February 25, 2004

Dear Chairman Boehlert and Ranking Member Gordon:

On behalf of the undersigned organizations, we thank you for your strong leadership in examining international student and scholar visa issues that are negatively affecting American science. By your words and your actions, you have demonstrated your awareness that current procedures and policies are hampering the ability of the world's brightest international students, scholars, and researchers to study and work in our country, where they contribute to our nation's science and technology enterprise, our economy, and our security. It is our hope that your work will help to bring about sensible security policies that protect our country while maintaining our nation's scientific and economic leadership.

Much as we feared, today’s General Accounting Office (GAO) report on visas for international students and scholars confirms that the visa adjudication process known as Visas Mantis is inefficient, lengthy, and difficult. We believe the current Visas Mantis process is discouraging international students and scholars from making the U.S. their destination of choice. We support the GAO recommendation to develop and implement a plan to improve Visas Mantis.

Unfortunately, there may be new evidence to suggest that the Visas Mantis process is already taking a toll on the future of American science. Earlier this month several higher education organizations jointly surveyed U.S. colleges and universities to determine whether there had been a drop in the number of applications from international students for the fall of 2004 compared to the fall of 2003. While the results of the survey are still being analyzed, preliminary results indicate that applications from prospective international graduate students decreased for 2004. We will inform the Committee of our findings when the analysis is complete.

U.S. colleges and universities are the best in the world and they are a beacon to talented individuals all over the globe. The excellence of U.S. education and research draws hundreds of thousands of students who seek educational and economic opportunity. While they are here they contribute to our nation's continuing educational, scientific, and economic leadership. As you know, graduate students are critical to American science. They are the next generation of scientists, engineers, and business and government leaders. The U.S. has for decades been the world leader in attracting the best and brightest international graduate students, and declining international graduate student applications may be a harbinger of a diminishing leadership role for American science. There should be no doubt that other countries will be happy to pick up the slack.

U.S. colleges and universities may also be the most effective transmitters of democratic values around the globe. At a time when we are engaged in a global struggle against terrorism, and while we must be alert to security threats from abroad, compromising the openness of our colleges and universities by erecting excessive barriers to international students and scholars threatens not only our educational and scientific excellence but our standing as the model for open and pluralistic societies around the world.
While the GAO report did not address the Student and Exchange Visitor Information System (SEVIS), we wish to bring a matter to your attention related to its continued implementation that we believe will prove a new impediment to international students and scholars choosing the U.S. as their destination. We strongly support the implementation of SEVIS. It is the single most important step that the federal government can take to improve its ability to monitor international students and exchange visitors. However, we have repeatedly expressed concern that this system is being implemented before it is fully operational, and in a manner that does not take into consideration the significant barriers it imposes to international educational and scientific exchange.

Currently, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) is in the latter stages of finalizing regulations that will govern a SEVIS fee collection system. Let me state clearly that we do not object to the imposition of a SEVIS fee. However, we do believe that the fee collection process should be as simple and straightforward as possible, and that fee collection should not become a barrier that makes it difficult for international students and scholars to come to this country. As currently structured, we believe the fee payment process does not meet these conditions. The higher education community submitted comments to DHS detailing its concerns and a copy of those comments is enclosed for your review.

Higher education and science are international activities in which the U.S. has been the undisputed leader. If the U.S. is to remain the world's leader in higher education, science, and technology, we must have a visa system that is secure, timely, efficient, transparent, and predictable; that will permit scientific exchange and collaboration; and that enhances homeland security. We support the federal government's efforts to strengthen homeland and national security through the visa issuance process, and we stand ready to work with you to accomplish these goals.

We thank you again for your leadership on these issues.

Sincerely,

Nils Hasselmo
President, AAU

On behalf of:

Alliance for International Educational and Cultural Exchange
American Council on Education
Association of American Universities
Council of Graduate Schools
NAFSA: Association of International Educators
National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges

cc: The Honorable Tom Ridge, Secretary, Department of Homeland Security
    The Honorable Colin Powell, Secretary, Department of State
    The Honorable John Marburger, III, Director, Office of Science and Technology Policy

Enclosure