

"Can You Tell Me If I'm Doing This Right?": Confirmation-Seeking in ISSS Advising During a Period of Regulatory Uncertainty

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Tags

International Student and Scholar Services; Management and Operations; Technology; University/Higher Education

Setting

This case takes place at a large public research university in the United States. The International Student and Scholar Services (ISSS) office supports F and J visa students and scholars through immigration advising and compliance with federal regulations, while also providing resources and programming to support students' academic and social transition.

In spring 2025, international students and ISSS professionals faced a period of great uncertainty when the US federal government suddenly issued a series of visa revocations and SEVIS record terminations. SEVIS, the Student and Exchange Visitor Information System, is the federal database used to track the legal status of international students. Although some students later had their legal status restored, the events intensified concerns about visa status. During this period, delays or errors in immigration-related requests could have severe consequences, including delayed employment authorization, disrupted travel, and threats to legal status.

This case takes place in summer 2025. Given a large student population relative to available staffing and resources, ISSS combines limited drop-in sessions with an online advising platform. The office encourages students to use a single communication channel per issue. Processing times can be lengthy, and real-time updates are limited once a request enters the review queue. For some requests, including Optional Practical Training (OPT) requests submitted through the online advising platform, institutional processing may take up to 15 business days. Recent internal discussions have emphasized the importance of avoiding over-reassuring students in advising situations where school-level processing was connected to later federal adjudication.

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Case

Jamie, an international student advisor in ISSS, was in the office on a morning in June, running the drop-in session that day. Shortly after the drop-in session began, several students were already waiting. Alvin, a graduate student from China, sat down and placed his phone face-up on the table. His first words were: “Can you tell me if I’m doing this right?”

Alvin had completed his degree in May and was in the 60-day post-completion grace period. Five days earlier, he had submitted an OPT request through the university’s online advising platform. He was waiting for ISSS to review the request and, if it met requirements, issue an updated I-20 with an OPT recommendation. Alvin needed that I-20 before submitting his employment authorization application to U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services. Although his request was still within the normal ISSS processing window, each day of waiting felt consequential as his grace period continued to pass. The request status in the advising platform had remained “under review” with no further updates.

“I know it’s summer and you have a lot going on,” he said. “And I know I shouldn’t keep following up. But recently I heard that some international students had sudden problems with their legal status, and there has been a lot of discussion about it online. Every time I see that the platform still shows the same request status, I wonder if I missed something, or if I should be doing something else.”

Alvin shared that a friend had suggested that he submit the OPT request through the advising platform rather than come to drop-in hours, so he did. However, afterward, he found himself scrolling through Chinese-language social media groups where students shared their experiences. Some described waiting weeks for school processing or federal approval. Others warned that even minor issues could become serious during this period. He was not sure which accounts were accurate or whether they applied to his stage of the process, but taken together, they made waiting feel like a source of pressure. So, he came to drop-in hours to confirm whether what he had done was correct.

Jamie reviewed Alvin’s OPT request step by step. His request had followed the correct ISSS process, his materials appeared complete, and it had entered the normal ISSS review queue. Jamie explained that Alvin was still within the regular processing window because this type of request could take up to 15 business days. Jamie also reminded him that he should wait for the updated I-20 with the OPT recommendation before submitting his application to U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services. Alvin nodded, then asked: “So I just wait? I don’t need to do anything else, right?” Jamie asked how Alvin interpreted the information from his friend and online. Alvin said he knew many posts might not apply to his situation, but he did not feel he could ignore them. The more he read, the harder it was to judge what was actually relevant to him.

Jamie acknowledged Alvin’s effort to stay informed and explained that others’ experiences did not necessarily apply to his specific OPT request or to his current stage in the process. Jamie confirmed that his submission was under ISSS review, that it appeared complete based on the information Jamie could see, and that no additional action was needed from him at that moment. Jamie also clarified the limits of what ISSS could confirm. ISSS could explain the school-level process, identify whether the request was in the review queue, and describe the normal processing window. However, ISSS could not guarantee the later federal adjudication process or the final outcome once Alvin submitted his employment authorization application to U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services.

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Just before leaving, Alvin paused: “But if I just wait like this, will I really be okay?”

Jamie glanced at the students waiting outside, then back at Alvin. Over the course of the summer, more students had arrived with similar questions. In a period when both policy and information felt unstable, students were not only asking what step came next. They were also asking whether what they had already done was enough. Jamie had to decide how to respond to Alvin and whether to bring this pattern of student concerns into a broader conversation within the office. This interaction was not isolated. Advisors were increasingly encountering students seeking confirmation rather than new information, raising broader questions about how ISSS should communicate about uncertainty, manage expectations, and support students during periods of policy instability.

Discussion Questions

As you consider this case, discuss:

- Alvin received information from three sources: a friend, Chinese-language social media groups, and ISSS. How do these sources differ in terms of speed, credibility, applicability, and emotional impact? How might an advisor help students navigate information from informal sources without dismissing them entirely?
- In this case, Alvin sought not only guidance on next steps but reassurance that what he had already done was sufficient. In advising practice, what is the difference between a student’s need for information and their need for confirmation? How might this distinction shape how an advisor responds?
- Alvin’s request was still within the normal ISSS processing window, but the lack of real-time updates made waiting feel uncertain. What aspects of ISSS’s current service model might provide support, and what aspects might generate additional pressure for students in Alvin’s situation?
- For students who continue seeking information during a waiting period and worry about making a single misstep, how should the boundaries of ISSS advising be understood? What falls within the scope of normal advising support, and what might be referred elsewhere?
- The ISSS office has limited human resources. How should they best prioritize their time, balancing completing service requests, student advising, staff training, coordination with other campus offices, etc?