



Highlights of [GAO-05-198](#), a report to congressional requesters

## Why GAO Did This Study

In February 2004, GAO reported that improvements were needed in the time taken to adjudicate visas for science students and scholars. Specifically, a primary tool used to screen these applicants for visas (the Visas Mantis program) was operating inefficiently. We found that it took an average of 67 days to process Mantis checks, and many cases were pending for 60 days or more. GAO also found that the way in which information was shared among agencies prevented cases from being resolved expeditiously. Finally, consular officers lacked sufficient program guidance. This report discusses the time to process Mantis checks and assesses actions taken and timeframes for improving the Mantis program.

## What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that the Secretary of State, in coordination with the Secretary of Homeland Security, (1) develop a timeframe for connecting agencies to the Mantis tracking system; and (2) provide officers at key posts more opportunities to learn through direct interaction.

In response, the Departments of State and Homeland Security said they are implementing our recommendations. The Department of Justice commented on a recommendation in the draft report, which we later retracted.

[www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-05-198](http://www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-05-198).

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact Jess T. Ford at (202) 512-4128 or [fordj@gao.gov](mailto:fordj@gao.gov).

## BORDER SECURITY

# Streamlined Visas Mantis Program Has Lowered Burden on Foreign Science Students and Scholars, but Further Refinements Needed

## What GAO Found

Mantis processing times have declined significantly. In November 2004, the average time to process a Mantis check was about 15 days, far lower than the average of 67 days we reported previously. The number of Mantis cases pending more than 60 days has also dropped significantly.

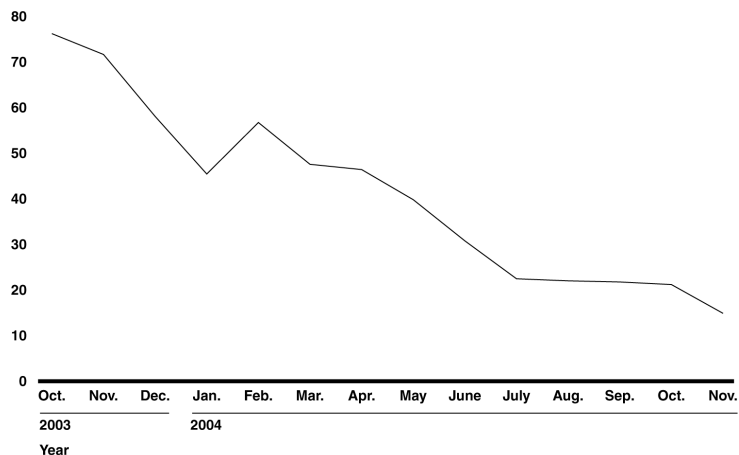
Although an action plan that the State Department (State) drafted was not fully implemented, State and other agencies took several actions in response to our recommendations to improve Visas Mantis and to facilitate travel by foreign students and scholars. These actions included:

- adding staff to process Mantis cases;
- providing additional guidance to consular officers;
- developing an electronic tracking system;
- clarifying roles and responsibilities of agencies involved in the Mantis process;
- reiterating State's policy of giving students and scholars priority interviews; and
- extending the validity of Mantis clearances.

Nonetheless, some issues remain unresolved. Consular officers at posts we visited continue to need guidance on the Mantis program, particularly through direct interaction with State officials knowledgeable about the program. Several agencies that receive Mantis cases are not fully connected to State's electronic tracking system. This can lead to unnecessary delays in the process. Finally, students and scholars from China are limited to 6-month, two-entry visas. The Chinese government has rejected a proposal by the United States to extend visa validities, on a reciprocal basis, for students and scholars.

### Decline in Mantis Processing Times, October 2003 – November 2004

Average time to clear in days



Source: State Department, Bureau of Consular Affairs.