

# Serving International Students and Scholars



Christopher Viers and IU in the Vanguard of International Services

When he first went away to college, Chris Viers thought he would be a pre-med major with the hope of someday becoming an emergency room physician. "I wanted a career that would help people," he says. A first-generation college student, Viers had to work to put himself through school. During his last two years at Wheaton College, that work took the form of residence hall advisor to a group that included a handful of international students. He also became a frequent visitor at the home of the director of World Relief (whose daughter he would eventually marry). Their home was a magnet for visitors from all over the world. "These experiences afforded my first meaningful opportunities to gain a better appreciation and understanding of other countries and cultures, and my horizon and world view began to expand," he says.

These unexpected encounters and a new interest in higher education and student affairs led him to Ohio State University for graduate work. There he almost accepted a full-time position as residence hall director, but his advisor urged him to pursue his international interests. "Since many of my papers and projects concerned global issues in higher education," Viers says, "she encouraged me to visit the international office and explore opportunities there."

Under the mentorship of John Greisberger, then director of Ohio State's international office, Viers took on the task of developing a unique living and learning center that would pair domestic and international students in residential living and provide ongoing educational, cultural, and social programs aimed at fostering global knowledge and understanding. "Since I had experience on the residence hall side and on the international side," he says, "I found myself at the heart of this project. I fell in love with the nature and variety of work in international education, and took a full-time position as international student advisor and coordinator of the international living and learning center immediately after completing my master's."

Viers explains how the international perspective can be transforming: "I wanted other people to see the world through the eyes of international students—as I had come to do. I hoped to find ways for others to know the caliber of these students, their reasons for study in the United States, the sacrifices they make in pursuing U.S. higher education, and their seriousness of purpose. Fear keeps so many people from that experience." After several years at Ohio State, during which he assumed responsibility for directing international student orientation and advising, Viers left to direct a comprehensive international education office at Central Michigan

▲ *Chris Viers (right) says if we really want to help students, we have to make at least as much effort to listen as we do to explain. He is wary of assumptions about the best ways to assist international students.*



Chris Viers



University. He then moved to Wayne State University, where he served as director of the Office of International Students and Scholars.

Viers came to IU as associate dean and director of the Office of International Services in 2002, just at the moment when new federal regulations, in response to 9/11, were about to transform the profession. Those changes brought computer tracking and vastly increased reporting requirements of the activities of international students and scholars. "These complex new requirements were draconian," Viers explains. Student activities were tracked minutely, and reporting omissions could end their academic careers in the U.S. "Could we really expect students who are fully engaged in their studies to remember, among a myriad of other requirements, to report a change of address within 10 days or face deportation?" he asks. A similar fate could await students who failed to report changes of major, dropping and adding courses, or dealing with illness or family emergencies at home.

"These changes generated a tectonic shift for international student advising," Viers recalls. "They were so monumental in scope and philosophy that a number of my professional colleagues around the country chose to leave the profession altogether. In order for students to give their full attention to academic study, the university needed to take a new, active—indeed, proactive—role in helping students and scholars manage their responsibilities under the new federal regulations."

Viers brought to IU a clear vision of what needed to change and what must not be changed: "This was an opportunity to establish a new office culture within the context of the new

dynamics of the field. We repositioned the office to assume more responsibility. We learned to think strategically as an organization. We focused on intercampus coordination and cooperation. And we strengthened our association with colleagues on campus who could help. The response from the campus community was overwhelmingly supportive."

Viers promoted a team-based approach that got the whole office focused on measurable outcomes; the entire staff became involved in planning and in collaborating with other offices. Still, he refused, as other universities did, to reallocate resources for educational, cultural, and social programming in order to meet the federal government's new technical demands. "At a time when the U.S. was tightening its oversight of international students and scholars," says Viers, "we had to work that much harder to assure a warm, friendly, and supportive campus environment and to celebrate the contributions these distinguished individuals make to campus."

