Recommendations for Enhancing the U.S. Visa System to Advance America's Scientific and Economic Competitiveness and National Security Interests

May 18, 2005

Following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, the U.S. government put in place new safeguards in the nation's visa system that made it extremely challenging for bona fide international students, scholars, scientists, and engineers to enter this country. While intended to correct weaknesses exposed by the attacks, the changes proved to be significant barriers for legitimate travelers and created a misperception that these visitors were no longer welcome here.

Other countries have used this opportunity to attract these individuals to their own educational, scientific, and technical institutions. In addition, key sending countries have enhanced their higher education systems in an effort to keep their best students at home.

Despite significant recent improvements to the U.S. visa system, considerable barriers remain that continue to fuel the misperception that our country does not welcome these international visitors, who contribute immensely to our nation's economy, national security, and higher education and scientific enterprises. These misperceptions must be dispelled soon, or we risk irreparable damage to our competitive advantage in attracting international students, scholars, scientists, and engineers, and ultimately to our nation's global leadership.

One year ago, most of the undersigned organizations of higher education, science, and engineering, in an effort to enhance national security and international exchange made a joint commitment to work with the federal government to make sensible changes to the visa system http://www.aau.edu/homeland/JointVisaStatement.pdf We recommended several improvements, some of which have been adopted in the past year. Today we come together again to express gratitude and support for the changes that have been made, to continue to urge approval of those that have not, and to recommend additional improvements, so that America can continue to compete for and welcome the world's best minds and talents.

We offer the following recommendations in the spirit of cooperation that has already resulted in improvements to the visa system:

- **Extend the validity of Visas Mantis security clearances for international scholars and scientists from the current two-year limit to the duration of their academic appointment**. While we appreciate that the limit has already been extended from one year to two years, this further extension would be comparable to that already provided for international students and would prevent redundant security checks that can waste resources and cause unnecessary delays and hardships.

- **Allow international students, scholars, scientists, and engineers to renew their visas in the United States.** Allowing individuals to complete, or at least initiate, the visa revalidation process before leaving the country to attend academic conferences or to visit family would reduce, and in many cases eliminate, visa delays, thus permitting them to continue their studies and research uninterrupted.

- **Renegotiate visa reciprocity agreements between the United States and key sending countries, such as China, to extend the duration of visas each country grants citizens of the other and to permit multiple entries on a single visa**. We applaud the State Department's initial efforts to achieve this and encourage continued efforts. Improved reciprocity would allow the federal government to focus its visa screening resources by reducing the number of visa renewals that must be processed.

- **Amend inflexible requirements that lead to frequent student visa denials.** The Immigration and Nationality Act of 1952 should place greater emphasis on student visa applicants' academic intent and financial means to complete a course of study in the United States, instead of their ability to demonstrate evidence of a residence and employment in their home country and their intent to return home. Up to 40 percent of student visa applicants from key sending countries are rejected because they are unable to demonstrate to the satisfaction of consular officials their intent and ability to return home after completing their studies. The United States is losing too many top students to this policy, and the Act should be revised.

- **Develop a national strategy to promote academic and scientific exchange and to encourage international students, scholars, scientists, and engineers to pursue higher education and research opportunities in the United States**. In addition to visa reforms, this strategy should include a plan to counter prevailing negative perceptions of studying and conducting research in the United States and should promote study abroad by American students.

The following recommendation, while not related to visa issuance, addresses a potential barrier to international scientists and engineers seeking to study and conduct research in the United States.

- **The federal government should not require that export licenses be obtained for international scientists and engineers to use equipment required to conduct unclassified, fundamental research in the United States.** The Department of Commerce is considering expanding existing regulations to require that licenses be obtained before certain foreign nationals are permitted access to specialized scientific equipment required for unclassified, fundamental research. Requiring such licenses would further discourage top international scientists and engineers from making the United States their destination, prompting them to seek research opportunities overseas.

Lastly, it is essential that adequate resources continue to be provided by Congress and the Administration to administer an effective visa system and to implement the above recommendations.

We reiterate our commitment to work with the federal government to improve the visa system. That system should maintain our nation's security by preventing entry by those who pose a threat to the United States and encouraging the entry of the brightest and most qualified international students, scholars, scientists, and engineers to participate fully in the U.S. higher education and research enterprises. Such a system will foster American scientific and economic competitiveness. We commend the Administration for the improvements made to the visa system to date, and we look forward to continuing to work together for these further needed changes.

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