Remarks of AAU President Nils Hasselmo at Heritage Foundation program, "Foreign Students and Homeland Security: Issues and Answers."

Homeland Security and International Students, Scholars, and Scientists: Issues and Answers
Nils Hasselmo
August 2, 2004

Thank you for this opportunity to address an important audience on an important issue.

I speak on behalf of the Association of American Universities (AAU), 60 of the top research universities in the U.S. and 2 in Canada. We at AAU – in collaboration with dozens of other organizations – have been working with the federal government and its representatives to try to achieve what I and many others consider a fundamental goal:

To combine homeland security and openness, both very important to our nation.

I want to express my appreciation to the many individuals and organizations that have committed themselves to seeking the best solutions possible.

I also want to express my appreciation to the representatives of the federal government who have been willing to work with us on these issues – and listen to and consider our many recommendations. These include officials and staff from the Department of Homeland Security, the State Department, the Office of Science and Technology Policy, and other agencies.

And now to the issues at hand.

Point #1: Legitimate security requirements exist, and must be met; let me make that point from the outset. Since the September 11 terrorist attacks all of us have come to recognize that we must assure our homeland security.

Point #2: These new security requirements must be met in a way that does not damage the very important – I would say essential - flow of international talent to this country, not least to its universities, and the continuing collaboration among, and exchange of, U.S. and international scholars and scientists.

Collaboration and exchange are important - and actually part and parcel of modern science and scholarship.

Science is a global enterprise. R&D spending and business investment now regularly cross national borders in search of available talent; talented people cross borders in search of challenging and lucrative work; and employers recruit and move employees internationally.
In its own national interest, as well as in the interest of the global community, the U.S.
needs to make every effort to facilitate that flow, that collaboration, and that exchange.

Moreover, foreign students contribute to national security. When we provide an
opportunity for the best and brightest international students to study in America, we give
them a chance to understand the American values and the American way of life.

These are people who will lead their nations one day, often in the government, business
or education sector. The experience they gain with our democratic system and our values
gives them a better understanding of what America is and who Americans are.

For example, one of the most moving events of my time as president of the University of
Minnesota was when a small delegation from the university and I presented an honorary
degree to Professor Tang Peisong in Beijing. He was a member of the Chinese Academy
of Science, and in his homeland often referred to as "the father of plant pathology in
China." He had been a student at the University of Minnesota in the mid 1920s. Almost
70 years later, I could present him with this honorary degree, at his bed in a hospital in
Beijing where he was being treated for heart problems. As I presented him with the
insignia of his Minnesota honorary degree, the comment of this scientist, who had been
showered with honors, was: "This is the greatest honor I have ever received!" He told us
about the professors who had taught him, and about the Minnesota family that had invited
him to share their Thanksgiving dinner in 1926. Vivid memories, it seemed, by someone
whose scientific career was shaped at an American university, who served his homeland
well, and who nourished – after all that had happened over the past 70 years – who held
an abiding affection for America.

If we want to make sure – in the national interest – that the flow of international talent
does not bypass our shores, we cannot rely on our nation’s traditional dominance in
science, technology and education. Especially in the face of significant competition from
other countries for the talent involved, we must demonstrate our commitment to openness
both in deed - through a streamlined and effective process - and in words - through clear,
loud, and frequent statements by national leaders that the nation treasures and welcomes
international students, scholars, and scientists.

The process used in screening must be effective in that it truly identifies, and focuses on,
possible problem cases rather than creating unnecessary bureaucracy and paper work.
We do not believe it serves our national or homeland security to waste unnecessary
bureaucratic resources on individuals who have demonstrated that they pose no threat and
have a legitimate purpose here. Those are resources better spent on detecting and
keeping out those who pose a threat. So when we create unnecessary barriers, we not
only do the damage to our economy and our research enterprise that comes with
restricting the flow of international scholars and students – we also do harm to our
nation's security.

There are unfortunately strong indications that the flow, the collaboration, and the
exchange have been hampered.
Examples:

- Total international applications to graduate schools in the United States for fall 2004 declined 32 percent from fall 2003, and student visa applications are down 24 percent from 2001.

- In an AAU survey from February 2004, 59% of our member institutions indicated a decline, 28% indicated no change in application numbers, and 11% indicated an increase.

- Among the 25 research institutions that enroll the most international students, all indicated declines in international graduate applications. Nine indicated a decrease of 30% or more; six reported a decrease of between 11 and 30%.

Meanwhile, the international competition is gaining ground.

- Asian countries are now investing in higher education, especially in graduate programs in science and technology, more than ever before, and the quality of those programs is improving rapidly.

One of the top priorities for Taiwan is to allocate the equivalent of roughly $1.6 billion US dollars for five years to a selected group of universities, as an incentive for them to reach – or to be closer to – the caliber of major US research institutions. China, Hong Kong, and South Korea are developing similar strategies to keep their talent at home – or attract it back from abroad.

- Major competitors for international students, such as the United Kingdom, Canada, and Australia, are gaining market share while the United States is losing share.

The number of Chinese and Indian students going to universities in Australia last fall was up by 25 and 31 percent respectively, and the comparable increases for Chinese and Indian students going to England is 36 and 16 percent respectively. It is worth noting that these two countries have security concerns similar to ours, but they also have national policies that help in the recruitment of international students.

To address our problems in regard to the international flow of talent, a set of visa policy recommendations were drafted and endorsed this past May by a group of 30 educational, scientific, and professional associations and societies, including the National Academies, the American Association for the Advancement of Science, the AAU and other presidential associations, the American Physical Society, and many others. We have copies of the statement available here today.

Action has already been taken on some of the community’s recommendations.
The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and the State Department issued its SEVIS fee collection rule on July 1st which did indeed allow several payment options suggested by the university community. Naturally, we want to continue to work with DHS and State officials as we monitor university experiences with the SEVIS fee collection process.

The DHS provided special facilitating services at major entry points for international students as they arrived in the fall of 2003 and has promised to do so again for students entering the country for the fall semester.

The Department of State has improved tracking of applications, increased consular training, and provided additional staffing, and has also given priority to interviews for international students because of the problem of getting them into the country in time for the beginning of the fall term.

We greatly appreciate all these efforts, but we feel additional changes are still needed.

The validity of Visa Mantis security clearances should be extended for international students, scholars, and scientists from the current one-year time period to the duration of their course of study or academic appointment. This would prevent the need for repetitive security checks that cause visa issuance delays.

A timely process should be established by which exchange visitors holding F (student) and J (scholars/scientists) visas can revalidate their visas, or at least begin the visa renewal process, before they leave the United States to attend academic and scientific conferences, visit family, or attend to personal business.

Visa reciprocity agreements should be revised between the United States and key sending countries, such as China and Russia, 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. In this we obviously need to work with the countries involved; it is not entirely our problem.

DHS and the State Department should move forward on a proposed pilot study in China and India in which the State Department would collect the SEVIS fee directly from international students and scholars in those countries. This is a method of payment strongly supported by the academic community.

We stand ready to continue our collaboration with all authorities involved in ensuring security with openness – and appreciate their willingness to work with us on what is a major national concern.
Thank you!