Greetings! Welcome & Updates
by Linda Duckworth, Ph.D., Director

Aloha! On behalf of the ISS, I welcome all of you to fall semester 2005 and to this edition of the ISS E-News. As always at this time of year with the Thanksgiving holiday around the corner, I like to reflect on all the reasons to give thanks:

1. Welcome to Amy Higashionna! Amy joins the ISS ‘ohana from the Hawaiian Tel Credit Union and fills the vital position of clerk-typist. We are already impressed by her organizational skills, can-do attitude, and professionalism with students and staff. More about Amy in the Features section.

2. Welcome to Jing Zhang! Jing joins the ISS ‘ohana as the new IT specialist. In the critical role of IT specialist, Jing assists the ISS with managing data and meeting SEVIS federal compliance responsibilities. More about Jing, too, in the Features section.

3. In spring 2005, ISS conducted student evaluations of ISS advisers and services to international students.

   a. Results of the ISS advisors evaluation indicated that of the 50 responses of students after their appointments with an ISS adviser over a 2-week period, 20 were undergraduates, 23 were graduate students, 4 were alumni, and 3 were exchange students. The primary types of assistance received were work permits (20); other reasons, such as data fix, dorm safety, seeking ISS assistance to recruit participants for graduate research study, taxes, grading; academic problems; reinstatement; concurrent enrollment; program extension; SSN (12); and visa/travel information (10).

   b. Results of the ISS services evaluation indicated that of the 126 responses of students over a 2-week period, the majority of respondents were from Japan (30%), China (20%), Canada (10%), Korea (10%), and Thailand (5%), in the following categories: transfer students (36%), undergraduates (39%), and graduates (61%).
Regarding ISS services, 70% were satisfied or very satisfied overall. Comments ranged from “terrific,” “you are doing a great job” to “staff needs to be more friendly,” and “the wait period is too long.” Our goal is to review all comments and discuss among ISS staff on ways to improve services.

Mahalo to all respondents.

4. In October 2005, ISS led the UHM Health Insurance Committee through a lengthy evaluation of the procedures for the automatic billing of health insurance charges. The results indicated that immediate improvements were needed to create a more efficient electronic system and that additional time for development would be necessary. Therefore, effective immediately, ISS has implemented temporary procedures to (a) facilitate student enrollment in the UH health plan, (b) facilitate requests for alternative health insurance coverage, and (c) facilitate spring 2006 registration. For more information, visit the health insurance page of the ISS web site at www.hawaii.edu/issmanoa or email issinsur@hawaii.edu with questions.

5. The International Student Association has worked very hard for international students this fall 2005! Not only did ISA undergo a transformation in organization as a result of an evaluation this past summer, but ISA also planned a welcome party & city tour, Kailua Beach Picnic, Hawaiian Water Adventures escape, International Cuisine Night, Ice Palace Outing, and Maunawilli Hike to help international students adjust and learn the culture of Hawaii. In addition, the ISA helped raise funds to donate to the Red Cross for Hurricane Katrina Relief and will be holding its next fund-raiser on November 16, 2005 at the Campus Center along with students from Pakistan and India for the South Asia Earthquake Relief with all donations going to UNICEF.

As usual, when I take time to reflect, I find many reasons to be thankful. I am thankful for our new staff members and the level of expertise and professionalism they bring to the ISS ‘ohana. I am thankful for assessment and evaluation, because it is only through this process that we can improve. And, as usual, I am thankful for ISA, because it is through its efforts that international students can benefit and adjust.

I hope you have a great rest of the semester. Good luck on your papers and final exams! Have a wonderful semester break! And, to those graduating in December, best wishes for the future! Aloha & Mahalo!
Rules & Regs: Reflections, News, Updates and Reminders
by Martha Staff, Assistant Director

SEVIS

It has been more than two and a half years since the national Student Exchange Visitor Information System (SEVIS) was implemented by the Department of Homeland Security. International student services offices across the US are no more-or-less accustomed to the SEVIS database and the electronic reporting procedures required for SEVIS compliance. Fortunately, the national SEVIS management team has been very responsive, making many improvements suggested by users. SEVIS management has also helped users correct errors through the SEVIS Help Desk.

