April 8, 2004

Nils Hasselmo, Ph.D.
President
Association of American Universities
Suite 550
1200 New York Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20005

Dear Dr. Hasselmo:

I am writing to thank you and the membership of the Association of American Universities for your support and to report to you on Homeland Security’s efforts to register foreign students and exchange visitors.

Colleges and universities across America made an enormous effort to help the Department of Homeland Security meet its Congressional mandate to register all foreign students and exchange visitors in the Student and Exchange Visitor Information System (SEVIS) by August 1, 2003. I know the Association of American Universities dedicated valuable staff and resources to this effort, and for that I am grateful.

I am pleased to report that because of our mutual efforts, we not only met but exceeded our goals.

Anticipating that all applicable schools and exchange visitor programs would not be able to fully comply with the mandate’s requirements by August 1, 2003, the Border Transportation Security Directorate established a SEVIS Response Team (SRT) to respond to questions and assist in the mitigation of student and exchange visitor issues at ports of entry. The SRT, comprised of representatives from Immigration and Customs Enforcement, Customs and Border Protections and the Bureau of Citizenship and Immigration Services, was highly successful in minimizing the deadline’s potential negative impact on schools, students, and exchange visitors that were not able to fully comply with the SEVIS requirements by the deadline.

Between August 1 and September 15, 2003, the SRT received and responded to more than 8,000 calls. In virtually all cases, the calls related to individuals arriving at ports of entry without proper SEVIS documentation. The SRT responded by conducting comprehensive searches of the SEVIS database to determine whether the student, visitor or school was SEVIS registered. Whenever possible, the SRT contacted the school to
verify that the school was expecting the student and to obtain copies of the student's SEVIS documentation. If schools were not registered in SEVIS, we contacted them to ensure that they were aware of the SEVIS certification requirement and walked them through the process. The SRT proved an invaluable means to facilitate the admission of these legitimate foreign students while ensuring that national security was not compromised.

More than 200,000 foreign students arrived in the U.S. for the fall academic term. Nearly all of them were properly registered and admitted into the country without incident. You also should know, however, that more than 200 people arrived in the U.S. claiming to be students who were not. Through our partnerships with colleges and universities, we were able to establish that these people were not registered at any U.S. school, and they were denied admission into the United States.

The Association of American Universities played an important role in helping to make America safer, and I hope you agree that the SEVIS process this year was a vast improvement from years past. Our goal at the Department of Homeland Security is not only to keep America secure, but also to keep America a welcoming and free nation for those who want to obey our laws and enjoy the exceptional educational and cultural opportunities available in our country.

The future success of SEVIS and other Homeland Security initiatives is heavily dependent on our partnership with the educational community. As you know, the SEVIS program is of great interest to our international partners as well. During my recent trip to Asia, several foreign leaders expressed interest in the success of the program. It is only through your continued cooperation, support and feedback that the program can remain on-track and realize its goals. I believe we have a few remaining challenges involving foreign faculty and graduate students. I look forward to continuing to work with the Association of American Universities on these and other concerns to make 2004 an even more successful year.

Sincerely,

Tom Ridge