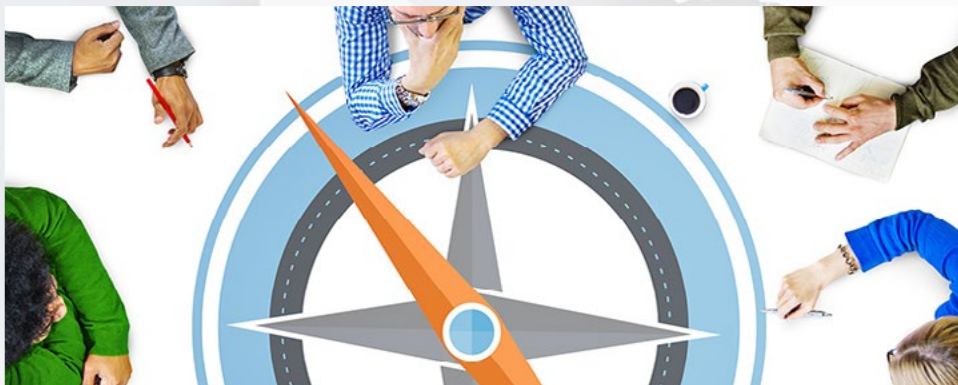


NAVIGATING THE SEVIS LANDSCAPE

ADVICE FOR
KEEPING UP TO DATE
ON COMPLIANCE
REGULATIONS
TO HELP PREVENT
COMMON MISTAKES.



Navigating the Student and Exchange Visitor Information System (SEVIS) can be onerous, so it's no surprise that schools sometimes get tripped up along the way. One mishap that Katie Wirka has witnessed is colleges adopting a cavalier approach to assigning Classification of Instructional Programs (CIP) codes—numeric codes for fields of study that are used to track and report program activity. For instance, a community college may assign a pre-med CIP code to international students. “They want to recruit international students with the promise of working toward a medical degree, but the schools aren’t certified [in that discipline],” says Wirka, a former International Student Advisor at the University of Wisconsin-Madison who now serves as a Client Support Specialist with Terra Dotta.

Missteps such as this drive home the importance of understanding SEVIS compliance requirements and adhering to them. “Affirmatively reporting on international students and exchange visitors is a tremendous amount of work because it requires that schools verify every few months that everyone is in compliance with their programs,” says Monica Sharp, a Product Specialist with Terra Dotta who previously acted as the Director of International Student Services at the University of Oklahoma. “This reporting burden is transparent to students and exchange visitors—and frequently university administration—but is very real to ISSS offices.”



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If you multiply reporting requirements for each student by the thousands of SEVIS records many universities handle, then it quickly becomes clear that the reporting obligations demand significant resources and planning. And it also becomes evident how unintentional lapses—and sometimes intentional shortcuts—might occur.



COMMON COMPLIANCE SLIPUPS

“There are two main places where universities can get caught up with respect to SEVIS compliance,” says Sharp. “The first is on the school side—what ISSS offices are doing. And the second is how school officials are accessing and reporting in SEVIS.”

Sharp cites a couple examples of mistakes made in the first area. One university did not assign CIP codes to incoming international freshmen with undeclared majors in their official system of record even though everyone with a SEVIS record requires a code. Other schools neglect to update addresses of international students within 10 days of moving.



Utilizing the SEVIS system opens up the potential for blunders, too. For instance, overworked DSOs may give their SEVIS login information to unauthorized staff to make updates. “That’s a unique user ID that has undergone background checks,” says Sharp. “The Department of Homeland Security wants to ensure that the designated school official is actually making the changes.” Another mistake is updating an institution’s Form I-17 “Petition for Approval of School for Attendance by Nonimmigrant Student” without first obtaining approval by the accrediting body, such as a Board of Regents.

THE INTERSECTION OF REGULATIONS AND REALITY

It's easy to see how slipups such as those and others can occur when complying with SEVIS requirements, particularly considering recent changes to the system. "SEVIS is undergoing so many changes this year and next year in what we've affectionately termed 'the ghost of SEVIS II,'" says Sharp. The second generation of SEVIS was designed to improve functionality and fix issues in the original system. Some of the recent and upcoming changes include the following:

As of January 2015, all J-1 and J-2 exchange visitors were required to report an email address as well as phone numbers.

