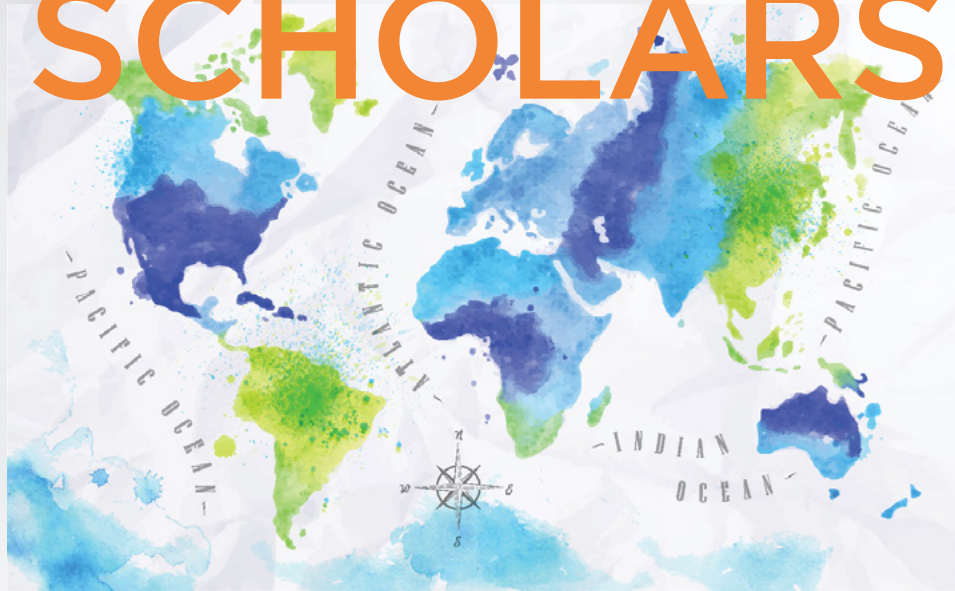


SERVING THE NEEDS OF INTERNATIONAL SCHOLARS



At universities where international students far outnumber international scholars, it's sometimes easy for the latter to slip through the cracks when it comes to advising. Regina Henry admits this occasionally happens at Oklahoma State University, which has approximately 2,000 international students this fall and only 80 scholars.

"You have a group of J-1 scholars that need the same attention you give F-1 students," says Henry, Coordinator of Immigration for International Students and Scholars at Oklahoma State. "However, the scholars have some different reporting and advising needs. Because they don't require a lot of SEVIS work and don't need to be checked in on every semester, they can get overlooked. We have to ensure we don't get so busy with the students that we forget things the scholar might need."

Previously, one advisor in the ISSS office at Oklahoma State handled all scholars, but now the university divides students and scholars among its advisors. "I am sure the Department of State would like one individual in each office to oversee scholars, but can you actually afford to do that?" questions Henry. "I just don't know."

THIS UNIQUE GROUP PLAYS
AN IMPORTANT ROLE ON
CAMPUS AND MAY REQUIRE
SOME EXTRA ATTENTION
FROM ISSS.



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The ISSS office at Vanderbilt University also navigates the delicate balancing act of serving both international students and scholars. The private university in Nashville, Tenn., has about 1,600 international students, the majority of which are enrolled in graduate programs, and 400 scholars. Staff in the ISSS office are cross-trained to work with both students and scholars, whose needs are largely the same, says Michelle Kovash from Vanderbilt's ISSS office.

"Both students and scholars require us to adhere to regulations. Though they vary slightly, the logistical and reporting parts are similar," says Kovash. "Both groups need to adjust to entering U.S. culture and, for us, Nashville and Vanderbilt culture, too. There also are a lot of overlapping issues that have to do with navigating campus, obtaining a driver's license, getting a social security number and so on."



"It's important that the scholars aren't just in their department teaching and doing research," says Henry.

WHAT SETS SCHOLARS APART?

While many advising tasks are the same for international students and scholars, there are some differences. The biggest one revolves around the primary reason each group is on campus. Students are enrolled in classes, while J-1 visa holders are typically short-term scholars, professors or research scholars.

"Their tasks are different at the institution," says Henry. "They are at Oklahoma State primarily to do research or teach our lower level classes in areas such as math and microbiology." As such, the ISSS office must keep tabs on scholars to ensure that they are fulfilling their main objective. If scholars want to engage in an activity outside their research or teaching duties, such as giving a lecture at another school, then they must contact the ISSS office for approval.

