**How SEVIS Has Changed Our Worklives**

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<u>Introduction</u>

Until the events of September 11, 2001, international student and scholar advisors were a relatively insignificant group of midlevel university administrators who "took care of" international students and scholars. After September 11th these advisors became part of the Department of Homeland Security's data collection infrastructure through the implementation of the Student and Exchange Visitor Information System (SEVIS), a national database that tracks international students and scholars during their time in the United States.  SEVIS was not just a new office tool – it changed the worklives of international student and scholar advisors.

This article will present the results of a national study sponsored in part by NAFSA[1] regarding the impact that SEVIS has had on the professional and institutional

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worklives of U.S. international student and scholar advisors (ISSAs) throughout higher education.  It is the first national study on SEVIS and worklife issues affecting ISSAs.

Background

This study, undertaken in early 2005, occurred at a time when international education in higher education is at a critical juncture. On one hand, internationalization and program expansion has been a major component of many institutions' strategic and economic growth plans. On the other hand, student participation in both inbound and outbound activities has been challenged on a number of fronts, from fearful parents to federal restrictions on student visas. ISSAs work at the intersection of these conflicting phenomena.

Yet, ISSAs did not always stand prominently at the crossroads.  In fact, they were once noted as the least influential individuals on college and university campuses and were powerless to make their views known to higher-level policy makers (Goodwin & Nacht, 1983). Often these individuals were regulated to the basements of "old main" buildings (Kurz & Scannell, 2002, p.13). Moreover, in spite of the best efforts of NAFSA's SEVIS Task Force, ISSAs were largely left out of the SEVIS planning process due to the federal government's need to push forward on its national security agenda (Hartle & Burns, 2002; Rowe, 2002). Now these midlevel administrators in international education are key stakeholders in advancing the economic and academic growth agendas of many colleges and universities.

Attention given to the worklives and satisfaction of ISSAs vis-à-vis SEVIS exists primarily in the professional literature. SEVIS-related issues found to be most important in existing literature are ISSAs' changing: 1) relationships with other departments on

campus, 2) reporting responsibilities, 3) knowledge, skills, tasks, and 4) work role from taking care of students and scholars to taking care of a federally mandated database.

The change in relationships with other departments is evidenced by the implementation of new business affairs processes and information flow (Hamilton, 2003; Retention, 2002; Sungard, n.d.), increased attention and notoriety (Althen, 2003; Kurz & Scannell, 2002), and increased information technology support (Bowen & Foley, 2002). Also changing are ISSAs' reporting responsibilities to the federal government due to requirements calling for more information to be reported more frequently (Kurz & Scannell, 2002; Retention, 2002; Sunguard, n.d.).

ISSA knowledge, skills, tasks, and time allocation have been altered because of new laws and procedures, a new database requiring enhanced information technology skills, and the need to focus a larger percentage of time to database management and government reporting (Bowen & Foley, 2002; Hamilton, 2003; Hartle & Burns, 2002). Finally, ISSAs' interactions with students and scholars have changed as a result of spending more time on database management and oversight and less on positive interactions with students and scholars (Read, 2003; Sunguard, n.d.).

**Method**

Data Source

In the spring of 2005, a national study was conducted to examine the impact of SEVIS on the worklives of U.S. international student and scholar advisors (ISSAs). The study was formulated by modifying a survey instrument that has been used with other groups of university administrators to determine which aspects of their work contribute to

overall job satisfaction and which issues make administrators want to leave their jobs (Rosser, 2004). The survey contained 109 items (including demographic characteristics), with 20 of them pertaining specifically to SEVIS.

The survey was sent to all NAFSA members who had identified international student and scholar advising as their primary job responsibility (2706 individuals). The initial mailing was followed up by two reminders; the three mailings ultimately yielded 1,226 responses for a 45 percent return rate. Of the 1226, 1168 were considered useable and retained for the final analyses. ISSAs from both public and private institutions and from all of the types in the Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education were represented.

Demographic Characteristics

ISSAs from all NAFSA regions in both public and private institutions within all Carnegie Classifications responded to the survey. The respondents by NAFSA region were as follows: Region 1=61, 2=70, 3=94, 4=95, 5=102, 6=90, 7=149, 8=122, 10=107, 11=110, 12=126 (Region 9 no longer exists). There were 634 (55.5%) individuals who responded from public institutions and 509 (44.5%) from private institutions. Within the Carnegie Classification of institutions, 461 (40.0%) ISSAs were from doctorate-granting institutions, 263 (22.8%) were from master's institutions, 53 (4.5%) from general baccalaureates, 130 (11.3%) from liberal arts, 148 (12.9%) from associate's colleges, 79 (6.9%) indicated they worked in specialized institutions, and 16 (1.4%) of the individuals indicated they worked at an external agency.

