

Emergency Communications with International Students & Scholars

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Executive Summary:

ISSS (International Student and Scholar Services) currently does not have a reliable way to communicate with all international students and scholars in a crisis. ISSS is not required by law to "watch over" them, and ISSS certainly does not have the staff or other resources to do so. As a result there is no reliable way to assure that communications will be received and read by international students, and the situation for international scholars is even more problematic and complex. We assume that a similar situation exists for domestic students and scholars. We recommend an expanded use and correction of some problems in getting a U of M e-mail account. This would assist ISSS and other university offices and also provide a more rarely used, but greatly improved means of communicating specially marked "emergency" messages.

Introduction

The challenge in communicating with the more than 4500 UMTC international students and scholars on the campus is that they are on many different kinds of visas, are here for times that vary from a few days to a number of years, and some unknown, but significant number are on campus that have no required or regular need to be in contact with any university office. Thus, any discussion of who these individuals are, where they are on campus or in the community, and when they are coming or going from the campus is not only complex, but sometimes no one knows anything about them! In the chart below and in the statements that follow, some of the complexities associated with knowing more about these different groups of students and scholars will become more evident. Prior to your review of our overview chart, we share the following conclusions and observations that should be helpful in simplifying emergency communications with not only international students and scholars, but other students, staff and faculty who are returning to campus from international travel.

Question: Who watches over international students and scholars? The simple answer is that no one does. The reason is that other than the required document check ("check in") there is nothing else that is required of international students and scholars compared to domestic students. Once they are on campus, the majority of their contact with ISSS is on an ad hoc basis and is related to seeking advice and counseling about a variety of issues including visa issues.

Conclusions of these authors

It is unlikely that the 4500+ international students and scholars on campus make up the majority of individuals coming to campus from another country because this is only a fraction of the total number of students, scholars, staff and faculty on campus.

The provision and use of a U of M e-mail account seems critical in being able to communicate with all faculty, staff and students, and not just the international students and scholars. With this in mind the following things need to happen: a) every attempt should be made to issue U of M e-mail accounts, b) eliminate barriers to getting a U of M e-mail such as charging unpaid scholars, c) ideally, the accounts need to be activated for international students and scholars before they arrive, d) the requirement (or perception of such a requirement) for a social security number needs to be eliminated in establishing such e-mail accounts, e) these accounts need to remain active for a longer period of time after the individual graduates or leaves the campus, because we know that some come back to visit over a period of a year, f) the university needs to be very clear about the nature of emergency e-mails that will go to everyone when the need arises. Such specially color-coded (or something other than words to indicate urgency) university emergency e-mails would seldom be sent, but would require the attention of everyone when they arrive.

- In general, it is theoretically easier to contact international students and scholars who are returning to campus rather than those who are coming for the first time. The reason for this is simple—the majority have an e-mail, but ISSS would have very little information about when such students and scholars are going out of the U.S., where they are going and when they return.
- There is a general consensus that the majority of international students and scholars will be very cooperative during a real emergency such as a pandemic flu outbreak, and the less they are singled out as a group the more cooperative they will be.
- Information about anyone entering the airport from outside the U.S. that is associated or about to be with the U of M would be very helpful in an emergency.
- After doing this exercise and considering many different kinds of emergencies, it is even more apparent that the university needs to know more about who is on our campuses, where they are going to or returning from in the world. The anticipated “International Travel Database” that is being discussed should be very helpful, but of course in an emergency will not be helpful in knowing more about newly arriving students, scholars, faculty or staff from anyplace in the U.S. or world.

Additional Information Beyond the Overview Summary Chart

- The overview chart and following comments apply only to UMTC. There are similar issues and questions for each of our U of M campuses.
- Theoretically, new international students cannot arrive on campus more than one month before classes start. This means that most new students arrive in August. However, we know that some do arrive more than a month ahead of classes.
- ISSS has information on all admitted students and scholars on payroll, but this does not mean that there is always a good way of communicating with these individuals because some may not access their U of M e-mail account regularly. We would anticipate that this would change during a real emergency and especially if the university started communicating that this form of communication will be critical to everyone, not just internationals.
- Knowing about and keeping track of international scholars on campus is more difficult than for international students because they are not registered for classes, many are not on payroll and many have no obligation or need to come to ISSS or other university offices.

- We believe there are only a minority of international students and scholars who live in our dormitories, but there are many in Como and Commonwealth Terrace housing facilities. Many single students live in rented apartments. For more details discuss with Housing.
- Each fall an “International Reception Center” is open for a month or so before classes start. This is administered by Housing.
- There are some international student (some may also serve international scholars) List Serves that might be useful. The overall one is with the Minnesota International Student Assn. or MISA. In addition, we are aware of nationally oriented ones for China (multiple ones) Korea and Malaysia. We do not recommend the use of these for a variety of reasons.
- Admissions and the Graduate School should be contacted about the nature of their initial contacts prior to and upon arrival of new students. The same is true for the MBA program and AHC units that have a significant number of professional degree students. For many international students and scholars, payroll may be an important communication avenue.
- AHC and IT have the largest number of international scholars. In Fall 2004, IT had 37.5% (1239/3302) of all international students on campus. CLA was second with 19%. Students from China (741), India (456), Korea (408), Malaysia (147), Taiwan (123) and Japan (120) made up 60% of the 3302 international UMTC students in the Fall 2004. Detailed statistics of this nature can be provided if needed.

