HOMELAND SECURITY

Performance of Information System to Monitor Foreign Students and Exchange Visitors Has Improved, but Issues Remain

Why GAO Did This Study

The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) has implemented the Student and Exchange Visitor Information System (SEVIS) to collect and record key data on foreign students, exchange visitors, and their dependents—prior to their entering the United States, upon their entry, and during their stay. In accordance with Conference Report 108-280, GAO reviewed SEVIS. Among the areas it examined were (1) system performance, (2) actions to improve performance, and (3) plans for collecting the fee to be paid by foreign students and exchange visitors to cover SEVIS costs.

What GAO Recommends

To strengthen SEVIS, GAO is making recommendations designed to improve DHS's monitoring of key system performance requirements, address educational association performance concerns, and expedite collection of the fee. DHS agreed with most of our findings, conclusions, and recommendations. It did not fully agree with two of our findings and their associated recommendations.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-04-690.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact Randolph C. Hite at (202) 512-3439 or hiter@gao.gov.

What GAO Found

Several indicators show that SEVIS performance is improving. First, program office reports for some key system performance requirements show that these requirements are being met. However, not all key performance requirements are being monitored or reported on. Without formally monitoring all key performance requirements, DHS cannot adequately assure itself that potential problems will be identified and addressed early. Second, other, less formal indicators of performance, such as daily system use by program officials and unsolicited user feedback, indicate that the system is meeting requirements. Third, GAO's analysis of new requests for system changes, including changes to address reported performance problems, shows these requests are declining. Finally, officials representing educational organizations generally see performance as having improved.

DHS has taken specific actions to improve SEVIS performance. In particular, it has installed a series of new software releases and increased Help Desk staffing and training. In addition, program officials are holding regularly scheduled meetings, both internally and with educational representatives, and are asking user groups to test new releases. Despite these efforts, however, educational organizations continue to report problems, such as the quality of Help Desk assistance. The following table identifies reported system problems, examples, and DHS's responses.

DHS Actions to Address User Problems

Problem	Example	DHS response
Inability of users to download data to create custom reports	One report shows only 20 records at a time, so it must be run repeatedly to show all affected individuals	Evaluating software options to provide custom report capabilities
Slow Help Desk response; inconsistent answers to technical questions and incorrect answers to policy questions	An error on a student's status took 6 weeks to correct; user received varying responses for how to record multiple training records; user incorrectly advised not to sign travel authorization	Increased Help Desk staffing as of March 2003; training given to Help Desk on continuing basis
Incomplete transmission of data to State Department database	Change to correct birth date not updated in State Department database	Software change implemented in January 2004
Insufficient identification of schools when transferring between schools	A student was transferred to the wrong school due to similarity of school names	Schools are listed by city and state on the DHS Web site as of July 2003

Sources: GAO and DHS.

DHS submitted its final rule on the SEVIS fee to the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) in February and plans to collect the fee once OMB approves it. Representatives of educational organizations are concerned that two of the three payment options in DHS's final rule are either not available to all students in developing countries or will result in significant delays. Program officials acknowledge the increased demands on students and visitors, but do not believe that these demands warrant changes to their plans.