[see attached figures in PowerPoint.]

Additional demographic and background variables included on the instrument were sex, race/ethnicity, highest degree earned, years employed as an ISSA, and years employed on campus. Of those who responded to the demographic characteristics, 865 or 75.7 percent were female and 278 or 24.3 percent were male. As for race/ethnicity, 869 or 80 percent of the respondents were Caucasian, 75 or 7 percent were Asian, 60 or 6 percent were African American, 42 or 4 percent were Hispanic, and 37 or 3 percent were mixed/other. The highest degree earned by ISSAs was as follows: 100 (8.7%) had earned doctorates, 43 (3.8%) held a professional degree, 625 (54.6%) held a master's, 322 (28.1%) earned a bachelor's, 8 (.7%) had an associate's degree, and 7 (.6%) had a high school diploma. These ISSAs have worked on their campus for an average of 10.6 years and in international student and scholar advising more specifically for 9.9 years.

## Results

SEVIS-Specific Items

For the purpose of this article, we extracted all questions related to SEVIS from the larger survey which addressed the additional worklife issues of satisfaction, morale and likelihood of departure. ISSAs were asked to indicate on five point scales their level of agreement or disagreement with 20 statements that were specifically related to SEVIS issues. The range was 1 to 5 with "1" indicating strong disagreement or a negative response and "5" indicating strong agreement of a positive response.

The responses to the SEVIS-related questions revealed a number of interesting findings. Approximately 70 percent of our respondents agreed that SEVIS had made advising international students and scholars more difficult. ISSAs in our study also

claimed that SEVIS had affected the positive regard they had for the career field of advising international students and scholars (61% agreed). The study showed that ISSA interactions with students had changed as a result of spending more time on database management and less time on positive interactions with students and scholars. Eighty-six percent of our respondents believed that SEVIS required them to focus more on regulatory compliance than student programming. Keeping up with the computer network and the SEVIS requirements reduced the amount of time they could spend on other services such as organizing orientation and outreach programs. Another finding that emerged from the study was that 62 percent of ISSAs agreed that there were conflicts between SEVIS mandates and their administrative practice. The study also supports the previous literature that suggests ISSA workload has increased due to SEVIS implementation; 91 percent believed that SEVIS reporting requirements had increased their workload.

This study indicates that new policies and mandates associated with SEVIS implementation had not only increased ISSAs' workload but had also affected their decision making authority. Eighty-two percent of the respondents reported that SEVIS requirements had changed their level of decision making authority when advising international students and scholars. On a more positive note, ISSAs in our study (70 %) claimed that SEVIS had enabled them to clean up their databases. Using the electronic format helped ISSAs to better monitor and maintain the records of international students and scholars. There was almost an even split in the responses regarding the SEVIS technical and troubleshooting support. The data revealed that 56 percent of the respondents were pleased with SEVIS troubleshooting support, as opposed to 44 percent

who reported experiencing problems with the technical assistance they received from SEVIS. Although SEVIS implementation had affected ISSAs' skills, knowledge, and tasks, a large number of the respondents (85 %), felt confident in their skills when using SEVIS. Finally, 63 percent of ISSAs in our study agreed that they had been adequately prepared for the changes that SEVIS brought to their work. Thus, despite the new skills and knowledge required under SEVIS, as educated professionals in the field, ISSAs on the whole have successfully managed to take on new and more challenging responsibilities associated with SEVIS implementation.

Additional questions related to SEVIS were asked of ISSAs: 1) were you in the office when the transition to SEVIS occurred? 2) what percent of your day do you spend performing advising services to international students and scholars? and 3) what percent of your day do you spend performing SEVIS-related tasks?  Of those ISSAs who responded, 951 (85%) were in the office when the transition to SEVIS occurred. They also indicated that on average, 42 percent of their day is spent on advising international students and scholars, 22 percent on SEVIS related tasks, and the balance of their day is spent on other administrative duties.

SEVIS and ISSA Worklife

We also conducted a statistical analysis using a structural equation model that examined ISSAs' morale, satisfaction, and their intent to stay or leave their current position and/or career. While space and length are limited here, highlights of the results illustrate how the impact of SEVIS has affected these additional dimensions of ISSAs worklives. As a group, ISSAs are extremely satisfied and their level of morale is very high with regard to their institutional and professional worklives. More specifically,

ISSAs are quite satisfied and their level of morale is very high regarding the quality of their career support and working conditions. They also perceive that institutions recognize them for their competence, and they thrive on fostering positive relationships with whom they interact, both external and intra department. In short, and as a subset of administrators in higher education, these ISSAs are extremely happy with many aspects of their worklives, even when controlling for various demographic and background characteristics.

