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The Challenges Faced by International Students at Seattle University

Andru Zodrow, News Editor

The stress of moving out of campus and transitioning to digital learning platforms has been particularly pronounced amongst international students, who face additional complicating factors, such as time changes, figuring out legal documentation and racism.

Since March 6, when Seattle University initially enacted its Infectious Disease Response Plan and moved all schooling online, students have faced a series of logistical challenges.

Senior Communication and Media major Khuong “Teddy” Vo, is currently living back at home in Vietnam. He described how his schedule has changed in the wake of the COVID-19 crisis.

“In my region, the time difference is fourteen hours,” Vo said.

“It’s kind of hard to manage. Time-management is going to be a problem for a lot of people. It hasn’t affected me so far, I’m a little bit tired, but it’s still manageable for me.”

The International Student Center (ISC) has also faced challenges due to time changes. Center Director Dale H. Watanabe described the logistical challenges posed by the swift change to online learning.

“I think another hurdle we are trying to navigate now is advising for the students that have returned to their home country,” Watanabe said in an emailed statement to The Spectator. “As many of our international students come from Asia, that means that timing now is more convenient for them outside of regular business hours. I have heard that some professors have been offering classes/advising at 9:00 p.m. our time to accommodate these needs.”

The ISC is also tasked with organizing student documentation, which has proved complicated, particularly with regard to coordinating with the federal government.

According to Watanabe, international students all have what is called an I-20 form attached to their student visas. Students must acquire valid travel signatures from a designated school official or they are not able to return to their homes. Before COVID, these documents were not allowed to be digital or photocopied.

“Prior to the COVID-19 outbreak, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) required these documents to be original so there was a rush for students wanting updated signatures in case they were suddenly called back home,” Watanabe wrote.

The DHS Student and Exchange Visitor Program (SEVP), which is in charge of the aforementioned I-20 form, relaxed these rules to allow for scanned digital signatures. However, this accommodation was not instituted in conjunction with Seattle U’s Infectious Disease Response Plan.



Leon Lee

"It took time for SEVP to make the decision to allow I-20s to be scanned and emailed to students, so we remained present on campus and had designated pick-up hours for international students to come and collect their documents," Watanabe wrote. "Fortunately, once SEVP made the decision to allow electronic documents, we were able to move to remote work."

The change in Security Student and Exchange policy allowed for the ISC to move to telecommuting methods, but there were still barriers to overcome.

"Most of the individual student files are still physical documents and that has proven difficult to make the advising transition seamless," Watanabe wrote. "For our team to truly work remotely, we also needed to make sure everyone had access to a scanner and printer as, although the I-20 can be sent electronically, it requires an original signature so the document must first be printed, signed and then scanned and sent to the student."

Students from the US also faced challenges getting home from study abroad programs. Sophomore student McCalee Cain spoke to the stress and dismay caused by being sent back from France after a brief period of time there.

"Of course it was disappointing and completely unexpected to have my program canceled mid-way, but then again, everyone is experiencing that same disappointment and shock because of COVID," Cain said.

This disappointment and shock has been compounded for many international students who are now facing maltreatment in the United States. Navigating time zone changes and the rush to secure proper paperwork to travel home were two technical hurdles that international students faced. There are also respect and dignity struggles to be acknowledged for those international students who have chosen to remain in the U.S. throughout the pandemic.

"For a lot of international students who decided to stay in the U.S., I think they experience some racist comments on the street," Vo said.

In late March, analysis by the Federal Bureau of Investigation concluded that hate crimes against Asian Americans could rise due to racist ideas about the spread of COVID-19. Vo continued to speak about the rise of prejudicial behavior in the U.S.

"For some reason in the last four or five years, we stopped talking about it, and then it bloomed back again, which is kind of a shock and surprise," Vo said. "He called on the community to recognize the importance of students from abroad. "International students play a big role in the educational system of the US."

Vo also said that disrespectful comments and actions towards international students can cause a lot of harm.

"They do a lot of things for this nation, they even want to be US citizens, and they experience some racism, and it's hard for them, because back in Vietnam I never expect any racism," Vo said.

The stress of moving home has been further complicated for international students due to the additional barriers they face.