

J-1 Insurance Requirements: Mediating Conflict Between Scholars and Internal Stakeholders

Chasity Drew

Associate Director, East Tennessee State University, Johnson City, TN, USA
drewcl@etsu.edu

Tags

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

Setting

At a public university with 14,000 enrolled students, the International Student and Scholar Services (ISSS) office serves approximately 400 international students and scholars. The university's enrollment includes undergraduate, graduate, pharmacy, and medical students. The ISSS office has three staff members—a Director, an International Student Advisor (ISA), and an Office Coordinator. The ISA has held her position for less than one year and advises graduate students, while the Office Coordinator has been with the office for less than six months. The Director has worked in ISSS for five years, and handles all scholar-related matters, serves on institutional committees, and advises all undergraduate students. Of the three staff, the Director is the only individual in the office with extensive experience regarding international education and federal immigration requirements for F-1 and J-1 students and scholars. Due to the busy nature of the office, the Director sometimes struggles to manage her advising load.

Case

A new faculty member with the College of Medicine wants to host a J-1 research scholar in his lab. The Director sends the professor all the necessary information regarding the J-1 scholar request documentation and gives him a link to the J-1 Scholar webpage for review. The request was submitted, an oral proficiency interview (OPI) was conducted successfully, and a DS-2019, Certificate of Eligibility for Exchange Visitor (J-1) status, was issued. The scholar received a packet with the signed DS-2019, emergency contact form, maintaining J-1 status fact sheet, a Welcome Brochure, and the Exchange Visitor Program insurance

requirement sheet (including an explanation of the Department of State requirements for coverage of medical evacuation and repatriation of remains). The scholar was invited to review the J-1 Scholar webpage, which includes information regarding pre-arrival, insurance requirements, two-year home residency requirements, maintaining status, program extensions, and 12-month and 24-month bars, to name a few. The scholar purchased insurance using the link provided on the ISSS webpage.

When the insurance policy was expiring, the professor contacted Human Resources to inquire about signing up for the institutional insurance policy. Initially, Human Resources denied the request as the scholar missed the enrollment period and the insurance policy did not meet the requirements set by the Department of State. The Director was unaware that a visiting scholar could purchase the institutional insurance as previous scholars purchased third-party insurance policies that met the federal requirements. As conversations progressed, tension built between the parties involved. The College of Medicine faculty member was upset that the institution did not provide insurance that met the requirements for J-1 scholars. At this point, the Director asked the university's Legal Counsel to intervene and help resolve the situation.

Legal Counsel stated that the university is not responsible for covering all J-1 insurance requirements. The scholar could purchase the institutional health coverage plan as other benefits-eligible employees; however, the scholar would be required to purchase supplementary health insurance that included medical evacuation and repatriation. At this time, the Director and Legal Counsel became aware that the scholar would not be eligible for institutional insurance until the next enrollment period, as he waived coverage when he signed his work contract. Based on this situation, ISSS and Legal Counsel updated the insurance coverage policy on the webpage. The new wording stipulates that if a scholar purchases institutional insurance, a supplementary insurance must be purchased to fulfill the federal insurance requirements. The J-1 Scholar request forms were also updated with the new insurance verbiage so all parties involved in the process would be aware of what the institutional health policy covers and what additional insurance would need to be purchased.

Discussion Questions

As you consider this case, discuss:

- What strategies can ISSS utilize so scholars can make informed decisions regarding insurance purchases?
- How can ISSS best support scholars and host departments while ensuring that federal requirements are being met?
- How could ISSS have acted differently to help alleviate the tension building between the scholar, the faculty member, and Human Resources?
- Which communication channels are most effective for reaching international scholars? How does your answer vary depending on the content and purpose of the communications?
- What should an ISSS office prioritize when understaffed or staffed with employees still gaining experience?
- Who on campus needs to understand the immigration regulations, and to what extent?