



# reactions

Two and a half years after its launch, SEVIS has become business as

**S**USAN GEARY, director of the Student and Exchange Visitor Program (SEVP) for the Department of Homeland Security's Immigration and Customs Enforcement branch, is no stranger to international student advisers. She has become a familiar face at NAFSA conferences, seeking to allay concerns about the Student and Exchange Visitor Information System (SEVIS), the computerized tracking system in place since February 2003 to let the government know the whereabouts and academic status of the 725,000 international students and scholars at campuses across the United States.



SEVIS SEVIS

# vary

usual on campuses—almost. BY CHRISTOPHER CONNELL

Geary acknowledges the first six months were “rough,” but says lately she is hearing fewer complaints and even getting thanks for ongoing efforts to work the bugs out and make the system run more smoothly. She has her special gauge of SEVIS customer satisfaction. “I’m somebody who enjoys Google-ing a lot, and on maybe a weekly basis, I just put ‘SEVIS’ in and do a search,” she said. “A year ago, we would have several pages of hundreds of stories out there. Last Monday, there were three stories total. I take that as people are satisfied with SEVIS. People are finding that it’s become more user-friendly.”

### Invasiveness Still Causing Unease

No news may indeed be good news in Washington, but many international educators still shudder when they think about the rush to get SEVIS started, and many still question why students and scholars have been singled out for such scrutiny, when the government makes no similar effort to track the millions more who enter this country each year on tourist visas—including most of the September 11, 2001 hijackers. Indeed, a survey this past spring of international student advisers found that morale and job satisfaction were high, but dealing with SEVIS was considered the most onerous part of

the job. These professionals “love what they do to advise and support international students and scholars,” authors Vicki J. Rosser of the University of Missouri, Columbia, and Melinda S. Wood of the University of Hawai‘i, West O‘ahu, reported. “However, SEVIS is having a profound effect on their morale, job satisfaction, and likelihood to leave the field.” [See Sidebar: “An Altruistic Calling Made More Difficult.”]

Gail Child Szenes, director of New York University’s Office for International Students and Scholars, summed it up: “Things are (now) much better and easier. It is no longer all SEVIS, all the time. We don’t have that trepidation that one little typographical error was going to ruin somebody’s life.” Szenes added, “I did not believe that things would turn around as much as they have, that we would get back to a point where the work could be fun again. I don’t feel like a snitch any more.” But she does not believe SEVIS “has made anybody safer. Nobody who does this for a living thinks that foreign students are the problem.”

Campuses must let the government know through SEVIS whether a student or scholar shows up within 30 days of entering the United States, if they drop out or take less than a full load of courses, and when they complete their studies,

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## An Altruistic Calling Made More Difficult

**T**HE HIJACKED JETS that slammed into the World Trade Center and Pentagon on September 11, 2001, changed many things about everyday life in the United States, including the jobs of mid-level college and university administrators who work with international students and scholars. As Vicki J. Rosser of the University of Missouri, Columbia, and Melinda S. Wood of the University of Hawai'i at West O'ahu describe it, this "relatively unknown group of midlevel university administrations who 'took care of' international students and scholars'" suddenly became an integral part "of the Department of Homeland Security's data collection infrastructure."

Rosser, an assistant professor of educational leadership and policy analysis, and Wood, assistant to the chancellor, set out to discern how advisers felt about going from relative obscurity to



research or teaching assignment.

That can be jarring at the 3,500 accredited institutions of higher education across the United States, where the culture is often more relaxed and where it's considered rude to ask any graduate student when he or she is going to complete that Ph.D.

"Can you imagine how Americans would react if an American study abroad student in France was arrested for dropping a course?" asked Ellen A. Dussourd, director of the Office of International Student and Scholar Services at the University at Buffalo (SUNY), which has more than 3,300 international students. In the months after September 11, as the United States required special registration for men from predominantly Muslim countries (a requirement later subsumed into photographing and fingerprinting most visitors), Buffalo's international students were warned that if they took a tourist trip over to the Canadian side of Niagara Falls, they might have trouble getting back across the Peace Bridge.

Now, before registering for classes, new international students

at Buffalo must attend a detailed briefing on U.S. immigration law. "We're definitely past the stage where students were really paranoid," said Dussourd, a former Peace Corps volunteer who has taught in Cameroon and Mauritania. "They know that we have this informant role. We get phone calls from the government, and if one of our students does not enroll in a given semester and does not depart the country, then we will get a phone call trying to find out where they are."

Dussourd added, "We see ourselves as the people who are protecting the students, who are trying to make the case for international education and counteract the negative image our students have of the United States. We really feel we are doing something that's vital to our university and to our country."

### Evolving Responses to Compliance Requirements

Congress in 1996 passed a law ordering the creation of a student tracking system in response to the first terror attack on the World



being point persons in colleges' efforts to keep their doors open to talent from all over the world. They mailed a questionnaire with 109 items to 2,706 international student and scholar advisers; 20 questions pertained to SEVIS. They received responses from 1,226 (45 percent) and used 1,169 for their analysis. Forty percent were from doctoral institutions and 23 percent from master's institutions. Three-quarters of the advisers were women. More than half held a master's degree, 9 percent had doctorates and 4 percent held law or other professional degrees.

