

Colleges wait to see how student visa plans pan out

■ President Bush has called for more strict controls to ensure that student visas are properly issued

By John Liebhardt
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The jury is still out on President George W. Bush's call Monday to conduct a thorough review of student visa policies.

The directive came during the first meeting of the Homeland Security Council. At the meeting, Bush ordered Secretary of State Colin Powell and Attorney General John Ashcroft to enlist the help of Secretary of Education Rod Paige in instituting tighter controls and ensuring that student visas are being issued correctly.

"We plan on making sure that if a person has applied for a student visa, they actually go to college or a university," Bush said during remarks made after the meeting. "And, therefore, we're going to start asking a lot of questions that heretofore have not been asked."

Higher education groups say it is too early to tell what changes will be made to the student visa program, which regulates the more than 500,000 international students

and academics in the United States, including nearly 1,400 at the University.

"It appears as though the president was perhaps a half a step ahead of everyone else on this issue," said Paul Hassen, assistant director of public affairs at American Council on Education, a group of 1,800 colleges and universities.

"We plan on making sure that if a person has applied for a student visa, they actually go to a college or a university."

George W. Bush
United States president

The Bush directive includes funding for a database run by the Immigration and Naturalization Service that would share information on foreign nationals with other government agencies.

"It seems that the administration is serious about letting the immigration service do the job they were supposed to do," said Gin-

ny Stark, associate director of the International Office of Education and Exchange. Stark referred to a 1996 law which charged the INS with setting up a database which would allow government agencies to track foreign nationals in the country. While the law created the database, it never gave any funding to the INS to pay for it.

Other than funding the database, Bush's order lacked sufficient details to give higher education groups any chance to gauge what effects it will have.

"Oregon Student Association is traditionally opposed to legislation that broadly hinders access to groups of people," said John Wykoff, legislative director of OSA. "Whether this administration will create a broad threat to access is hard to tell."

Student visas have come under congressional scrutiny since the Sept. 11 attacks. Sen. Dianne Feinstein's office reported that one of the hijackers of the Sept. 11 attacks was in the country on a student visa. In the weeks after the attack, Feinstein, D-Calif., called for a six-month moratorium on all student visas, but rescinded the proposal after meeting with concerned higher education groups.

Feinstein has since written legislation

with Sen. Jon Kyl, R-Ariz., overhauling the student visa program. Feinstein and Kyl's proposal requires the INS to conduct background checks before the state department can issue student visas and stop issuing student visas to individuals from countries included on the U.S. State Department's list of terrorist-sponsored states, including Iran, Iraq, Sudan, Libya and Syria.

Hassen warned that with competing bills receiving hearings in Congress, not to mention visa plans submitted by ACE, legislative and higher education leaders should attempt to strike a balance between the desire for international students and national security.

"We have a good visa system," he said. "It just needs a little tinkering."

Bush's plan only reviews student visa policies, not policies of other visa types, which sent up a red flag for Hassen.

"By focusing solely on student visas," he said, "we are doing a disservice to holders of student visas and holders of all type of visas."

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Aviation

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The House is working on its own version of the bill, said Jonathan Grella, spokesman for Tom DeLay, R-Tex. The Senate version stipulates a federal takeover of airport security, while the House version of the bill, called the Young bill, would give the president discretion to choose between the private sector and the federal government for security on a case-by-case basis, Grella said.

President Bush has voiced support for the House's version of the bill but has indicated he will not oppose a bill that requires screening

workers to be federal employees, said Lisa Wade Raasch, spokeswoman for Sen. Ron Wyden's office.

The bill will likely be discussed in a joint committee once the House passes their own version, which might go through by the end of the week, Grella said.

"The Senate was anxious to get the political hot potato off their lap and hastily voted," Grella said. "(The House) wants to explore this issue. (Senators) are more interested in window dressing than keeping people safe."

Supporters for the Senate's version stressed that a federal takeover is the only way to keep the country safe. Raasch said that many of the

security companies fail to conduct background checks on security screeners and often have turnover rates higher than 120 percent a year.

Security companies such as Argenbright have come under fire for lax safety measures. NPR news reported Monday night that screening workers routinely miss up to 20 percent of dangerous objects carried by passengers.

"Private screening companies like Argenbright should no longer be allowed to provide security for the front line of defense at our nation's airports," DeFazio said. He noted that the company has been fined \$1.6 million by the federal government for sloppy hiring prac-

tices and lying to federal officials.

