

FOREIGN STUDENTS BACK VISA SECURITY SOME COLLEGE OFFICIALS FEAR PLANS MAY DETER APPLICANTS

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Body

A month ago, Raul Gamboa might have fretted that Congress' desire to crack down on student visas and track foreign students threatened his civil liberties.

But like many international students these days, Gamboa is suddenly willing to sacrifice personal privacy for the sake of national security. Along with university and immigration officials across the nation, Gamboa agrees that the U.S. government's system of monitoring foreign students is so lax and outdated that it needs to be reformed.

"The world is not the same as it was a month ago," said Gamboa, 21, a native of Spain who is studying biochemistry at the University of California-Berkeley. "America is not the same paradise."

Sen. Dianne Feinstein said last week that she wants immigration officials to speed up development of a tracking system that would allow federal authorities to tap into a national database and check the status of any foreign student.

Worried about reports that some of the terrorists may have entered the country on student visas, the San Francisco Democrat also wants colleges to make regular reports to immigration officials about which courses students are taking and whether they have had disciplinary problems.

Feinstein had also called for a six-month moratorium on all student visas, but she dropped that Friday after meeting with university groups and immigration officials.

Administrators worry that the proposals would slow down the visa process, deter foreign students from applying and devastate the country's colleges and universities.

But of the nearly two dozen international students interviewed at local campuses, none objected to the idea of an electronic tracking system, though they worried such a system could be abused. All said they would accept closer scrutiny of their movements if it made the nation safer.

"It's all about giving personal information to people, and I do that already," said UC-Berkeley student Ralf Steinhauser, 23, of Germany.

"I don't care if the FBI knows where I am or what I'm studying."

Data already available

In theory, the Immigration and Naturalization Service already keeps tabs on foreign students. Colleges regularly compile personal and academic information about international students, and the INS can see it any time.

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Some colleges report important changes to the INS, such as when a student switches schools. But most other key pieces of information, such as when a student drops out or stops taking a full load of courses, have not been regularly collected by the INS since 1988, college administrators said.

Only occasionally do immigration officials request records of individual students.

"For a long time we haven't been asked for any reporting," said Helen Stevens, director of international programs and services at San Jose State University.

Another big gap in the system is that the INS knows when a prospective student enters the country but may not know for months if the student enrolls in college.

One local administrator said it can take up to nine months for the INS to notify a college when a foreign student has entered the country.

The new electronic tracking system -- in the works since the mid-1990s -- would change all that, creating a central database accessible by colleges, immigration officials, the State Department and the FBI. Any new information about the student -- a change in major, number of college credits completed -- would be entered into the database. Fingerprints and photographs would also be included in student files.

The new system could also cut down on visa fraud by placing an encrypted bar-code on the I-20 form, the document used by foreigners to prove they've been admitted to a U.S. college.

"You want to have as much forewarning as possible if there is a person with suspicious activity," said Sanjeev Kale, president of a software company that has consulted with INS officials and colleges. "The current system offers none of that."

Student complaints

Some foreign students complained they are being scapegoated for a much larger problem, because student visas account for only about 2 percent of non-immigrants admitted to the country every year.

"It's stereotyping," said Silvio Brugada, a San Jose State computer engineering student from Paraguay. "It's offensive."

Several said the focus on students is a quick fix to help make people feel safe. But they questioned whether it would make a difference.

Students said the proposed changes alone would not keep terrorists out, because those intent on harm would find a way to enter the country legally.

A surprising number of students said they had no objections to being part of a large database accessible to law enforcement agencies.

"It doesn't change anything for us," said Matthieu Ferreira, 21, a San Francisco State University student from France. "I already assumed they were using that information that I gave them. As long as I'm clean with my conscience, I have nothing to be afraid of."

Virtually every college administrator supports an electronic student visa system -- in concept. But they question whether the INS has the expertise to manage it.

"If it was UPS or FedEx running the show, I'd probably be pretty sanguine, because they don't seem to lose my packages," said Ray Wallace, director of the Center for International Students at California State University-Hayward.

Wallace worries that the new system will become a bureaucratic nightmare.

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But if students have to contend with problems such as lost records or incorrectly entered information, Wallace said, "people will say the system is so screwed up, I'm just going to college in Australia."

Important role

International students play an important role at American universities, where they make up a large percentage of graduate enrollments and are engaged in cutting-edge research.

At Stanford University, for example, roughly one of every three graduate students is from another country.

Prohibiting or discouraging students from entering the country "could do a lot of damage," said Terry Shoup, dean of the College of Engineering at Santa Clara University, where international students make up 40 percent of the graduate program.

Educators worry that another Feinstein proposal, for comprehensive background checks before a visa is granted, would create such delays that foreign students would go elsewhere.

"A long, drawn-out process would make it effectively impossible to get a visa before the semester starts," said Victor Johnson, associate executive director of public policy for NAFSA, an association of international educators.

But San Francisco State student Siritorn Sattapant, 22, of Thailand said sometimes security concerns must take precedence.

"It's good for the country," she said. "Maybe it will be less good for me. But if you don't disturb us too much, I think it'll be OK."

CHART: MERCURY NEWS

FOREIGN STUDENTS

California universities depend heavily on foreign students to fill many of their graduate programs. The undergraduate population at University of California-

Berkeley is 3.7 percent foreign, while the overall graduate population is 19.6 percent foreign. At Stanford, the undergraduate population is 4.7 percent foreign, and the graduate population is 31.8 percent.

STANFORD PROGRAM % FOREIGN

Earth Sciences	40
Engineering,	38.3
Business	31.8

UC-BERKELEY PROGRAM % FOREIGN

Engineering	42.4
Information management	37.9
Business	27.6

Source: UC-Berkeley, Stanford

Graphic

Photos (2), Chart;

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PHOTO: Ralf Steinhauser, a University of California-Berkeley student from Germany, said, "I don't care if the FBI knows where I am or what I'm studying."

PHOTO: RICHARD KOCI HERNANDEZ -- MERCURY NEWS

Raul Gamboa, 21, an international student from Spain studying at UC-Berkeley, says he'd be willing to sacrifice personal privacy for the sake of national security.

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