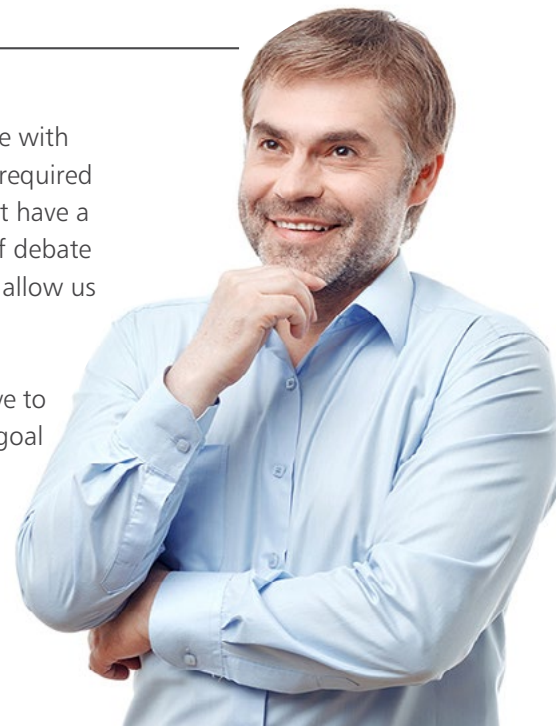
A June update release introduced new functionality, with an interface that looks substantially different than it did when SEVIS initially launched in 2003. Additionally, Forms I-20 and DS2019 were significantly redesigned.

Beginning in November, all F-1 SEVIS record updates will require that DSOs complete email address and phone number fields.

Starting in June 2016, email addresses and phone numbers will be required for all new SEVIS records.

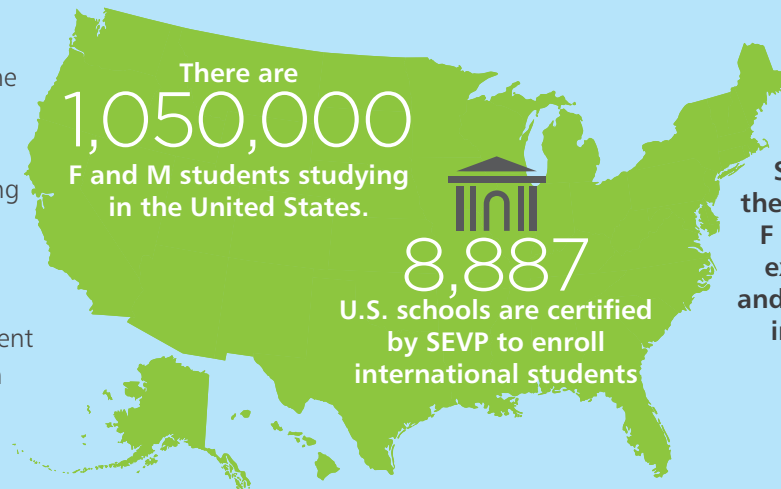
The problem, however, is that the web-based reporting system isn't always in line with regulations. Take the first requirement listed: Alternate responsible officers were required to provide exchange visitors' phone numbers starting in January, but SEVIS didn't have a field for that information at the time the requirement started. "There was a lot of debate among DSOs on how to comply with the requirement when the interface didn't allow us to do so," says Sharp.

So what's a university to do? "In the SEVIS environment, you sometimes have to get in the head of Homeland Security and ask, 'Is this achieving the compliance goal they wanted?'" says Sharp. "You have to live in the intersection of compliance regulations and reporting functionality."



SEVIS At a Glance

Navigating SEVIS can be cumbersome for universities with a few hundred or thousand international students, but the need for meticulous recording becomes clearer when you consider the vast number of international students and visitors that U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement track. Here are some highlights from a “SEVIS by the Numbers” report published in August:



7 WAYS TO STAY INFORMED OF CHANGES

Handling the fluidity of SEVIS—and the occasional disconnect between regulations and the compliance tools—can be frustrating. “The challenge for school officials is to stay abreast of changes and know how they impact their reporting responsibilities and their advising populations,” says Sharp. She and Wirka offer several tips:

- Pay attention to broadcast emails from SEVP, and check for any updates each time you log onto the system.
- Participate in webinars offered by SEVP.
- Attend conferences hosted by NAFSA: Association of International Educators, where you can participate in meetings on SEVIS as well as network with peers who may offer advice.
- Read NAFSA’s weekly e-newsletter, NAFSA.news, and join the association’s listservs.
- Connect with your regional NAFSA regulatory ombudsperson.
- Review the SEVIS tutorial and other resources for DSO training on the SEVP website.
- Choose cloud-hosted software that will automatically update to adhere to SEVIS changes.

In addition, Sharp and Wirka encourage DSOs to “advocate for sanity” by offering feedback on SEVIS compliance. “When NAFSA and SEVIS request comments, provide them,” says Sharp. “If Homeland Security doesn’t hear your input, they won’t know about some issues.”

A final thought on navigating SEVIS: No matter what tools and strategies you rely on to stay up to date with changes, you’ll likely have to “learn by doing,” says Sharp. “You can hear about updates and understand intellectually that the system will look and act differently. But user experience is key.”



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Our mission at Terra Dotta is to offer the very best products and services in higher education software. We are committed to delivering a user-experience that transforms the way our clients operate and engage with their constituents. We accomplish this through the continual deployment of best-in-class technology, and the focus we place on mutual trust in each and every one of our business relationships. These values form the Terra Dotta difference.

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