

Local Connections

BY KAREN DOSS BOWMAN

**Helping International Students
Find a Welcoming Place
within the Local
Community**





release. “More than half of students who were less than very satisfied with their American friendships felt that the main problem lay with the Americans.”

Students from East Asia—the region sending the greatest number of foreign students to the United States—were found to be the least satisfied with their connections to U.S. students. Conversely, survey respondents from English-speaking countries were likely to have several close American friends. Gareis suggested that the reason for this fact may be partly attributed to the cultural differences between highly individualistic Americans and East Asian people, whose societies are more focused on relationships and community bonds. Survey responses also indicated that the foreign students who were unsatisfied with their relationships with American peers tended to perceive Americans as superficial or uninterested in other cultures.

These findings are significant because the United States is the world’s top education abroad destination. Helping international students and scholars acclimate to the communities in which they’re studying and helping them cultivate friendships are important steps to ensuring they get the most out of their education abroad experience.

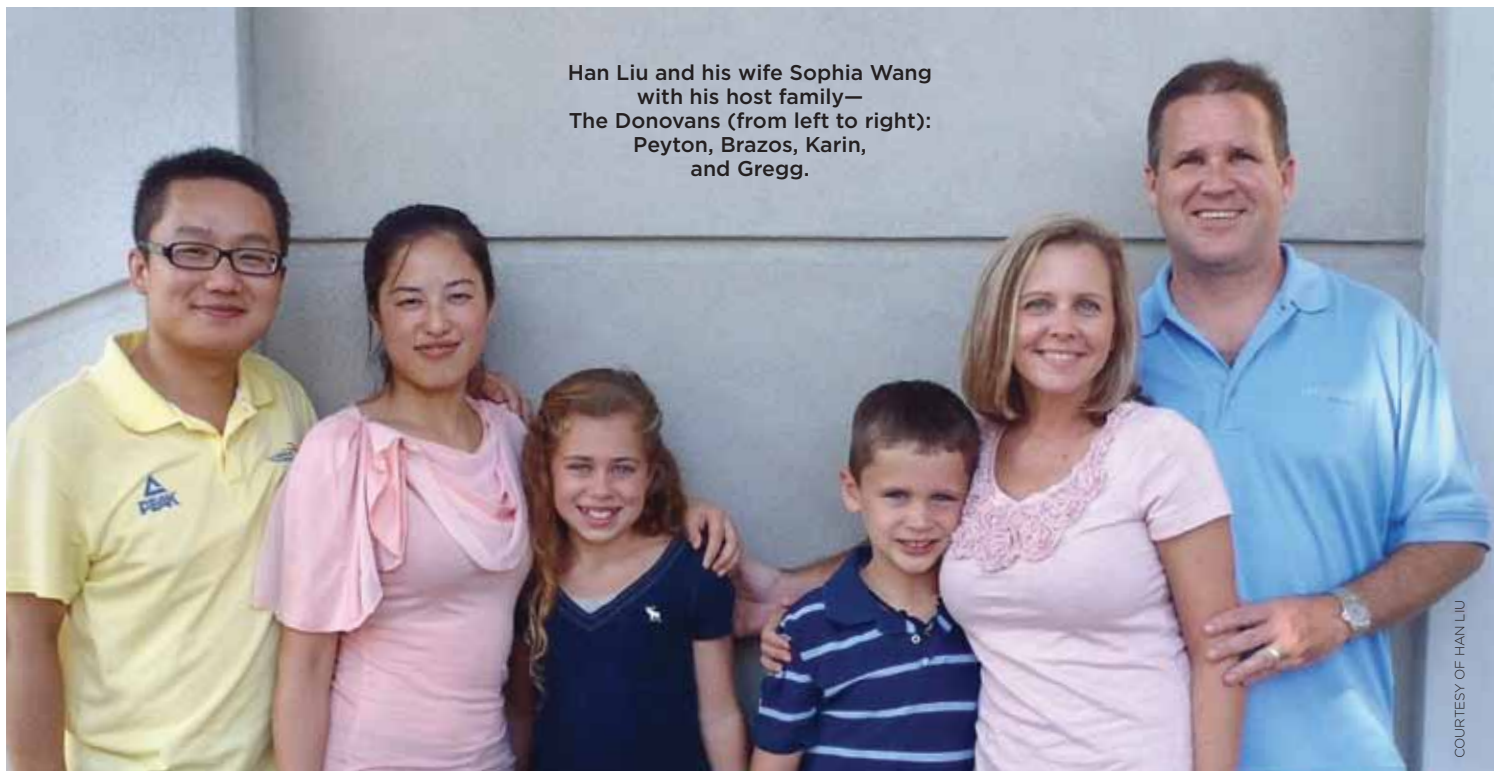
“It’s important to recognize that not every international student has a strong desire to [develop

