

Visas for Foreign Scientists and Students

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POSITION:

The Geological Society of America supports a secure, rational, efficient, effective, and transparent visa policy that not only welcomes the brightest minds in the world to attend or visit our colleges and research institutions, but also works to encourage the participation of international students, scientists, and engineers in our professional meetings.

Background

The Geological Society of America (GSA) membership and their colleagues have experienced the unintended consequences of a more strict and complex visa policy established after September 11, 2001. GSA fully recognizes that careful review of all visa applications is critical to United States security given the dual-use nature of many technologies and the serious and ongoing national security threats. However, our science is global in nature and to move forward toward solving some of our most pressing Earth Science problems we must be able to work with our international colleagues and easily exchange students among our international universities. These problems, such as earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, tsunamis, flooding, water supply, etc., can have immense socioeconomic impact. In addition, because geology as a discipline relies on field observations, individuals must be able to freely and easily travel to field sites. Therefore, GSA advocates a visa policy that allows for the open and relatively easy interaction of U.S. and international colleagues and students. Policies that unreasonably delay or deny visas to international students, scientists, and engineers are hurting U.S. researchers, universities and students and are diminishing the quality of U.S. scientific research and education. As a scientific society we feel that restrictive visa policies will ultimately affect both scientific progress and U.S. prosperity.

State Department restrictions that delay and prevent outstanding international students from receiving student F-1 visas, and that impede the issuance of B-1 and J-1 visas to visiting science professors and researchers, have an adverse effect on major scientific conferences, public and private research efforts, and other scientific collaborations. In addition, universities thrive on the presence of international students and scholars who embody their diverse cultures and are their countries' unsung cultural ambassadors. When they leave the United States, that role is often reversed. They often form friendships that are natural bridges for crossing the cultural divides and lead to relationships that will be of long-term benefit. A piece of the 'American way of life' returns with our international colleagues, many of whom become strong supporters of U.S. policy, able to explain American positions and opinions.

Implementation

GSA understands that the State Department shares the goal of the American academic and scientific communities in striving to work with international students, professors, and scientists in our colleges and research institutions. We are also aware that this issue is fluid and changes occur frequently. However, the society urges swift federal action on quick and effective screening procedures for international students, scientists, and engineers that reduce barriers to international interaction. The following issues should be given consideration for such a visa policy:

1. Clear protocols should exist for initiating a Visas Mantis review and screening tools should be reviewed to ensure they are used appropriately;
2. A mechanism should exist by which visa applicants and their sponsors may inquire about the status of pending visa applications, and a process should be in place by which applications pending for more than 30 days are given priority processing;
3. The validity of Visas Mantis security clearances for international students, scholars, and scientists should encompass the duration of their course of study or academic appointment;
4. A timely process should exist 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 US to attend academic and scientific conferences, visit family, or attend to personal business;
5. Visa reciprocity agreements between the US and key sending countries, such as China and Russia, should be reviewed and revised as necessary 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; and
6. Any fee-collection system for the Student and Exchange Visitor Information System should allow for a variety of simple fee payment methods that are quick, safe and secure, including payment after the individual arrives in the US.