

# SEVP Spotlight

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1

Director's Corner

2

SEVIS Enhancements  
CTCEU Update

3

Field Representative  
Update

4

Department of State

5

K-12 Schools  
SEVIS Form I-901  
Contact Us

## DIRECTOR'S CORNER

# SEVP Engages with the Academic Community



*A message from Louis M. Farrell, Director of the Student and Exchange Visitor Program*

I always enjoy the opportunity to meet with our academic stakeholders and in May I had the privilege to attend the [NAFSA Annual Conference and Expo](#). At this particular conference, I heard directly from our stakeholders during an hour-long listening session where we discussed key topics surrounding international education. More than 180 designated school officials (DSOs) attended this session and shared personal observations of trends and issues they experience on a daily basis. They also offered feedback for our program.

Overall, the feedback we received at NAFSA was positive and I attribute this to the hard work and professional courtesy that the entire Student and Exchange Visitor Program (SEVP) staff demonstrates when working with our stakeholders. We heard how much school officials appreciate us attending NAFSA regional conferences, issuing draft policy guidance for public comment, offering webinars, and continually updating and improving [Study in the States](#) based

on their needs. They were particularly pleased with how the program used their feedback toward an updated Form I-20, "Certificate of Eligibility for Nonimmigrant Student Status," as part of the latest Student and Exchange Visitor Information System (SEVIS) release.

Also brought to our attention were specific areas that need improvement, which we look forward to addressing in the weeks and months ahead. Receiving this type of candid feedback from our stakeholders allows SEVP to better uphold our national security.

Another topic of discussion surrounded issues DSOs face with the Form I-17, "Petition for Approval of School for Attendance by Nonimmigrant Student." Primarily, we discussed the adverse effects of the processing times for updates to the form, specifically when schools update DSO information.

We are working internally to establish sustainable, solutions (both near-term and long term). We appreciate our stakeholders' ongoing patience as we work toward faster and more predictable processing times for updates and think through possible solutions to reduce the impact this situation currently causes. In the meantime, we encourage all school officials to update their Form I-17 as soon as the changes occur and not wait until recertification to do so.

Because your excellent feedback is so valuable to us, we plan to specifically address the action items

received during the listening session. Moving forward, we will clearly communicate what SEVP's plans are so that you can follow the progress of your recommendations. We will establish realistic deadlines for resolving issues and provide regular status updates so there's more transparency between SEVP and our academic community stakeholders.

Through our attendance at the NAFSA listening session, we were able to walk away with a greater understanding of how best to move SEVP forward. Based on the feedback received from these school officials, we gained insight into:

- How to structure future SEVIS releases.
- Which regulations we need to more clearly communicate.
- The types of resources we can continue to create to make it easier for schools and students to remain in compliance.

We look forward to connecting again with our school officials throughout the year and encourage everyone to provide us feedback by sending an email to [SEVP@ice.dhs.gov](mailto:SEVP@ice.dhs.gov) or completing our [User Satisfaction Survey on Study in the States](#).

Take care,

Lou



U.S. Immigration  
and Customs  
Enforcement

# Largest SEVIS Release Deployed This Summer

This summer, the Student and Exchange Visitor Program (SEVP) deployed the largest Student and Exchange Visitor Information System (SEVIS) release in recent history. This release is part of SEVP's continuing efforts to close vulnerabilities and work closely with the academic community to make it more efficient and effective for system users.

SEVIS Release 6.21, implemented June 26, 2015, included system enhancements that make it easier for SEVIS users to complete their reporting responsibilities as well as upgrades that strengthen SEVIS data integrity. This release was especially significant because of its impact on the way designated school officials (DSOs) use SEVIS. For example, SEVIS Release 6.21 included system enhancements to standardize name and email addresses that will help DSOs with student data entry, as will the recently implemented U.S. address conversion and validation process.

