SEVIS Is Watching
Will Fewer International Students Submit to Its Scrutiny?
by Mark Hughes

All was not quiet on college and university campuses across the country this past summer. Many institutions were scrambling to meet an Aug. 31, 2003, deadline for registering their international students with the Bureau of Citizenship and Immigration Services (formerly known as Immigration and Naturalization Services). The online registration program, Student Exchange Visitor Information System, or SEVIS, monitors the educational activities of all international students in the United States. Currently that’s more than half a million students nationwide, almost 400 of them enrolled at the University of Hartford.

At the University, the task of dealing with SEVIS fell to Richard Lazzerini ’84, associate director of the International Center and an alumnus of the College of Arts and Sciences. According to Lazzerini, Hartford was one of the very first schools to comply. The University had SEVIS up and running in September 2002, which meant there was plenty of time to work out all the kinks in the system. “It was the smartest thing we could have done,” says Lazzerini. This fall, registering students went relatively smoothly.

In the wake of the 9/11 attacks, government policies regarding student visas tightened, no doubt because one of the 19 hijackers entered the United States on a student visa. But, Lazzerini points out, SEVIS didn’t significantly alter the regulations for international students. What it did was to put into place much stricter monitoring and add a few hoops for applicants to jump through. All international students must fill out three new forms when they apply for a visa and then wait in a sort of limbo, sometimes for months, to learn whether their applications have been approved. Once the students arrive at their respective campuses, each school must create an electronic file in SEVIS that includes information such as the student’s address, degree program and number of credits, semester start and end dates, employment—SEVIS wants to know all.

For students, failing to meet all the bureau’s requirements can have dire consequences, like losing their visa status or even deportation. All this is compounded, Lazzerini points out, by the fact that English is not the first language of many of these students. He has spent the past 23 years advising international students as they make the transition from their native lands to community and academic life on campus. Before SEVIS, that meant anything from helping a student from Chile find a used car to organizing the yearly international festival on campus. Since 9/11, however, Lazzerini has been spending an increasing amount of time meeting regulations from the U.S. Department of Homeland Security.
For now, most international students seem to accept and understand the need for SEVIS in a post-9/11 world. There have been some notable glitches, however. Lazzerini recalls one young woman in Turkey who traveled some 300 miles from her home to the embassy in Ankara three times before her name showed up on the State Department’s list and she could get her visa and make her way to the University.

Could these new requirements discourage international students from applying to U.S. schools?

Many in the higher education community say they are already seeing signs of a change. An article in the September issue of The Chronicle of Higher Education titled “In Visa Limbo” states, “Although aggregate numbers are not yet available, anecdotal evidence suggests that tighter visa regulations, in addition to growing competition from universities in other English-speaking countries, may lead to a decline in foreign-student enrollment in the United States this fall.” The Chronicle quotes U.S. Department of State figures showing that from Oct. 1, 2002, to Aug. 1, 2003, close to 175,000 student visas were issued—65,000 fewer than for the same period two years earlier.

Ursula Oaks of the NAfSA: Association of International Educators points out that schools in the United States don’t exist in a vacuum. “American institutions of higher learning compete with their overseas counterparts. We have to be careful to maintain our status as the destination of choice for international students.”

International student exchange is grassroots diplomacy at heart, says Oaks. “It’s a part of our foreign policy, a means of gaining goodwill ambassadors for our country and helping American students understand the world. We must find a way to achieve the security we need while ensuring that legitimate student exchanges can continue to thrive.”

Adds Catharine Stimpson, dean of the Graduate School of Arts and Science at New York University, writing in the Los Angeles Times on Aug. 27, “I recognize the heightened role that education institutions must play in national security. But bad visa policies make it hard for international students to study here. This harms U.S. higher education, the creation and transmission of knowledge, and, ultimately, society—exactly what the terrorists sought to do in the first place.”

Lazzerini and his staff at the International Center couldn’t agree more. They take great pride in making sure that international students see very little red tape. Their mission is to ensure that the exchange of cultures and ideas that takes place when these students sit in University of Hartford classrooms, live in the dorms, and make American friends among the students, staff, and faculty will continue as seamlessly as possible.