

Today's News

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Student-Visa Fees to Support Federal Surveillance Program Could Double

By [JJ HERMES](#)

Washington

The U.S. Department of Homeland Security plans to roughly double the fees, to as much as \$200, that visiting international students must pay in order to upgrade a federal surveillance program that monitors those students' activities.

The increased fees for international visitors applying for student, exchange-visitor, or similar nonimmigrant visas (in categories known as F, J, or M visas) were outlined in Monday's [Federal Register](#) and are scheduled to take effect on October 1. The revenue will support a growing database on international visitors called the Student and Exchange Visitor Information System, or Sevis.

That database was created by Congress in the wake of the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks. It tracks only foreign students and exchange visitors, which represent about 3 percent of all nonimmigrant visa holders. Since the system took effect on January 30, 2003, nearly five million students and their dependents have been entered into the database, according to Homeland Security officials.

Congress required that all costs for Sevis be borne by the international students and the institutions they attend. The increased fees are intended to recertify participating institutions and to pay for more agents to enforce the program.

The proposal would double the Sevis fee paid by nonimmigrants applying for F-1 student visas to \$200 and would increase the fee for students seeking J-1 exchange-visitor visas to \$180. The Sevis charge, technically called the I-901 fee, is assessed by the federal government when a student applies for guest status, and is nonrefundable if the student is rejected for a visa.

Officials from Homeland Security argued that the increased fee would not deter more international students from coming to the United States because it represents "less than one half of one percent of the average tuition costs for a four-year college education."

But some college administrators argued that the extra \$100 to be charged under the new plan could affect students who are applying to attend community colleges.

"We enjoy having the students, and we just hate to see another fee," said Patricia A. Preston, immigration coordinator for Santa Monica College, a community college where nearly 3,000 students have F-1 visas. She added that the fee for off-campus work permits for nonimmigrant students also jumped recently. Last July, that charge rose from \$180 to \$340, making the climate for international students even less desirable, she said.

The perception that they are unwelcome could eventually lead to fewer visiting international students, said Victor C. Johnson, senior adviser for public policy at Nafsa: Association of International Educators.

"The problem is, If those students want to study in any other country in the world, they don't have to pay that fee,"

Mr. Johnson said. "It's one of the myriad actions our government takes to provide disincentives for students to come here and study, at the same time that the heads of these agencies are giving speeches about how important it is for us to have foreign students come here."

Homeland Security officials' proposal would also increase fees for institutions to help support the student-monitoring database, although the plan would not affect colleges that already participate in the program, and there is no charge for institutions being recertified.

For colleges that are not now enrolled in the system, fees charged for initial certification to participate in Sevis will increase from \$230 to \$1,700. In addition, site visit charges, which are incurred when an agent with Immigration and Customs Enforcement inspects a campus applying to participate in Sevis, will nearly triple, from \$230 to \$655.

Institutions will not face those increases before October 1, if the proposed fees are eventually adopted.

The public has until June 20 to comment on the proposed rule, which may be submitted through a government [Web site](#) or by fax to (866) 466-5370.

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