One of the most notable SEVIS enhancements was a redesign of the Form I-20, "Certificate of Eligibility for Nonimmigrant Student Status," that made it both easier to read and more useful due to additional visible information. With feedback directly from the academic community, the DSO name is no longer pre-printed in the travel signature section of the Form I-20 and the system also offers mass reprint functionality, allowing users to reprint Forms I-20 for multiple students at a time.

The release also included a SEVIS Downloads page that allows school officials to download reports on students whose names or addresses were changed during the name and address conversion process, as well as overall improved search functionality.

In addition to these enhancements, SEVIS now accommodates the recent regulation change, which permits schools to nominate an appropriate number of DSOs based

on their specific school population needs. During this release, SEVP removed the SEVIS validation business rule that previously prevented principal DSOs from adding more than 10 DSOs.

Despite some minor technical issues with this large release, SEVP was able to quickly address them and communicate necessary updates to SEVIS users. As always, we greatly appreciate stakeholder feedback and patience as we move ahead with system enhancements.

DSOs have more SEVIS enhancements to look forward to later this fall, including updates to the SEVIS event history page, slated to go live in November. DSOs will be able to enter SEVIS information about multiple employers, instead of just one, for a student participating in optional practical training. In addition, SEVP will improve users' ability to view a student's record history in SEVIS. Currently, the event history page summarizes updates made to a student record since it was created, but the page does not always provide enough detail. Come November, the improved event history page will specify changes made to a student's SEVIS record, including what was listed both before and after the update, making it easier for DSOs to see what student information has changed.

SEVP stakeholders interested in SEVIS Release 6.21 and future SEVIS releases can find more information and resources on the [SEVIS Help Hub](#) on Study in the States. SEVP designed the SEVIS Help Hub specifically for DSOs to offer information about SEVIS reporting requirements including job aids, frequently asked questions and webinars. We encourage DSOs to visit the SEVIS Help Hub often and provide feedback as we continue to add new information regularly. You can learn more about recent and upcoming SEVIS enhancements in the latest [SEVIS Way Ahead](#) video update from SEVP Director Lou Farrell.

## CTCEU UPDATE

# HSI Reports Increased Number of Scams Targeting International Students

If it sounds too good to be true, it probably is.

Recently, U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement's Homeland Security Investigations (HSI) has seen an increase in the number of scams targeting unsuspecting international students. Cultural and language barriers often make it difficult for international students to discern genuine offers for assistance from scams, making them particularly vulnerable to deceitful solicitations.

For example, scams may take the form of all-inclusive student visa service packages or great deals on travel. Often students realize too late that the fees they paid to a company to organize their trip to the United States are lost forever or they have not been properly registered as promised by the scammer.

Scam companies will often produce websites or addresses that are similar in name to legitimate student organizations or government agencies. To avoid falling prey to these solicitations, students should carefully scrutinize websites and thoroughly research companies before submitting any payments or personal information. School officials should work with their international students to ensure they are aware of how to avoid scams.

International students are required to adhere to many rules and regulations to maintain their student status, so it is especially alarming when they receive an email or telephone call advising them that their immigration status is in jeopardy unless they provide immediate payment for services, fees or fines.

With these scams, students are typically contacted by email or telephone, and often the sender or caller will know specific information about the student. The scammer

will usually request immediate payment either by credit card or electronic transfer, and may even claim to be from a U.S. government agency or known student organization.

Students should be aware that a government agency would never contact them by telephone to demand immediate payment and would never request that the student wire money for immediate payment. Students should always consult with their designated school official (DSO) about their immigration status. Additionally, students should pay careful attention to the email address of any contact, as government emails and websites will always end in ".gov" and never ".com."

HSI recommends that school officials communicate to their students that if they receive a scam telephone call or email, they should:

- Remain calm.
- Not give out any personal information.
- Not send money.
- Obtain as much information from the caller or email as possible without alerting the scammer so they can report it to police, HSI or the Student and Exchange Visitor Program (SEVP), and their DSO.

