

By Dana Wilkie



# Supporting Dependents

## Help and Guidance for the Spouses and Children of International Students and Scholars

### **L**anguage barriers. Culture shock. Isolation. Financial stress.

These are among the challenges a spouse and children can face when they accompany an international scholar or student to a foreign university.

Dependents often quickly discover that their new life looks quite different from that of the scholar or (often, graduate or postdoctoral) student. While the scholar is swept into a campus experience that offers new friendships, collegial interaction, and invigorating work, his or her dependents can find themselves struggling with boredom, a lack of meaningful work, overwhelming culture shock, and a need for social connections.

The international student and scholar services (ISSS) office is typically the primary campus contact for the dependents of international scholars and students, and the office serves as an important resource in preparing for and easing their transition into a new community.

“We feel that we have just as much of a responsibility to our spouses and partners as we do to our students and scholars,” says Molly Hampton, assistant director for programs and communications at Yale University’s Office of International Students and Scholars. The dependents’ experience directly affects that of the scholar’s—and if that experience is negative, it is neither good for the visiting scholar nor the institution. However,

a positive experience contributes to internationalization and cross-cultural exchange in the wider community.

### **Starting on the Right Foot**

Thousands of international students and scholars bring their children and spouses to the United States for the duration of their program, and the earlier in the process that dependents’ needs are taken into account, the better.

“For us, the responsibility kicks in when we know a scholar has plans to bring his or her family to the United States,” says Eva Wong, assistant director for international programs at the College of William & Mary (W&M)’s Reves Center for International Studies. “We provide information on how to request the appropriate immigration documents and apply for visas. Resources for family members are sent to the students and their family before they arrive.”

At many institutions, ISSS staff who work with international scholars and their families try to build these connections immediately—sometimes from the day the scholar learns of his or her acceptance at an institution. It takes time to complete visa paperwork for the entire family and wait for approval, to locate appropriate housing, and to research local schools, which can serve as a prime opportunity for the ISSS office to step up.

“It’s always helpful when the family unit is able to stay together,” says Wong. “However, there are many challenges when scholars choose to bring their families with them. It is important for ISSS offices to support the scholars and their families.”

### **Navigating Logistics**

Perhaps one of the most daunting tasks facing a newly arrived family is finding housing that is affordable, safe, and within reasonable distance of the campus. This is especially important to spouses and dependents because it is likely that they, rather than the scholar or student, will be spending the most time in their new home.

In response, many universities have on-campus dorms or housing for such

families, though space is often limited and fills up quickly.

Jennifer Recklet Tassi is a senior program manager at Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) who helps acclimate the families that accompany international postdocs and graduate students. Because most scholars do not receive much in terms of funding and many of their spouses are unable to attain work visas, it is important, she says, to steer international families to outlying neighborhoods that still meet each family's needs and standards.

The U.S. school system may be different from the system in their home country, so ISSS advisers can provide resources on education options for the family to discuss and evaluate. They “often need assistance navigating the school enrollment process of their children,” says John Hildebrand, an adviser in Colorado State University's ISSS office.

How does the public school system work? Should private school be an option? What records are needed to determine placement? How do coursework and the grading scale differ from what they are used to? Because spouses and children typically do not need to prove their English proficiency to stay in the country, their language skills could be less advanced, which could lead to challenges at a new school.

Help comes in many forms. Hildebrand's office works with a nonprofit community organization that assists with school registration and offers free English language classes. At MIT, Recklet Tassi connects spouses and children with an on-campus work-life center that helps with schooling and child care. And Wong's office at W&M offers a free, weekly English conversation club for scholars' relatives.

## Managing Culture Shock

It is crucial that ISSS offices acknowledge and support dependents through their experience with culture shock, which can affect people differently at different times. Experiencing an unfamiliar language, food, or customs—along with learning new ways to do routine tasks like banking, grocery shopping, or managing medical appointments—can take an emotional, mental, and physical toll.

In late fall each year—before winter sets in—Recklet Tassi delivers a presentation about what to expect from culture shock. “That's the time that most people have [already] figured out public transportation, the grocery, and their housing, and now it's getting colder and darker, and that's a really tough time for people.”

She refers many spouses experiencing culture shock—and the depression that can come with it—to mental health counselors.

“Our job is to provide these resources and referrals so people can adapt and do whatever they want to do,” Recklet Tassi says. “Whether that's study, work, volunteer, or care for their children.”

## Evading Isolation and Building Community

Many spouses give up their careers to accompany scholars and students abroad. While some spouses may embrace the challenges and the chance to try new things, others may find themselves housebound, homesick, and unable to develop strong social connections because of language barriers.

“No one wants to be homebound and bored,” said Jennifer Kelley, the ISSS lead at the University of North Carolina-Greensboro.

Like ISSS offices at many institutions, Kelley's office helps dependents connect with their communities through schools, social clubs, and religious groups. Other

ISSS advisers may guide spouses toward resources on child care, support groups, new and expectant parent groups, cultural groups, volunteer activities, low-cost education, mental health counseling, and more. Many of these local groups organize events for international spouses and children and offer in-person consultations to help them adapt and find their own purpose.

Recklet Tassi's staff hosts peer-led parent groups, weekly gatherings with free child care, and speaker events that include spouses who share an interest or area of expertise. Her office at MIT also connects spouses with a program that helps them to develop work skills or find work, assuming the spouse has a work visa.

Similarly, Hampton runs the International Spouses and Partners at Yale (ISPY), which offers a two-day orientation for international scholars and their spouses or partners, weekly meetings where spouses can mingle, and a daily English conversation group that offers insights on U.S. life and culture.

“Typically, when spouses come to us they are looking for help finding community, getting a Yale ID card to access certain things at the university, applying for work permission, and job hunting,” said Hampton. ISPY encourages spouses to get involved and create their own enriching experiences during their stay in the United States.

At W&M, the International Family Network links spouses and children with others who have gone through the transition so they can help newcomers adapt. These interactions serve as a reminder that any feelings of displacement or culture shock that the dependents experience are usually only temporary.

“Family members can sometimes be a forgotten group on campus,” Wong said. “It is important for ISSS offices to highlight their contributions and collaborate with on- and off-campus partners to meet their needs.” ■

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## NAFSA Resources

*Supporting International Spouses and Dependents:* [bit.ly/2llsTSV](https://bit.ly/2llsTSV)

*Health and Wellness:* [bit.ly/2JQhuNk](https://bit.ly/2JQhuNk)