

Navigating Academics and Parenthood: An International Doctoral Student's Dilemma

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Tags

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Setting

A midsize public university in the U.S. annually offers scholarships to talented high-achieving international students to pursue undergraduate, graduate, and doctoral studies at their institution. The university has a total enrollment of 5,000 and international students represent 15% of the population. Since the majority of the students are residents, most have an established network of family, friends, and community to rely on for support.

The university has an Office of Research and Doctoral Services (ORDS) that offers a wide range of services and resources that support international students' transition to the rigor of doctoral studies. During new student orientation, it is mandatory for doctoral scholars to meet with an ORDS advisor. The advisor provides students with the onboarding guide that contains information to help them acclimate to their new environment. In addition, the advisor helps the student to clarify their research interests and identify a faculty advisor.

Case

Imani, a talented scholar and researcher from Kenya, received a full scholarship from the university in the U.S. to pursue doctoral studies and research. This four-year academic journey would bring Imani closer to fulfilling her dream to return to Kenya and become a professor at a prestigious college in Nairobi.

Imani is a newlywed and has the support of her husband, Benoit, in pursuing this international academic endeavor. Imani's parents, siblings, and community supporters were all excited for her and Benoit to relocate to the U.S. for this academic opportunity.

The couple learned within three months of arriving in the U.S. that Imani was pregnant. Benoit and Imani agreed that he would be the primary child caregiver when the baby arrived while Imani focused on her doctoral studies. However, a month after the baby was born, Benoit accepted a scholarship offer to enroll in a master's degree program in political science from a university located in an adjacent city. This meant he could not serve as the primary child caregiver for their new baby. Imani's mother offered to join them in the U.S. to help with her grandchild, but unfortunately, she was diagnosed with cancer.

Imani met with an advisor in ORDS to inquire about university-provided affordable childcare benefits for doctoral students. The advisor was empathetic to Imani and stated that university administrators were aware of the challenges international students face to secure affordable childcare but had yet to initiate an institutional strategy to address this matter. She provided Imani with contact information for external resources that offer childcare. After the meeting, Imani informed Benoit the institution had no provision for childcare services for international students. The couple was proactive and met with several childcare agencies, but they realized the cost was unaffordable for their budget. During the International Student Networking Luncheon, their fellow students shared similar challenges with securing childcare (Roden & Kinchington, 2021; Brooks, 2015).

Imani was determined to continue with her doctoral studies. As a solution to her childcare dilemma, she negotiated with her professors to bring the baby with her to class three times a week. Imani explained that she and Benoit arrived in the U.S. a year ago, did not have family in the area, and that their support network is currently small. She assured her professors that the baby would not disrupt the class sessions. The professors granted her request. Imani informed the advisor in ORDS of the special arrangements she made with the professors to allow her to bring the baby to class.

Imani's classmates were initially empathetic and were willing to help her with childcare. On occasion, Imani's classmates served as childminders while she was working in the research lab, meeting with her faculty advisor, and meeting her teammates to complete group projects. Imani was always cognizant of her reliance on her classmates. She tried to make sure the baby was not a burden or disruption to their academic studies and did not infringe upon their personal space. Imani expressed her appreciation for their generosity by baking a batch of her famous homemade chocolate chip cookies for them to share.

A month into this special arrangement the professors realized this accommodation was problematic and, unfortunately, the baby had become a disruption during their classroom lectures and group project activities. Imani's classmates became less empathetic and expressed their exacerbation to the ORDS advisor about Imani bringing her baby to class and further stated they had become uncomfortable with serving as childminders.

Discussion Questions

As you consider this case, discuss:

- What potential solutions could the advisor in the Office of Research and Doctoral Services (ORDS) have considered to better help Imani with the childcare dilemma?
- Was it appropriate for professors to make special arrangements with Imani to allow her to bring the baby with her to class three times a week?
- Was Imani's reliance on her classmates appropriate and what, if anything, could she have done differently to resolve the childcare dilemma?
- In what ways may have gender roles and/or culture influenced this scenario?
- What barriers do international students face to acclimation into the local community? What strengths do they bring that they can use to build community?
- What potential systemic changes can institutions implement to better support international students with dependents?

References

- Brooks, R. (2015). International students with dependent children: The reproduction of gender norms. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 36(2). 195-214.
- Roden, M. & Kinchington, F. (2021). Examining the challenges faced by international women with preschool children studying for a postgraduate built environment degree in the United Kingdom. *Journal of International Students*, 11(4). 970-987.