

State department clarifies visa policy for foreign scientists

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A US State Department official has clarified a visa processing policy, saying that people applying for visas to enter the US do not have to leave their passports with consular offices while awaiting approval. Applicants have typically been leaving their passports with consular officers for the duration of the application process, making it impossible for them to travel internationally while waiting for the US visa.

In an e-mail to Amy Flatten, director of international affairs for the American Physical Society, Stephen "Tony" Edson, the State Department's deputy assistant secretary of visa services, said it is not necessary for consular officials to keep passports during visa processing, "and travelers should feel free to ask for their passports back."

"The only relatively minor inconvenience will be for applicants to return their passports to the consular section once they are cleared so that the visa can be issued," he wrote. "No traveler should ever have to defer or miss travel because we are holding their passport for visa issuance."

The clarification is important for non-US physicists and other scientists who, because of the nature of their work, are often subject to a more rigorous investigation before a visa is granted. That investigation, known as a Mantis review, caused visa delays in the wake of the September 11 terrorist attacks, and can take several weeks to complete. It is triggered when the visa applicant is involved in work related to any of a long list of items on the State Department's technology alert list.

Edson's e-mail to clarify the policy can be found at <http://www.aps.org/programs/international/visa/passport.cfm>. Flatten said scientists applying for visas should take a copy of the e-mail with them to their US consulate.

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of really intelligent PhDs, many of them very much into science, but they wanted to be more actively engaged in the decision making that affects all of us." Whittlesey joined the office of Rep. Doris Matsui (D-CA) because, he says, "House staffs are usually about 10 people. Senate staffs can be 50. So in a House office, as opposed to having a subset of science issues, you are the science person."

This year's AIP fellow is Jonna Hamilton, whose 2006 PhD from Brown University focused on how puffins use their wings to both swim and fly. She is working on energy and environment issues in the office of Senator Richard Durbin (D-IL). "I love academics, and I love science, but [doing my research] I felt like I wasn't doing anything that mattered in the broader scheme of

things," she says. "Here, I get to use my scientific training to influence policy in a positive way."

In choosing to work for Sen. Christopher Dodd (D-CT), Mark Wenzel, this year's fellow for the American Geophysical Union, looked for "politics, personality, and portfolio." When PHYSICS TODAY spoke with him, Wenzel, who holds a 2006 PhD in Earth and planetary sciences from the University of California, Berkeley, had just joined Dodd's office and expected to work on defense procurement, energy and the environment, and competitiveness.

Eleanore Edson, this year's fellow sponsored by OSA and the International Society of Optical Engineering (SPIE), came to the office of Sen. Hillary Clinton (D-NY) from a fellowship at the NAS. As a graduate student in neurobiology at



Congressional fellows sponsored by physics societies this year include, from left: Jonna Hamilton, Donald Engel, Alex Saltman, Kevin Whittlesey, and Mark Wenzel.

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