

SEVIS: The Impact on American Colleges and Universities

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Introduction

In late 2001 and throughout 2002, colleges and universities scrambled to modify their student information data systems to handle the demands of the newly enacted laws and reporting requirements that resulted from the horrific events of September 11, 2001. Into a milieu of crisis and chaos, the Student and Exchange Visitor Information System (SEVIS) came into existence as a result, in part, of the allegations that international students – or at least people who pretended to be international students – were involved in the tragic acts of 9/11. SEVIS was the government's answer to the steady drumbeat of demand from the Bush Administration and from the public for better control, monitoring, and enforcement of visa regulations on international students and scholars (Rosser, Hermsen, Mamiseishvili, and Wood, 2007; Kurz & Scannell, 2002).

Pre-Implementation

As sensitive as most educators were to the horrors of 9/11, the introduction of SEVIS took the international educators' community by surprise. SEVIS became a major component of the Uniting and Strengthening America by Providing Appropriate Tools Required to Intercept and Obstruct Terrorism Act (USA PATRIOT Act) that many educators believed overreacted to events of September 11, 2001. Further, many argued that the January 30, 2003, SEVIS implementation deadline was unrealistic (Kurz & Scannell, 2002; Wong, 2006). Institutions with moderate to large international student and scholar populations, such as Washington State University, appeared particularly vulnerable to the demands imposed by SEVIS (Danley, 2009; Wong, 2006).

In 2002, this author reported one institution's efforts to implement SEVIS in an article for PACRAO, *SEVIS: One Institution's Tale of Implementation* (Danley, 2009). In this current article, a review of the events leading to the SEVIS era and four institutions' response to the law are considered. The article also briefly looks at operations under SEVIS at these institutions today.

Post-Implementation

In the intervening years between 2002 and today, colleges and universities that admit and enroll international students have implemented SEVIS with mixed success. This author followed the experiences of four colleges and universities in Idaho and Washington State as the institutions completed the initial deployment and subsequent compliance with SEVIS and the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) regulation of the international student and scholar monitoring system. Since the SEVIS deployment, these four institutions have coped with the new rules and regulations and for some, with attendant and significant staffing and budgetary consequences.

Impact of Implementation. In the post-9/11 era, there have been changes to the legal and policy landscape surrounding international student education. International students wanting to study in the U.S. continue to face innumerable hurdles in the SEVIS post-implementation era (Martin, 2009). Colleges, universities, and even lawmakers recognize that although the number of applications for student visas is slowly increasing after steep declines during the year following 9/11, U.S. higher education has lost momentum in attracting international students and scholars, due in large part to the difficulties students and scholars face in obtaining and

maintaining educational visas (Bagnato, 2005). The lack of communication and contradictory information emanating from DHS and the Department of State (DOS) with regard to changing SEVIS requirements and restrictions, especially when the changes affect students' status, continued to frustrate international educators and other staff at many campuses (Bagnato, 2005). Drawn from interviews with this author, the following sections present descriptions of four schools' experiences in the SEVIS post-implementation period.

Washington State University (WSU). Robert Rigg (2009), SEVIS Coordinator at WSU, reports that the University weathered the pre- and post-implementation phases of the SEVIS system successfully. Rigg observes that WSU has successfully integrated the SEVIS data requirements into the institution's business processes in all of the departments responsible for SEVIS compliance. "Although the main responsibility [for SEVIS compliance] is charged to the Office of International Student and Scholars, Undergraduate Admissions, the Graduate School, the Intensive American Language Center, and the three branch campus locations all have Designated School Officials (DSOs) now, and these individuals assist with parts of the SEVIS processes," says Rigg. Rigg also reports good support from the executive administration for the procedural and budgetary needs that arise to remain in compliance with SEVIS regulations and requirements.

In addition to creating DSO positions, the University established a SEVIS Coordinator position early in the process. Among many other responsibilities, the Coordinator is responsible for the time-consuming work of ensuring that data reporting is accurate and timely. Rigg states that WSU's recognition of the need for this key position in part explains the ease of implementation WSU experienced.

Although there continue to be maintenance fees and expenses, Rigg reports that the significant initial budget outlays to install SEVIS interface software and the initial changes to business practices are now fully absorbed. Rigg states that the budgetary impacts that were once cause for concern are no longer that significant. The largest expenditure that the SEVIS system requires is staff time. Rigg states that with more experience and training, staff time dedicated to SEVIS has declined somewhat although the continuous changes to SEVIS reporting requirements and regulations challenge the staff.

With respect to WSU's international student and scholar community, Rigg notes that the students and scholars are now well aware of their responsibilities for maintaining frequent contact with the International Students and Scholar Office in order to protect their status. Rigg believes the intensive orientation students and scholars receive on arrival at one of the WSU campuses helps new students and scholars understand the requirements. There was only a minimal impact on WSU's ability to recruit and enroll international students, according to Rigg.

Rigg concludes that SEVIS changed the people-oriented culture of the International Students and Scholars Office to a more technical, data-oriented culture.

University of Idaho (U of I). Tammi Johnson (2009), Coordinator of International Student, Scholar and Faculty Services in the International Programs Office states that the U of I has adapted, with many staffing changes, to SEVIS. Johnson says, "SEVIS has required additional staffing as well as additional training. We also had to add campuses to our I-17 [the petition form submitted by the institution to gain access to the SEVIS system and authority to admit and enroll international students and to hire international scholars], and we are now required to have

DSOs at each of those campuses. We also had to purchase VisaManager™ [a third-party software application] for batch processing.” The International Programs Office is the primary unit responsible for SEVIS, according to Johnson. She adds that each campus has a DSO staff position, which may be located in other offices besides International Programs.