There were, however a few areas in which ISSAs indicated a low level of satisfaction and morale, and were more likely to leave their position and/or career. Three areas were directly related to SEVIS and one area involved perceptions of discrimination. The more time ISSAs spent on SEVIS related tasks, the lower their overall satisfaction level. The only other variable that explained dissatisfaction was ISSAs' perceptions of discrimination (i.e., sex, race/ethnicity, age); that is, those ISSAs who perceived some kind of job discrimination, were also less satisfied. As for their level of morale, the more involved ISSAs are with the various aspects of SEVIS reporting, the lower their overall morale. And finally, the only aspect of their work that would make them likely to leave their positions and/or career was the issue of SEVIS training or more precisely, the lack of training. Clearly, this group of ISSAs did not feel well-trained and supported in SEVIS, and this had a direct and powerful impact on their intentions to leave their position and/or career.

Open-ended Items

Two open-ended questions were included in the survey. Open-ended questions are frequently used in conjunction with scaled items to highlight different aspects of a

problem than what the statistical data examine.  Like using a camera flash when taking a photo of a dimly lit scene, open-ended responses can illuminate elements that would otherwise be obscured in the background.  This background information enriches our understanding of the larger context in which the statistical results occur.

The first question asked for general comments about SEVIS, and 238 individuals shared their perspectives. In analyzing their comments, four problem areas emerged as major themes.  The first two themes addressed technical or implementation issues in using the SEVIS system whereas the latter two are concerned with conflicts in roles and values.

The primary theme, on which 62 respondents commented, was that data fixes take too long: they "take months and months if they are ever done," or are "at times glacially slow."  As one individual stated, "Someone needs to fix the data fix issues!" The second theme was that errors made by an ISSA are not forgiven, which was a concern of 39 respondents. One respondent was concerned that, "I have made typing mistakes that have caused my students harm." "The stakes are too high for making mistakes in SEVIS!" summarizes the overall feeling of these comments.

The third theme, with 21 respondents, was that SEVIS has changed the role of ISSAs "... from caring advisors into bureaucratic enforcers."  One lamented, "I feel like a paper (and data) pushing bureaucrat," and another felt that s/he "work[s] for the government, not my students."  Finally, the fourth theme centered on the overall policy issues of SEVIS. One of the 19 individuals commenting on this topic noted, "While I not only understand but applaud the effort to keep better track of international students and scholars during their time in the United States, I find that much of the work I am required

to do in SEVIS is counter-intuitive." Others were more vehement: "SEVIS is a tool of unjust policy, the tool is not the problem," and "SEVIS is an unfunded mandate that discourages exchange while not enhancing national security."

The second question asked, what initially attracted you to international education, and specifically international student/scholar advising as a career? Of the 1168 useable surveys, 929 individuals answered this question. The first major finding was that quite a large group of respondents had _not_ been attracted to the field as stated in the question, rather they "fell into it" or said "It was dumped on me!" In the "fell into it" category, responses included, "I needed a job," "It was part of my job when I came to the position, now it's my favorite part," and "I was initially reluctant, now it is my passion!" Many of these respondents were happy with their jobs and felt that they were lucky to be in international education; as one person noted, "The position chose me but I enjoy it greatly."

Those who felt that international education had been "dumped on" them often noted negative experiences such as "I went on vacation; when I came back I was the F-1 advisor," or an abrupt resignation, death, or reorganization required them to take on the duties without any preparation or training. Other responses indicated that international education was just one part of another position such as registrar or admissions counselor; thus it was viewed as one of many "other duties as assigned."

As for those who were attracted to the field (the vast majority of respondents), three categories emerged as major determinants of career choice: 1). prior experience, 2). job characteristics, and 3). personal values. Each of these categories was then further sub-divided as described below (see figure A for details).

Prior Experience: Three types of experiences were identified: a) Family, b) College, and c) Work. In the *Family Experience* category were respondents whose families had hosted international students and whose parents worked in career fields that piqued their interest in international education. Also in this group were advisors whose parents or grandparents had immigrated to the US, those whose families spoke other languages at home, and those who lived abroad as a child because of a parent's job (e.g. military dependents).

The *College Experience* subset identified a large group of respondents (at least 140 individuals) who had studied outside of their home country at some time during their college years; this includes self-identified former international students who stayed in the US as well as US students who had studied abroad. Another group in this category had majored in a subject that prompted their interest in international education, e.g., foreign languages, international relations, international communication, cultural studies, counseling, and education. Last in this group are advisors who had had positive college encounters in a campus job (often in an international education office), living arrangements (with international roommates), or other campus interactions. In the words of one advisor, "In college, I had the opportunity to have many friends who were international students. They taught me so much and I enjoyed my experience with them so much that I knew I wanted this to be my career."