American friendships], and that should be fine, but there are groups of international students and scholars that want to be more integrated,” says Sylvia Chen, staff psychologist at the University of Texas-Austin. “They want to get to know their American community and make friends with people from different cultures. It would be important to make sure there are opportunities for these individuals to help them connect to the greater community. According to research, students who have more meaningful contacts with people from the host culture are usually more satisfied with their adjustment experience, and tend to be more academically successful.”

These cross-cultural relationships are not only important for the international students and scholars visiting the United States, they also are valuable for the U.S. campus community and for local citizens off campus.

“Not everyone goes abroad, but we’re trying to get everyone an international experience,” says David DiMaria, associate director of Kent State University’s Office of Global Education. “One way to do that is by bringing students and scholars from various parts of the world to our campuses. It serves both groups by building that community, and that’s what most folks in higher education would view as an academic community.”

Han Liu and his wife Sophia Wang
with his host family—
The Donovans (from left to right):
Peyton, Brazos, Karin,
and Gregg.



Loneliness and Adjustment

When international students and scholars come to the United States to study, they face many overwhelming challenges, from meeting new people and becoming acclimated to the area to finding a place to live, buying a car, or navigating public transportation systems. That's why it's important for campuses to encourage international students and scholars to build new social networks and offer programs and services that support those efforts.

When PhD candidate Vien Cao, from Vietnam, enrolled at Southern Illinois University (SIU) in Carbondale in 2007, she was excited about exploring her new community and making American friends. Having a previous study abroad experience in the United Kingdom, Cao knew that requesting a host family was a great way to become familiar with a new place and make connections—so she signed up for SIU's Host Family program.

"It can be good for students [to have a host family] because first, it can be good for their English and second, they'll get to know the culture and make good relationships that may last a long time," says Cao. "The relationship with my host family helps me enjoy my time in the U.S. more, keeps me busy, and gives me an insight into the life of an American family. It opens my horizons."

Cao's host parents, Bruce and Louise Williams, have become like second parents to her. Mr. Williams even escorted her down the aisle during her wedding in August 2009, since her own parents were unable to travel from Vietnam for the occasion.

"My host family is just like my own family—I often go to their house when I have time, and when they happen to be in town they pick me up and we go somewhere to eat or something," says Cao, who gave birth to her first child in the United States two years ago and is expecting a second child in November. "It doesn't mean that the host family replaces your real family, but it's someone who cares for you and makes time for you."

For many international students and scholars, understanding and speaking English can be the greatest struggle during their stay in the United States. Even those who are proficient in English likely will have difficulty understanding the regional colloquialisms and slang their American peers use in everyday conversations. Providing settings to help improve their language skills may boost their confidence while helping them develop new friendships.

At Rice University in Houston, the Office of International Students and Scholars sponsors free, weekly English and culture classes taught by volunteers from the local community. The classes offered include English Idioms and Slang, Beginning English Conversation, Advanced/Intermediate conversation, and Grammar and Pronunciation. Family members of the international graduate students also are invited to take the classes.