"I often tell students to think of International Services as their home away from home," he says. "We visit students and provide support when they are sick or injured. We're here for them when they experience the loss of a loved one, and we celebrate their accomplishments as they pursue their educational dreams at IU." Viers launched the annual "IU World's Fare," a celebration of international food and culture. It expanded the services of the International Center, brought together international and domestic student leaders in planning a major event for the campus and community, and renewed the energy of the International Student Leadership Forum—a group comprising the presidents of IU's international student associations.



*Cultural immersion in U.S. student life is rarely complete without a visit to a theme park. Chris Viers (center) fulfills his cultural duty to a group of international students at Cedar Point in 1997.*

Although he is now a veteran in the field, his professional hopes and dreams have not left him. Still, he sees an essential weakness in the profession: “So much of what we declare to be the issues and needs of international students is based on what we know about domestic students—there is little research and scholarship that has a meaningful impact on practice. What students expect, want, and need from their educational experience raises a complex set of questions. When we apply those questions to international students, we grossly simplify, and typically do not even acknowledge, regional or country specific perspectives.

“We know too little about what students from more than 200 countries are in the United States to accomplish. For example, students from many parts of the world are not accustomed to working in small groups and were not encouraged by their home educational system to question or challenge the instructor. When these students do not participate in class, too often we assume that either we are failing the student, or that we simply need to work harder at helping the student effectively engage. Our notion of engagement within U.S. higher education is culturally bound, and we need to see it as such.

“All kinds of questions have not even been asked, let alone answered. We need more evidence-based work to enhance and strengthen practice. We need to break down our assumptions about international study into manageable pieces. And we need to reconsider the way we train professionals in the field.”

To that end, Viers developed the graduate course International Students in U.S. Higher Education, the first such course at IU. He has also worked with faculty in International Comparative Education and Higher Education and Student Affairs at IU to build an international concentration in higher education administration that would include course work, practicums, and internships on and off campus.

Viers has served in a variety of regional and national leadership roles within NAFSA: Association of International Educators. One of his efforts there has been to establish a culture of scholarship in the profession. He has helped guide a reorganization of NAFSA that recognizes the value of scholarship and research. And this fall, Viers was elected by the 10,000-strong membership to serve as president and chairman of the Board of Directors of NAFSA in 2010. Last year at IU, Viers was promoted to the position of associate vice president for international services. “I feel very fortunate to work at an institution of worldwide distinction in comprehensive internationalization, with colleagues I greatly admire and respect,” he says.

**Links:**

[www.indiana.edu/~intlerv/](http://www.indiana.edu/~intlerv/)  
[www.nafsa.org/](http://www.nafsa.org/)

## Humanizing Advisor Technology

When the federal government put the Student and Exchange Visitor Information System online in 2003, it radically increased the amount of tracking information that universities had to provide about their international students and scholars. International student advisors panicked. It was not the tracking. Universities have been doing that, by law, for almost 100 years. Indeed, the notion that foreign visitors should expect scrutiny when travelling outside their own country is ancient; it dates at least to 450 B.C. when the King of Persia provided a letter asking that one of his citizens be given safe passage through Judah.

The advisors’ panic was rather that, in the new system, an inadvertent mistake or reporting omission could result in the government’s revoking an international student’s right to study here. To protect the status of students and scholars, advisors saw their lives becoming an interminable routine of checking one set of data against another, of watching for reporting deadlines, of confirming addresses and enrollments for 5,000 clients. Existing software, which emphasized the correct printing of forms, was of little help. After experimenting with one such product, the Office of International Services (OIS) decided it had no choice but to invent its own solution. That effort, spearheaded by OIS Director of Information Services Jason Baumgartner, came to be called iOffice.

