

## **International students flock to online American universities**

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Associated Press

TAMPA - International students, scrambling to secure their U.S. education before immigration crackdowns come, are turning to online learning in numbers not seen before.

Inquiries from international students are up 40 percent in recent months at Bisk Education in Tampa, a company that has partnered with five universities to offering Internet courses. Students are seeking everything from undergraduate degrees to specialized certificate programs.

That's about 64,000 potential students who won't have to leave their home countries to obtain a U.S. education. In fact, they can earn exactly the same degree as those who spend tens of thousands of dollars more seeking students visas and relocating to the United States.

The surge in interest comes even as U.S. universities report their international student enrollments don't appear to have been affected by new scrutiny to international students following the Sept. 11 attacks.

If anything, the events of the last 10 months have made an American education even more desirable, educators say.

"For the ones who can't get in, this is a way for them to get the American dream without leaving home," said founder and CEO Nathan Bisk.

Some had thought stricter reviews of applications for international student visas would dissuade many from coming to the United States.

Universities offering online courses have been poised to enroll some of those students through U.S. State Department advising offices that provide information about Internet learning courses.

While the State Department isn't yet tracking the international interest in Internet learning, there is interest in doing so, officials say. It has not been determined who in Washington would do that, or how the tracking would be done.

Students from the Middle East face the toughest scrutiny in the refined student visa process, which calls for more thorough background checks and tracking students once they arrive in the United States.

In November, the State Department said the United States would slow down the process of issuing visas to young men from Arab nations so their backgrounds can be searched for any evidence of terrorist activities.

Students from Middle East countries account for about 37,000 of 547,000 foreign students attending American colleges and universities, according to the Institute of International

Education. The institute promotes international study and was instrumental in the creation of the United States' student visa program.

Students from predominantly Muslim nations, such as Indonesia, might also fall under the new directives. Those countries account for tens of thousands of additional international students.

The International Student and Scholar Services at the University of South Florida has also seen increased interest from international students, said director David Austell.

While the university won't know until classes start in the fall exactly how many international students show up for classes, the university expects to top last year's figure of about 1,800 international students. USF is one of the universities that partners with Bisk Education in the online schooling.

"There's lots of speculation in the future, but now the U.S. experience seems to be extremely popular," Austell said.

Austell and Bisk said the increase in international students seeking an American education could be twofold: Some students might be heading to the U.S. before further visa restrictions are imposed while others who don't have the money to travel here might still be seeking an American diploma to help secure future chances of being granted an immigrant visa.

"The one way you can get to America is to get a degree," Bisk said.

For Bisk, the increased interest comes at a time when the privately held company is among those dominating the Internet learning. It also offers distance learning programs to U.S. Army personnel through a program called eArmyU, which will go worldwide this fall.

Professors come from around the United States to a 70,000-square foot building east of Tampa to tape their courses on elaborate sets. The company streams the video onto the Internet alongside complete course materials. There are online chat rooms for students to converse with professors. They also provide students with books and a university logo shirt.

Among its offerings are associates and bachelors degrees from Saint Leo University, an MBA from Regis University; a project management certificate from Villanova University; and an online nursing program at Jacksonville University.

Bisk Education had enrolled 75,000 in its eight-week semesters since 1996. "All these companies were bragging about what the Internet will do - they are going to sell toys, they were going to sell prescriptions - to me the killer applications for the Internet is education," Bisk said.