"It's a place for the students to land, it's a place for them to make friends, and they can practice English in a fun, nonthreatening envi-

ronment," says Adria Baker, associate vice provost for international education and executive director of the Office of International Students and Scholars. "The goal for the teachers is hospitality. If the students learn language along with it, that's great, but it's more about building bridges and practicing English in a stress-free area."

Catherine Spain of Houston has been one of Rice's volunteer English teachers for 18 years. Spain, a Spanish teacher who grew up in Peru and Colombia, understands the desire to make connections with people and places in a new, unfamiliar community—and the apprehension that goes along with that.

"Having grownup overseas, I know firsthand how helpful it is to have teachers and friends who can put you at ease while you tackle the job of learning their language and give you a window into their

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culture and values," Spain says. "For me, teaching as a volunteer at Rice has been a wonderful opportunity to now fill that role for others. At the same time, I've been able to learn from students, scholars, and their spouses about their families and cultures, as well as their studies and experiences as newcomers to a university campus in our country. I have especially enjoyed being able to offer these newcomers glimpses into United States culture and point them to interesting possibilities that may help them make the most of their stay."

It's also important for international offices to consider the adjustment of foreign students' spouses and families, who also are grappling with an unfamiliar culture and language. Immigration restrictions often prohibit spouses from holding jobs, though many of them were working professionals in their home country. This role reversal may lead to boredom and depression. Many colleges and universities sponsor special activities for spouses, including orientation sessions, social networking groups, and community outings.

"Supporting the spouse is critical, and it's a way of indirectly supporting the student," says DiMaria. "If you have a graduate student who's in a chemistry lab all day, concerned about a thesis or dissertation or coursework, only to go home and find a spouse who's going stir crazy, then that student has a hard time focusing when he or she gets back home. So assisting the spouse to be more satisfied, then we may reduce the amount of stress the student may feel."



Building Social Networks

One of the most common and effective ways to help students adjust to their new environment and build relationships is to match them with host families from the local community. The University of Houston's International Friendship Program, hosted by the International Student and Scholar Services Office and through which Liu met the Donovan family, has seen many positive results since its inception in 1970. Host families are asked to commit to monthly get-togethers with their international students or scholars, and either party can drop out at any time if the need arises, explains coordinator Dale Hamilton.



Vien Cao with her hosts, Bruce and Louise Williams.

"For many students, it may be the only way they get off campus to meet folks," Hamilton says. "This is a good way to help the student personally meet Texans or Americans, and I think they develop a good bond that you just don't get on campus with your roommates or your professors. We have some former students who are still in touch with the families they met 20 and 30 years ago. They form lifelong friendships."

While these relationships benefit the students in their personal and academic endeavors, Hamilton notes that they also may boost recruitment and retention. The international students and scholars tend to e-mail their friends and families and post on social media sites pictures and descriptions of the fun outings with their host families. Once they return home, they continue talking about those experiences—and sometimes invite their American host families to visit their country. Their ex-

citement is contagious, and that may encourage other international students and scholars to choose the University of Houston. Some have even signed up online for the International Friendship Program before arriving in Houston, Hamilton notes. Once they form bonds on campus, they are more likely to stay and complete their degree programs or research projects.

