

Boston bombing fallout: US moves to close security gap on student visas (+video)

Student visa snafu involving a Kazakh friend of Dzhokhar Tsarnaev, the Boston bombing suspect, prompts US to beef up security checks. Will the episode undermine chances for comprehensive immigration reform?

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By Cheryl Sullivan, *Staff writer* / May 4, 2013

The Boston Marathon bombing has yielded its first change in US security policy, with the government ordering border agents to check the validity of visas for every international student entering the United States for study.

The order, effective immediately, was prompted by revelations that a Kazakh college student, a friend of Boston bombing suspect Dzhokhar Tsarnaev, was allowed to reenter the US after winter break even though his student visa had been revoked 16 days earlier because of poor grades. The student from Kazakhstan is now in federal custody for allegedly removing evidence from Mr. Tsarnaev's dorm room and discarding it before authorities conducted a search.

Those obstruction of justice charges against Azamat Tazhayakov and a fellow Kazakh student, Dias Kadyrbayen, put renewed scrutiny on America's student visa program – and found its enforcement wanting. The security gap may serve to buttress the arguments of those who say border and visa enforcement remain too spotty for Congress to responsibly consider a sweeping immigration reform measure that would grant legal status to many of the 10 million illegal immigrants already living in the US.

The problem with student visas has been known for years, and US officials say a permanent fix is in the works. The new order, which The Associated Press obtained Friday, presents a work-around in the meantime. It uses airlines' flight manifests to identify incoming foreign students, and US border agents will verify their visa status while the students are en route to the US, according to AP's report on an internal memo circulated with the Department of Homeland Security's US Customs and Border Protection.

America's colleges and universities are a magnet for students worldwide: Twenty-one percent of all college students studying abroad attend schools in the US, according to an April report by the Brookings Institution in Washington.

That was almost 700,000 foreign students as of 2010 – or about 3.5 percent of total higher education enrollment in the US, the report said. The number has been growing as colleges and universities stepped up recruitment of students abroad, who often pay higher tuition rates.