

Scientific Exchange: Storm Rising?

You're an assistant professor of electrical engineering at a well-known research university in the United States. Your H-1B visa is good for another 2 years. With your wife, a British citizen, you've gone to Egypt to visit your family; she comes back to the United States in midsummer, but your application for an H1-B1 nonimmigrant visa to return home has been delayed for security clearance. An interview can't be scheduled for several weeks; when it finally happens, the U.S. consul requests a form from your department, which faxes it promptly. At the next interview, 2 weeks later, you're told that your file is complete but you cannot even inquire about the status of your application until a month after your course is scheduled to start in the United States. Naturally, your department chair is frantically searching for a substitute.

This is an actual case—from a year ago. Bad enough news—but it gets worse, because this year beginning in August, nearly every visa applicant in a nonwaiver country (that list includes India, China, and six other nations among the top 10 suppliers of international students to the United States) must be interviewed by a U.S. consular official. Scientists seeking to immigrate for graduate study or research appointments—or to return to jobs here—are apt to find themselves in queues stretching around the block outside the consulate. When they are finally interviewed, the information system set up to provide security-relevant information to consulates—the Student and Exchange Visitor Information System (SEVIS)—will not have provided the data needed for the interview, or will have delivered wrong information.

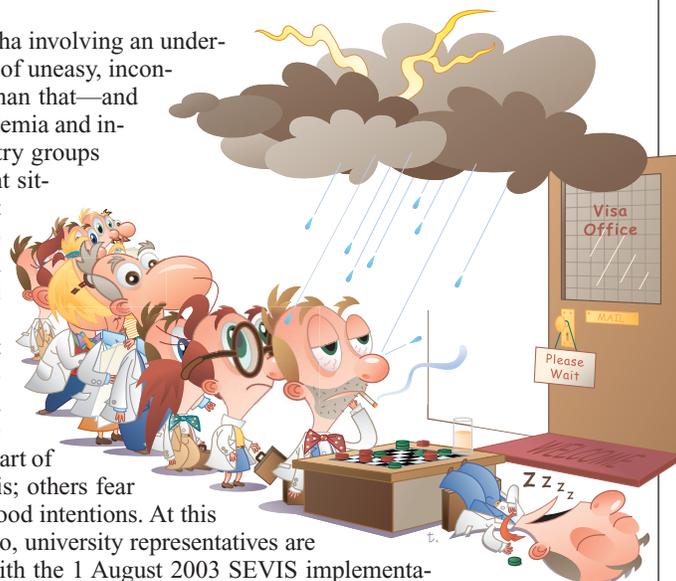
One might tend to discount this as a typical brouhaha involving an understandably security-conscious government and a group of uneasy, inconvenienced universities. But it is much more serious than that—and provides one of those rare instances in which U.S. academia and industry are allied. Testimony from academic and industry groups persuaded many members of Congress that the current situation is problematic—including Sherwood Boehlert (R-NY), chair of the House Science Committee, who called it “untenable.” Modest steps have been taken since, including interview priority for international scientists and students—but more needs to be done.

As bad as the situation is, there is a real concern that it may get worse. President Bush proposed a new system in 2002. Called IPASS (Interagency Panel on Advanced Science and Security), it is intended to make information about scientific qualifications an integral part of the visa application process. Some would welcome this; others fear that it would add a new layer of difficulty despite its good intentions. At this point it is doubtful that it will ever be installed. Even so, university representatives are concerned that the interview requirement—coupled with the 1 August 2003 SEVIS implementation deadline, and possibly with IPASS as well—will create a “perfect storm” for the visa process.

There is no need to recite the importance of scientific exchange to the world. Policies made in the United States, because it has had such a large share of the traffic, have an enormous impact on the international structure of the research enterprise. Lest this be viewed as a problem affecting a few scientists from Muslim or Middle Eastern nations, here are two examples of the impacts elsewhere. Applicants from China to a leading engineering department at a major midwestern research university have decreased from 185 a year ago to 39 this year. Norwegian student enrollment in U.S. universities has dropped, and in the current year three times as many Norwegians are studying in Australia as in the United States; Australia has launched an aggressive program of its own to recruit foreign students in the sciences.

And the difficulty is not confined to young, ambitious scientists who are eager to come to the United States for the first time. Senior researchers originally from abroad but not yet citizens are often fully integrated into U.S. projects on a more or less permanent basis. They could both gain value and contribute to it by attendance at international meetings, or by working abroad for a period. Yet many are hesitant to leave, fearing that they will be unable to return. The result is a climate that has become chilling for scientists already in the United States—almost as chilling as it is for those who wish to go there.

Donald Kennedy
Editor-in-Chief



Science

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Science **301** (5632), 437.

DOI: 10.1126/science.301.5632.437

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