

ISSS DIRECTORS LEAD THE WAY



As a high school student in a small town in West Virginia, Jody Pritt had a transformative international experience thanks to a devoted French teacher. During class, Pritt and a handful of classmates shared their desire to visit France. The teacher said, “Let’s make it happen!” Then, the educator worked with a program provider and organized the school’s first faculty-led trip to France and Italy.

“It changed my life fundamentally from that moment forward,” says Pritt, Director of International Student Services at the University of South Carolina. “I want to give back to international education and student mobility, a field that has given so much to me.”

For Pritt, like so many other directors of International Student & Scholar Services (ISSS), interaction with international students is the best part of their jobs. “I love watching them go through their years at the university and keeping tabs on them after they graduate, seeing how their experience here was really impactful for them,” says Pritt. But, she admits, a director must wear many different hats. That can be challenging.



THREE DIRECTORS
SHARE ADVICE
FOR OVERSEEING
INTERNATIONAL
STUDENTS AND
SCHOLARS.



TERRADOTTA

THE MANY ROLES OF AN ISSS DIRECTOR



The job of an ISSS director varies from school-to-school, depending upon the international student and scholar demographics and the composition of international education at that university.

“Most directors fill multiple roles, but the two big ones are managing immigration compliance for students and the university and managing office staff,” says Pritt. Her office includes 12 full-time employees who oversee approximately 1,900 international students, as well as a couple of hundred F-1 students with Optional Practical Training status who are temporarily employed in their major area of study.

Regina George spends a lot of her time as Director of the Office of Immigration and International Admissions at the University of South Alabama handling immigration

students. They also handle immigration compliance for employees at the three hospital systems affiliated with the University of South Alabama.

A typical day for Charter Morris, Director of ISSS at the University of Alabama, includes a few hours of standing committee and departmental meetings, one to two hours of student advising, perhaps a new scholar check-in and time to tackle various ongoing projects. “I have competing needs that I try to address in a way that one doesn’t fall too far behind,” admits Morris, who manages a staff of six. “It can be a struggle.”

Other tasks that ISSS directors juggle may include developing strategic internationalization plans, directing international student recruitment and retention efforts, providing intercultural training to university faculty and staff, spearheading campus activities for international students and scholars, participating in external outreach and organizing international student and scholar orientations and arrival services.



compliance and communicating with institutional stakeholders, such as department heads and administrators. George and her staff of six full-time employees oversee all aspects of immigration for the university, from foreign faculty, staff and researchers down to degree-seeking students (380 currently enrolled) and English language



ADVICE

FROM THE FIELD

With so many demands being placed on ISSS directors, it may seem tricky at times to do the job well. Pritt, Morris, and George offer the following nine tips, some of which they culled from peers while leading a session entitled, “Real Advice on Being Director of an ISSS Office” at regional NAFA conferences:

1

Maintain a work-life balance.



“One of the biggest tips I would give a new director is to take care of yourself,” says George. “There is a tendency to be all about the job, but you need to allow yourself to leave work at the office when you go home.”

2

Advocate for your staff.



“Get to know them, engage them and make sure they are supported,” says Morris. “Push them to seek out opportunities for growth—professional training or engagement in a leadership role on campus. I want my employees to grow and honestly get stolen away from me at some point.”

3

Find your tribe.



“Know your counterparts at other institutions and rely on each other,” says Pritt. She participates in an ongoing group text with Morris, George and a couple other ISSS directors, where they share ideas, discuss issues and celebrate successes. “Identifying others around the country who know exactly what you are doing is very helpful,” says Pritt. “We have developed a friendship that will last a lifetime.”

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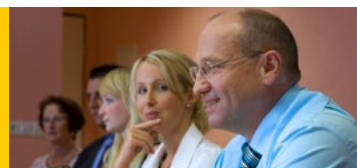
Participate in NAFA.



“Being a volunteer at NAFA: the Association of International Educators, has elevated my leadership skills as well as expanded my knowledge base of compliance and regulations,” says George. She has volunteered at several conferences and currently serves as the Regulatory Ombud Subcommittee Chair.

5

Join campus committees.



“When I first got into this role, I injected myself in every committee that would say yes,” says Morris. “I felt like the only way for our students to have a voice at the table was for someone from this office to be at that table.” While Morris admits he overextended himself, some of the relationships he formed have proved quite valuable. For example, he attends meetings hosted by the Community Affairs Division centered around providing outreach to new immigrants in the University of Alabama’s hometown of Tuscaloosa. “The goal of the committee is primarily to reach out to the Latinx population in town,” says Morris. “But I have a few hundred visiting scholars who have the exact same issues as these new immigrants.”

6

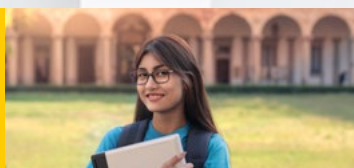
Understand university HR policies.



“Make sure you are very familiar with your institutional policies on human resources and how to manage an office and employees,” says George. The University of South Alabama offers a two-day management training program to cover expectations of campus directors and regulations that must be followed. George also opted to meet one-on-one with the university’s director of human resources for more tips on being an excellent manager to employees of all generations in her office, from baby boomers to millennials.

7

Stay student-focused.



“No matter what we are doing in the office—even if it’s building office procedures or working in the weeds of immigration compliance—we’re trying to make sure the students are going to benefit most,” says Pritt. “Keeping that yardstick in mind helps ensure that students have every opportunity they are eligible for and that we’re making the process as smooth as possible for them.”

8

Hire a complementary Associate Director.



If you are fortunate enough to have an Associate Director, make sure you are a well-matched team. “Finding the right associate director is very integral to how successful you are as a director and how successful the office will be,” says George, adding that she trusts her associate director completely. “When I take a day off, there are no worries. The office is in good hands.”

9

Rely on students and interns.



“One of the most important things to remember is that you are on a university campus with a lot of students who want practical experience in their fields,” says Pritt. Last year during International Education Week, they turned to a team of students to help rebrand and promote the event. The students created special Snapchat filters, Twitter hashtags, and other social media strategies. “It was really exciting, and it freed us up to look at intentional programming for the week,” says Pritt.

As an ISSS Director, it’s easy to get caught up in mundane tasks related to compliance or get bogged down in data and paperwork. When that happens, Pritt thinks back to her high school trip to France—and to the ten months she spent in China after college graduation. “I remind myself why I love international education so much,” she says. “We really are building links between people from all over the world. To me, that’s a very noble mission, and I’m just playing a tiny part in that.”



T E R R A D O T T A

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