Visas for Foreign Scientists and Students

Position Statement. The Geological Society of America (GSA) endorses a United States visa system that supports international scientific exchange and cooperation. Government visa policy is especially important to the earth sciences 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.

RATIONALE

Our nation's colleges and universities, corporations engaged in scientific research and development, 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.

Representatives of organizations of U.S. higher education, science, and engineering, and corporations seeking to hire international talent, are deeply concerned about the significant increase in delays experienced by many international students, scholars, and scientists who have applied for visas to work, study, conduct research, or attend conferences in this country.

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. As delays continue, highly qualified individuals are more likely to decide not to come to the United States, which damages the nation’s ability to foster technological innovation and job creation.

RECOMMENDATIONS

GSA believes the United States must have a visa system that supports international scientific 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.

The Department of State, the Department of Homeland Security, and other partner agencies have worked closely with the scientific community in recent years to make the visa process less cumbersome. We urge the current Administration to take these additional steps to address some of our concerns.

- 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

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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.
- 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. Protocols should be established 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. 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.

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.

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About the Geological Society of America

The Geological Society of America (GSA), founded in 1888, is a scientific society with over 25,000 members from academia, government, and industry in more than 100 countries. Through its meetings, publications, and programs, GSA advances the geosciences, 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 geologic issues, and supports all levels of earth-science education. Inquiries about 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.

Note About This Statement Revision: The original GSA visa position statement of May 2005 was amended in April 2012 to endorse a visa statement titled "Statement and Recommendations on Visa Problems Harming America's Scientific, Economic, and Security Interests," issued on June 10, 2009, and signed by the leadership of many of the nation's principal educational and scientific organizations. In 2017, a decision was made to fundamentally modify the GSA position statement on visas. Instead of endorsing a joint society statement, this revision of the GSA visa statement has incorporated the relevant language of the June 2009 statement.