Visa Process Improves for International Students

By Ellen S. Smith

There is good news out of Washington, D.C., for international students. In mid-February, the State Department announced that the Visa Mantis clearance process for students and scholars is being improved. Student clearance has increased from one to four years, and scholar clearance has increased from one to two years.

The Visa Mantis system is a multi-agency clearance process where departments and scholars planning to work in sensitive and technical areas. A recent Government Accountability Office report noted that, however, even with a reduction in processing time from two months to 15 days, there remains a need for all agencies to have comparable computerized systems, for greater guidance at U.S. Consular.

Both the federal and state legislatures returned to session the week of Feb. 28. At the state level, key leaders planned to complete initial budget resolutions by mid-March and aim for a complete initial budget by early April. In recent years, budgets have been significantly delayed, and it is not clear whether restorations for Columbia's key student aid programs will remain. At the federal level, budget committees will begin addressing their non-binding resolutions over the next month. These resolutions set a blueprint for overall spending and do not require presidential signature.

When budget resolutions are not agreed upon between the House and the Senate (as they have not been in recent years), annual funding committees can proceed in April. Other big items on the agenda include the Transportation Authorization Bill and the Higher Education Reauthorization Bill.

Following a successful student lobby trip to Albany, New York, a Washington, D.C., student lobby trip has been planned for April 6. Other trips to the nation's capital are being planned, including one to promote federal support for the Humanities Day. These trips will bring faculty to lobby for the humanities and several areas of science and the Double Discovery Program. Although one-time events cannot change the course of budget deliberations, students and scholars make a great impression on legislators, and follow-ups are carried out by the government relations department.

Academic Freedom and the Role of the University

Editor's note: The letter below, written by Eric Foner, Derricott Clinton Professor of History, and David Johnston, Joseph Strauss Professor of Political Philosophy, and signed by 44 faculty from diverse disciplines, addresses the fundamental importance of freedom of thought and speech to the mission, character and contributions of research universities. This letter was circulated in light of the current public controversy regarding certain aspects of the teaching and discussion of the Middle East at Columbia and other universities.

An Open Letter on the Controversy at Columbia

During the past several months, Columbia University has been subjected to an extraordinary series of attacks impugning its reputation as a center of learning that welcomes students and scholars with a diverse range of points of view and similarly diverse backgrounds, loyalties and commitments. Many of the allegations that have been made during this campaign of defamation that have attempted to create the impression that an atmosphere of intolerance exists at Columbia—are blatantly false. In many ways, they betray a failure to understand the mission and character of research universities and their contributions to modern life.

Columbia, like a number of its peer institutions, is a great center of teaching, inquiry and research. Its primary mission is to produce new knowledge. The lack of scholarly knowledge and the college's search for a new knowledge. This research university has contributed immensely to the national welfare in areas that range from scientific advances to improvements in our historical understanding to discoveries that have led to numerous inventions of importance to people in all walks of life.

Universities will continue to make important contributions only insofar as they allow faculty and students to explore and develop their ideas freely and to expose those ideas to robust and uninhibited debate in an atmosphere of civility, both inside and outside the classroom. Some of these ideas—including some of the best among them—will be unwelcome, unsettling or offensive to many people when they are first articulated. That is as it should be. Universities contribute to American life primarily because they foster innovative ideas, and innovation is by nature unsettling. No one associated with the Columbia community—including students, faculty and others—should have reason to fear repression or sanctions of any kind for expressing unorthodox or unpopular views of any political stripe.

Universities have a responsibility for ensuring that teaching and inquiry under their auspices are conducted in an atmosphere that is characterized by civility and freedom from intimidation, physical assault or violations of rights. Within the context of a university, however, neither faculty nor students have a right to be shielded from disagreeable or unfamiliar ideas, the production of which is integral to the mission of the university. We urge all those who take note of those or have taken part in the current outside campaign, which aims to pressure Columbia into censorship of its own faculty, to remember that a commitment to freedom of thought and speech is fundamental to the modern university.

Lila Abu-Lughod, Anthropology

Charles Armstrong, History

Helen Benedict, English

Elizabeth Blackmar, History

Douglas Brinkley, Political Science

Partha Chatterjee, Anthropology

Lewin College, Film

John Collins, Anthropology

Victoria de Grazia, History

Jon Elster, Political Science

Joan Ferrante, English

Barbara Fields, History

Eric Foner, History

Genevieve Galanter, Psychology

Herbert J. Gans, Sociology

Lynn Garafola, Dance

Todd Gitlin, Journalism

Robert Hannan, English

William V. Harris, History

Andreas Huyssen, German

Robert Jervis, Political Science

David C. Johnston, Political Science

Mark Kesselman, Political Science

Alice Kessler-Harris, History

Philip Kitchin, Political Science

David H. Kranitz, Psychology

Edward Mendelson, English

Christina Mercer, Philosophy

Brinkley Messick, Anthropology

Rosamund Morris, Anthropology

Keith Moxey, Art History

Andrew J. Nathan, Political Science

Fred Neufeld, History

Gary Y. Okihiro, Ethnic Studies

Thomas Pogge, Philosophy

Wayne Proudfoot, Religion

David Rosner, History

James Schuma, Film

Eliot Schep, Architecture

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, English

Anders Stephanson, History

Michael Thaddeus, Mathematics

Charles Tilly, Sociology

Gwendolyn Wright, Architecture

Faculty Perspective

Columbia College honored four alumni with John Jay Awards for distinguished professional achievement in a black-tie celebration at New York City's Plaza Hotel on March 2. The honorees, Allison Butts, CC'64, Virginia W. Cornwall, CC'93, Mark Kingdon, CC'77, and Fernando Ortiz Jr., CC'79, represent a range of careers travel and real estate, teaching and research, finance, and U.N. peacekeeping, respectively.

The awards are named for the first chief justice of the United States, a member of the King's College class of 1764 and, with 1759, is presented annually. Proceeds from the dinner support the John Jay National Scholarship Program, which provides financial aid and special programs for College students.

President Lee C. Bollinger, who presented the awards, pledged support for the College's policy of non-discrimination admissions and fullemployed financial aid, saying: "Our principle and all of us in this room hold highest is that we will give to Columbia education to associate professor in 2004, is the first alumnus of the College to be hired to a tenure-track faculty posi- tion at Columbia since the College became coeducational in 1983. Ortizes, who served as the University Board of Trustees, as president of Kingdon Capital Management, a New York-based investment management firm that he founded in 1983. Ortizes, who served as the United States' Department of Peacekeeping Operations, collaborating with senior management to develop policy and strategy and frequently traveling to areas of peacekeeping operations to conduct pre-deployment and in-service training on military and police disciplines.