In the final category of prior experiences, *Work Experience*, many respondents simply said they had "worked abroad" but several identified Peace Corps, government jobs, and missionary work as leading to their interest in international education. A large number of advisors had taught ESL as their first career. Finally, several respondents

recounted that they started out as the unit secretary, administrative assistant, "part-time 'go-fer,'" or volunteer and then jumped at the opportunity to become professional staff.

Job Characteristics: A number of advisors were attracted to international student/scholar advising because of particular aspects of the job. These features comprise the second category in the typology. The most commonly cited positive aspect of the job was "the students." One advisor appreciated "working with motivated students." Another found that s/he "related well to people coming here from other countries" while another simply noted, "[I] love international people and working with them."

A related job characteristic that the respondents mentioned was the diversity among the international student population and their contribution to campus diversity. A number of advisors commented on how they "enjoy the different cultures and languages" and the chance to hone their "cross-cultural expertise."

Advisors also reported that international student and scholar advising is a dynamic career in which they can "enjoy a variety of tasks" and in which "the ever-changing, surprising nature of the field" requires them to keep learning. Several advisors noted that they especially enjoyed dealing with the challenges of interpreting federal regulations and finding solutions to help students. Finally, advisors remarked that they liked working in the higher education environment.

Personal Values: The two primary values that attracted advisors to their positions were Service and Global Peace/Understanding. With regard to service, advisors who had experience abroad felt a responsibility to "give back." Others described their interest as "a calling," "a passion," or "an opportunity." The words "to help" and "to serve" were

used repeatedly, often in conjunction with enabling students to "solve problems," "navigate challenges," and "adjust" to life in the US.

The second personal value, Global Peace/Understanding, may be a reflection of what one advisor referred to as his/her "'60s and '70s values," at least for the cohort of ISSAs who have been in the field for over twenty years. The belief that international education contributes to peace and greater understanding among people recurred in advisor comments such as, "It's a great feeling to know that I am changing the world for the better in my own little way each day."

## Conclusion

ISSAs clearly enjoy their work and a large majority of them love what they do to advise and support international students and scholars. This study indicates they are satisfied with their work and hold their institutions in high regard. However, SEVIS is having a profound effect on their morale, job satisfaction, and likelihood to leave the field. It is a stark and worrisome finding that SEVIS reporting requirements comprised the *only* factor affecting the overall morale of ISSAs in the study. In addition, the more time they spend on SEVIS tasks, the less satisfied they are with their job. Finally, the lack of SEVIS training and support *is* influencing ISSAs intentions to leave their profession/career.

A number of poignant comments from advisors drive these points home. One advisor stated, "I get great lip service and little pay and help for the overwhelming workload and responsibilities I carry: counseling students, health insurance, programming, SEVIS and ICE/DHS, administrative duties, problem solving, etc. We're all significantly weary and worn out." Another alludes to the possibility of a career

change, noting, "After nearly six years I want to get out of rules and regs entirely and focus only on programming.  This is no longer a good fit."  Yet another advisor is much clearer in stating an intent to leave: "I don't know how much longer I will stay, though I do enjoy working with the students."

While there are significant issues regarding the worklife of ISSAs, perhaps what is most important is the perceived change in their professional role from being a student and scholar advocate to becoming a government enforcer. This change prevents them from buying into SEVIS, which has resulted in compliance verses commitment to the overall change process.  As one advisor lamented, "I had no idea of the reporting requirements before offering to take the job over after another colleague's death. SEVIS changed everything, but so did 9/11.  I feel we are now less valued by USCIS as advisors than we are as 'REPORTERS'—almost police!"

Policy makers need to reexamine the reporting requirements, training and support issues, and the demands SEVIS places on ISSAs' work time. The findings of this study make clear that advisors are stressed by the burdens that SEVIS places on their day-to-day professional worklives. Institutions also need to re-examine staffing levels, training resources, and professional development activities. The data revealed in this study may give them some starting points for such an analysis.

ISSAs themselves need to recognize the change in their role in relation to the federal agencies that have mandated these policy changes. Advisors may also need to resolve or redefine their roles with stakeholders on their campuses and examine the degree to which their personal values are reflected in the work they do. None of these actors within the change process can act alone. In fact, good change management

processes suggest that the federal agencies, higher education institutions, and ISSAs need

to collaborate to recognize each others goals and objectives. Issues regarding national

security and creating a positive learning environment for international students and

scholars need not be mutually exclusive.

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