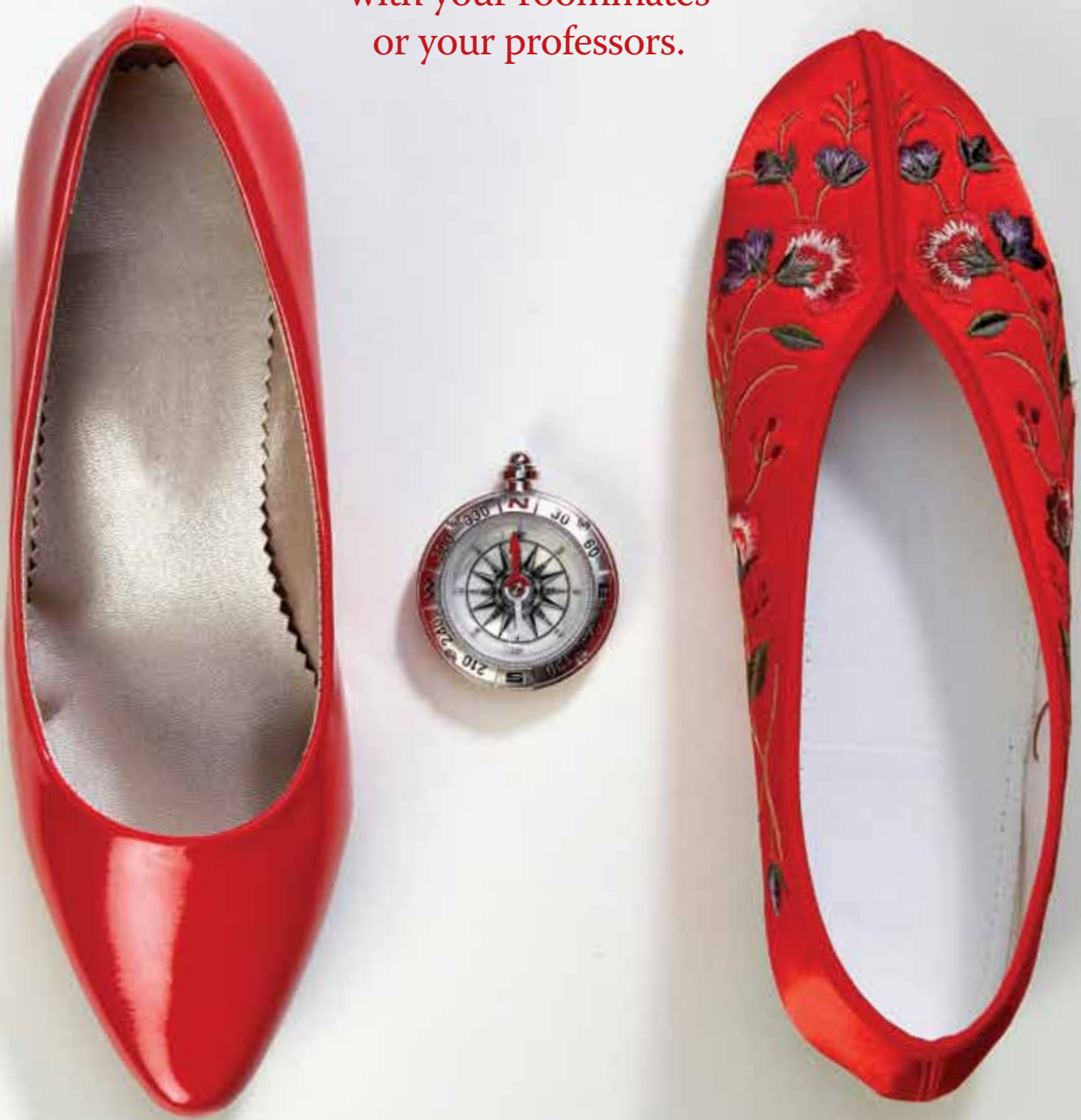
"The sphere of influence goes beyond the actual student who was here," Hamilton says. "They let their family and friends back home know about the good times they had here. It's helping people of both countries get a better view of each other, and that can only be a good thing for relationships between countries and people as well."

At SIU, building community starts with engaging about 200 U.S. campus and community volunteers in a broad range of programs and projects supporting international students and scholars. The Loan Closet, for example, provides household items and winter coats that international visitors may borrow during their stay in the United States. Through English in Action and Language Exchange, foreign students and community volunteers can break down cultural barriers through practicing each other's languages. IN GEAR provides opportunities for international students and scholars to share their culture in nearby schools. Mother Care friendship teams, comprising community volunteers, offer support and encouragement to pregnant international women by helping them wade through unfamiliar medical terms and procedures; shop for maternity clothing and baby items; host a baby shower; and share in the joy of the occasion.

International students are just as likely as their American counterparts to face personal crises, too. The difficulty of the situation is only compounded when the student is far away from close family and friends—and immigration restrictions often prevent them from being able to come to the United States right away.

