

Maine urged to attract students from India

The state is getting a smaller share of those students – and their money – than the nation as a whole.

By ANN KIM, Staff Writer

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PORTLAND — In the 2008-09 academic year, India sent more than 103,000 students to colleges and universities in the United States, where they spent \$4.5 billion, the president of the U.S.-India Business Council told a group in Portland last week.

Maine is getting a smaller share of those students – and their money – than the nation as a whole, Ron Somers said.

While students from India, the largest source of foreign students, made up 15 percent of the foreign post-secondary student population nationwide, they comprised only 7 percent in Maine, according to the Institute of International Education.

"We need to get Maine's share of that chunk," Somers told the group assembled Thursday for a Maine International Trade Center event, "From Bangalore to Bangor: Attracting Indian Students to Maine's Schools."

The event was part of the trade center's growing effort to promote the export of education. Education is treated as an export even though the consumers make use of it in the United States.

Overall, it's a growing category. The total value in 2008 was \$17.8 billion – an increase of 11.5 percent from the previous year, according to the U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis.

"We really see this as exporting our services. It obviously has the trickle-down effect of economic development," said Janine Bisailon-Cary, the trade center's president.

Maine had an estimated 1,256 foreign students in its post-secondary schools last academic year, with an economic impact of \$31 million, according to the Institute of International Education. Canadians made up the largest percentage, 19.5 percent, followed by China at 13.3 percent and India at 7.3 percent.

Data isn't available for the state's private high schools or town academies, which take both private students and public school students whose tuition is paid by their districts.

School officials say the presence of international students helps prepare the whole student body for living and working in an increasingly global society.

"There's a huge benefit for all the students," said Dan Kunkle, Gould Academy's head of school. The private school in Bethel has about 15 students each from China and Korea and smaller numbers from Germany and Japan among its 240 students.

International students also can help bolster a shrinking school-age population and be a greater source of revenue. Town academies can charge foreign students more than \$30,000 a year in tuition, room and board – triple the amount they receive in tuition for public school students.

To get visas, foreign students generally must prove in advance that they can pay for their studies. They also are less likely to rely on financial aid.

"That's a win-win situation for the institution" because more money is freed up to support other students, said Bob Pecchia, associate admissions director at the University of New England.

India's demographics and shortage of post-secondary institutions, its shared language and the high value it puts on education are reasons that Maine schools should be reaching out to India, said Somers and Ashok Nalamalapu, Thursday's other presenter.

The emerging Indian middle class stands at 300 million, and 54 percent of the population is younger than 25, Somers noted.

"In India, the measure of success for parents is how well educated their children are," said Nalamalapu, president of iCST, a software company in South Portland.

Somers, who grew up in Maine and graduated from Oxford Hills High School, emphasized the need to promote the state as a brand, by establishing connections between Maine institutions and their Indian counterparts, touting well-known companies such as Fairchild Semiconductor and L.L. Bean as potential employers of graduates.

"It's all about quality and prestige – those are the drivers," Somers said.

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