Additional Questions or Comments:

Who are the incoming international student/scholar groups? They typically come from 130-135 countries, but many countries have less than five. Please remember that for emergency purposes it makes no difference whether the internationals are students or scholars because as carriers they are equal even though they come for different reasons and on different visas. Secondly, as you will note throughout this document at any given time we know less about the scholars and international visitors on campus because many are coming and going all the time, they are here for a few days to a few years, they are not registered for classes, some but not all are on payroll, a significant but unknown number are not on U of M visas, many are never required to visit or communicate with ISSS, and many never have or will have a U of M e-mail address.

How does ISSS currently communicate with them? Simple answer—nothing that we currently have in place is foolproof, but the best way would be an expanded use of U of M e-mail accounts and the sharing of emergency information in a special manner through these accounts. We cannot envision any other method that will reach as many students, scholars, staff and faculty as U of M e-mail. This is true of domestic as well as international students and scholars—we cannot imagine any differences. The challenge is that we know there are some who do not read U of M e-mail or announcements on it, but what else could reach more people if the following issues in acquiring these accounts were addressed:

- Give all internationals a U of M email account for free. This includes unpaid researchers/scholars who currently must pay (or the dep’t. must pay) for a U of M account. A question in this regard, is what length stay on campus results in the issuance of such an account (a few days, few weeks or few months)?
- Simplify the process for initiating U of M email online. Currently, a social security number is required to initiate U of M email online, making it impossible for new students to access U of M email before arriving on campus. The social security

number requirement needs to be dropped because many internationals do not have one and have no reason to have one. In this regard the U of M is very “domestic centric!”

Thus, **we recommend** a special e-mail communication to the entire U of M community (without singling out internationals) is probably the best way to communicate emergency information, with supplemental e-mails going out through selected listservs. The message should be sent to all email addresses associated with an individual (in PeopleSoft) to reach incoming students who use e-mail but don't yet have access to their U of M accounts.

Finally, We can assume that the majority of new students (but only some scholars) have some access to email prior to their arrival (this is especially true for Grads because their entire application process occurs online). Admissions (Grad and Ugrd) probably have a better idea of what percentage of new students use email as primary communication with the U.

After check in, students (but only some scholars) are able to access their U of M accounts, and we know that they have access to the internet (at computer labs, kiosks, etc.). We also know that they have been informed of the “official” status of U of M email accounts (ISSS tells them this at document check.).

Use of Listservs

We do not have a listserv that reaches all students, and certainly not all scholars. The ISSS Weekly Update (see: www.iss.umn.edu for more info) is voluntary and is sent to subscribers, who are a mixture of students, scholars and departmental reps. Many students and scholars never subscribe. We can safely assume that the vast majority of new students will not subscribe until after document check. Moreover, many subscribers simply don't read it. This is reason that it is so critical that any emergency mass e-mail must be uniquely identified as “urgent” in a way that sets it apart from other mass e-mails that students regularly receive.

It should also be noted that the other listservs mentioned (MISA, country-specific student groups, etc.) have much more limited reach and are not as easily accessed as ISSS Weekly. They shouldn't be considered as a more reliable avenue than sending to the entire University community. In addition, we don't know that these listservs reach incoming students at all. As with the ISSS Weekly Update, we suspect that most students learn about and subscribe to these sometime after their arrival on campus.

People Soft Queries:

ISSS can get a list of scholars on our J-1 documents, including their email address (any U and non-U address in PeopleSoft (PS)) by doing a search of the database. But some J-1 scholars on our documents do not have a U email address because the department has to pay for it if the person is not employed. If they have a non-U email, it will probably not be in the PS system. But we can get a list of all scholars on U of M documents which definitely include a mailing address (which is hopefully current) and possibly a phone number.

We do not have a way to contact scholars who are here on visa documents that are not issued by ISSS. Most of the time, we do not even know they are here because they are not required to check-in with us. The departments are not required to check in with us before inviting

them, and the scholars are not required to check in with us upon arrival.

J-Scholar Administrative Email list:

ISSS has an email list for department contacts (usually administrative staff) who are responsible for handling J (scholar) visa issues in their departments. However, this list is voluntary. And it is never completely up-to-date.

Payroll:

We believe that Payroll can do a query for anyone (students and staff) who is on payroll. But again, this would not capture scholars on campus who are not on university payroll.