you need scientists, engineers and business managers trained at the world's best universities.

### **U.S. LEADS RANKINGS**

And if you look at the two best-known rankings of the world's best universities -- the London Times' Higher Education Supplement's list of the 200 best universities in the world, and the University of Shanghai's ranking of the world's 500 best universities -- U.S. universities overwhelmingly dominate the first 100 places.

Unless Latin American families follow the steps of their Asian counterparts and invest more in their children's education -- including graduate studies in the United States, Europe or wherever the best universities in their fields of study are located -- they will continue losing competitiveness, and the gap separating them from Asia's booming economies will continue to widen.

Post script: On a happier note for Latin America, the IIE study shows that a record 224,000 U.S. college students studied abroad last year, an 8.5 percent increase over the previous year.

Latin America did not do badly: There was a 14 percent increase in the number of U.S. college students that chose the region as their destination.