

International Scholars Office

The International Scholars Office (ISO) facilitates the visas for international researchers and professors, who come to MIT for a variety of purposes. The ISO advises on immigration matters, issues visa documents, and provides guidance, workshops, and literature on a wide range of issues relevant to the international scholar population. Weekly orientation sessions are held for incoming scholars and family members. The ISO also engages in advocacy efforts to protect international educational exchange, prevent burdensome regulations, and clarify and improve related regulations and procedures.

MIT'S International Scholar Population FY2004

The ISO served 1,567 international scholars who were affiliated with MIT and their accompanying family members, as well as other members of the MIT community. This reflects a slight decrease since last year (1,577). Among institutions hosting the greatest number of foreign scholars, MIT now ranks 10th nationally. During the past year, international scholars came to MIT from 83 countries, with the highest numbers coming from the People's Republic of China, Japan, Republic of Korea, Germany, Canada, India, Italy, the United Kingdom, Israel, and France.

The ISO worked closely with administrators in 72 departments, laboratories, and centers, preparing the appropriate visa documents or petitions for incoming and continuing scholars and their families. The areas hosting the largest number of scholars are the following, in descending order: Chemistry, Biology, Sloan School of Management, Mechanical Engineering, Materials Science and Engineering, Research Laboratory of Electronics, Laboratory for Computer Science and Artificial Intelligence, Earth, Atmospheric, and Planetary Sciences, Chemical Engineering, and the Picower Center for Learning and Memory.

The majority of MIT's international scholars are sponsored on MIT's J-1 exchange visitor program. There were 750 scholars under MIT's J-1 program sponsorship during the 2003–2004 period, down 11% since last year (847). An additional 63 scholars were here through other J sponsors. There were 366 scholars on campus in H-1B status, sponsored by MIT. This reflects an 18% increase over last year (310) and a nearly 100% increase since 1999–2000 (185). There were 11 international scholars on campus this year whose O-1 visas were sponsored by MIT. The rest of the scholar population had other sponsors or nonimmigrant categories (note that some of the scholars held more than one visa status over the course of the reporting period). According to HRIS data, 72% of MIT's postdoctoral associates and fellows are foreign, as are over 51% of "visiting" appointees. The ISO submitted 15 permanent residence petitions to U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) on behalf of MIT faculty members and upper-level researchers.

MIT Initiatives and the ISO

MIT's numerous international initiatives continue to bring international researchers and students to the Institute. This year, scholars joined MIT as part of the new MIT-China Management Education Project in the Sloan School of Management.

On November 1, 2003, the Whitehead/MIT Center for Genome Research became the cornerstone facility of the Broad Institute. ISO advisors worked to get the visa documents in place for 30 transitioning international employees before that deadline.

Primary Activities and Accomplishments

The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) mandated that the Student and Exchange Visitor Information System (SEVIS) be populated with the records of all international scholars in J status and their J-2 family members by August 1, 2003. ISO staff diligently met that deadline, transferring, entering, and verifying all database records in SEVIS and issuing new documents to all international scholars. The ISO continued to grapple with gaps in functionality of the government system, and regularly sought short-term solutions from the SEVIS help desk while simultaneously trying to effect longer-term solutions through other channels. In December 2003, DHS published a proposed rule describing how the legally mandated "SEVIS fee" could be collected from international students and scholars being tracked in SEVIS. In an ongoing effort to influence the final rule, the ISO sent a comment letter to DHS with constructive suggestions to minimize the burden of the fee and maximize access to fee payment systems.

Staff members created an office instruction manual for conducting all ISO operations using the new systems and technologies. They also developed internal SEVIS compliance procedures, including an internal audit process. This process ensures that required SEVIS functions are being performed at regular intervals and confirms the integrity of data entered and maintained in the ISO database for transmission to the government tracking system.

