

MIT/WHOI Joint Program in Oceanography/Applied Ocean Science and Engineering

The Joint Program of the Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution (WHOI) and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology offers advanced degrees in oceanography and applied ocean science and engineering. Graduate study encompasses virtually all of the basic sciences as they apply to the marine environment: physics, chemistry, geology, geophysics, and biology. Students who choose applied ocean science and engineering may concentrate in the major fields (civil, environmental, mechanical/ocean, and electrical engineering). More than 160 scientists/faculty from the two institutions participate in the Joint Program. There are currently 135 students enrolled in the five areas of study offered: biological, chemical, or physical oceanography; marine geology and geophysics; and oceanographic engineering.

Since all MIT faculty involved in the Joint Program are members of an academic department, their individual accomplishments and awards are reported through those departments. These include the departments of Civil and Environmental Engineering, Mechanical Engineering, Electrical Engineering and Computer Science, Biology, and Earth, Atmospheric and Planetary Sciences.

Transportation Worker Identification Credential Card Denials to Joint Program Students Holding J-1 or F-1 Visas

In 2006, the Department of Homeland Security initiated the Transportation Worker Identification Credential (TWIC) program in an effort to increase security at US ports. The program, administered by the Transportation Security Administration (TSA) and the US Coast Guard, is designed to ensure that individuals who pose a threat do not gain unescorted access to secure areas of the nation's maritime transportation system.

Fourteen Joint Program students applied for the TWIC card in order to be able to conduct their research aboard US oceanographic research vessels. Applications from those who had either a J-1 or F-1 visa were rejected by the Department of Homeland Security, and several received a letter stating, in part: "I have personally reviewed the Initial Determination of Threat Assessment. . . . Based upon this review, I have determined that you pose a security threat and you do not meet the eligibility requirements to hold a Transportation Worker Identification Credential (TWIC)."

Both the language used in the letter and the unexplained designation of "security threat" greatly alarmed the students who received it, the scientific staff of the Joint Program, the directors of the program, and senior officials at MIT and WHOI. Appealing to their respective representatives in Washington, both institutions responded by sending official letters of protest to Michael Chertoff, head of the Department of Homeland Security, expressing their objection to the security threat language in the letter and asking him to clarify the finding that these students pose a "security threat," reverse the decision, or, at the very least, amend the language in the letter. These letters of protest were copied to Senator Edward M. Kennedy, Senator John Kerry, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, Undersecretary for Science and Technology Jay Cohen, and Dr. Nina Fedoroff, science advisor to the secretary of state.

Several meetings ensued between members of Congress and TSA. Although it was determined that foreign graduate students in the United States on a J-1 or F-1 visa are not eligible for the card simply because they do not fall into any TSA predetermined categories, TSA initially refused to change the language of its letter or issue a new letter that would allow the affected students to withdraw their application and have the “security threat” label removed from their files.

On June 30, however, TSA sent a reissued letter of refusal to one Joint Program student. The wording of this new letter was changed to reflect TSA’s internal rules, which forbid unescorted access to anyone with F-1 or J-1 visas, and explained that this condition alone was the reason for rejection. However, the second condition requested by both MIT and WHOI—allowing the students to have the “security threat” designation removed from their files—has not been met. Also, the reissued letter has not, to our knowledge, been sent to any of the other Joint Program students whose cases are pending.

Meetings are still taking place between TSA, MIT, and WHOI representatives in Washington and members of Congress, and we hope to resolve these remaining issues in the next few months.

New Alumni Website

The Joint Program alumni website mentioned last year as being under development has been launched. This newly designed site (<http://alumni.who.edu/>) provides an up-to-date directory of alumni with current address and contact information, Joint Program discipline, current position, and year of graduation. In addition, it offers the ability to search using a variety of criteria, including geographical location; a section devoted to news and current events; and a forum where alumni can post topics of their choosing or ask for more information about any aspect relating to the alumni community. There are also links to sites where donors can make gifts directly to designated Joint Program alumni funds.

Joint Program 40th Anniversary Celebration

On May 8, 2008, the Joint Program officially celebrated the 40th anniversary of the signing of the agreement between MIT and WHOI. The program organized a reception in honor of the occasion at SeaWorld Adventure Park in Orlando on March 4, during the 2008 Ocean Sciences Meeting. More than 100 students, alumni, staff, scientists, and postdocs attended, including the new president and director of WHOI, Dr. Susan Avery.

The anniversary will also be celebrated at MIT in September 2008, with a formal symposium and reception at the Wong Auditorium. Details related to the symposium are currently posted at <http://web.mit.edu/mit-who/ww/community/Anniversary2008.html> and will be covered in next year’s report.

Paola Rizzoli, Director

Ronni Schwartz, Administrator

More information about the Joint Program in Oceanography/Applied Ocean Science and Engineering can be found at <http://web.mit.edu/mit-who/ww/>.