

Racial Tracking

Jina Kim, 2/18/03

Technology has introduced a new mode of discrimination. Colleges and universities are now required to send the federal government academic and disciplinary records of foreign students through the \$36 million Student and Exchange Visitor Information System, Sevis. According to Diana Jean Schemo's article "Electronic Tracking System Monitors Foreign Students" on February 16th, Sevis is "the central element...in the government's effort to keep tabs on nearly a million foreign students and scholars in this country" (2/16/2003, A11).

Although this tracking system may be justified in some respects, I do not agree with this system for a number of reasons. Implemented after the September 11th attacks, the system discriminates against students from Muslim nations by especially targeting them. Sevis also faces many technical problems, making it difficult for colleges and universities to abide by the new rules.

Background details on the hijackers of September 11th prompted the implementation of Sevis. One hijacker came to the United States on a student visa, but never attended classes. The attacks exposed loopholes in the student visa system and increased investigation of foreign students. Sevis is a new component of national security aimed to detect warning signs of possible terrorists and to reassure an uneasy public. However, this system is catching many innocent students in its broad net. At the University of Colorado, several Iranian students were detained during registration; in her February 16th article, Diana Schemo relates the story of "Yashar Zendehtdel, [who] had fallen below the minimum course load for a full-time student when he switched majors and dropped a course." Mr. Zendehtdel was threatened with deportation.

It is not fair that for the sake of national security, innocent foreign students are so severely scrutinized and made fearful. Furthermore, students from certain countries are under greater surveillance despite claims otherwise from the Department of Justice. Schemo reports that “[t]he tracking system signals a new era for university officials and students, particularly those from Muslim nations.”

I also share the colleges’ worries that students and scholars may be mistakenly considered illegal when Sevis is fully implemented. Zendehtel’s story is clear proof that this concern is not unfounded. Also, human mistakes in advising or entering data for foreign students, which would never have been discovered in the paper-based system, could result in harsh outcomes under the new electronic system.

Sevis currently faces too many technical obstacles to be a fully effective system. As more colleges log on, the system slows down, and officials are unable to enter information on foreign students. In her article “Immigration Service Extends Electronic Tracking System for Foreign Students”, Schemo quotes Kay Thomas from the University of Minnesota, “[t]he system really is jammed with users trying to get on...[i]t’s just unbelievably slow” (2/2/2003, A14). Due to numerous complaints that the system was overloaded and slow, the Immigration and Naturalization Service extended its deadline for approved institutions to enter their student data. For potential foreign students, these technological problems can be considered involuntary discrimination because they reduce students’ chances for studying abroad and may lead to future misunderstandings.

Sevis’ advanced system and even consequent problems discriminate against all foreign students. Its mere concept implies that foreign students are less trustworthy than

U.S.-born students due to their racial backgrounds. Technology is often perceived to provide an objective and unbiased approach, but in this case, it is the opposite.