

# WELCOME TO CAMPUS!



**T**homas Lavenir of James Madison University (JMU) talks about the “expensive learning mistakes” that new international students make—sometimes before they even set foot on campus. One student flew into Harrisburg, Pa., rather than Harrisonburg, Va., where JMU is located. Another went to the emergency room at a local hospital for a cold rather than see a physician at the university health center.

New international student orientations, mandated by the federal government for all F-1 and J-1 visa holders, can help students who have just arrived in the United States with more than visa check-in and processing requirements. Incorporating both pre-departure information and on-campus events, orientations introduce international students to a university’s academic, cultural and social setting. And they provide practical tips to help students navigate day-to-day life and avoid costly mistakes like those mentioned above.

“We try to use a personable, friendly approach to orientation so the whole ordeal of moving overseas and leaving your family behind can be made a lot smoother,” says Lavenir, Assistant Director for Orientation and Student Leadership Programs in JMU’s International Student and Scholar Services office.

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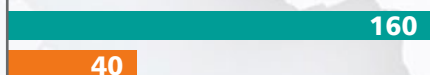
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# PEER PARTICIPATION

One of the challenges of organizing student orientations is the increasing number of international students attending U.S. schools. When Lavenir joined JMU 11 years ago, the public university nestled in the Shenandoah Valley received about 40 new international students each year. Today that figure has risen to approximately 160.

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NEW INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS PER YEAR



“Part of the challenge is that we have different types of international students,” says Lavenir. “We have English learners in a bridge program, exchange students here for one or two semesters, transfer students, incoming freshmen and graduate students.” JMU’s three-day orientation includes information and activities for all international students, with events ranging from informational sessions on campus safety and transportation to social gatherings such as a picnic and water balloon toss.

JMU’s orientation runs smoothly—even as the number of international students increases—thanks in large part to 15 student helpers called LINKers (Leader for International Networking & Knowledge). They serve as the main links between incoming and current JMU globally-minded students. During orientation, new international students are broken into groups led by a LINKer. “This helps personalize the experience and make it more comfortable for students to ask questions,” says Lavenir.



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## A UNIFORM MESSAGE

Southern Methodist University (SMU) has nearly 500 new international students arrive on its urban Dallas campus each year. The majority are graduate students enrolled in one of 80 programs offered by SMU. The university's Office of Student Transitions & Orientation oversees orientation for undergraduate international students, while the International Student and Scholar Services office organizes a day-long orientation for graduate students.

Until this year, grad student orientation was done by individual academic departments. ISSS now spearheads orientation to disperse information on campus life, health and safety, enrollment services, library and information technology resources and more. "Previously, some of the departments had one-day orientations, some were one or two hours and some sent students to us," says Anna Lippard, International Services Specialist at SMU. "ISSS began running orientation to make sure every international grad student is getting the information they need no matter what program they are in."

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# 7 IDEAS FOR ORIENTATION

Planning for your 2015 new international student orientation is done, and the event itself may be just around the corner. But as you evaluate the orientation when it's over and begin to plan for next year, consider adding these seven components to make it more valuable to students.



**Online pre-departure orientation**—Don't just mail students large packets with information on immigration documents and other important topics. Provide as much data as possible online. Considering adding short videos featuring international students that cover critical topics ranging from classroom culture to transportation. JMU just completed a video welcoming new students to campus and telling them what they need to know about the new international student orientation.

**A shopping trip**—International students don't arrive on campus with all of the essentials. Many schools, including JMU and Oberlin College, organize a visit to a local store. JMU offers two opportunities for students to board a bus to Walmart and buy linens.

**A welcome fair**—SMU hosts a welcome fair where vendors from the community can introduce their services to students. Vendors include the Dallas Area Rapid Transit (DART), the division of motor vehicles and banks.

**A panel discussion**—In a breakout session, LINKers at JMU share tips for being successful at the university.

Receiving advice from peers may have more impact than hearing it from school officials.

**A parent/family program**—Many universities, including the University of Michigan and Duke University, hold separate orientation programs for parents and families of international students to address their specific needs and concerns. If your university has a large graduate student population whose families will remain in the U.S. with them, consider an orientation for them, too.

**A volunteer project**—This has the dual benefit of teambuilding and introducing students to the importance of community service in the United States. During orientation at UCLA, students create gift baskets to donate to Mattel Children's Hospital that include items to make patients feel more comfortable during their hospital stay.

**An off-campus retreat**—SMU holds the Mustang Corral for all incoming students, including international undergraduates. The five-day excursion at a retreat center south of Dallas allows for personal self-discovery and creates bonds among students.

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► **A final bit of advice** from Lavenir and Lippard on planning new international student orientations: Plan ahead, and involve other departments, such as residential life. "Get buy-in from different stakeholders and departments at your university that can help line up speakers, provide financial support and stage the orientation," says Lippard. In the end, the more university partners who are involved, the better your orientation will be. And that will help ensure that new international students will begin their college career on the right path.



T E R R A D O T T A

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