

Testimony of C. D. Mote, Jr.
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Before the House Subcommittees on
21st Century Competitiveness and Select Education
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Chairmen McKeon and Tiberi and Subcommittee Members:

My name is Dan Mote, and I am president of the University of Maryland at College Park. I appreciate the opportunity to testify at this joint hearing of the House Subcommittees on 21st Century Competitiveness and Select Education on an issue of concern to the entire higher education community, the impact of the Student and Exchange Visitor Information System (SEVIS) program and other foreign student visa-related issues on this nation's academic and research enterprise.

Because of the interest in this issue, I appear before you representing the Association of American Universities (AAU), the National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges (NASULGC), the American Council on Education (ACE) as well as the University of Maryland. The entire higher education community believes that SEVIS is only one part of a broader problem in the post-September 11 environment for international students and scholars in the United States.

Protecting our citizens is the top priority. Universities and colleges are committed without reservation to serving this interest. To that end, we fully support careful scrutiny of those entering the United States, including those who will study and conduct research. We also have an historical responsibility to deliver the highest quality education and research programs that keep the nation strong and competitive. This goal is under its greatest challenge in half a century.

Our nation and its colleges and universities pride themselves on attracting the world's brightest students. Their presence in science and engineering has helped make the United States the world leader in technology and innovation. We are deeply concerned that America is in danger of losing the edge in brainpower and other advantages we have enjoyed since World War II as a result of our diminished opportunity to attract these students and scholars.

At the same time, those who have studied in the United States serve as our nation's best ambassadors. The opportunity to learn about our democratic form of government, our history, culture, and values fosters an understanding and admiration of our country that is more crucial than ever. Undue restrictions that hinder our ability to recruit outstanding talent from other nations threaten our technical and economic strengths and also our diplomatic efforts as well.

Alarming Decrease in International Students at U.S. Universities

Over the past year, media reports have highlighted the alarming decreases in the applications and enrollment rates of international students at our colleges and universities. International

applications at the University of Maryland were down 37% last year and another 5% this year. Nationally, these decreases are 28% and 5% respectively.

The Educational Testing Service (ETS) analysts declared recently that the “bubble has burst on foreign student enrollments.” The number of international students registering in 2004 for the Graduate Record Exam (GRE), which is required for admittance to most graduate programs in the United States, was predicted to drop by 50% for Chinese students, 43% for Taiwanese, and 37% for Indians. Reforms in the administration of the test in China and elsewhere account for some of that decrease, but the drop in registration occurred in all countries – a clear indication that international students are turning away from American schools while universities in Canada, Australia, and Europe are increasing enrollments.

We believe the decrease in international student applications and enrollment is due to interrelated factors:

- First, increased difficulties obtaining visa approval from the United States following 9/11, along with implementation of the SEVIS program, have contributed to a perception that international students are no longer welcome here;
- Second, other nations have seized this opportunity to recruit the most talented students to their universities; and
- Third, countries that have sent many students here are working to keep their students at home with better opportunities for research and post-graduate jobs as well as policies intended to squelch what they perceive to be a brain drain to the United States.

Assessment of the Student and Exchange Visitor Information System (SEVIS) and Recommendation for Improvement

After a difficult initial implementation, the SEVIS system appears to be working reasonably well. At Maryland, the batch system within SEVIS ties into our University database, due in large part to the extraordinary effort of our Office of International Education Services and our technical people.

Problems with SEVIS are mainly related to technical matters and costs.

Correction of Errors: Automation of the system works well until a technical or human error occurs. Personnel at the University are not able to correct errors, even those that mistakenly put a student in violation of SEVIS status, but must request immigration personnel to correct them. The correction can take months, and often students graduate before the “fix” occurs. SEVIS does not have sufficient personnel to deal with these corrections.

Recommendation: SEVIS should qualify a Designated School Official at each institution to correct technical errors and report the changes on a specific schedule.

Colleges and universities have paid substantially to support SEVIS, both in personnel costs and in building sophisticated web delivery systems. At Maryland each international student requires verification of information including course enrollment each semester in order to meet the

reporting requirements of SEVIS. The international student advisers spend all their time ensuring that the University and students are in compliance with SEVIS. They have almost no time for counseling or enhancing the experience of international students on the campus. The burden is very high.

The problem of payment of applicant fees has been addressed satisfactorily by the DHS Bureau of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), and we appreciate their cooperation in this area. The \$100 fee, though necessary, is a burden. At the University of Maryland, we believe the fee makes the difference in a student's accepting an offer of admission. We consider it so serious that we commit \$50,000 a year to ensure that this fee will not prevent top international students from enrolling at the University.

Finally, our Office of International Education gets no reports back from the SEVIS system. It would be extremely helpful if SEVIS would provide universities with regular statistical reports reflecting activity of students and notification of changes the students make to their immigration status outside the institution, for example, achieving permanent resident status, which would allow us to delete students we should no longer be tracking from the system.

Improvements to Visa Processing

I have briefly outlined the dangers to our nation if we fail to attract the best talent internationally to our universities. The media and the federal government have highlighted the difficulties international students have experienced with respect to visas, including the lengthy delays that visa applicants have endured.

Because the problems were so great and the implications so troubling, in May 2004 under the auspices of the Association of American Universities and the American Association for the Advancement of Science, the major national associations representing the academic and scientific communities in the United States submitted to government and congressional leaders a statement with recommendations for alleviating a number of the problems with the U.S. visa system without compromising national security. This statement is attached. Because of the cooperation between academia, the scientific community, and the Administration, as well as strong interest and pressure from many members of Congress, several recommendations offered last spring have been adopted and others are under review.