At SIU, an Emergency Response Team of volunteers may provide legal, medical, insurance, spiritual, and counseling support to international students, scholars, and their families in times of need. The team was activated recently, for example, when an international graduate student was diagnosed with a life-threatening disease with treatments scheduled once or twice a day, four days each week. Though friends took turns transporting him at first, the volume of appointments became too much for them to handle alone. SIU activated an Emergency Response Team to take the student to and from medical appointments for about five months, until his wife could join him in the United

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States. Although the student passed away, the situation is a touching example of how local residents can rally around international students on their local campuses.

“What I hope is that at a difficult time such as when a student is experiencing a life-threatening illness, our emergency response team provides more than just transportation to medical appointments,” says Elaine Conrad, community programs coordinator in SIU’s Center for International Education. “I believe that our volunteers provide a life-long connection to compassion for not only the student, but their families as well. When a student becomes ill thousands of miles away from their families, volunteers assume the role of extended families. We are so very fortunate to have volunteers who reach out to our students in an emergency with both caring and compassion.”

Partnerships Boost Connections

For many American colleges and universities, financial and staff resources are tight. By forming partnerships with other organizations on campus or within the local community, international offices can expand their outreach and maximize the effectiveness of programs.

At Kent State University, for example, the Office of Global Education has formed partnerships with the Rotary Club, the local historical society, and downtown merchants to engage international students and scholars in the local community. The historical society, for example, hosts walking tours of the downtown area and provides an orientation to the local farmer’s market. Foreign students often are invited to give presentations on their countries and cultures at the Rotary Club, giving them an opportunity to develop friendships with Americans. Additionally, an off-campus housing liaison in the university’s Center for Student Involvement maintains close contact with landlords to educate them about the needs of international students and scholars, as well as to advocate for the students by negotiating contracts and assisting with resolving conflicts with landlords.

Partnerships also thrive at Colorado State University (CSU). Apartment Life, a global and multicultural residential village with residents from more than 80 countries, has teamed up with numerous campus and community organizations (such as adult learner and veteran services, the recreation center, and athletics) to provide family-friendly events and access to CSU resources such as technology and recreational opportunities, as well as addressing larger community needs such as transportation, public school, and childcare needs, says Christie Mathews, director of apartment life.

Apartment life also partners locally with the Fort Collins International Center—a community organization that strives to create a model community that embraces global connections and celebrates cultural understanding and diversity. The Center sponsors a number of programs to bring together CSU international students and local residents, including the Home Stay Program to provide foreign students with temporary housing in local homes and the Global Ambassadors Program through which CSU international students and scholars share their culture, heritage, and language in local schools and organizations. International students, scholars, and spouses may volunteer for the center, providing opportunities for them to make friends and become an integral part of the community.

“We take a comprehensive, holistic view of [addressing] the needs in the community,” Mathews says. “We advocate for students and families on campus and in the community to say, ‘What is the impact of [this issue] on our families or the non-students, who are not necessarily paying fees but still need to have access to navigate Fort Collins and the campus?’ It’s important to look at how the needs of international students differ from domestic students and to provide an inclusive environment where those needs are addressed.”

At Northern Arizona University (NAU), the increasing number of Chinese scholars coming to campus inspired the creation of the Scholar Academy to provide a learning and support structure for visiting faculty and to help them become integrated into their respective disciplines, the campus, and the community. The program, a partnership between NAU’s Center for International Education and the College of Education, sets up a framework for matching scholars with NAU faculty mentors. Friday morning sessions are focused on helping the scholars meet their academic objectives and learn about the U.S. education system. The group takes field trips to area Native American schools, local public schools, and a community college to get a first-hand view of different academic models and methods. The initiative gives both scholars and the sponsoring academic departments guidance about expectations and facilitates professional and friendly dialogue.

“It’s a great experience all around,” says Catherine Ribic, director of international student and scholar services at NAU. “It’s great for the scholars to have this wide-ranging interaction in their academic departments, and it’s nice for the faculty here because it exposes them to international visitors. This kind of sharing of cultural and academic experiences has been great.”