Johnson reports that the financial impact on the University has been significant, although she notes that SEVIS takes budget priority simply because failing to budget for SEVIS adequately would adversely affect the U of I’s ability to recruit and enroll international students. The purchase of VisaManager™, in addition to the extra staffing needs, requires a significant allocation from the overall International Programs budget, according to Johnson.

Student recruiting and enrollments are beginning to improve after tumbling to record lows following 9/11, reports Johnson. She states that the students and scholars are aware of the SEVIS requirements to maintain status. However, she notes that the International Programs Office sends frequent and repeated reminders and updates about every two weeks to the students, and she believes this helps keep students on top of their responsibilities.

In Johnson’s opinion, although SEVIS was supposed to take the staff in international student management and monitoring into a paperless era, the recordkeeping situation is actually more difficult since the SEVIS implementation. In addition to the sheer volume of information that must be collected and maintained for individual students, the constant updates and rules changes to SEVIS make work difficult for offices, particularly offices with small staffs, “to keep up with everything,” while trying to meet the needs of the students and scholars. As a result, Johnson says that she and her staff feel that their contact with the students is limited.

Lewis-Clark State College (LCSC). Diane Douglas (2009), Director of Admissions and Registrar at LCSC, reports that SEVIS caused this small four-year school to completely overhaul the way staff deals with international students. Douglas goes on to say that SEVIS changed the role of the International Student Services Office (now known as International Programs Office) from a student support role to that of enforcer. Overall, however, LCSC successfully survived the SEVIS implementation, according to Douglas. She further notes that there is now a straightforward “chain of command” within the International Programs Office. The International Programs Office staff and faculty follow detailed processes for notification and problem solving for issues that arise.

Douglas reports that ongoing costs of licensing, training, and maintenance for SEVIS limit the College’s ability to recruit international students aggressively simply because there is less money available. Recent budget cuts mandated by the Idaho State Legislature are creating unanticipated challenges for the international students and staff. To address the budget reductions, there are fewer scheduled courses and some academic programs dropped. Consequently, international students are facing difficulties maintaining the required full-time enrollment status.

The challenges for the staff to stay abreast of continuous changes to the SEVIS rules and data requirements are taxing for a small school, Douglas says. She notes that the International Programs Office employees try to take as much burden off other offices as possible. However, the clerical time required to input all of the students’ data manually into SEVIS is just too much for the small International Programs staff, so some of the workload migrated to other offices such as admissions and the registrar’s office.

The international students, for the most part, are complying with SEVIS status requirements, according to Douglas. However, she notes that students from some regions, particularly Asian and African students, harbor great fear of falling out of status and that they exhibit significant stress that the reporting of their data is correct and on time.

Complying with SEVIS, Douglas concludes, has resulted in some unexpected twists and turns for the College. Prior to SEVIS, LCSC had little to do with agencies such as the border patrol, DHS (and INS prior to DHS), the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), and other agencies. The International Programs employees are discovering that less affluent international students need more help coping with financial worries, particularly related to their status. Douglas is concerned that students will be tempted to work illegally, imperiling their status.

Walla Walla Community College (WWCC). Sandra Leonetti (2009), Office of Admissions and Records at WWCC, states that the College has successfully mastered the SEVIS requirements. Leonetti reports that the admissions process and preparing I-20s for the students “has become much smoother and easier since the implementation of SEVIS.” She further notes that transferring in students from other institutions is much easier than in the past. Leonetti states that she believes it is also easier to keep track of the changes to U.S. admission procedures through SEVIS with the nearly continuous stream of email alerts, unlike the previous means that INS used to inform colleges and universities through letters mailed to the President of the college.

In counterpoint to the staffing challenges other institutions have suffered, WWCC has not experienced staffing changes because of SEVIS. Leonetti notes that staff work together to submit data for international students’ records through the manual data inputting screens. The employees in the Office of Admissions and Records are primarily responsible for all SEVIS data submission and maintenance.

The budget impact from the SEVIS implementation has been negligible in Leonetti’s opinion, “Probably because the College’s international student population was not large enough to warrant purchasing additional software to handle SEVIS.” The only continuing direct cost, according to Leonetti, is the annual re-licensing fee, which is budgeted each year.

Leonetti states that the international students attending at WWCC appear to understand and comply with the SEVIS requirements without complaint. She notes that WWCC faculty and staff help new international students understand the rules.

In summary, Leonetti considers WWCC’s transition to SEVIS relatively free of the problems and issues that have caused other colleges and universities such difficulties. In her opinion, Leonetti confides, serving international students is easier than in pre-SEVIS days.

Summary

From a review of the extant literature and in consultation with staff at four colleges and universities, each institution’s experience and transition to SEVIS compliance appears unique. For some schools, compliance with SEVIS rules is a lengthy, time-consuming and costly endeavor. For other campuses, the process appears straightforward. While officials within and close to the Bush Administration judged SEVIS to be a total success, educators and administrators at many colleges and universities do not agree (Bagnato, 2005; Wong, 2006).

From a practical application standpoint, SEVIS continues to frustrate college employees responsible for complying with the myriad array of rules and regulations. Near continuous change plagues the system and challenges the individuals who must make the system work. Ongoing costs from re-licensing and maintenance are challenging budget administrators' ability to balance the books. The expectations and requirements to remain in good SEVIS status stymie and confuse students at times.

With reference to policy, SEVIS accomplished centralization of the control and monitoring of international students and scholars. However, many hold the opinion that security concerns have eroded the status and leadership of U.S. higher education around the world.

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