Penny Rosser and Amanda Doran served as consultants to the MIT Appointment Forms Redesign Team with regard to the visa-related fields on personnel action forms. The ISO also provided assistance during the cyborg-to-SAP transition, helping Human Resources to locate immigration information for certain incomplete records. The MIT SAP/Payroll implementation team has begun its work and the ISO has been asked to contribute in a similar capacity to this team, offering expertise with regard to visas and work authorization.

Staff members continue to be very active in NAFSA: Association of International Educators. Penny Rosser served on the Region XI Nominations and Elections Committee for the second consecutive year and was named dean of the NAFSA national professional practice workshop on permanent residence in an academic setting. Penny was also selected to serve on NAFSA's national trainer corps, training immigration advisers. Sharon Ralston served on the selection committee for the Region XI Academy and served as table moderator in a workshop at the NAFSA national conference.

Amanda Doran attended advanced workshops at the national conference and has been serving as editor of the Region XI 50th Anniversary Archival History project. She was also asked to contribute materials from MIT's scholar orientation to NAFSA's "model programs" educational resources.

ISO staff members participate in NAFSA working groups on scholar's issues, providing information and ideas for use in legislative and other government advocacy. The ISO works closely on these advocacy issues with Jack Crowley, vice president for federal relations, and Alice Gast, vice president for research and associate provost, who are both instrumental in communicating MIT's concerns. During the period from July 2003 to June 2004, the ISO submitted a number of letters to DHS, addressing concerns and offering constructive solutions in the following areas: processing delays and backlogs at the nation's immigration processing service centers; travel difficulties for scholars awaiting adjustment to permanent residence; SEVIS enforcement; immigration application fee increases; and the new US-VISIT system, which requires machine-readable visas and takes fingerprints of all foreign national visitors upon entry to the US at designated locations. The ISO also sought reduction in visa delays at US consulates abroad through the US Department of State.

In addition to advising, preparing immigration documents, advocacy, running a weekly orientation program, and providing extensive written and web-based information, the ISO sponsored its annual tax workshop for international scholars. The ISO also held workshops for new administrators in departments, laboratories, and centers regarding visa processing.

Sarah and Thomas Kailath International Scholars Fund

In January 2004, Sarah and Thomas Kailath of Palo Alto, CA, generously endowed the International Scholars Office with this fund to promote community and connection between and among MIT international scholars, MIT, and the larger Cambridge and Boston communities. The fund has made it possible for the ISO to subscribe to the *Newcomers Almanac*, order helpful publications for scholars and their families, and jointly sponsor activities with other organizations, including the Spouses and Partners Group and the Chinese Postdoctoral Network.

Technology

In late spring, 2004, the ISO unveiled its greatly enhanced website at <http://web.mit.edu/scholars>. Many intake forms, packets, policies, and instructions can be accessed directly by scholars and department administrators. A comprehensive section on security clearance procedures and visa delays at US consulates overseas should prove particularly useful.

Over the past year, ISO staff members devoted considerable effort to implementing SEVIS while simultaneously transitioning to a new database for all scholar records and issuance of visa-related documents. The software provider for the ISO's database asked staff members to serve on a "scholar record" focus group. The scholar side of the

software has been less developed than the student side since implementation of SEVIS, and the ISO hopes to contribute to improvements in the software's usability and report functions for scholar offices.

The ISO now has a designated database for permanent residence cases, making it easier for advisors to track the status of pending cases and providing archival electronic records dating back to 1971. Meanwhile, BrioQuery was installed on ISO computers, and staff will learn how to access records in the Data Warehouse to confirm visa-related information. This will ensure accuracy of records in use by many MIT administrative offices, payroll, personnel, and the ISO.

Personnel

Penny Rosser continues as director. Sharon Ralston was promoted to assistant director of the ISO in August 2003. HuQing Iavicoli was hired as advisor to international scholars in September 2003, bringing the ISO back to full staffing. Amanda Doran was promoted from assistant advisor to advisor in November 2003, and Fumiko Futai continues her role as administrative assistant.

Penny Rosser Director

More information about the International Scholars Office can be found online at <http://web.mit.edu/scholars>.