The original plan was that iOffice would help with the reporting and the forms (as the previous software did), but it would also automate a system of data checking—comparing federal data with university data and alerting advisors to deadlines and reporting issues. Advisors would be spared hours of tedious auditing, and students would know that in the normal course of their studies, their status was secure. In the past, it was primarily the student’s job to assure that he or she did what was necessary to preserve status in the U.S. The new regulations made that a burden students couldn’t assume on their own. With iOffice, the university could provide a safety net to assure that students’ academic careers would not be cut short by inadvertent reporting omissions.

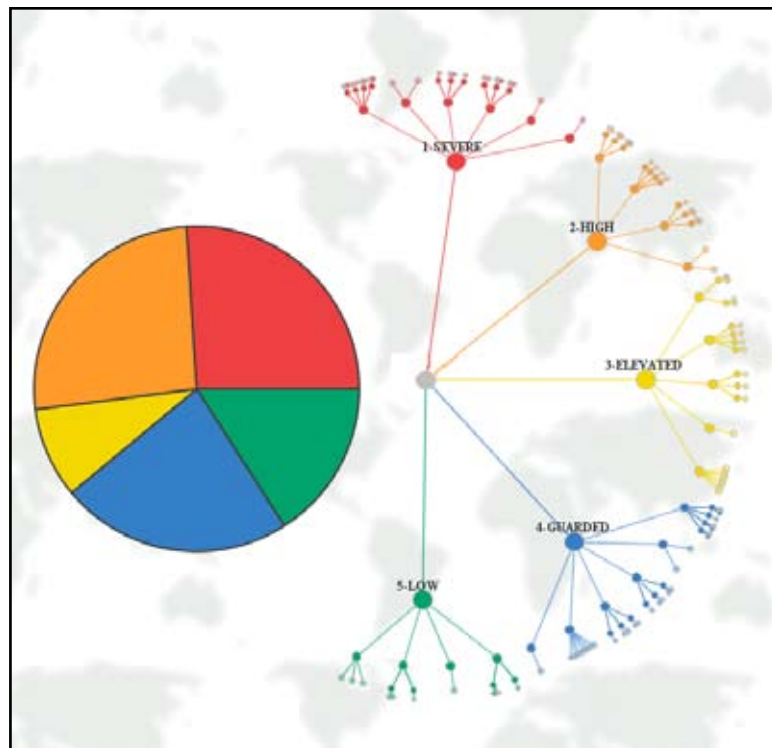
The first version of iOffice took six months to build. As soon as staff members began to use it, they thought of other things it might do. It could keep a history of the student’s interaction with the office. It could provide ways to communicate quickly with students. It could be extended to meet the needs of international employees. As the ideas came forth, the application

*(continued on next page)*

grew. Still, its central mission—to spare advisors tedious data entry and data tracking—remained. Advisors had time to talk and listen to students, and with the deep information resources for case management, advisors could provide more informed and more individualized assistance. Technology functioned as it should; it allowed the advisor's role to become more humane.

OIS was proud of its brainchild. Word got out, and other universities inquired about it for their own use. One of the most persistent was the University of Cincinnati. They became the first site for iOffice outside the IU system, and iOffice has become the primary international office management tool at seven universities outside of IU: Iowa State University, Miami University (Ohio), Murray State University, SUNY at Buffalo, the University of Cincinnati, the University of Kansas, and the University of Pennsylvania. Ten more universities, from coast to coast, are currently considering adoption.

"In today's immigration climate, even the most inadvertent oversight on the part of an international student or scholar can result in devastating consequences for their studies, teaching, or research," Viers says. "iOffice prevents such violations, and it serves as a comprehensive case management and administrative tool. It helps staff in International Services provide our gifted students and scholars high quality service and support."



*Like an imaginary monster with tentacles into the most distant corners of international data, iOffice monitors the technical status of all international students and scholars and keeps tabs on potential issues from the urgent (red) to the minor (green)—all so advisors don't have to.*



*Jenny Bowen, assistant director for student services in the Office of International Services, makes a suggestion for how the software can be made even more helpful to advisors. Seated is iOffice author Jason Baumgartner, director of information services.*