We ask DSOs to immediately alert their student body when they learn of any scams targeted toward international students so others are not harmed and to also contact their local HSI office or SEVP to notify them of any identified scams. DSOs may also contact the [HSI Tip Line](#) at 866-DHS-2-ICE (866-347-2423) if calling from the United States.

# Back to School Reminders for DSOs

*Adam Harold is a Student and Exchange Visitor Program (SEVP) field representative. He serves as a liaison between SEVP and certified schools in his territory of Dallas/Fort Worth. This area hosts around 340 SEVP-certified sites and campuses, including about 170 U.S. colleges and universities, 135 private kindergarten-12th grade programs, more than 20 flight schools and a growing number of public high schools. Prior to joining SEVP as a field representative, he spent almost 10 years as a designated school official (DSO) at a large state institution in Texas that was home to more than 3,000 international students. In this article, Adam shares his general advice for DSOs for the upcoming back to school year.*

The Dallas/Fort Worth territory expands out around three hours to the east and west from the urban center. However, more than 80 percent of the SEVP-certified locations are in what locals call the “Metroplex,” which consists of the areas in and around the cities of Dallas and Fort Worth. Within my territory, I have completed more than 450 school visits since starting as an SEVP field representative in spring of 2014. I enjoy providing helpful resources to school officials and sharing from my previous experience as a DSO.

As a former DSO, I understand that as the new school year approaches you are in the midst of gearing up for the incoming crop of new students as well as welcoming back returning students. Since it is important that you fulfill all of your DSO requirements, below I highlight some responsibilities that can help you stay compliant, whether you are brand new to the job or returning with years of experience.

## Check-In Students

First, develop a check-in process for students arriving on your campuses. From my experience visiting a variety of different schools, I know there is no one way to organize this process. A variety of ways can work well. Having an established check-in process is helpful for several reasons:

- It allows students the opportunity to immediately meet the person who students can go to with immigration questions and verify all their documents are correct.
- This process gives DSOs the chance to make sure their students are aware of the regulations they need to follow including what to do if they received a [Form I-515A, “Notice to Student or Exchange Visitor,”](#) on their recent entry into the United States.

The check-ins help both students and DSOs work through any initial inconsistencies found in immigration documents and ensure proper reporting in the Student and Exchange Visitor Information System (SEVIS).

## Accurate and Timely Reporting in SEVIS

After verifying that the students are on campus, you need to register each F and M student your school issued a Form I-20, “Certificate of Eligibility for Nonimmigrant Student Status,” to in SEVIS. Keep in mind that you are responsible for reporting every student you issued a Form I-20 for, not only the ones that arrive to your campus.

You must register each returning student no later than 30 days after the deadline for registering for classes and each new student must be registered no later than 30 days after the program start date. Although SEVIS contains the functionality to automatically terminate student records, these terminations are set beyond the regulatory deadlines that you must adhere to as a DSO. Therefore, you should never let a SEVIS record automatically terminate.

No doubt you have many other duties to keep you busy at the beginning of the term, so set a calendar reminder to make sure you have completed your reporting requirements by the 30 day deadline.

Registering a student in SEVIS means you authenticate that the student is properly in F-1 or M-1 status and you verify:

- The start date of the student’s next session.
- The accuracy of the program completion date listed on the Form I-20.
- The correct and current local address of each student. If a student lives on campus, it is important to not use the school address in this field, but rather their dorm room number must be entered.
- The full-time enrollment of students, per the regulatory definition found in 8 CFR 214.2(f)(6) for F-1 students or 8 CFR 214.2(m)(9) for M-1 students.

Once again, in my visits to schools I have seen this information obtained in a variety of ways. Take some time to think and evaluate your institution’s internal processes and make sure that it captures all of the above information in a timely manner.

Personally, this [SEVIS fact sheet](#) from SEVP was a resource that never left my desk while I was a DSO. It lists out the reporting requirements for each category of student as well as the SEVIS alerts, lists and deadlines that will guide you through your student registration.

