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Leading Science, Higher-Education and Engineering Groups Urge Six Improvements to U.S. Visa-Processing Quagmire

WASHINGTON, D.C. -- More than 20 science, higher-education and engineering groups, representing some 95 percent of the U.S. research community, today urged the federal government to adopt six practical recommendations for solving the current visa-processing crisis, by removing unnecessary barriers to multi-national discoveries.

The recommendations are designed to combat “the misperception that the United States does not welcome international students, scholars and scientists,” according to a joint statement by AAAS, the world’s largest general science society, the Association of American Universities (AAU) and other top groups.

The statement is believed to be the first time that U.S. science and academic leaders have endorsed a comprehensive plan to address the visa-processing quagmire, which emerged from heightened security concerns in the wake of terrorist attacks.

“We are resolute in our support of a secure visa system and believe that a more efficient system is a more secure one,” the groups said in a statement routed to U.S. policymakers. “We also are confident that it is possible to have a visa system that is timely and transparent, that provides for thorough reviews of visa applicants, and that still welcomes the brightest minds in the world.”

While “the need to ensure national security is indisputable,” said Alan I. Leshner, chief executive officer of AAAS and executive publisher of the journal *Science*, “legitimate applications from scholars and students seeking to improve human welfare must not become snared in red tape. Scientific advances to combat HIV and AIDS, hunger, terrorism and many other crises will require the insights and contributions of scholars from many regions.”

The joint statement expresses strong support for the U.S. government’s efforts to establish new visa policies while bolstering security.

AAU President Nils Hasselmo said: “The flow of international students, scholars and researchers to America’s campuses is important to our nation’s economy, to its education and research enterprises, and to national security. With applications declining, it’s clear that many of the best and brightest students abroad no longer believe the United States is the destination of choice. That is a trend we need to reverse.”

Albert H. Teich, director of science and public policy at AAAS, noted that “science and security are not an ‘either-or’ proposition. We must and can have both. If we don’t take action now to improve the U.S. visa system, growing fears among researchers from other countries will do irreparable harm to scientific progress as well as U.S. competitiveness.”

In 2000, only 1,000 non-immigrant visa applications were flagged for review under the Visas Mantis program, one of several U.S. screening systems. By 2002, that number had risen to 14,000. By spring 2003, some 1,000 cases were under review at any point in time, according to John H. Marburger III, the U.S. President’s science adviser. At the same time, an increased number of cases are being set aside for even more detailed screening, creating massive backlogs and delays that prevent students from attending school, and scientists from participating in research and conferences.

In addition, a survey earlier this year by the American Council on Education, AAU, NAFSA: Association of International Educators; and the National Association of State

Universities and Land-Grant Colleges documented a substantial drop in applications by international graduate students to leading U.S. research institutions for the 2004-05 academic year.

The statement outlines six problems and related recommendations, as follows:

- **Problem:** Repetitive security checks that cause lengthy visa issuance delays.
Recommendation: Extend the validity of Visas Mantis security clearances for international students, scholars, and scientists from the current one-year time period to the duration of their course of study or academic appointment.
- **Problem:** Inefficient visa-renewal process that causes lengthy delays.
Recommendation: Establish a timely process by which exchange visitors holding F and J visas can revalidate their visas, or at least begin the visa renewal process, before they leave the United States to attend academic and scientific conferences, visit family, or attend to personal business.
- **Problem:** Lack of transparency and priority-processing in the visa system.
Recommendation: Create a mechanism by which visa applicants and their sponsors may inquire about the status of pending visa applications, and establish a process by which applications pending for more than 30 days are given priority processing.
- **Problem:** Inconsistent treatment of visa applications.
Recommendation: Provide updated training of consular staff, establish clear protocols for initiating a Visas Mantis review, and ensure that screening tools are being used in the most appropriate manner.
- **Problem:** Repetitive processing of visa applications for those with a proven track record.
Recommendation: Revise visa reciprocity agreements between the United States and key sending countries, such as China and Russia, to extend the duration of visas each country grants citizens of the other, thereby reducing the number of times that visiting international students, scholars, and scientists must renew their visas.
- **Problem:** Potential new impediment to international students, scholars and scientists entering the United States created by the proposed Student and Exchange Visitor Information System (SEVIS) fee collection mechanism.
Recommendation: Implement a fee-collection system for the SEVIS that allows for a variety of simple fee payment methods that are quick, safe, and secure, including payment after the individual arrives in the United States.

In addition to these specific recommendations, the science, higher-education and engineering organizations also called for additional funding and staffing resources across all U.S. agencies involved in handling visa applications. “Congress and the Administration should ensure that adequate resources are provided” for efficient visa processing, the statement emphasized.

MEDIA NOTE: Attached please find the Statement and list of signing organizations.

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The American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) is the world’s largest general scientific society, and publisher of the journal, *Science* (www.sciencemag.org). AAAS was founded in 1848, and serves some 265 affiliated societies and academies of science, serving 10 million individuals. *Science* has the largest paid circulation of any peer-reviewed general

science journal in the world, with an estimated total readership of one million. The non-profit AAAS (www.aaas.org) is open to all and fulfills its mission to “advance science and serve society” through initiatives in science policy; international programs; science education; and more. For the latest research news, log onto EurekAlert!, www.eurekalert.org, the premier science-news Web site, a service of AAAS.

The Association of American Universities (www.aau.edu) is an association of 60 U.S. and two Canadian research universities organized to develop and implement effective national and institutional policies supporting research and scholarship, graduate and professional education, undergraduate education, and public service in research universities.

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