On behalf of the higher education community, I want to thank the Administration, especially the Departments of State and Homeland Security, for welcoming our suggestions and working with us to address many of our concerns.

As a result of the adoption of recommendations and other actions by the Departments of State and Homeland Security, the visa process has improved. Last month, the GAO noted that the average time to process a Visas Mantis clearance is approximately 14 days, down from the 67 days it took a year before. The State Department has increased resources to cut processing time, and it was recently announced that the length of Visas Mantis Clearances has been extended so that international students working in certain science and technology fields will not have to undergo repetitive security checks. The State Department's appointment system giving priority

to students helped get students into the Consulates. At Maryland we had many fewer visa problems this year than last year.

The visa application process is still disruptive to people in continuing programs. We and other universities have many students in graduate programs who are reluctant to return home because they might not be able to return by the following semester. A couple at Maryland in agricultural economics was caught in Bogotá, Columbia when they went home for a vacation. The husband was Columbian, and the wife was Danish. Both were in the middle of their courses of study and had been required to obtain security clearances, which they did. They left in December and could not get back into the country until a month into the Spring semester.

Our Chinese students are reluctant to go home because they are required each time to obtain a new visa before they can return. At Maryland we have over 800 students from the People's Republic of China. Some of them need to go home for research, emergencies, or for family reasons. Their perception is they may not get a new visa. If they do get a new visa, they may be subject to arbitrary delaying procedures. My doctoral student in mechanical engineering made the apparent mistake of visiting his parents in China during the winter break. He left this country for China in the last week of December and was scheduled to return at the end of January for the beginning of the Spring Semester. Before renewing his visa, the U. S. Embassy requested extensive new descriptions of his research (he took with him a one-page description). Then another document was required verifying that he was still enrolled in the program. After lengthy delays and numerous interchanges, he returned to Maryland on February 21st, a four-week delay. Unfortunately, this is a success story.

Is there any merit to these delays for students who have already been cleared to study in the United States? Word spreads. Once the pipeline closes or is severely restricted, it may dry up completely. We already know that students and scholars who have experienced significant delays or hardships as a result of changes to the U.S. visa system tell others coming along not to bother applying here. The United States does not want you. The international students and scholars we keep out, or scare away, today will be the world's leading scientists, engineers, and doctors of tomorrow. In past years they chose to make the United States their destination, much to our benefit.

Recommendations

1. The government should pursue changes in visa reciprocity agreements between the United States and key sending countries, such as China and Russia. Current reciprocity agreements with some countries require students and scholars to renew their visas multiple times during their stays here, because U.S. citizens are subject to similar restrictions in those countries. We should seek to extend the duration of visas each country grants citizens of the other and to permit multiple entries on the same visa.

This change would significantly reduce the number of times that visiting international students and researchers must renew their visas and would permit the government to focus its limited security resources to clear persons seeking to enter this country for the first time and not on repeat visitors who have been already screened.

2. We must fight what appears to be a growing perception that we no longer welcome international students, scientists, and scholars. Our nation must make it clear that the U.S. treasures international scholars and scientists. The problem is broad based and attention must be paid to all groups of scholars and scientists who were so welcome in our universities in previous times.

3. The very helpful improvements made in the processing of student visas have not been extended fully to visiting scholars and scientists. I strongly urge that this be the next step.

4. In particular, visa mantis clearance should be extended to visiting scholars for up to three years instead of the current two.

5. We regret also that people in the United States on valid visitors visas are no longer allowed to take any courses at university or colleges, not even English language, and we urge reconsideration of this prohibition.

Conclusion

We need to remind ourselves that three billion people have joined the worldwide, free-market, knowledge-based economy in the past 15 years. The competition for human capital is absolutely fierce. Our economic future and security depend on our successful competition for human capital.

If the trend in international student applications is not reversed, the implication for the future of our science and technology enterprise is dire. Consider the extent to which our research universities have depended on our past open-armed welcome of the best talent from other countries. In our top twenty school of engineering we have 193 tenured tenure/track faculty; 101 of them are foreign born. The vast majority did their graduate work in the United States. Currently, 52% of our graduate students in engineering are foreign born. The Deans of the Colleges of Life Sciences, Computer, Mathematical, and Physical Sciences and the A. James Clark School of Engineering are foreign born and U.S. educated, and 45% of science graduate students are foreign born.

These data are not an aberration. One only needs to extrapolate to the engineering and science schools throughout the country to get a sense of the enormous impact fewer international students would have on the nation's research and technology enterprise. Consider the lost opportunity by not attracting the right people, the most talented people to work in our industrial, commercial, educational, and research enterprises. Other nations are competing effectively for those scientists and will gain technological advantages, weakening our economic and technological position and our security.

New contenders in the fiercely competitive environment of higher education emerge daily. China has set a goal to greatly increase over the next decade the number of universities, and some will be of world-class stature. Taiwan and Japan also plan to build top universities. Though most of the world's top universities are currently in the U.S., many are determined to

change this balance, and they probably will. To remain competitive in the coming decades, we must continue to embrace the most capable students and scholars of other countries. Our security and quality of life depend on it.

I thank you again for this opportunity to appear before your today. I would be glad to answer your questions.