



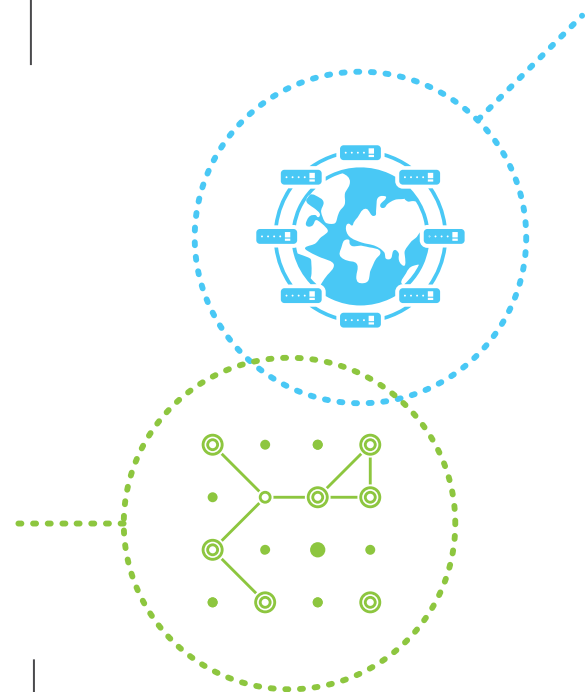
STREAMLINING SEVIS COMPLIANCE

Reporting on international students is mandatory, but there are ways to make it less arduous.

In early May, Robert Rigg listened to a webinar hosted by the U.S. Department of State's Exchange Visitor Program. It covered upcoming changes to name standards on two forms required by the Student and Exchange Visitor Information System (SEVIS). Beginning in June 2015, SEVIS will remove the middle name field and only require family and given names. These types of changes, which may seem minor, keep employees busy in International Student Services offices.

"I don't think people realize how much has to get reported on an international student," says Rigg, who serves as SEVIS Coordinator—Principal Designated School Official in the Global Services Department at Washington State University (WSU). "The Department of Homeland Security, which maintains SEVIS, is continually adding to our reporting responsibilities and changing regulations." Rigg oversees reporting for approximately 1,890 international students at WSU, as well as 280 graduates participating in Optional Practical Training within their field of study.

Designated School Officials (DSOs) report when international students enroll in a university, begin a new semester, transfer schools, apply for jobs, graduate and more. The reporting can be burdensome. Aside from new and updated regulations issued by the Department of Homeland Security, DSOs face challenges getting the necessary information from students and faculty.



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As an example, consider Optional Practical Training. OPT is temporary employment directly related to an F-1 visa-holding student's major area of study. It allows graduates to further their education by gaining practical experience. Universities must endorse the work and make appropriate notations in SEVIS. But after students graduate, it's sometimes hard to get required information from them, says Cory Owen, Ed.D., Director of International Advisement at The Julliard School in New York. "We don't have a carrot to hold over them, even when we tell them it's a requirement to report on OPT," says Owen. She is one of five DSOs at Julliard, where approximately 30 percent of the 879 students are international.

Like many of their peers, Owen and Rigg have found ways to overcome challenges and streamline the SEVIS reporting process. There are three main areas where DSOs can create efficiencies—in the office, in student interactions and in faculty communications.

OPERATING EFFICIENT OFFICES

Rigg says his office spends a lot of time deciphering regulations for students. "About half of the regulations are well defined," he says. "The other half are open to interpretation." For instance, work authorizations are required for Curricular Practical Training (CPT). "The regulations clearly state the employment must be an integral part of the student's program of study. But what is an integral part? There's no definition," says Rigg.

To help translate, WSU relies on best practices from peer institutions, such as the Association of International Educators. "We're always looking for guidance to make sure our university is taking on those gray areas in a middle-of-the-road stance, not being too conservative or too liberal in our application of the rules," says Rigg.

While relying on best practices can help streamline compliance, sometimes schools have to devise their own procedures. Because Julliard is a performing arts conservatory, many of its students' CPT opportunities are last-minute performance gigs. The work authorizations require approval from faculty members, who may not be on campus—or even in the city—at the time. For example, if a student needed the signature of a faculty member who was at the Grammy Awards, Julliard would accept authorization via email. "Look at what works for your specific institution," recommends Owen. "Understand your institutional culture, and adapt the tools you use accordingly."