House Republicans favor legislation that would give the president control over the security situation. Grella cited hijackings in Western Europe when some countries' aviation security was federally operated. There were 31 hijackings in Western Europe in the 1970s when some countries had nationalized security systems. In the 1990s, Grella said, Western European countries implemented a partnership between the private sector and the government; four hijackings occurred that decade.

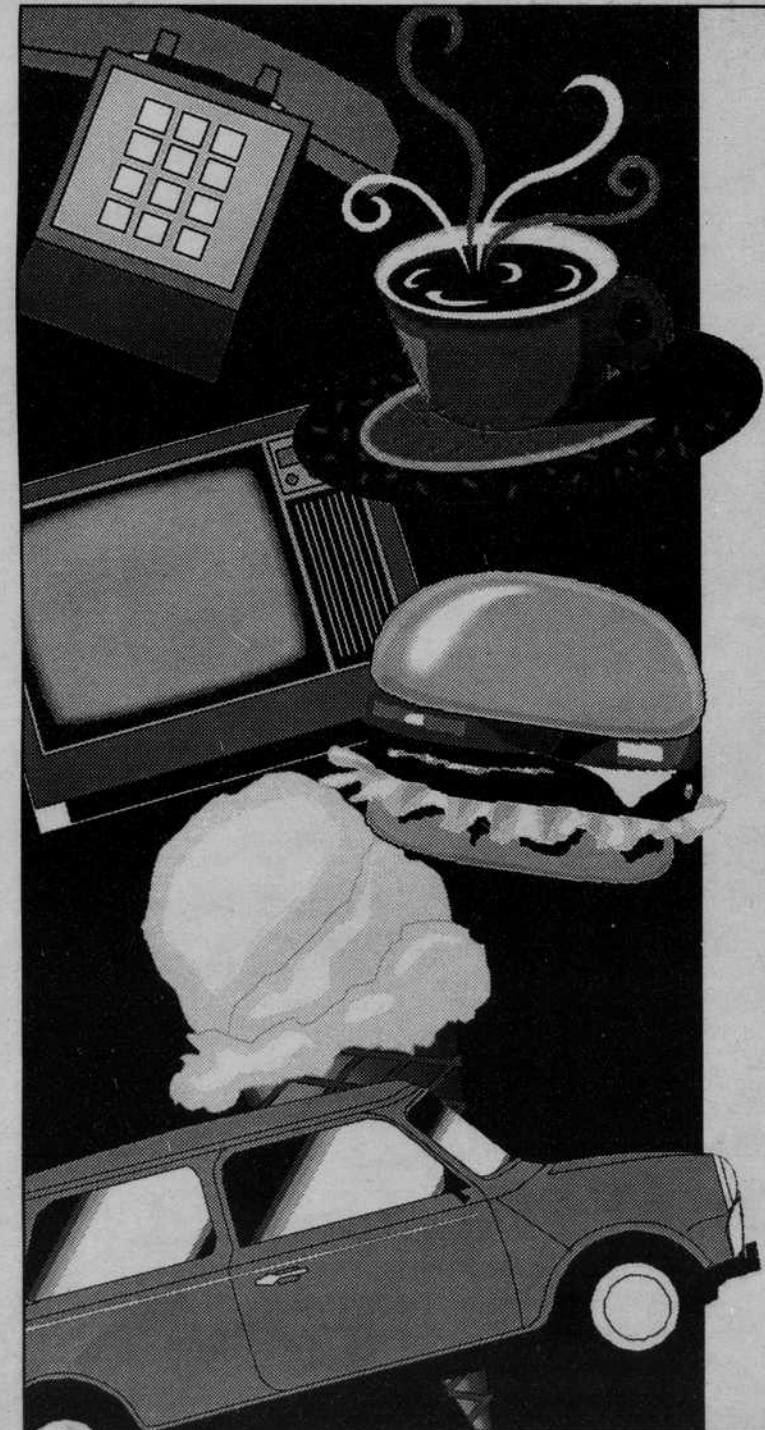
Democrats in the House remained firm in their support for federalized security.

"Right now we're trusting the front line to convicted felons and minimum wage employees," Greco said.

Both the House's and Senate's bills establish an undersecretary of transportation security that would ensure safety in the airports. The undersecretary would have the authority to issue emergency security rules without a cost-benefit analysis.

"The price of keeping airports safe is \$2.50 a ticket," Blumenauer said. "It's less than a latté."

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