FOREIGN STUDENT
Affairs

By Alan Dessoff

Biometrics—So Far, So Good

FIVE YEARS after the U.S. Department of Homeland Security's US-VISIT program began collecting biometrics—fingerprints as well as photographs—of non-U.S. citizens applying for visas and arriving in the United States, the program appears to be having little impact on the numbers of international students and scholars coming to U.S. colleges and universities.

Authorities who deal with international students at several higher education institutions say they have heard of no problems about US-VISIT, shorthand for U.S. Visitor and Immigrant Status Indicator Technology, and students offer few complaints about it. "I don't think it is affecting the number of students who are coming here. In fact, our numbers are up," says Sherif Barsoum, director of international student and scholar services at Vanderbilt University.

"Usually we hear about issues when there are delays or complications that our prospective international students or scholars face but in this case, we have had very little feedback, which makes us think that it's going smoothly," states Sara Kurtz Allaei, assistant dean and director for international services at Indiana University Purdue University Indianapolis. "There aren't any concerns," adds James P. Cross, vice provost for international affairs at Clemson University.

Experts in the biometrics industry also say that US-VISIT has been working well. "The elements of the program that have been implemented so far have been very successful," declares Walter Hamilton, board chairman of the Washington-based International Biometrics Industry Association.

But a new part of the program—collecting fingerprints from non-U.S. citizens when they are *leaving* the country as well as entering—is just beginning to be implemented and Hamilton questions how that will work. It also is unclear how international students headed back home might feel about it.

The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) was planning to launch tests of the exit fingerprinting over the summer at Atlanta's Hartfield-Jackson International Airport and Detroit's Metropolitan Wayne County Airport. In Atlanta, Transportation Security Administration officers will collect the biometrics from travelers at TSA checkpoints and in Detroit, U.S. Customs and Border Protection officers will collect them at boarding gates.

The tests were scheduled to last 30 days and based on their results. US-VISIT plans to begin implementing the biometric exit procedures at other airports nationwide within the next year, according to Anna Hinken, a DHS spokesperson.

Adding biometrics to the current paper-based system of recording departures has been a long-term objective of DHS because it will give the United States a faster, more accurate way to determine whether non-U.S. citizens who were checked in when they arrived in the country have departed or if they remain in the U.S. illegally, Hinken explains.

"We don't know with 100 percent accuracy who leaves the country," she says, adding that "visa overstays are a huge problem." She notes that the national commission that investigated the September 11, 2001, attacks on the United States found that a number of the terrorists involved entered the United States legally but overstayed their visas and "we didn't know if they had left." With the new exit fingerprinting, "we'll know without a doubt that someone has left. This is one way of knowing who is in our country and who is not," Hinken says.

She assures international students and scholars, as well as other non-U.S. citizens planning travel to the United States, that US-VISIT applies "stringent privacy protection" to the biometrics it collects. "We always protect the data," she says. Also, whenever there are other changes to the collection of biometrics, "we have an extensive outreach program and
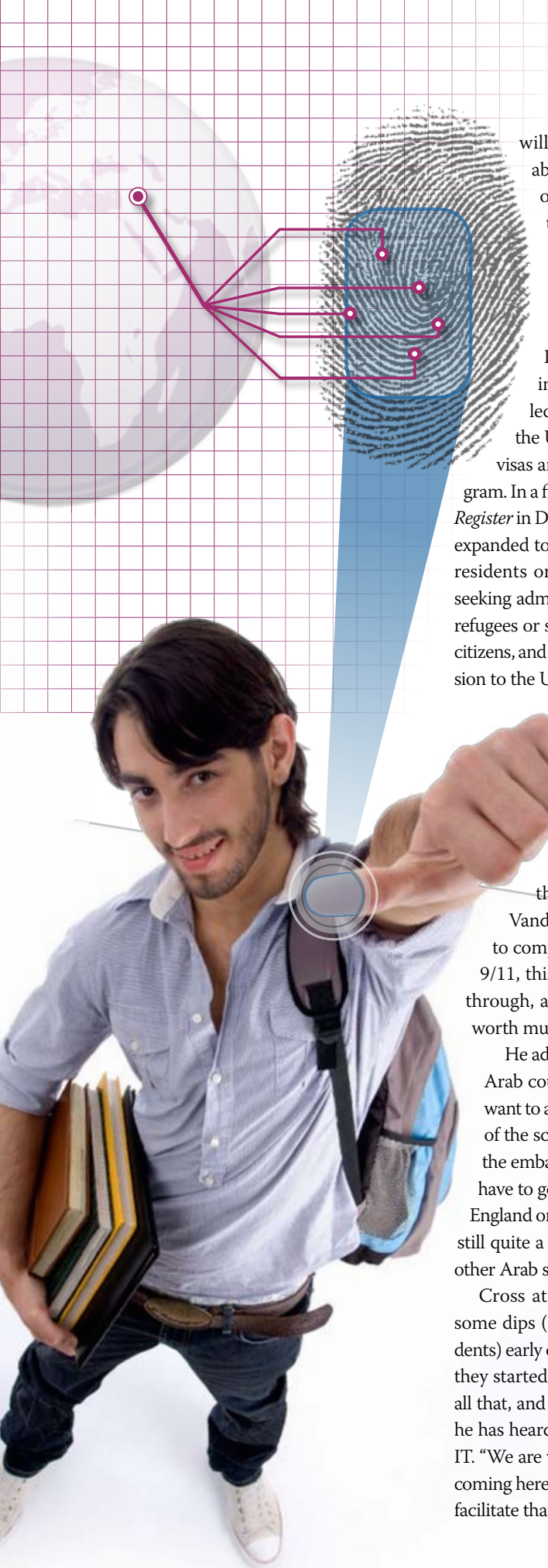
will always try to the best of our abilities to let them know ahead of time when something is going to change," Hinken asserts.