Advisors also must make sure that scholars are involved in cross-cultural programs where they learn about the United States and its people. "It's important that the scholars aren't just in their department teaching and doing research," says Henry. "There must be a component that has cultural exchange value." This can be tricky. The principle investigators in many labs, for example, bring in scholars from their home countries, so it's easy and comfortable for the researchers to stick together rather than venture out into the community at large.

Vanderbilt sends a weekly e-newsletter to international students and scholars highlighting all the opportunities for cultural exchange. One of the school's most popular activities with scholars and their families is the EAT! Program, which stands for Experience American Taste. Once a month, host families in the Nashville area invite two to four international students and scholars to dinner at their homes. "It provides them the opportunity to share their culture and learn about ours, get outside the Vanderbilt bubble and build friendships," says Kovash.





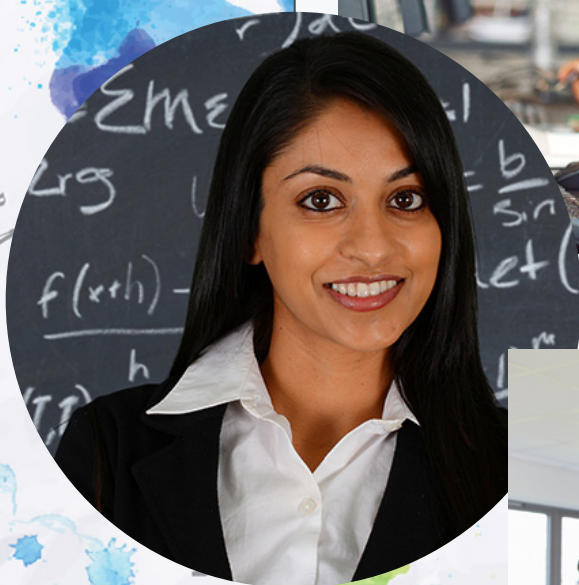
SUGGESTIONS FOR SERVING YOUR SCHOLARS



Henry and Kovash offer a handful of tips to help safeguard international scholars from getting lost in the shuffle:

- **Hold routine orientation sessions.** The Department of State requires universities to hold orientations for international scholars. Rather than planning one big orientation at the beginning of each year or semester, consider hosting more frequent sessions. Vanderbilt has a weekly 45-minute orientation every Thursday at 1 p.m. to catch any new scholars who may have arrived on campus.
- **Augment orientations with advising hours.** Because so many topics are covered in orientation, Vanderbilt has set advising hours twice a day and encourages scholars to come in with any questions they might have.
- **Provide extra assistance in language proficiency.** The Department of State has tightened requirements, asking universities to verify that scholars have sufficient proficiency in the English language to function in an English-speaking environment. “Even though our scholars meet the new proficiency levels, we still like to give them opportunities to advance their English skills,” says Kovash. The ISSS office guides them to classes offered by Vanderbilt’s English Language Center as well as lessons provided by various community organizations.
- **Ask for reports on extracurricular activities.** To streamline reporting on activities, Oklahoma State has begun asking scholars to provide information on the events they’ve attended and activities they’ve participated in. Henry says it’s made her job compiling the annual report much easier.
- **Offer support for dependents.** Vanderbilt has between 250 and 300 international dependents, most of whom arrive with scholars who are generally older than students. Advisors in the ISSS office plan spouse and partner programming and help J-2 visa holders submit work applications. Vanderbilt also holds a spouse and partner orientation once a semester. “It gives them an opportunity to learn about the university and community as well as meet other spouses,” says Kovash.
- **Train administrators in departments hosting scholars.** Provide training on topics such as visa basics, scholar requirements and cultural adjustment. Vanderbilt holds training sessions once a year in the summer. When new regulations were released last winter, the university also had special training sessions for academic departments to fill them in on the changes, particularly concerning new language proficiency requirements. “It helps the departments understand the process for getting scholars here and avoid frustrations,” says Kovash. “In addition, training departmental administrators creates a partnership between them and the ISSS staff.”

Scholars are a unique—and important—group on campus. Whether they are teaching freshmen an introductory calculus course or conducting ground-breaking research in a biomedical engineering lab, their contributions to your university are significant. In return, they deserve your full attention.



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