Foreign Scholars to Get Longer Clearance

The United States plans to extend the validity of security clearances for foreign students and scientists beyond the current 1-year duration. The new policy, which government officials say could be implemented as early as this fall, will reduce delays for U.S.-based international scholars seeking to reenter the country.

"We've heard loud and clear from the university and scientific communities that the image of this country as a venue for research and scholarship has been suffering," says C. Stewart Verdery Jr., assistant secretary for border and transportation security policy at the Department of Homeland Security (DHS). "And we want to change that."

Foreign students and researchers who work in sensitive fields of science and technology currently must undergo a security review to obtain a reentry visa if their last clearance was granted more than 12 months ago. Under the new policy, which has yet to be finalized, the clearance could be valid for as long as the duration of their study or academic appointment. DHS officials say the extension is a result of improved measures to monitor individuals entering and leaving the country. Through the Student and Exchange Visitor Information System, for instance, "we can know when an international student majoring in English has switched to nuclear engineering," says Verdery. "And if the system shows that a scholar is returning for the same activity that he or she was pursuing prior to leaving the U.S., it makes sense not repeat a security check."

The administration is also planning to revise the list of sensitive technologies used to determine whether a visa applicant needs to undergo an elaborate interagency review. DHS officials say that the department will consult with scientists to review the list, which they acknowledge is "too broad."

The scientific community sees the proposed changes as the latest in a series of positive steps. "They've already made some serious efforts to minimize visa delays," says Mark Frankel of AAAS, publisher of *Science*, which this spring helped draft a set of visa policy recommendations (*Science*, 14 May, p. 943).

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Published by AAAS