Visas for Foreign Scientists and Students

GSA PREAMBLE AND ENDORSEMENT OF VISA POSITION STATEMENT

The Geological Society of America endorses the attached Statement and Recommendations on Visa Problems Harming America’s Scientific, Economic, and Security Interests. Visa policy is of special importance to Earth science for many reasons, such as:

1. Earth science is inherently an international endeavor because it is not possible to understand Earth by studying only those parts of the planet that fall within the boundaries of a single country.

2. Progress in Earth science requires international field research, participation in international conferences, access to international research facilities, and other activities that involve international exchange and cooperation.

3. Delays in issuing visas to Earth scientists responding to natural disasters -- such as earthquakes, tsunamis, volcanic eruptions, and floods -- can result in loss of life, loss of property, and loss of scientific opportunities. Earth scientists can help prevent some natural hazards from becoming natural disasters through international exchange and collaboration.

GSA supports the attached position statement (see p. 2-6) to promote international scientific exchange and encourage students, scholars, scientists, and engineers to pursue international education and research opportunities.

ABOUT THE GEOLOGICAL SOCIETY OF AMERICA

The Geological Society of America, founded in 1888, is a scientific society with more than 25,000 members from academia, government, and industry in more than 100 countries. Through its meetings, publications, and programs, GSA enhances the professional growth of its members and promotes the geosciences in the service of humankind. GSA encourages cooperative research among earth, life, planetary, and social scientists, fosters public dialogue on geoscience issues, and supports all levels of earth science education. Inquiries about the GSA or this position statement should be directed to GSA’s Director for Geoscience Policy, Kasey S. White, at +1-202-669-0466 or kwhite@geosociety.org.
As representatives of organizations of U.S. higher education, science, and engineering, we have been deeply concerned about the significant increase in delays experienced earlier this year by many international students, scholars, and scientists who have applied for visas to study, conduct research, or attend conferences in this country. Our nation's colleges and universities and scientific and technical organizations are the engines of the new knowledge, innovation, and advanced training that power the country's research enterprise and contribute greatly to economic and national security. Moreover, they are important hubs of international scientific and technical exchanges, and they play a vital role in facilitating educational and cultural interactions that help to spread our nation's values.

Lengthy and unnecessary delays frustrate and discourage many of the best and brightest international students, scholars, and scientists from studying and working in the United States, or attending academic and scientific conferences here and abroad. This compromises our ability to attract international scientific talent and maintain scientific and economic leadership. Given the current economic crisis, as delays continue, individuals are more likely to decide not to come to the United States.

Our nation needs a visa system that supports international exchange and cooperation. We are confident that it is possible to have a system that protects national security, and yet is still timely and transparent, provides for thorough reviews of applicants, and welcomes the finest talent. Scientific exchange and security are not mutually exclusive; to the contrary, they complement each other, and each is vital to the other.

We applaud this Administration's commitment to restoring America's image abroad. We understand that steps currently are being taken to increase personnel resources and improve and streamline the visa application review process to eliminate the current backlog of applications and significantly reduce wait times for prospective applicants undergoing Visas Mantis security review. The Department of State, Department of Homeland Security, and other partner agencies have worked closely with our community in recent years to make the visa process less cumbersome, and we are pleased that the Administration is taking these additional steps to address some of our concerns. It is, therefore, in the spirit of past and future cooperation that we offer the following recommendations:

- **Address the current backlog of visa applications as expeditiously as possible** by providing sufficient resources to the Department of State and its partner agencies to allow timely processing of visa applications. This action must be taken to prevent the world from again believing that the United States does not welcome international students, scholars, and scientists.

- **Streamline the visa process for credentialed short-term visitors in science and technology fields**. A non-immigrant visa applicant who is a legitimate graduate student, researcher, or professional in any field of science and technology, and whose application is
supported by a qualified university, scientific body, or corporation should receive a
determination on his or her visa application within 30 days. Longer delays are very
disruptive to scientific study, research and collaborations.

➢ **Reduce repetitive processing of visa applications for those well-known researchers and scholars who regularly visit the United States.** The Department of State and its partner
agencies should reduce repetitive reviews of international researchers and scholars who
regularly travel to the United States to attend academic conferences and conduct research. Longer duration clearances and visas are needed.

➢ **Establish protocols to make treatment of applicants more consistent.** Consular staff at
posts abroad should receive regular training on protocols for initiating a Visas Mantis review
so that this screening tool can be used appropriately and consistently. Additional training and
guidance for consular staff can enhance security while simultaneously reducing the number
of applications submitted for Visas Mantis reviews, thereby alleviating potential delays.

➢ **Provide more transparency in the visa system.** We recommend that the Department of
State provide more transparency for visa applicants who experience delays, and establish a
special review process to address applications pending for more than 30 days.

➢ **Review and streamline the Technology Alert List (TAL) to include only subject areas
that clearly have explicit implications for national security.** The list identifies sensitive
areas of science and technology in which exports of technology or information might be
controlled. However, over the years, the TAL has been broadened, and it now restrains and
inhibits legitimate areas of scientific research.

➢ **Continue and expand ongoing efforts to renegotiate visa reciprocity agreements
between the United States and key sending countries, such as China, to extend the
duration of visas each country grants students and scholars of the other and to permit
multiple entries on a single visa.** We applaud the Department of State’s efforts to date in
this area and encourage continued efforts. Improved reciprocity and allowing multiple entries
would reduce the number of visa renewals that must be processed.

➢ **Convene a high level interagency panel to review the full range of visa-related policies
and procedures put into place after 9/11.** Many policies and procedures designed to
enhance national security were put into place after 9/11. An evaluation of their cost-
effectiveness is needed, and ineffective and unnecessary procedures should be revised or
eliminated. Such a review would resolve these and other outstanding issues.

We appreciate the steps taken recently to improve the visa processing system. We reiterate our
commitment to work with the federal government to address remaining issues and improve the
visa system further. A system that maintains our nation’s security while encouraging the entry of
the brightest and most qualified international students, scholars, scientists, and engineers will
bolster American scientific and economic competitiveness, as well as help restore America’s
image abroad. We believe that implementing the above recommendations will help make this
goal a reality.
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- American Anthropological Association
- Materials Research Society
- The American Society for Cell Biology
- Fulbright Academy of Science & Technology

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