UNIVERSITY MANAGEMENT

Debate Flares Over Tracking Foreigners

Thousands of foreign students flock to U.S. campuses each year, providing critical intellectual muscle as well as revenue for science and engineering departments. But Congress, the Administration, and members of a national commission are worried that some of those students may be using their education as a cover for terrorism, leading to a proposal to watch them more closely. Academics have responded with alarm. They say the terrorist threat is overstated and that the surveillance proposal could turn into an ad-

Thoughts and deeds. Duke and other universities may be asked to monitor foreign students' coursework more closely to combat terrorism.

ministrative nightmare that could harm U.S. institutions.

At the root of the controversy is a pilot program designed by several southeastern colleges and universities and the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS). The effort, called the Coordinated Interagency Partnership Regulating International Students (CIPRIS), is an electronic system intended to replace the current patchwork of record-keeping on foreign students. In June, a panel of 10 national security experts recommended using the program to track when foreign students alter their workload or change their major field of study, among other things. It's that proposal, from the National Commission on Terrorism chartered by Congress, that has elicited an outcry from university officials. "We absolutely support electronic reporting" of foreign students, says Catheryn Cotten, who directs the international office at Duke University in Durham, North Car-

olina. But the increased monitoring, she adds, could force institutions like Duke into "a megareporting system ... that is invasive at a level we can't manage."

Some 900,000 foreign students and scholars are studying in the United States, spending about $9 billion annually on tuition and other expenses. The CIPRIS program stems from a 1996 immigration law ordering the INS to set up an electronic tracking system to collect detailed information, such as current address and academic status. Under CIPRIS, universities would be required to let the INS know if a student dropped below a full course load, and why. INS began the pilot program with 21 colleges and universities, intending to expand it nationwide by the start of 2003.

The commission report warned that "a small minority may exploit student status" to conduct terrorist activities. To reduce that threat, it proposed that INS also gather data on when students change their majors—from, for example, English to nuclear physics. "We have to be careful not to lump all foreign students together," says Yonah Alexander, a terrorist specialist at the Potomac Institute for Policy Studies in Arlington, Virginia, who spoke last month at a meeting on science, human rights, and national security hosted by the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS, which publishes *Science*). "But the risk is real." Commission member Richard Betts of Columbia University says that "it's not exactly paranoid" to suggest that modest efforts to gather more data would help authorities. "We're not talking about black FBI vans trailing students to their dorms," he adds.

But most university officials say that increased scrutiny is unnecessary and could be extremely burdensome. The terrorism commission "vastly overstates the case," says Victor Johnson, a policy expert at the Association of International Educators in Washington, D.C. "There is no evidence that foreign students pose a threat."

The commission's proposal to track a student's major has also come under withering fire. "At the undergraduate level, that information is relatively useless" given the frequent changes many students make to their majors, says Cotten. And changes at the graduate school level may be less helpful than first appearances might indicate. "We've got ourselves into a Cold War warp" by focusing on nuclear weapons development, says Mary Good, dean of engineering

at the University of Arkansas and AAAS president. A terrorist, she says, "can do just as much damage in computer science."

CIPRIS would allow the INS to invalidate the visas of students who do not show up on campus or drop a full course load for unauthorized reasons. The INS and universities that participate in CIPRIS are negotiating the details and when the data would be collected.

Johnson and others are worried that a more vigorous effort may "turn colleges and universities into the eyes and ears of the federal government." That change could make foreign students wary of choosing U.S. universities, he adds, at a time when "this is one of the few areas where we have a trade surplus." Betts doubts that any new system would affect enrollments, but adds that "if it deters a few, that may be the unfortunate price we pay." However, Good is less confident of a benign effect. "They've become a real part of the research establishment," she says about the foreign students. "We can't lose that in this shuffle."

–ANDREW LAWLER

TOXICOLOGY

Arsenic Researchers Face Isotope Shortage

Molecular biologist Barry Rosen has been making good headway studying the mechanism by which arsenic causes cancer. But he's hit a roadblock. Although he's got funding from the National Institutes of Health, he can't buy the reagent that he needs—arsenic-73. The Department of Energy's (DOE's) Los Alamos National Laboratory in New Mexico is the only place in the world that sells the radioactive isotope, and they've run out. And it could be the middle of 2001 before Rosen, at Wayne State University in Detroit, and some two dozen other labs around the world are back in business.
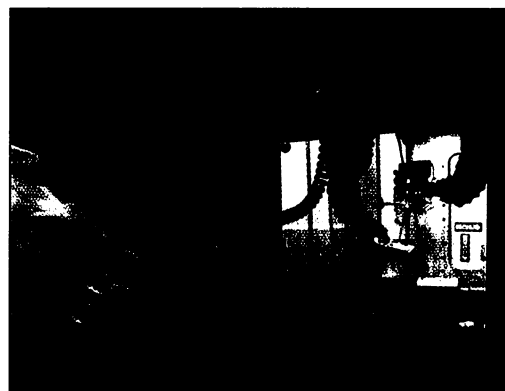
Hot commodity. A radioisotope is purified at Los Alamos, where a shortage of one isotope has sparked an outcry from scientists.