

## **More Than an Academic Exercise**

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### **Body**

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The Sept. 11 hijackers, it was recently revealed, code-named the Pentagon "the Faculty of Fine Arts" and the twin towers "the Faculty of Urban Planning." An Internet message from one plotter spoke of "19 certificates for private study and four exams," and ended, "Regards to the professor."

The idea that the terrorists of Al Qaeda hid behind a veil of studies is both appalling and familiar. Who can forget the Iranian "students" of 1979 who held our Tehran embassy hostage? But the fact that enemies sometimes assume the guise of students should not be a signal to crack down on foreigners who genuinely want to study here. New regulations aimed at improving the screening of visa seekers have forced tens of thousands of foreigners already here to return home and reapply for student visas. Many have been waiting months for permission to come back.

The new policy requires that officials in Washington approve visas for every male between the ages of 16 and 45 who is a native of any one of 26 countries. This has led to a dramatic drop in the number of visa applications by genuine students from Arab countries, and interminable delays for those who try to see the process through. Most of these applicants are precisely the people who can help combat militant Islam in their own countries.

There is no question that the Immigration and Naturalization Service has been dysfunctional and that closer I.N.S. scrutiny of applicants and tracking of foreigners by their host institutions are necessary. But the failure to halt the Sept. 11 attack was one of intelligence, not visa processing. Since almost none of the 19 hijackers had a history of terrorist activity, the new screening process would not have stopped them.

Part of the problem right now is technical. The I.N.S. and the State Department are rushing a new computer tracking program into operation, and it is taking longer than hoped. But the larger misunderstanding about the role of foreign students may persist after technical glitches are solved.

The fact that we educate many of the future leaders in countries around the globe is among our strongest diplomatic assets. Our efforts to spread our influence and understanding of our culture should be stepped up, not abandoned. Higher education is one of the best methods we have of spreading the word about who we are and of exposing our citizens to non-Americans. Bringing foreign students onto our campuses is among the best favors we can do ourselves.

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