## Update Your Form I-17

As you meet with students one-on-one and register them in SEVIS, it is also a good time to check that the information on your school’s Form I-17, “Petition for Approval of School for Attendance by Nonimmigrant Student,” is accurate. Some questions to ask yourself include:

- Are there programs you are issuing Forms I-20 for that struggle to meet the regulatory definition of full time?
- Are students coming to you with questions about a new program your school is offering?
- Do the Form I-20 program dates accurately reflect the length of the program?
- Are students asking you about study options at one of your programs that is offered at a different location?

The beginning of a new academic term brings these questions to the forefront because it allows you to compare what your F and/or M students are actually experiencing versus what is listed on your Form I-17. If you have updates to be made, be sure to make them in a timely manner. Regulations require certain updates to be made within 21 days of the change.

## Have a Plan

As you prepare for this new academic year, please take some time to plan or re-evaluate your school’s international student process. When I was a DSO, I developed a written plan of action that I referred to during every registration period. With input from colleagues, this plan included the deadlines I needed to meet in order to stay compliant. Having a plan in place before the hectic pace of the new school year began helped me and subsequently my students remain compliant.

If you have any questions, I highly recommend you contact your SEVP field representative if one has been deployed to your area. To find out if your region has a field representative, contact the SEVP Response Center at [SEVP@ice.dhs.gov](mailto:SEVP@ice.dhs.gov).



# Q&A: Department of State's Office of Private Sector Exchange Administration

In 2013, the U.S. Department of State established the Office of Private Sector Exchange Administration (OPA) within its Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs, which manages and supports the J-1 Exchange Visitor Program, to increase monitoring of critical activities, with the paramount goal of ensuring exchange visitor health, safety and well-being. To help better understand our new federal partner's mission, they answered a few questions for SEVP stakeholders.

## **Q: What led to the establishment of the U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs Office of Private Sector Exchange Administration – Academic and Government Programs?**

A: OPA has four units, each assigned to monitor several of the 15 Exchange Visitor Program categories. OPA established an Academic and Government programs unit (OPA-AG) to work with the colleges, universities, research labs and government agencies that sponsor professors, research scholars, university students and specialists entering the United States on a J-1 visa. The Department of State formed OPA-AG to actively monitor and respond to complaints and incidents affecting the large and quickly growing academic and government portfolio.

## **Q: Prior to the establishment of OPA-AG, how were incidents (e.g., death, serious injury, sexual abuse) that involved exchange visitors handled?**

A: Previously, incidents were handled by the Office of Designation. The re-organization of the Office of Private Sector Exchange in 2013 included the creation of OPA-AG with the understanding that additional staff would be required to fulfill the office's mission to ensure the health, safety and welfare of all J-1 exchange visitors.

## **Q: What are some of OPA-AG's biggest challenges?**

A: The J-1 academic categories represent the largest number of department-designated sponsors (approximately 1,200) and the fastest growing number of exchange visitors. Given the size of these categories, even once fully staffed, engaging academic sponsors on a frequent, one-on-one basis will be challenging.

## **Q: What are some of the biggest changes exchange program sponsors can expect, now that OPA-AG will actively monitor and respond to incidents involving exchange visitors?**

A: We now have the opportunity to engage and partner more actively with sponsors. We look forward to learning and sharing best practices in our discussions with the sponsor community, and to clarifying what the OPA-AG can do to help sponsors learn our monitoring process and work with us.

Our purpose and function is to provide day-to-day administrative oversight, respond to complaints and incidents, and ensure the health, safety and welfare of exchange visitors. To be clear, OPA-AG's formation is not necessarily out of concern for how sponsors currently handle incidents and complaints that involve their exchange visitor populations. Yet, recent trends and reports do raise concerns, and we will work with sponsors to determine what is appropriate to report to the department and what can be kept in-house. This is an ongoing process in which OPA-AG will work with sponsors to find the right path.

