

## Interconnecting Worlds

Any list of significant changes affecting higher education over the last generation would note two key developments: the increasing centrality of information technology (IT) for everything that occurs on campus and the increasing indispensability of support from the federal government. Indeed, it is impossible to imagine the modern U.S. college or university without either of these critical elements. Traditionally, however, IT and federal policy have occupied two very different worlds, and the people who inhabit one rarely interact with those from the other. Although not mutually exclusive, the two worlds represent different cultures that deal with different issues, emphasize different values, attract different people generally speaking different languages, have different forms of expertise, and honor different accomplishments.

This separation is changing today as events are requiring increasing interaction between the two worlds. The rapid and multifaceted public-policy response to the September 11 tragedy in the United States further underscores the growing interconnection. The desire for more and better information about non-U.S. students, the courses they take, and the activities they are engaged in—especially research projects—involves serious questions of public policy and technology. More important, the response to 9/11 illustrates the extent to which IT professionals are being called upon to help shape public policy that directly affects higher education institutions.

International students are a relatively small but vitally important part of U.S. higher education. Some 300,000 foreign citizens receive student visas to come to the

United States each year. They add diversity to the campus, bring knowledge and skills that enrich research and teaching activities, and leave with a personal appreciation for democracy, market economics, the United States, and Americans. While here, they spend some \$11 billion a year buying goods and services, making higher education the fifth-largest service-sector export in the country. For good reason, international students have long been regarded as a clearly and unambiguously good thing.

But the events of 9/11 raised questions about the U.S. visa policies. The public soon learned that several of the hijackers had entered the United States on student visas and had obtained training at U.S. flight schools—training that they used with horrifying efficiency. More revelations followed, including that the federal government did not know much about international students after they received their visas, including whether or not they actually enrolled in a college or university after entering the country. Moreover, a database mandated by the federal government in 1996 to improve its ability to monitor international students was years behind schedule and way over budget.

In fact, the nation's mechanism for keeping track of international students was hopelessly outdated. Since the 1950s, colleges and universities have been required to keep track of student visa recipients who enroll at their campuses. The requirements are straightforward. Schools maintain information on all international students, including the student's name, address, visa number, major, date studies begin, and expected date of completion. Whenever a student does anything that might change his or her visa status—for example, move,

marry, apply for a job, change majors, or leave school—the information is reported to the federal government.

For years, this was a paper-based system, and schools sent literally tons of paper to the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) each term documenting all the required information. In 1988 the INS, drowning in unused and unusable data, instructed schools to keep the records on campus and to make it available to the INS on request. Some campuses developed institution-specific software to keep the increasingly voluminous records manageable, but most just bought more file cabinets and kept hard copies. But in 1993, when the chief suspect in the first bombing of the World Trade Center was found to be in the United States on an expired student visa, Congress responded by calling for the development of an electronic tracking system to monitor international students. Known as the Cooperative Interagency Program Regulating International Students (CIPRIS), the new system was star-crossed from the outset. Congress neglected to provide adequate funding, and initial efforts by the INS to create a funding stream—by requiring institutions to collect a fee from students and remit it to the agency—were exceptionally controversial. NAFSA: Association of International Educators actively opposed CIPRIS.

September 11 changed everything. Before the dust settled at the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, policy-makers had begun to demand changes to the system of visas, especially student visas. Some congressional officials sought a complete moratorium on the issuance of student visas. As often happens when public policy demands urgent action, ef-

orts to develop a workable solution were complicated by a search for someone to blame for the sorry state of affairs. Both higher education institutions and the INS endured plenty of criticism.

CIPRIS, which was always seen as a pilot effort, is now being succeeded by the Student and Exchange Visitor Information System (SEVIS), a more comprehensive and far-reaching tracking program. Recent months have been dominated by the debate over how to move quickly and effectively to implement SEVIS. The INS has made strong progress—indeed, better progress than even the most optimistic observer would have imagined possible a year before the terrorist attacks. This progress was possible partly because Congress finally provided a stable source of funding and partly because the changed environment eliminated INS indifference to SEVIS and ended any lingering doubts within the higher education community. But the strong progress was possible mostly because the INS has moved aggressively and unilaterally. Discussion and dialogue—and concerns about the workability of SEVIS for the users (i.e., colleges and universities)—have been replaced by a desire on the part of regulators to implement the system as quickly as possible. So although the INS is making great progress, it has done so, in part, by making unilateral decisions and assuming (hoping? praying?) that colleges will be able to adjust.

As this column is being written, many colleges and universities have expressed much concern about the ability of SEVIS to accommodate batch processing to let institutions with large numbers of international students enter the data all at once. According to plans, SEVIS will incorporate two methods for electronic reporting. One version is the “real-time interactive option,” which is essentially data entry over the Web. The INS announced that this capability was available starting on July 1, 2002. The second, less labor-intensive method is “automated batch processing.” This method is not scheduled to be available until late summer or fall. For those institutions with large numbers of international students, batch reporting is the only viable method for electronic reporting. This makes the wait for batch specifications worrisome.

Moreover, IT professionals on campus

are finding that early development by the INS ignored community standards that could serve as a foundation for integrating batch records with campus systems. The Postsecondary Electronic Standards Council, a higher education partnership focused on electronic standards, provides a forum that the INS could use to aid schools in implementing batch processing. So far, this resource has not been tapped by the INS—which, along with its contractor EDS, appears to be using a very odd language, one that is likely to increase the cost and complexity of SEVIS implementation and to delay the effort to integrate batch processing on campuses.

Making this problem even more vexing



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is the debate over the date

by which institutions must be in compliance with SEVIS. In draft regulations, the INS proposed that all schools that want to admit international students be in compliance by January 30, 2003. Most educational organizations believe that this is nowhere near enough time for the INS to create a system, for schools to obtain software (currently unavailable) to link campus information systems to SEVIS, and for campus personnel to obtain needed (currently unavailable) training. The slow progress of the INS to finalize the specifications for batch processing only deepens the concerns that the INS will seek an excessively early implementation deadline.

While the final implementation of SEVIS currently remains unresolved, other post-September 11 developments are also bringing the IT world and the federal policy world together on campus. The USA PATRIOT Act of 2001 and the Enhanced

Border Security and Visa Entry Reform Act of 2002 not only added new parameters of information and new deadlines for SEVIS but also created potentially significant burdens for Internet usage, such as the way e-mail traffic moves around campuses and the availability of wiretapping. Likewise, the Bioterrorism Act (Public Health Security and Bioterrorism Preparedness and Response Act of 2002) and the Presidential Directive on Sensitive Areas of Study (October 29, 2001) have the potential to affix significant limits on the way higher education institutions share information, on the subjects they teach, and on who will be allowed to participate in certain courses. Shaping sensible and effective rules under these new provisions will require the shared insights and expertise of both IT professionals and public-policy advocates in higher education.

Whether their efforts will be successful remains to be seen. Winston Churchill once wrote, “It’s an incredible rush to be shot at and missed.” College and university lobbyists dealing with the INS, campus officials, and the media on some of these complex, multifaceted, and pressing issues know exactly how he felt. What Churchill might have added is that the chances of getting shot decrease considerably when there is plenty of covering fire.

With each passing year, the IT world and the federal policy world are increasingly relying on one another to avoid or survive such firefights. As the two worlds become more complicated and interconnected, they are learning invaluable lessons from each other and are influencing policy debates that will have a huge impact not only on students—international and domestic—but also on higher education institutions as a whole.

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