

Fading Oasis:

Weathering Big Changes in an ISS Office

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Tags

Crisis-Management; Education Policy; Ethics, Equity, and Social Justice; International Student and Scholar Services; Leadership and Strategy; Management and Operations; Personnel Management; Student Services; University/Higher Education

Setting

Morning Glory University (MGU) is a large, top-25 R1 research university in the U.S. with a total student body of more than 40,000. The Office of Advising Services for International Students (OASIS) provides immigration advising and student success programming for its Global Storks (MGU's mascot is the stork) community of more than 7,000 F-1 and J-1 visa holders. OASIS has been part of the Division of Student Affairs' Inclusion, Equity, and Identity (IEI) subdivision for more than 30 years, which has fostered a mission and office culture dedicated to these principles and allowed the unit to implement a strong portfolio of student-centered programs.

However, as a result of a Chancellor-mandated steering committee's multi-month inquiry into the state of immigration services at the University, it was recently decided that OASIS and International Scholar and Employee Services (ISES), a unit within Human Resources which solely provides immigration advising and document processing services, would both transition to the Division of International Affairs (DIA) and share an office space for centralization purposes. In contrast to Student Affairs, DIA is situated within the Academic Affairs branch of MGU and has a mission primarily focused on enhancing global learning across the University's curriculum by helping faculty integrate best practices; expanding international partnerships and academic linkages; and increasing exchange and study abroad participation.

Coinciding with this transition is the recent hiring of OASIS' new permanent director, Dr. Lyla Gallagher. Gallagher was an external candidate for the position and shined throughout the interview process by demonstrating her comprehensive knowledge of F and J visa regulations and extensive experience innovating services and programs for international students. She has a doctorate in intercultural education and came to MGU after six years of serving as Director of International Student and Scholar Services (ISSS) at Wonderwall

College, a campus internationalization award-winning, small liberal arts institution well-known for its proportionately large and diverse international student body and high study abroad participation rate.

Case

It has been a tumultuous two months since OASIS transitioned to DIA. MGU and OASIS have been in the national news, unfortunately not for positive press. A recent Global Stork graduate has filed a lawsuit against the University, claiming that she was misadvised by an OASIS advisor about the deadline to apply for Optional Practical Training (OPT), and as a result, will miss out on three years of post-completion employment with a high profile tech company that recruited her.

OASIS is also under fire in the campus community. *Signed, Sealed, Delivered by Stork*, the University's student-run newspaper, recently ran a front-page feature story lambasting OASIS. In the article, titled "OASIS Services Just a Mirage for International Students," Global Stork members of the MGU Student Governance Association's leadership team are quoted as criticizing OASIS for its "snail pace" 15-business day request processing time and limited advising appointments, despite the \$100 international student fee they must pay each semester. The article and the news of the lawsuit seem to have struck a nerve with other Global Storks disgruntled with OASIS' services, some of whom have contacted the Office of the Chancellor to air their grievances.

"Who Put the Weight of the World on My Shoulders?"

With campus at a boiling point and pressure from the Chancellor, the DIA Dean meets with Gallagher for a serious discussion about how OASIS will improve its services to begin repairing its reputation. He demands that for the foreseeable future OASIS function as an immigration advising and paperwork processing office like their colleagues in ISES. He also gives the order that weekly advising hours be doubled and all requests be processed within 7 business days. Additionally, he shares that, due to the economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and a much lower enrollment projection for the Fall 2021 Global Stork cohort, all OASIS programs will be indefinitely suspended, with the exception of new student orientation, along with professional development opportunities for staff.

Complicating matters for Gallagher, two of her senior staff members, an associate director and senior international student advisor, recently departed the office dropping their team to 13 professional staff members (including herself). Her current staff now includes:

- 1 Assistant Director of International Student Engagement
- 1 International Programs Coordinator
- 1 Advisor and International Peer Mentorship Program Coordinator (hybrid 50/50 role)
- 1 Advisor and Intercultural Speakers Program Coordinator (hybrid 50/50 role)
- 1 Data Specialist
- 1 Administrative Assistant
- 6 International Student Advisors (three of whom are new ISAs that started in the last six months)

Even though all her staff members have Designated School Official (DSO)/Alternate Responsible Officer (ARO) authorization and access to the Student and Exchange Visitor Information System (SEVIS), Gallagher's mind is in a supersonic tailspin pondering how they will be able to adjust roles and maximize efficiency to meet the advising and paperwork needs of their massive Global Stork community, while adhering to the 7-business day processing time. She also knows that, despite these demanding service changes and being understaffed, she must soon start the hiring process for her two permanent staff vacancies.

