

## A helping hand

International students benefit from mentors, friendships with local families

BY JIM HEFFERNAN ('96)

International students bring unique perspectives and add an important element of diversity to the Madison community. The Office of International Programs offers several initiatives designed to facilitate these students' transition to life at JMU and to help ensure their success.

The Leaders for International Networking & Knowledge program was instituted in 2006 in part to address the university's need to improve the recruitment and retention of international students. Since then, more than 60 student assistants from around the world have signed on to become program ambassadors, known as "LINKers." These individuals assist international students with everything from campus tours and residence hall check-ins to bus schedules, shopping trips and opening a bank account—"basically everything their parent or sibling would do for them," says Yifei Zhang, a LINKer originally from central China.

Each cohort of LINKers undergoes a two-semester program. In the spring, they help with recruitment and retention of international students by creating online admissions profiles, blog posts and short informational videos, and they engage in group work to advocate for the needs of the international student community. They also host the annual International Student Leadership Conference at JMU. In the fall, LINKers assist with Transitions, JMU's orientation for incoming international students, and are available to answer any questions that their "LINKees" may have. "When they ask me questions, I'm glad because it means they're comfortable with me," says Zhang, who is majoring in economics with a minor in mathematics. "I just try to keep a smile on my face all the time. That's very hard to do sometimes, but it's very important for this job."

LINKers attend bimonthly meetings and trainings and are



**(Above): LINKers help other international students transition to life at JMU. (Left, below): The LIFE program matches students with local families for friendship and cultural exchange.**

evaluated based on intercultural and leadership competencies.

"Being a LINKer taught me a key definition to good leadership," says Michelle Lee ('15). "Leaders are not superiors or commanders. They serve as an example so that others may learn the importance of giving back. ... The students who learn from their LINKers go on to create a communal atmosphere for future students, and that's what builds a strong academic community."

Another transitional program, Leaders in International Friendship Exchange, matches international students at JMU with local families for friendship and cultural exchange. LIFE is not a residential program; rather, the families volunteer to spend time with the students and include them in activities such as meals, recreational outings, events and more.

Program director Hunter Swanson says international students are genuinely interested in learning more about American life and customs through interactions with a local family. "They get outside of just meeting 18- to 21-year-olds on campus," he says.

The families, in turn, gain an appreciation of different cultures and get to sample new cuisines and even pick up on a new language.

"We have learned so much," says Jane Rynar, who, with her husband Eric, serves as a LIFE friendship family. "In some ways, it has helped me to shed some prejudices. That's one of the wonderful things about the program. Your eyes open and you become more receptive, and you see life differently than you would if you had not had these experiences."

Students and families must apply to take part in the LIFE program. Participants are matched according to similar interests as well their expectations for how often they want to meet. The program offers time commitments of three months, eight months or a full year.