## **Q: How do exchange program sponsors properly report incidents to the OPA-AG? What is the general protocol to follow?**

A: Recognizing the size and complexity of academic and government programs, we established a separate email address the academic community can direct complaints and concerns. Effective immediately, academic sponsors and academic exchange visitors can report incidents and complaints to OPA at: [AGalert@state.gov](mailto:AGalert@state.gov). Academic sponsors of the Exchange Visitor Program can find OPA-AG's incident report form on the [academic sponsors section of the J-1 visa website](#).

## **Q: After the initial submission of the incident report form, what type of follow-up and next steps can exchange visitor sponsor programs and exchange visitors expect from OPA-AG?**

A: One of OPA's core responsibilities is to investigate incidents and complaints involving exchange visitors that are brought to our attention. In most cases, an OPA analyst will contact the designated program sponsor to initiate a complaint or incident review, ask questions and obtain a report or other information that helps us understand the situation. Occasionally, the analyst may even ask a second or third round of questions that are specific to the individual complaint or incident, in order to get closer to a resolution of the matter. OPA encourages sponsors and exchange visitors to work closely with OPA analysts to ensure that a thorough review takes place, facilitating a prompt and satisfactory resolution to all incidents and complaints.

## **Q: How is OPA-AG taking proactive measures to promote the safety of exchange visitors in the United States?**

A: The Department of State publicizes [Visas@state.gov](mailto:Visas@state.gov) as the primary email point of contact for J-1 visa Exchange Visitor Program participants. Designated sponsors are required to provide this email address to all incoming exchange visitors to afford them direct communication with the department. OPA uses this mailbox to receive and respond to inquiries from prospective, current and former exchange visitors, as well as from their families, sponsors, third parties and the general public.

The Department of State also established the J-1 Visa Emergency Hotline: 1-866-283-9090. This line is for use by exchange visitors and third parties in the case of urgent situations.

Additionally, as a new unit, we continue to explore opportunities for OPA-AG to learn from our large, diverse sponsor community and become a resource for others. For example, some expert groups in emergency action planning have come together to discuss the integration of international students into college and university emergency action plans. OPA-AG looks forward to meeting with these individuals, as well as taking advantage of other opportunities to participate in ongoing dialogues, so that we might collect best practices and distribute them to the broader Exchange Visitor Program sponsor community.

To learn more about the Exchange Visitor Program, visit the Department of State's [J-1 Visa website](#).



# K-12 Schools: The Fastest Growing Stakeholder Group in SEVIS

There are nearly 4,000 primary and secondary schools in the United States that enroll over 48,000 F-1 and M-1 international students, making kindergarten through 12th grade (K-12) programs the fastest growing stakeholder group in the Student and Exchange Visitor Information System (SEVIS).

To help support this core Student and Exchange Visitor Program (SEVP) stakeholder group, new [resource pages](#), including pages for both [private](#) and [public](#) schools, were added to Study in the States to help designated school officials (DSOs) at these K-12 programs remain compliant with U.S. regulations.

If school officials want to enroll F-1 and/or M-1 international students at the K-12 level, the school must be SEVP-certified. This means, the school officials must apply for initial certification by submitting a Form I-17, "Petition for Approval of School for Attendance by Nonimmigrant Student," to SEVP to begin the certification process. To remain compliant, the school's DSOs need to adhere to the same SEVIS reporting

requirements as other SEVP-certified institutions, which involve registering students in SEVIS at the start of each school year, updating the school's Form I-17 promptly with any changes and going through recertification every two years.

However, there are also unique rules that govern K-12 schools and their programs. As the school year begins for many, whether you are a seasoned school official or just starting the process of becoming certified, you should be aware of the different regulations for public and private K-12 schools.

First, it matters if the K-12 program is funded publically, through government tax revenue, or privately through tuition. Public schools are only eligible for SEVP certification at the high school level, while their public elementary and middle school counterparts are not. U.S. public high schools that are SEVP-certified may only enroll each F-1 student for a total of 12 months, or a single calendar year. Moreover, F-1 students attending an SEVP-certified public secondary school

must pay the full, unsubsidized, per capita cost of attending school.