In the wake of 9/11, Congress mandated the use of biometrics in U.S. visas in the Enhanced Border Security and Visa Entry Reform Act of 2002. In its initial implementation, US-VISIT collected data from visitors entering the United States on nonimmigrant visas and through the visa waiver program. In a final rule published in the *Federal Register* in December 2008, the program was expanded to include lawful U.S. permanent residents or "green card" holders, people seeking admission on immigrant visas or as refugees or seeking asylum, some Canadian citizens, and individuals who apply for admission to the United States through the Guam visa waiver program.

"I hear some complaints from students, mostly Canadians and Western Europeans—especially Canadians—that they shouldn't have to go through this," says Barsoum at Vanderbilt. "But nobody else seems to complain. They just know that after 9/11, this is something they have to go through, and an education in the U.S. is worth much more than a fingerprint."

He adds that he also hears from some Arab countries, "where they don't even want to apply to come to the U.S. because of the scrutiny they get when they go to the embassy to get a visa; the hassle they have to go through there. So they choose England or Canada instead." But "there are still quite a lot of Saudis and Kuwaitis and other Arab students in the U.S.," he says.

Cross at Clemson notes that "we saw some dips (in the number of arriving students) early on in the post-9/11 period when they started taking pictures at airports and all that, and then it seemed to recover" and he has heard no complaints about US-VISIT. "We are very eager to see more students coming here and hopefully this program will facilitate that," he says.

From what she hears, adds Allei at IU-PUI, international students "are able to apply for visas and go through the screening at the port of entry with little complication." But in "one or two" cases, biometrics triggered "a very real issue of a student who had been in the legal system previously" and "from that perspective, I would suspect that Homeland Security feels it is a successful program," Allei says.

Overall acceptance of US-VISIT by the international education community in the United States is consistent with two studies conducted by Unisys Corporation. In one, which it reported last December, Unisys found that 67 percent of consumers surveyed around the world trust fingerprint scans to verify their identities with banks, government agencies, and other organizations. Fingerprint scans rank far higher in consumer trust than lesser known biometric applications like facial and blood vessel scans.

Consumers in Malaysia, Australia, and the United Kingdom are the most accepting of all biometric methods studied in its research, Unisys reported. Hong Kong residents, who distrust many methods of authentication, including PINs and personal passwords, also are most accepting of fingerprints, Unisys added.

In 2006 Unisys reported that consumers from North America supported biometrics for identity verification more than those from any other region, followed by Europe and Asia-Pacific. Latin Americans were the least supportive. Of survey respondents who did not favor biometrics, most said they were suspicious of the technology.

Frost & Sullivan, a global business research and consulting company, reported in March this year that with security concerns in the world continuing to grow in intensity and complexity, the European biometrics market is expected to experience substantial growth of its own in coming years with broader deployment of fingerprint technology in particular. Its main advantages, the company states, are that it is economical, requires small storage space and reduced power to implement, and is resistant to temperature and background lighting, making it ideal for use in a range environments.

More countries are using it, as the United States does, for their international visitors, including students, and some university authorities wonder how American students going abroad will react to it. "I wouldn't be surprised if there was kind of a knee-jerk reaction of 'why are we being required to do this?'" says Allei.

"I would laugh and say, 'well, we are getting our own medicine now, so we shouldn't complain.' I can imagine myself feeling a little grumpy if I have to get fingerprinted as part of a visa application to another country. But for the most part, we in the U.S. do not experience nearly the screening that we impose on others," Allei says.

Meanwhile, back home, Hamilton is pleased that the "gloom and doom" concerns expressed about US-VISIT when it began have proven to be unfounded. "There was a lot of concern about it with respect to impeding the free flow of commerce and tourism because of delays in airport entry halls and that did not materialize. I think that's to the credit of Homeland Security. They did an outstanding job in public education and outreach before the program was launched," Hamilton says.

But he notes that US-VISIT does not yet cover all land entry points from Canada and Mexico. "They present some difficult logistical problems because of the physical arrangements at these border crossing points and the numbers of vehicle and pedestrian lanes; the physical space you need to accommodate the people. There are challenges there that have not yet been fully fleshed out," he says.

As for the new airport exit part of the program that is being piloted in Detroit and Atlanta, "it seems to me that the process can be implemented more simply than with the full 10-fingerprint capture that is done at entry," Hamilton says. A single finger capture, maybe two fingers at the most, would be "the most efficient way to do it with a quick half-second comparison against the person's original entry record, assuming it is accessible at the exit point," Hamilton says.

He suggests that it also might be more efficient and less costly to consolidate the fingerprinting at "a few checkpoints," like the security lanes all travelers must pass through, or even before that at ticket counters, instead of at boarding gates for individual flights. But he acknowledges that he sees the logic of not doing it at ticket counters. "You can go up to the counter and present your passport and visa document and get your boarding pass and then turn around and hand it to somebody else while you walk out the door," Hamilton says, adding that "even if you go through security, there's no guarantee you won't turn around and walk back out."

"So there still are some gaps in the program, but from the standpoint of its execution so far, the performance of the technology has been exemplary," he concludes, and no one seems to be publicly disagreeing with that. **IE**

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