But opinion remains divided on whether SEVIS has been a positive influence overall. Many of my colleagues doubt that the US is safer because of SEVIS. Many are still wary of such an invasive system and of the possible negative consequences that could result to individual international students if incorrect data languishes undiscovered in SEVIS. On the other hand, some colleagues are pleased that SEVIS has required international student services offices to develop significant new resources and improved technology and management tools, leading to improved timeliness and efficiency.

Although every university has to use SEVIS, each school has had to develop new computerized interfaces to link a school’s unique student record with SEVIS in an efficient manner. SEVIS fees paid by students go to support the federal agency, but schools and universities have had to fund their own SEVIS compliance costs. Resources for UHM have been slow in coming, but now ISS and IT staff are working together to develop and refine new systems. Our goal is to complete the transition to a stable, effective, and efficient SEVIS management and reporting system during the spring 2006 semester. These technology changes should be relatively invisible to international students. But for ISS advisers the changes should allow us to once again devote more time to advising students, the heart and soul of our professional commitment.

NEW I-20 FORM

According to the August 2005 Student & Exchange Visitor Program (SEVP) newsletter, a new I-20 form with a new look has been designed. The current I-20 form was not designed for use with an automated system; it has seen few revisions in several decades of use. SEVP plans to release the new I-20 form as soon as it receives final approval. Once approved, the new I-20 form will automatically be printed from SEVIS.

FEE CHANGES

As noted in ISS emails, many of the fees for the forms used by students for benefit applications have recently increased. In September, the ISS received notice that fees would increase “an average” of $10 per application in late October. However, the most commonly used form, the I-765, Application for Employment Authorization, which is used for both F-1 Optional Practical Training and Employment Based on Economic Hardship, had a fee increase of only $5.00 (from $175 to $180). This form is also used by J-2 visa holders seeking employment authorization. Another commonly used application form, the I-539, Application to Extend/Change non-immigrant status (for example, from F-2 to F-1 or vice versa) increased from $190 to $200.

Fee changes for these and other forms are detailed at http://uscis.gov/graphics/formsfee/forms/ In most cases, the fee change went into effect on October 26, 2005. If you filed an application that
was received at the US CIS prior to this date, your application will be processed with the “old” fee rate, but those applications arriving on or after October 26 must have the new fee attached. The US CIS returns applications with checks that are over or under the required amount on the day received.

DEPARTMENT OF STATE STUDENT VIS A

ADVISORY

In a September 28, 2005 cable, DOS issued new instructions to their Consular Officers. The cable stresses that visa adjudications should be made based on the applicant’s present intent, not on what may happen in the future. It notes that the typical student is young and will not have the same ties to his or her home country as those applying for other types of nonimmigrant visas. Additionally, the cable provides favorable guidance on visa reissuance, educational qualifications, and for those student applicants planning to attend community colleges, English language schools and schools that are lesser-known. For example, the cable states that even if the Consul believes a student has a poor chance of finding work in the home country using his or her intended major, this should not be a reason for visa denial, since many countries have an evolving employment marketplace that may be different by the time the student completes his or her degree. The more flexible interpretations of visa requirements have long been advocated by NAFSA. Association of International Educators and the ISS advisers welcome this good news.

NEW PROCEDURES FOR OBTAINING A STUDENT VISA IN MEXICO

F-1 students visiting Mexico over a holiday period may wish to renew their visa. However, all “third country nationals” applying for a visa in Mexico must now make an appointment in advance through a self-service website. Instructions and further information are found at the following: www.visa-usa.com.mx/DetermineTCN.aspx

Students who wish to obtain a student visa in Mexico should, however, first make an appointment with an ISS adviser to discuss travel plans, justification for a third-country visa renewal, and request a letter of support.

TRAVEL REMINDERS

With the winter break just around the corner, please take a few minutes to review your documentation needs before you leave Honolulu.

