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# Technical issues delay INS visa-tracking system

**Robert Becker**  
Chicago Tribune (KRT)

CHICAGO — Just one day before educational institutions around the country were scheduled to begin using a new computer system to keep tabs on their foreign students, the federal government delayed implementation of the troubled system, citing continued technical problems.

The U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service late Wednesday postponed until Feb. 15 implementation of the Student and Exchange Visitor Information System, or SEVIS, acknowledging that campuses were still having trouble entering student data into the massive database.

INS spokesman Chris Bentley said the "grace period" would allow universities and the agency to resolve some of the technical issues surrounding the system, which is being rolled out to track the approximately one million international students who enroll in U.S. schools.

Late Thursday, Bentley said upgrades to the system during the last 24 hours had greatly improved its performance.

But those assurances were of little comfort to several hundred college officials from around the Mid-

west who had gathered earlier in the day at the University of Illinois at Chicago to quiz INS officials about the new system.

When Paul Ladd, INS' special counselor to the SEVIS team, acknowledged that the computer system "has been a little slow" in recent days, the crowd erupted in laughter.

"Please tell me what I'm doing wrong, or I am going to quit," said Brigid Avery, an admissions representative at Aquinas College in Grand Rapids, Mich., who had been unsuccessful in coaxing SEVIS to print crucial documents for the school's international students.

Fast-tracked after the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks, SEVIS is designed to link for the first time the schools that admit foreign students with federal agencies, providing an instant exchange of information ranging from academic status and field of study to any disciplinary action taken against a student because of criminal conviction.

SEVIS, which cost \$36 million to implement, will replace a tracking system riddled with errors and fraud. The INS has conceded that it had all but stopped monitoring the more than 70,000 schools and institutions empowered to admit foreign students.

But technical problems and delays have hampered the system. Schools are only now testing key software that would allow them to enter thousands of student records at once instead of one at a time.

The INS acknowledged Thursday that while it has approved 3,200 schools to issue the necessary documents to admit foreign students, it has yet to complete the required review of another 1,100 schools.

Bentley said the agency anticipated completing that assessment in coming weeks.

On Thursday, school officials swapped horror stories of the hours spent on SEVIS trying to enter the records of a single student or of dozens of calls to a friendly, but ultimately unhelpful, SEVIS help line.

Harvey Stein, acting director of the office of international affairs at the University of Chicago, offered a philosophical approach to the glitches.

"Everybody knows when you break out a new system nationwide, it's got to have problems," Stein said. "So I feel beleaguered and exhausted, but not hostile."

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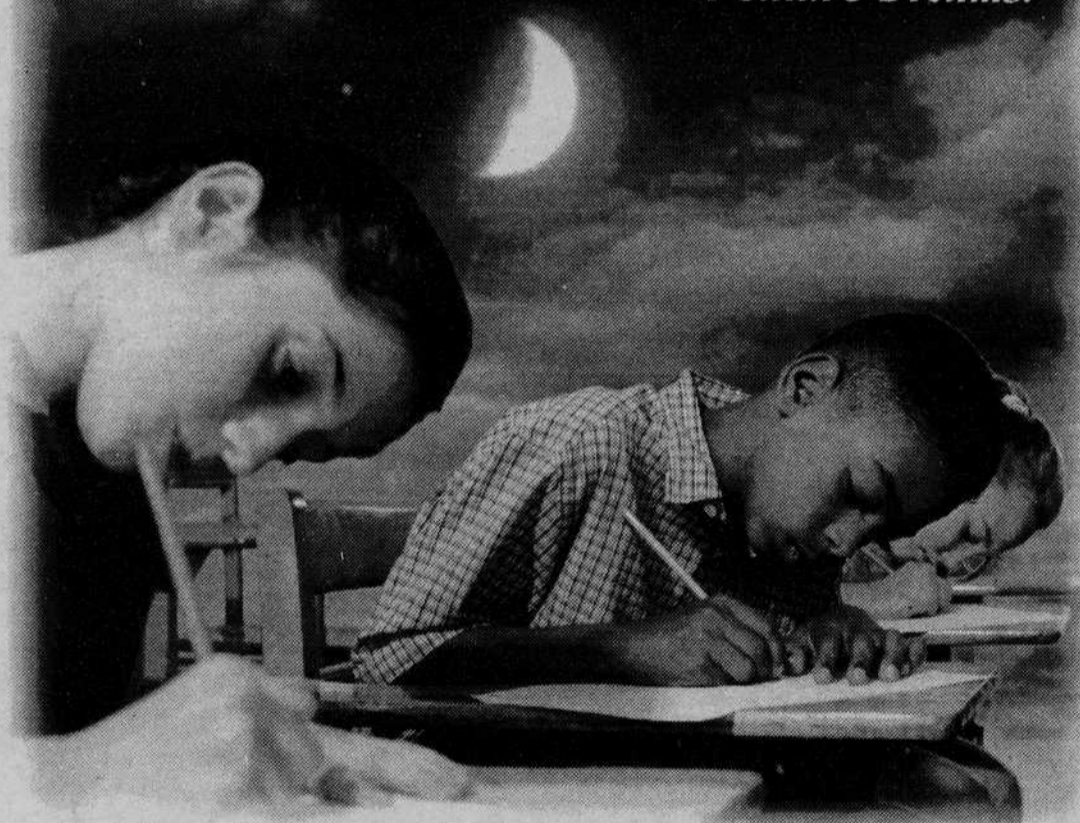


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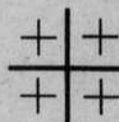
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