FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
June 10, 2009

SCIENTIFIC, ACADEMIC, ENGINEERING GROUPS
PRAISE ADMINISTRATION VISA EFFORTS, URGE FURTHER STEPS

Call for high-level interagency review of post-9/11 policies and procedures

A group of science, academic, and engineering organizations today urged the federal government to take additional steps to improve the visa process for international students, scholars, and scientists, including creation of a high-level interagency panel to review all the government’s post-9/11 visa policies and procedures.

“[W]e have been deeply concerned about the significant increase in delays experienced earlier this year by many international students, scholars, and scientists who have applied for visas to study, conduct research, or attend conferences in this country,” the groups wrote in a joint statement. “Lengthy and unnecessary delays frustrate and discourage” these individuals from traveling to the United States to work, study, or attend conferences.

The statement praises recent actions taken by the federal government, as well as those taken over the past several years, to address the concerns of the academic and scientific communities in the wake of restrictions imposed after 9/11.

The statement underscores the scientific and academic communities’ appreciation for actions taken by the Departments of Homeland Security and State this month to provide additional personnel in order to streamline the security review process known as Visa Mantis, eliminate the current backlog of Mantis applications, and reduce wait times for the international science students and researchers subject to Visa Mantis.

“The Department of State, Department of Homeland Security, and other partner agencies have worked closely with our community in recent years to make the visa process less cumbersome, and we are pleased that the Administration is taking these additional steps to address some of our concerns,” the group wrote.

The organizations said that the federal government should build on these positive actions by taking a number of steps to improve the visa process further:
Convene a high-level interagency panel to review the full range of visa-related policies and procedures imposed after 9/11, evaluate their cost-effectiveness, and consider revising or eliminating ineffective and unnecessary procedures.

Provide additional resources to agencies involved in the visa process to allow timely processing of visa applications.

Streamline the non-immigrant visa process to 30 days for legitimate graduate students, researchers, or professionals in science and technology whose applications are supported by a qualified university, scientific body, or company.

Reduce repetitive processing of visa applications for well-known researchers and scholars who regularly visit the United States to attend academic conferences and conduct research.

Increase training of consular staff to make treatment of applicants more consistent and enhance security.

Provide more information to applicants who experience delays in the application process and establish a review process for applications that take more than 30 days to process.

Review and streamline the Technology Alert List, which identifies sensitive areas of science and technology for possible export controls, to include only subject areas that have explicit implications for national security.

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.

"The time is ripe for a comprehensive high-level review of the cost-effectiveness of existing visa policies and procedures for science and engineering students and exchange visitors," said Albert H. Teich, Director of Science and Policy Programs at AAAS. "All of us in the science community are pleased to see that the federal government is taking steps to address our concerns. We hope to see significant progress in the coming weeks and months, and we hope that federal officials will continue to work with us to improve the visa process further."

“Our colleges and universities provide much of the new knowledge and training that advance the innovation that can restore America’s prosperity,” said Robert M. Berdahl, President of the Association of American Universities. “Critical to our ability to play this role has been the attractiveness of our institutions and our country to international scientists and students. It is essential that we eliminate visa policies and procedures that undermine the desire of international scholars to come to our country to learn, to teach, and to conduct research.”

“We applaud the State Department for working with its partner agencies to address this most recent spate of visa delays for students and scholars in the sciences,” said Marlene M. Johnson, Executive Director and CEO of NAFSA: Association of International Educators. “Students and scholars have more choices than ever of where to study and conduct research, so we must work together to address the remaining visa problems if we are to remain a leading destination for innovation and academic excellence.”