• Is your I-20 expiring in December but you are not graduating? If so, apply to ISS for a program extension prior to December 4! (ten working days to process.)
• Do you need a new travel re-entry signature? ISS recommends a new signature every semester you travel (3 days to process). However, if you already received one and used it in fall 2005, you do not need a new signature to return after winter break.
• Do you need a new student visa? Apply to ISS for a support letter at least 10 days before you leave the US. See an ISS adviser first if you are applying for a visa in a country that is not your home country.
• Are you changing program levels i.e., starting a new program of study in January. Don’t leave Hawaii without receiving your new I-20 or DS 2019 for the new program. You should enter the US in January using the correct document—the form for the program you are entering in January.
• Are you graduating and traveling abroad before beginning Optional Practical Training? Make sure you have your Employment Authorization card or your receipt showing the card is being processed. A job offer letter is also helpful. And, you still need a re-entry signature on your I-20 from the ISS (3 days to process, or 2 weeks for mail back-and-forth for students on the mainland).
New Addition to ISS

The International Student Services (ISS) office has a new Clerk-Typist on its staff, Amy Higashionna. Before coming to ISS, Amy worked for the Department of Health in the Women, Infants and Children Division and the Hawaiian Tel Credit Union. On weekends, in addition to her work with ISS, she also works as a tour agent and key punch operator.

With all of her experience, however, Amy feels that one of the most important “jobs” she has had was that of taking care of her grandchildren when they were younger (Amy has three children and five grandchildren). It was a job she truly enjoyed.

All of us at ISS welcome Amy Higashionna to the staff and look forward to working with her for many years to come.

Artist (and “Techy”) in Residence

Jing Zhang has recently joined the International Student Services (ISS) staff as an IT Specialist. She will be assisting the ISS staff in all matters related to computer programming, data management, and technical problem solving.

Jing comes to ISS from the People’s Republic of China and has two Master’s degrees: Master’s of Business Administration (MBA) and Master’s of Science in Information and Computer Science (ICS). Jing states that in obtaining the ICS degree, one of her professors, Dr. Will Gersch, was instrumental in encouraging her to study for the Master’s in the field. He was very important in Jing’s academic life.

Obtaining the M.S. degree in ICS allowed Jing to have the computer expertise ISS was looking for. Both degrees are part of a variety of courses Jing has taken during her academic career, including studies in civil engineering, entomology, and art. And, it is in art that Jing expresses herself creatively, painting landscapes and portraits in acrylic, watercolor, and oil (one of her paintings, a beautiful seascape with a sail boat and Kualoa Mountain in the background, is displayed in her office).

With her technical, business, and, most especially, art skills and talents, Jing Zhang has a lot to offer. Like the sailboat in her painting, she is sailing the seas, adding knowledge and beauty to wherever she goes.

A Friendly Voice

Karen Michael Mikel has been working for the International Student Services (ISS) for the last several years in a variety of
areas: front desk help, clerk, telephone receptionist, Optional Practical Training (OPT) Workshop Presenter, etc. In all these positions, her approach to her work, as she states, has been to serve international students within a friendly environment, emphasizing the word “friendly.” An example of this approach to her work is the warm and friendly greeting one hears when calling ISS on the telephone. It is that of Karen’s voice.

Karen came to Hawai‘i from Malaysia, initially, because of its beautiful weather and trade winds. An additional reason is the fact the UH has, as she notes, the best Asian Studies program in the world. Once here in Hawai‘i, Karen enrolled in the Asian Studies program and in 2000 obtained her Bachelor’s degree. She is now studying at UH for a Master’s degree in Asian Studies.

One of four children, and the only one of her family to leave her native country, Karen feels that she has become more open and tolerant as a result of living in Hawai‘i and experiencing the diversity of cultures that live here. The multicultural environment and the variety of foods that come with this is an additional delight to her.

Education, she feels, is important in exposing people to different cultures. As this happens, she continues, wars around the world will lessen. Her career goal, in this regard, is to work in her country’s foreign service as a Cultural Attaché, “breaking new ground” in educating people about her country and its people. In this way, she feels she can increase the level of tolerance that people have for those different from themselves, thus bringing some measure of peace among people living within cultures different from their own.

Karen’s service at ISS exemplifies today all that she hopes to obtain in the future working in the foreign service. On an everyday basis, she is helping, assisting, encouraging, and supporting large numbers of international students at UH that come to ISS for immigration services – and she does this with a friendly attitude, a friendly demeanor, and a friendly voice.