Technology can help simplify reporting, too. "If you have good SEVIS batch software that interfaces with the university's system, then basic reporting requirements—such as address updates and changes to major areas of study—will roll in automatically and generate an event for someone to review quickly and send off to SEVIS," says Rigg. He encourages DSOs to always "look at the next step up" when it comes to technology: If you track everything on spreadsheets, consider a more robust Access database. If you use an Access database, look into batch software that runs on an SQL server and offers even more powerful tools.



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HELPING STUDENTS COMPLY

Rigg estimates that the five DSOs in his department spend 80 percent of their time on tasks related to SEVIS compliance. Because the reports are derived from information provided by students, the Global Services Department employs several strategies to keep them informed and help them meet deadlines.

Face-to-face interaction is often the best approach, so Rigg's department has daily walk-in hours for students. It also holds workshops on specific topics, such as OPT. But students can find answers to many of their questions on the department's website, which has nearly 300 pages of well-organized information. "Students can self-serve until they run into questions," says Rigg. "Then when they come into our office, they have good, well thought out questions. It saves us a lot of time."

Julliard's Office of International Advisement also relies heavily on its website, which features online modules, forms and links on everything from filing U.S. taxes to maintaining F-1 and J-1 status. Even so, sorting out the maze of SEVIS reporting requirements can be overwhelming for international students.

"We try to make it very easy for students on the front end so when they send in paperwork we don't have to go back and forth with them," says Owen. For instance, to streamline the admissions process Julliard sends international students a mock copy of a financial aid letter, with pertinent areas circled so they can see how much aid they will receive from the conservatory and how much they must report to the DHS. "We can't do anything in SEVIS until that is done," says Owen.



To emphasize important issues, WSU sends a weekly email blast to international students called "Immigration Advisories." It covers timely topics, such as travel authorizations before winter and spring break and departure forms for graduation in May. WSU also holds special events, like travel endorsement parties, before winter and spring break. "It's a clever way of being more efficient during those high-volume times of year for specific things—to handle groups of students rather than meet one-on-one," says Rigg.



SEVIS REPORTING REQUIREMENTS

The Department of Homeland Security maintains the Student and Exchange Visitor Information System (SEVIS). It is a web-based system that contains data on nonimmigrant students in F and M visa categories as well as J-1 visa exchange visitor program participants. Designated School Officials (DSOs) and Alternative Responsible Officers (AROs) at schools are required to update and maintain SEVIS records. Some of the reporting requirements include the following:

- Initial student reporting within 30 days of the program start date.
- Active student reporting for each term or semester.
- Initial records for F-1 transfer students.
- Reports for M-1 transfer students.
- Changes to F-1 or M-1 status.
- Reporting graduation and program completion.
- General record reporting, such as changes in personal information or academic status.
- Employment authorization through CPT or OPT.

FACILITATING FACULTY INVOLVEMENT

The final stakeholder in SEVIS compliance is university faculty and staff, whose assistance and seal of approval is often needed. “We do a lot of outreach to university employees,” says Rigg. “It’s a constant process keeping people up to speed on SEVIS requirements.”

Julliard offers two training sessions each year for faculty, explaining what international students go through to attend the conservatory and what the professor’s roles and responsibilities are. Owen’s department simplifies things for faculty, many of whom are professional dancers, musicians and actors in addition to teachers. For instance, they send documents requiring signatures via overnight delivery to faculty who are out of town or allow emails to serve as official approvals, if an original signature isn’t required.

Julliard also offers a faculty handbook online to guide professors through SEVIS compliance. “Information is offered in short snippets—not in immigration lingo but in terminology that makes sense to the average person,” says Owen. “Our faculty don’t want to sift through all this. That’s my job.” And making things easier on professors makes Owen’s job easier, too.

Most schools are continually searching for ways to be more efficient without sacrificing any services to students. “It’s a delicate balance of improving technologies and the way we communicate information while at the same time providing good, personalized service to students,” says Rigg. “Spending quality time with students and less time doing the processing is something we’re always striving for.”



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*-Robert Rigg, SEVIS Coordinator
PSDO, Washington State University*



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