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## The case for a common database for travel visas

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U.S. passport-holders are lucky. We get to travel virtually anywhere without visas. Citizens of other countries looking to travel internationally, however, are not so fortunate because they have to go through a lengthy visa application process.

It is clear that travel visas are necessary. They allow governments to regulate their borders and keep track of people or groups of people that pose threats to national security.

At present, many countries require extensive amounts of paperwork to determine eligibility for a visa. For instance, in order to control unauthorized migration, identifying travelers who may — possibly — overstay and not return to their country of origin is important. But in order to make the determination about the migrant in question, immigration officers need bank statements, tax returns and letters from employers to verify that the traveler will go back to where they came from.

Due to the lengthiness of this process, travel plans may need to be drastically altered or even canceled because a 10-page visa application was approved too late. So travelers often have to postpone planning a trip until a visa has been obtained. This causes other problems, since plane tickets and hotel prices can skyrocket within just a few weeks.

Visas are also often quite expensive — though \$25 per person (a typical visa fee) does not seem too expensive, when converted to other currencies, the amount can be quite forbidding. The lengthiness of the application combined with the expense often dissuades people from traveling. Visas can also be expensive for the host country as well. In fact, researchers at the Cato Institute estimate that eliminating all travel visas to the U.S. would add between \$90 billion and \$123 billion in yearly spending.

Thus, it is clear that travel visas — although necessary — are often unfortunate deterrents for travelers who are neither security threats nor overstay risks. Improvement is necessary if tourism is to remain a significant part of a country's economy.

One simple improvement would be to reduce the length of a travel visa form. Britain, for instance, requires each applicant to fill out a 10-page form. In contrast, other countries in continental Europe are able to screen visitors with a two-page form. The length of travel visa forms can be reduced if countries are willing to share information about applicants via a common database. Not only would this reduce the time that applicants spend completing forms; it would also be easier for countries to quickly make visa decisions.

With simple measures such as the one suggested above, the fun and excitement of traveling could be made more universal. If U.S. passport-holders are able to travel with few issues, citizens of other countries should be able to do so as well.