**AMONG THE NOTABLE FINDINGS:**

70 percent said SEVIS made advising students and scholars more difficult.

86 percent said SEVIS required them to focus more on compliance than programming.

As a group, the advisers "are extremely satisfied and their

level of morale is very high."

Many viewed their work as a calling and a service. Some saw their role as contributing to global peace and understanding. One wrote, "It's a great feeling to know that I am changing the world for the better in my own little way each day."

But "the more time they spend on SEVIS tasks, the less satisfied they are with their job."

They did not feel well-trained or supported in SEVIS, and "this had a direct and powerful impact on their intentions to leave their position and/or career."

Rosser and Woods said the results make a compelling case that policy makers should "reexamine the reporting requirements, training and support issues, and the demands SEVIS places on (advisers') work time....Institutions also need to re-examine staffing levels, training resources and professional development activities." In an in-

terview, Rosser said, "This is a very altruistic group. They absolutely, positively love their jobs," but are frustrated by the difficulty of fixing errors in SEVIS. Woods, the principal Designated School Official for her university, said, "We're having to go from being the people who like international students and love doing things with them ... to managing data and being much more on the enforcement and reporting side. These were not the things that drew most of us into this line of work."

They presented their findings at the NAFSA conference in Seattle, where SEVIS officials noted the complaints about data fixes. "After we got back, a miracle occurred. The (errors) were getting fixed really fast," Woods said.

*The full text of a report by Woods and Rosser detailing their survey findings can be found on the NAFSA Web site at <http://www.nafsa.org/SEVISreport>.*



Trade Center that killed six people in 1993. Originally the system was going to be called CIPRIS for Coordinated Interagency Partnership Regulating International Students. The USA Patriot Act, passed six weeks after September 11, 2001 stepped up funding for SEVIS and required every college to be in compliance by Jan. 30, 2003 (although the launch was delayed into February due to technical problems).

In that first year after the terror attacks, students and scholars faced long waits for visas in China, India and elsewhere as consular officers required face-to-face interviews with all applicants. International enrollments eventually slipped from 586,323 in 2002-2003 to 572,509 in 2003-2004, according to the Institute of International Education. Even before September 11, U.S. campuses faced growing competition from universities in other English language-speaking countries such as the United Kingdom, Australia and Canada. The visa bottlenecks now have significantly improved, but the Council on Graduate Schools reports that international applications dropped 5

## RISKING 'IRREPARABLE DAMAGE'

On May 18, 2005, the heads of 41 national higher education associations—including the National Academy of Sciences, the American Council on Education, the Association of American Universities, NAFSA and the Association of International Education Administrators—called once again on the White House and Congress to reduce the visa headaches and hassles for bona fide international students and scholars. Unless "the misperception that our country does not welcome these international visitors" is dispelled, the leaders warned, "we risk irreparable damage to our competitive advantage in attracting international students, scholars, scientists, and engineers, and ultimately to our nation's global leadership."

## IN CONGRESS, STEROIDS—NOT SEVIS—DRAWS THE CAMERAS AND CROWDS

**T**HE HOT LIGHTS AND TELEVISION CAMERAS were arrayed in dense rows in a crowded hearing room last March 17 where Congress had summoned baseball sluggers to answer questions about the use of steroids. Down the hall in the Rayburn Building, a much smaller audience turned out to ponder a different question altogether: In the name of national security, is the United States turning a cold shoulder to international students and scholars?

Rep. Howard P. “Buck” McKeon, R-California, chairman of the House Education and the Workforce Subcommittee on 21st Century Competitiveness, remarked, “It’s fortunate that we all made it through the crowds to get here....I’m glad we’re here to talk about something substantive.” McKeon said the purpose of the hearing was to get an update on SEVIS and find out “what still needs to be done to ensure a smooth transition for foreign students studying in the United States.”

A State Department official, Stephen A. Edson, managing director of the Visa Services Directorate in the Bureau of Consular Affairs, sought to counter what he called “lingering misperceptions” that there were still major bottlenecks in issuing visas. “Almost all the visa applications we receive—some

97 percent—are processed in one or two days,” said Edson, and the time it takes to decide Visas MANTIS cases—for permission to study and conduct research in sensitive scientific fields—is down from 10 weeks to less than two weeks. He also quoted Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice’s words on March 9 to the House Appropriation Committee. She promised to “keep America’s doors open and our borders secure,” and to “maintain the fundamental openness that gives our democracy its dynamism and makes our country a beacon for international tourists, students, immigrants, and businesspeople.”

