There are currently close to a million international students studying in the United States. More than 200,000 of these students—one out of every four—are currently guided through the maze of federal and university procedures with a tool developed by the Office of International Services at Indiana University.

After 9/11, Homeland Security was charged with finding more reliable ways to track students coming from abroad to study in the United States. The agency’s solution was SEVIS (the Student and Exchange Visitor Information System). SEVIS was built on a huge federal database. Universities access the database online to record and maintain information about all of their international students and scholars. If SEVIS records were incomplete or inaccurate, the student or scholar might be judged out of status and forced to return home, and in some cases, not allowed to return to the United States for long periods of time.

SEVIS created the international student advisor’s worst nightmare. Advisors could see students’ university records online in the university system and they could see online what SEVIS knew about those students, but the two systems were completely separate. Advisors constantly had to cross-check one against the other. A small discrepancy or an inadvertent delay could cost a student his or her academic career.

A solution was devised a few months after SEVIS went online when Jason Baumgartner, then the only technical staff member of the IU Office of International Services, working in the evening on his own time, found a way to connect the data in the two systems. His prototype software provided the synapse between the brain cells of the university system and those of the federal database. Sunapsis was born.

Sunapsis made it possible to have all of a student’s data in one place, and that made it possible for the computer to do the heavy lifting—to cross-check and make sure both systems had the same information, to alert advisors and students when deadlines were approaching, and generally to assure that all the technical rules were met to keep international students in status in the United States.

Baumgartner led the office over the next year in implementing the software and assuring that it followed the welter of federal and university regulations affecting students and scholars from abroad. Chris Viers,

The Sunapsis team celebrated 10 years of the software that provides a safety net for international students and scholars during their study and training in the United States.
“Nothing comes close to Sunapsis in terms of functionality. We’ve been able to accommodate a 30 percent increase in student enrollment—over 1,000 more students—without needing additional staff.”  —Run Cushing, University of Cincinnati

associate vice president for international services, lobbied the university administration to allow this homegrown solution to manage its international student compliance—to manage hundreds of details for thousands of students. It was a huge risk; if the university failed to comply with federal rules, it could lose the right to host international students. On the 21st of January, 2005, at 6:24 in the evening, Baumgartner used Sunapsis to approve and upload four address updates to the federal database. The system worked.

International Services initially developed Sunapsis for its own use, but when other universities heard about it, they wanted in. The University of Cincinnati was the first non-IU institution to implement Sunapsis. Now 91 universities, large and small, from coast to coast, manage the work of their international student and scholar offices with Sunapsis.

Although the core solution—the synapse between university and federal systems—remains as relevant today as it did a decade ago, Sunapsis has grown well beyond its original conception. It now provides soup-to-nuts support from the moment a student inquires about studying at IU, to admission and orientation, assuring that students feel connected to the university long before they arrive here, to communication tools that keep students up to date on their own cases and on campus activities, to providing the technical resources to support students’ employment through practical training after they graduate.

The Sunapsis team in the Office of International Services has grown to twelve staff members. From the start, Sunapsis also provided services for scholars—academics from abroad coming to IU to teach, consult, or conduct research. The team has developed new applications for managing the spectrum of study abroad operations, for data management and institutional reporting and statistical analysis.

At the 2015 Sunapsis User Conference last fall, which brought representatives from 62 institutions to Bloomington, Chris Viers celebrated the 10th anniversary with an award to Jason Baumgartner for his dedicated service to the office and in recognition of his “outstanding work with Sunapsis and its transformative impact on the field of international education.”