Complicating matters further, with summer and the end of the fiscal year on the horizon, many of her staff have accumulated leave that expires at the end of the June. The Assistant Director of International Student Engagement and one of the ISAs have already been pre-approved for month-long vacations to visit their families in Asia whom they have not seen in many years. It dawns on her that while her Assistant Director is on vacation, she will be responsible for supervising the entire staff in addition to all her other responsibilities as Principal Designated School Official (PDSO)/Responsible Officer (RO) and director of the unit. Gallagher never

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experienced such a perfect storm of crises during her tenure at Wonderwall College and feels as if already the weight of the world is on her shoulders in her new role.

Knowing she must take action soon and feeling apprehensive about how staff will respond to the changes in services, she consults the Assistant Director of International Student Engagement. He is shocked by the drastic measures Gallagher intends to announce and implement. He tells her this will be a tremendous burden and source of stress for their already overworked staff. The Assistant Director also says he is “deeply concerned” about how this shift will impact OASIS’ engagement and student success support for Global Storks, as well as the morale of his passionate coworkers whose roles are focused on programming. He ends their conversation with: “With all due respect, some of us aren’t just in this field to issue I-20s and advise on CPT. Our students have real needs that go beyond immigration advising and processing paperwork. Not providing this support, which has always been part of our mission, is a major disservice to thousands of our students and our staff, too.”

At their next staff meeting, Gallagher announces the changes dictated by the Dean, including doubling advising hours, the new 7-business day processing time expectation, and the indefinite moratorium on all OASIS engagement activities, including the peer mentorship and intercultural speakers programs, except for new student orientation. She also explains that due to the heavy workload, shortage of staff, and budgetary shortfall, all professional development is on hold through at least the end of the next fiscal year. She adds that their weekly staff-wide social justice and student development conversations, formerly an OASIS goal and practice when they were affiliated with Student Affairs’ IEI subdivision, will also be discontinued to maximize time for advising, processing, and document production services.

In the week since the staff meeting, a number of OASIS team members have reached out to Gallagher and requested to meet to discuss the announced changes. Those working in programming, in particular, have questioned and voiced their concern about this sea change and the implications for their important work in student engagement as well as OASIS’ mission. Gallagher has heard desperate pleas and fervent remonstrations from her colleagues and seen a few of them break down in tears. Having started her career as a programming coordinator in an ISSS office many years ago—a job she adored—she now feels deeply conflicted about these sacrifices and how they will impact the Global Stork experience for many as well as the morale of her staff. She senses a very challenging road ahead, like crossing a great desert, that will ultimately shape the mission and future of OASIS.

Discussion Questions

As you consider this case, discuss:

- How might cultural differences between Student Affairs, Academic Affairs, and institutional leadership affect this case?
- What lessons can we take away from how decisions were made and handled by institutional leadership in this case?
- With the service changes, work volume, staffing challenges, and budgetary restrictions, how might the director bolster staff morale to avoid further attrition?
- To what degree are crisis management and change tolerance complicating factors for the director and her staff in this case, and how might growth in these areas be facilitated for them?
- Which services provided by ISSS offices, such as immigration advising, document production, orientation, programming, etc., should be prioritized and why?
- In ISSS offices which primarily provide immigration services, should social justice and student development discussions and trainings be expected of staff and incorporated into their work, including advising and programming?

- How can ISSS offices best balance the sometimes incongruous relationship between upholding federal regulations and institutional policy and advocating for international student and scholar equity, inclusion, and success?
- In what ways can a divisional transition impact the mission, services, and culture of an ISSS office, and how can this benefit or disadvantage international students and scholars?
- Bonus question: What legendary British rock band is subliminally referenced throughout this case study?

Bonus Question Answer: Oasis

References: "Morning Glory" (song from the album *What's the Story Morning Glory?*), "Lyla" (song), "Wonderwall" (song), "Supersonic" (song), "Who Put the Weight of the World on My Shoulders?" (song), "Gallagher" (last name of Liam and Noel, Oasis's band-leading brothers)