September 14, 2004

The Honorable Asa Hutchinson
Undersecretary for Border and Transportation Security
U.S. Department of Homeland Security
Washington, D.C. 20528

Dear Mr. Undersecretary:

The world’s best minds come to the U.S. in search of a quality education and the opportunity to participate in cutting edge research. America benefits from this opportunity to educate the world’s brightest minds who will become future leaders, to attract top-notch talent whose innovations foster America’s economic growth, and to enrich the educational experiences of American students through cultural diversity at our campuses.

In the post-September 11th world, America has been challenged to maintain this open door for scholars to study here, while at the same time taking steps to improve the security of our nation. The Student and Exchange Visitor Information System (SEVIS) exemplifies the commitment to both open doors and secure borders. We commend the work that has been done to achieve these two goals.

As you are aware, over the last few years the number of scholars applying to U.S. institutions of higher learning has been declining. To this end, we believe that it is crucial that we make the SEVIS program as efficient and as user-friendly as possible. We are concerned that the system, as implemented beginning on September 1, is not as efficient as it could be, and may represent an unnecessary obstacle for those international students considering study in the United States. We believe one common-sense approach to make the SEVIS program less onerous is to allow the State Department to collect the fee at the time of the visa application.

We understand that a pilot program for simultaneous SEVIS and visa fee collection has been proposed, involving the strategic nations of China and India. Yet we are concerned with the delay in this program’s implementation. Because we believe this program may prove worthy of replication elsewhere, we believe work on the China-India pilot program must commence in a timely fashion.

We are aware that administrative and financial hurdles may impede full implementation of this pilot project. Nevertheless, we urge you to develop and share with us a realistic timeline for its implementation.
Thank you for your tireless efforts at maintaining open doors and secure borders, and we appreciate your attention to this matter.

Sincerely,

Norm Coleman  
United States Senate

cc:  Assistant Secretary of State Maura Harty

Jeff Bingaman  
United States Senate