Conversely, private K-12 programs are eligible for SEVP-certification at both the elementary and secondary level. Private K-12 schools also do not have a limit on how long an F-1 or M-1 student may enroll in their schools or programs.

More information about public and private K-12 programs is available on the [K-12 Schools page on Study in the States](#). Summer English as a second language programs and dioceses enrolling students at these grade levels can find important information unique to their needs on the [K-12 Private School page](#) as well.

Please take a moment to visit the new K-12 resource pages for school officials on Study in the States. We welcome your feedback and suggestions on information you would like us to share in the future. Email us your thoughts at [SEVPCommunications@ice.dhs.gov](mailto:SEVPCommunications@ice.dhs.gov); we look forward to hearing from you!

## New Email Address Field Added to the SEVIS Form I-901

In July, the Student and Exchange Visitor Program (SEVP) updated the Student and Exchange Visitor Information System (SEVIS) Form I-901 to include a new mandatory email address field.

Collecting this email information expedites the payment confirmation process to allow students who pay by check or money order to receive instant email notifications from SEVP when their I-901 SEVIS Fee payment status changes. Previously, students who paid their I-901 SEVIS Fee by check or money order needed to continually check [www.fmjfee.com](http://www.fmjfee.com) to see if SEVP received their payment.

Providing all students with instant email notifications allows them to keep a record of their payment actions and minimizes the need to log into the payment processing system to check the status of their I-901 SEVIS Fee payment. Applicants must still

visit [www.fmjfee.com](http://www.fmjfee.com) after they receive the email notification so that they may print their I-901 SEVIS Fee receipt.

F and M students must present this receipt as proof of I-901 SEVIS Fee payment when they visit a U.S. embassy or consulate for their visa interview and upon arrival to a U.S. port of entry. Regulation requires all prospective F and M students pay the [I-901 SEVIS Fee](#) before the U.S. Department of State issues them a student visa and they enter the United States.

Only students who pay the I-901 SEVIS Fee on or after July 26, 2015 must provide an email address on the Form I-901. All previous I-901 SEVIS Fee receipts will remain valid and do not require an email address. For additional information about the SEVIS Form I-901 and the I-901 SEVIS Fee, check out our easy-to-follow [tutorial on the payment process](#).

### CONTACT US

## SEVP Contacts

The Student and Exchange Visitor Program (SEVP) is dedicated to maintaining open communication with international students and academic officials to provide the necessary support while studying in the United States. SEVP has multiple contact options:

**Phone:** 703-603-3400  
**Email:** [SEVP@ice.dhs.gov](mailto:SEVP@ice.dhs.gov)

**Find us on the Web:**  
[www.ice.gov/sevis](http://www.ice.gov/sevis)  
<http://studyinthestates.dhs.gov>

**Follow us on Twitter** [@StudyinStates](https://twitter.com/StudyinStates)  
**Like** [Study in the States on Facebook](#)  
**Connect** with [SEVP](#) using LinkedIn

If you need assistance with passwords or Student and Exchange Visitor Information System (SEVIS) technical help, call the SEVIS Help Desk at 800-892-4829 or email [SEVISHelpDesk@ice.dhs.gov](mailto:SEVISHelpDesk@ice.dhs.gov)

*Disclaimer: The information presented in the SEVP Spotlight is provided for informational purposes only and should not be considered legal advice.*

### ICE Contacts

To report national vulnerabilities or national security concerns:

Contact ICE's **Counterterrorism and Criminal Exploitation Unit** at [CTCEU@dhs.gov](mailto:CTCEU@dhs.gov)

To report exploitation of student visa programs:

Contact your local **HSI Special Agent** or call 1-866-DHS-2ICE (1-866-347-2423) or visit [www.ice.gov](http://www.ice.gov)