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LEADING ACADEMIC, SCIENCE GROUPS PROPOSE VISA REFORMS TO BOOST U.S. ECONOMIC COMPETITIVENESS AND SCIENTIFIC LEADERSHIP

A group of 40 leading academic, science and engineering associations today urged the U.S. government to accelerate its effort to reform the visa process for international students, scholars, and researchers.

While noting that progress has been made during the past year, the group said that additional steps are needed to help dispel 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.”

The organizations represent nearly all of the higher education and research communities, as well as many of the businesses and industries vital to the U.S. economy.

The groups, led by the Association of American Universities (AAU) and the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS), made six recommendations for reducing or eliminating barriers that they said cause undue hardship for the kind of visitors who for decades have helped to sustain the nation’s leadership in science and innovation.

The statement is available on the AAU Web site at:
<http://www.aau.edu/homeland/05VisaStatement.pdf> and on the AAAS Web site at:
<http://www.aaas.org/news/releases/2005/0518recommendations.shtml>.

A year ago, most of the same groups issued a similar statement with recommended reforms (<http://www.aau.edu/homeland/JointVisaStatement.pdf>), and a number of those proposals have been implemented, in whole or in part. The group today expressed appreciation for those “significant recent improvements to the U.S. visa system” but pointed out that “considerable barriers remain.”

The misperceptions caused by these barriers, they wrote, “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.”

“If our nation is to remain the world’s leader in science and innovation, we must continue to encourage the contributions made by international students, scientists, and engineers,” said AAU president Nils Hasselmo. “We appreciate the steps that have been taken by the Administration to fix the visa process, but unnecessary barriers remain.” He added, “We will continue to work with the Departments of State and Homeland Security to eliminate them.”

“Foreign students and visitors are a hugely valuable asset for the United States,” said Albert H. Teich, director of science and policy programs for AAAS. “Not only do we benefit from those who ultimately may decide to apply for immigrant visas and stay in this country, but we gain equally from those who return to their home countries and remain connected to us through collaborations, friendships and common interests. U.S. visa policies need to be calibrated to restore the image, and the reality, of the U.S. as a welcoming nation.”

The group made the following recommendations:

- **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.** This would be similar to the extension provided recently for international students. The change “would prevent redundant security checks that can waste resources and cause unnecessary delays and hardships,” the group wrote.
- **Allow international students, scholars, scientists, and engineers to renew their visas in the U.S.** Visitors who leave the country for any reason, such as attending an academic conference or visiting family, need a visa to return. Currently, the visa renewal process must be initiated and completed outside the U.S., usually in the applicant’s home country. The group proposes allowing individuals to complete, or at least initiate, the process before leaving the U.S., to facilitate their return and enable them “to continue their studies and research uninterrupted.”
- **Renegotiate visa reciprocity agreements with key sending countries to extend the duration of visas for citizens of each country and permit multiple entries on a single visa.** The U.S. maintains reciprocal visa agreements with other countries under which U.S. policy toward visitors from those countries matches their policy toward U.S. citizens. Agreements with some countries, such as China, are very restrictive. Negotiations with China have already begun.
- **Amend inflexible requirements that lead to frequent student visa denials.** Current law requires student visa applicants to demonstrate that they have a residence and employment opportunities to return to in their home country, and that they intend to return. Nearly half of the visa denials for international students from certain countries occur on the basis of this requirement. The group recommended that Congress amend the law to focus less on these criteria and more on applicants’ financial ability and intent to fulfill a course of study in the U.S. They said this change would help to prevent the loss of many highly qualified students.
- **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 U.S.** The strategy, the group said, should include visa reforms as well as other efforts by both the government and the academic community to “counter prevailing negative perceptions of studying and conducting research in the United States...”
- **The government should not require that export licenses be obtained for international scientists and engineers to use equipment for unclassified, fundamental research in the U.S.** The Department of Commerce is considering a new requirement that export licenses be obtained before certain foreign nationals may use specialized scientific equipment for unclassified, fundamental research. It would apply even to researchers who had undergone a

Visas Mantis security review. The group argued that such a requirement could further discourage top international scientists and engineers from working in the U.S.

“We reiterate our commitment to work with the federal government to improve the visa system,” the group statement concluded. “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 federal government 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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