Gretchen McAllister, an NAU associate professor of teaching and learning, says one of the benefits of the program is that it has led to an increasing number of NAU faculty members working with international scholars.

“This is a safe international step for those faculty who are less interested in traveling or living outside of the United States,” McAllister says. “They can have a cross-cultural experience on their own turf. My hope is that this may then lead to them traveling outside of the U.S., which I believe is more transformative.”

A Happy Ending

Though some international students and scholars may be hesitant to branch out into the local community, encouraging them to break out of their comfort zone is the best way for them to have an enriching, life-changing study abroad experience. Cultivating meaningful connections and friendships between foreign students and Americans within the communities surrounding the campus will hopefully dispel stereotypes and offer more accurate representations of each other’s respective cultures.

“It’s important when students study abroad and come to the U.S. that they don’t do so in a bubble and that there’s a cultural exchange

“While they’re here, they’re ambassadors for their country. They educate students who don’t study abroad about their countries or cultures.”

that goes with it,” says DiMaria. “I’m in the old camp of why we do what we do for international education, and that is it can lead to positive diplomatic relations. You have a student who comes here from another country, and while they’re here, they’re ambassadors for their country. They educate students who don’t study abroad about their countries or cultures. It provides that intercultural exposure that people wouldn’t otherwise have, and it does that for community members as well who maybe have never been outside of the U.S. When students go back home, they become ambassadors for the U.S. because many of their family and friends maybe haven’t left their countries or been to the U.S.—so it serves as a lifelong investment for the U.S. and for their country as well.”

For colleges and universities wanting to create or expand support programs that help build community for international students and scholars, Baker recommends finding “champions” for the activities and programs you want to try. Those champions can be members of the campus community, or local volunteers. Baker and her colleague

Cory Owen, Rice’s program manager and senior international adviser, caution against pushing programs that no one is excited about doing. Don’t sponsor a baseball event, for example, if you hate baseball—either find another staff member or volunteer who can get behind it or try something else.

“It’s very important that the person who takes on these events and programs has a heart for it,” Owen says. “That makes all the difference. If you’re going to do something, be excited about it. A lot of these activities are done on the evenings or weekends, and it can be exhausting—but if you go into it with the right attitude, it’s rewarding. [These activities] can be a real bonding experience, and it changes the way I advise students because I get to know them personally. So much good comes out of it.”

Conrad offers simple advice: “Listen to the students. Find out what students feel they need and open your eyes to see that need.”

SIU formed a Student Programming Advisory Council, made up of both undergraduate and graduate students, to represent the university’s international students and to find ways to facilitate interaction between international and American students. The group meets regularly to keep Conrad and her staff informed about the needs of international students.

“These students act as the eyes and ears of the general population to keep us in touch with the changing needs of the students,” Conrad says.

Building community for international students and scholars is a comprehensive effort that should involve the entire campus, suggests DiMaria. At Kent State, an International Students and Scholars Integration Committee—with representatives from the campus’ 11 colleges, from each service area and from the student body—meets three times each semester to talk about issues and concerns of foreign students and scholars.

Members of the group share ideas about how to meet their needs of these visitors and how to integrate them on campus and within the local community.

“Just like it takes a village to raise a child, it takes a university to educate a student,” DiMaria says. “It’s everyone’s responsibility to serve international students and scholars—it’s not the job of one office. At a lot of universities, the international offices become the catch-all for all kinds of issues, and they get referrals for problems because other offices on campus don’t feel trained or prepared to interact with someone who doesn’t speak English or to handle the cultural differences. So having that training and those discussions on the front end and being a resource for these offices so that they can be a more effective resource for international students and scholars is important. It’s institutionalizing how we support international students and scholars and thinking about community in a broader sense.” **IE**

KAREN DOSS BOWMAN is a freelance writer in Bridgewater, Virginia. Her last article for *IE* was “Beyond the Comfort Zone” in the March/April 2012 issue.