Victor X. Cerda, counsel for Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) in the Department of Homeland Security, said that SEVIS has made the nation safer. “Gone are the days of the questionable dog grooming school that ... had the authority to sponsor individuals to enter the country,” said Cerda. In the old paper system, 70,000 schools were certified to admit foreign students. Now there are 7,800 schools and federal inspectors have laid eyes on the premises of each one. Some 585,000 students on F-1 and M-1 visas are registered in SEVIS, along with 134,000 visitors on J-1 visas in 1,400 exchange programs.

Cerda testified that ICE’s Compliance Enforcement Unit

percent this year after a 28 percent plunge in 2004.

Cathryn Cotten, director of Duke University’s International Office, said, “I think they’ve made a lot of improvements and come a long, long way in the last couple of years—to a great degree because NAFSA has pulled them along.” Cotten added, “Still, there’s so much you can’t do with the Js because SEVIS does not reflect the regulations or cannot accommodate them.”

While the \$100-a-student registration fee has defrayed the government’s costs of operating SEVIS, colleges and universities have been forced to absorb large costs of supporting their end of the system. Many made major investments in software and created a new position in their international offices: information technology manager. Cary M. Jensen, director of University International Relations for the University of Rochester, said he now spends 90 percent of his time overseeing the international office “working with the advisers on all the tough situations they face.” Rochester has 1,200 international students and more than 500 international scholars.

“For years we had four people running the student side and one running the scholar side. It’s a 10-person office now,” said Jensen, who is an attorney. Sylvia Kless, the associate director for student services, said part of the difficulty is collecting information from departments across the university. “With people coming and going all the time, it’s really hard to keep up and not have sleepless nights (thinking), ‘OK, who did I miss?’” said Kless.

“My big problem now is with Social Security changes and (the

Department of) Motor Vehicles. I had a student practically in tears yesterday in an emergency room who needed to get his wife’s license renewed. They said she was not in status, but she is,” said Kless. “Motor Vehicles is not trained to understand the immigration documents.”

Mary Idzior, director of visa services for Princeton University’s general counsel, said,

“SEVIS is better than nothing, but I am not convinced that the data is thousands of times better than what we used to have. By and large my colleagues across the country always kept records and data on international students ... SEVIS forced us to be much more precise about everybody and forced us to get to the piles that we put aside, the three or four people we couldn’t figure out.” But the system is far from perfect or complete. “We still don’t know what student in SEVIS is (eligible for) J-1 training,” Idzior said.

Gang Wang, associate director of international students and scholars for Yale University, said SEVIS “is going better than what we expected” despite the slow fixes and the need for “a lot of workarounds.” Wang believes the challenge is hardest on campuses with smaller numbers of international students and scholars, and less familiarity with SEVIS. “If someone wears multiple hats, it’s really hard for that staff member to keep up with what’s going on. If you don’t do it regularly, you always feel like you don’t know what you’re doing,” he said.

While larger schools update SEVIS records in batches, smaller ones often do it one at a time, in what is known as a SEVIS RTI for

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“identifies approximately 1,000 potential student and exchange visitor status violators a week through SEVIS.” It has resolved 81,000 potential violator leads and “placed more than 130,000 lookouts on students and exchange visitors who have been terminated in SEVIS, and who have potentially violated their nonimmigrant status.” Field offices wound up investigating 3,700 and making 641 arrests.

Randolph C. Hite, an information technology expert from the Government Accountability Office (GAO), said education associations report they have seen steady improvements in the system over the past year, but they also chafe at persistent delays in getting errors fixed. “What we were told is that there are times when data fixes take months, even over a year, to fix,” Hite said.

Lawrence Bell, director of the Office of International Education at the University of Colorado in Boulder, testifying in his capacity as NAFSA vice president for public policy and practice, said that the government has yet to face up to the challenge of developing a coordinated national strategy—including streamlined visa requirements—to attract international students, as a NAFSA task force recommended two years ago. “The days are long gone when we could just sit back and wait for the students to come. The stakes are too high,” said Bell. “Many students and scholars are afraid to travel for fear of lengthy delays when they

return home.” Despite improvements in SEVIS, “we still have a distance to go,” Bell said. Campuses should be allowed to fix errors in the SEVIS database themselves. He added that, “The bifurcation of visa responsibility has not served us well...[T]he relationship between DHS (Homeland Security) and State in the visa area remains dysfunctional.”

University of Maryland President C.D. (Dan) Mote, Jr., added a note of passion to the hearings when he brought up “the alarming decline in graduate applications.” He said registrations for Graduate Record Examinations were down by 50 percent in China, 43 percent in Taiwan and 37 percent in India. He noted that a graduate student he was working with in mechanical engineering went home to China over last winter break “and could not return until the end of February because of visa processing.”

Other lawmakers mentioned the value of their own or family members’ experiences in studying abroad. Rep. Dale Kildee, D-Michigan recalled his study of Islamic history at University of Peshawar in Pakistan in the late 1950s on a Rotary fellowship. Rep. Ruben Hinojosa, D-Texas, said, “We need to regain our lost momentum. The international student market is increasingly competitive. We must ensure that our processes, while safeguarding our national security, do not discourage international students from seeking to study in the United States.”

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