HOMELAND SECURITY

Performance of Foreign Student and Exchange Visitor Information System Continues to Improve, but Issues Remain

Why GAO Did This Study

The Student and Exchange Visitor Information System (SEVIS) is an Internet-based system run by the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) to collect and record information on foreign students, exchange visitors, and their dependents—before they enter the United States, when they enter, and during their stay. GAO has reported (GAO-04-690) that although the system had a number of performance problems during the first year that its use was required, several SEVIS performance indicators were positive at that time (June 2004). Nonetheless, some problems were still being reported by educational organizations.

In addition, concerns have been raised that the number of international students and exchange visitors coming to the United States has been negatively affected by the U.S. visa process. Accordingly, the Congress asked GAO to testify on its work on SEVIS and related issues. This testimony is based on its June 2004 report, augmented by more recent GAO work, reports that we issued in February 2004 and 2005 on student and visiting scholar visa processing, and related recent research by others.

What GAO Found

Indications are that SEVIS performance has improved and continues to improve. In June 2004, GAO reported improvement based on several indicators, including reports showing that certain key system performance requirements were being met, trends showing a decline in new requests for system corrections, and the views of officials representing 10 educational organizations. DHS attributed this performance improvement to a number of actions, such as installation of a series of new software releases and increased Help Desk staffing and training.

However, GAO also reported that several key system performance requirements were not being formally measured, so that DHS might not be able to identify serious system problems in time to address them before they could affect the successful accomplishment of SEVIS objectives. Further, some educational organizations were still experiencing problems, particularly with regard to Help Desk support. GAO also reported that educational organizations were concerned about proposed options for collecting SEVIS fees. Accordingly, it made recommendations aimed at improving system performance measurement and resolving educational organizations' Help Desk and fee concerns.

Since June 2004, DHS reports that it has taken steps to address GAO recommendations, and in particular it has taken a number of actions to strengthen Help Desk support. Moreover, educational organizations generally agree that SEVIS performance has continued to improve, and that their past fee collection concerns have been alleviated. However, these educational organizations still cite residual Help Desk problems, which they believe create hardships for students and exchange visitors. Most of these organizations, however, do not believe that SEVIS is the reason for the declining number of international students and exchange visitors coming to the United States.

These declining numbers were cited in a recent report by the Council of Graduate Schools, which describes declines in foreign graduate student applications, admissions, and enrollments between 2003 and 2004, and further declines in these applications between 2004 and 2005. The report attributes the decline to increased global competition and changed visa policies. In this regard, GAO recently reported on the State Department's efforts to address its prior recommendations for improving the Visas Mantis program (under which interagency security checks are performed to identify applicants who may pose a threat to national security by illegally transferring sensitive technology). According to this report, a combination of federal agency steps resulted in a significant decline in Visas Mantis processing times and in the number of cases pending more than 60 days. The Council of Graduate Schools' report also recognizes the recent Visas Mantis program changes as positive steps.