

Peer-ing Ahead

Peer mentors help international students adapt to U.S. campus life.

WHEN RASTI JAMEEL INVITED SOME OF HIS NEW FRIENDS from Kent State University in Ohio to go to a restaurant, he paid the bill—as he often did in his native Kurdistan, a region of Iraq. He had yet to learn that in the United States, college students usually paid for themselves. So, the bill was paid twice. (They did get the money back.)

He also discovered other cultural differences: “In my country we shake hands and kiss each other; here everyone wants his or her own personal space.”

International students have lots of questions before going abroad to study: How do I find a place to live? Who are the best professors? How does the public transportation system work?

“If they don’t have anyone to talk to, it can be challenging,” Eron Memaj, adviser for Kent State International Mentor (KSIM) program, says.

Several higher education institutions have come to the rescue through peer mentoring and buddy programs, pairing U.S. and international students. Some are university run, some student run, and some a combination of the two. Although they vary in size, structure, flexibility, and training, they all provide a bridge to the American way of life.

Meeting International Student Needs

Overseas students need help in a variety of areas, from the nitty-gritty of finding housing and getting a cell phone without a social security number to signing up for classes and obtaining a driver’s license. They also have to adjust to different expectations. Back home, their grades may have been based on one exam with class attendance not required. In the United States they have lots of quizzes and learn that class participation counts toward their final grade.

“Many international students come from colleges without health services, student organizations, and academic skills centers,” Jodi Simek, international student adviser at the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire’s (UWEC) Center for International Education, says. “At home, everything is planned for them. Here they have to make choices about everything; it can be overwhelming.”

Jameel learned a lot from his buddies: to pump gas, order food, and use public transportation. He also went bowling, to movies, and to parties, where he met other Americans as well as other international students.

“I would not have had an opportunity to do this on my own,” he says.



Formal and Informal Programs

Some programs have formal application procedures and requirements for mentors while others are more laid back. Most provide mentors for orientation and the first few weeks; others continue throughout the semester or year.

Social media sites expand the possibilities for mentees. "We give all buddies access to a larger international student pool through social networking," Noah Kuchins, international exchange programs adviser at San Francisco State University (SFSU), says. "There's a back and forth, with international students able to ask questions. We're working hard to make the connections."

Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis' (IUPUI) International Peer Mentoring Program, which began in 2004, is run out of the Office of International Affairs. Currently, groups of 3 mentors are matched with 5 to 10 mentees, this year 135—even

before the international students reach the United States. Each mentor team is a mix in terms of gender, major, and geography and includes both U.S. and international students.

"In this way, the new international student meets a larger group of people," Sandra Lemons, IUPUI associate director for student services, says. "It gives them a ready set of friends when they arrive." The team concept also provides flexibility for mentors; they step up for each other when someone has a heavy workload or will be away for a while.

The International Peer Guide program at UWEC also employs the team concept. Approximately 15 peer guides, both U.S. and international, serve 130 international students. Guides spend time with the foreign students during orientation to help prepare them for the first weeks of classes and help them adjust to the school.

"Sometimes students feel more comfortable asking their peers about roommates

and other social situations, as well as how to manage their schedule," Simek says.

SFSU has a study abroad peer-to-peer program for domestic students, managed by the Office of International Programs, and a student-run international Buddy Program in connection with the International Educational Exchange Council (IEEC), which boasts 2,000 members.

Many peer mentor programs seek to expand their offerings. IUPUI will add another team in September 2012 for engineering and technology undergrads. They are also developing a separate program for graduate students. Kent hopes to form an alumni mentoring association.

Student-Run Programs

The Buddy Program continues the trend toward hooking up mentors and mentees before school starts. SFSU targets study abroad students while at one of the 130



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overseas partner colleges. Approximately one-third of the university's international students are able to meet a buddy in their home country some two months before they come to the United States. "This has greatly eased our integration efforts," Kuchins says. About 250–300 buddy pairings are made each fall and 150 in the spring.

IEEC organizes 5 to 10 social events each week. "That way, Americans and internationals get together through common interests like rock climbing, music, or theater," Kuchins says.

"Ours is not rigid structure," he continues. "Once we provide them with the resources, we let the students take the lead."

UWEC also has a student-run International Buddy Project. Last fall, 65 U.S. students were matched with 49 incoming international students, sometimes two to one. Buddies are encouraged to meet once a month; they watch football games and build snowmen (some have never seen snow before).

Remi Roumezin, who heads this program, is an international student from France. He e-mails incoming international students to assess their interest and then e-mails university departments to round up mentors.

"This is an opportunity for cultural exchange," Roumezin says. "It's mostly for social interaction and to make friends."

Memaj initially arrived in the United States from Albania as a high school exchange student. In 2008 he came to Kent State as a residence hall director. The next year he launched KSIM, with the help of Carrie Circosta, assistant director of alumni relations for student and recent graduate programs.

"I thought of what I wanted and needed as an international student: friends, social activities, a sense of community," he says.

KSIM has 289 members and 136 partnerships; 125 are U.S. students. Although the guidelines suggest meeting once a week, they meet more or less, depending on schedules

Selecting Mentors

How a student becomes a peer mentor varies widely, from formal applications and interviews to checking off "yes" on an e-mail. Many mentors are from the United

States, but some are also international students studying at U.S. universities.

IUPUI maintains a waiting list for the overflow of applicants. Traditionally about half of its mentors are from the United States, many from diverse backgrounds, and half are international students. Mentors receive a \$1,700 annual scholarship, which requires attending training sessions and helping with international programs.

At UWEC resumes, essays, references, and interviews are required. And if students want to sign up to be a peer guide again, they have to go through another interview. "We want to make sure they grow and learn," Simek says. "We set goals about what they want to do with their mentees. We put a lot of trust, responsibility, and time into the peer guides."

Some higher education institutions have less formal matching procedures. Kent State, which includes graduate students, asks a few questions "to make sure mentors are involved for the right reasons," Memaj says. "We look at their preferences and hobbies. We don't usually reject anyone unless there's a concern."

Megan Ollendyke filled out a short questionnaire relating to age, year, and language spoken while at State University at New York-Albany, indicating she wanted a French-speaking mentee to help prepare for her study abroad experience in France the following year.

At SFSU mentors list their top three preferred countries on the application form. According to Kuchins, France is number one, with Japan, the UK, and Spanish-speaking countries in high demand. Canada and Australia are the hardest to find mentor for the program. In fall 2011 there were 270 U.S. and 264 international exchange mentors.

E-mail is often used to recruit study abroad students. While in Copenhagen, Andre Durham received such a missive from the University of North Carolina's Easing Abroad Student Entry (EASE) program, which includes business and law students in addition to undergrads. Durham helped three students from Denmark and one from Hong Kong get adjusted to their classes and "gave them reasonable expectations about how to interact with professors and classmates."

What Peer Mentors for International Students Can Do

Here are some tasks that peer mentors may perform to help international students adjust to campus life:

- Contact prospective international students interested in coming to the college
- Send welcome notes to new international students
- Attend the new international student orientations and each new exchange student orientation lunch in August and January
- Attend the various social outings planned for the incoming exchange students
- Assist with the college's involvement with cultural festivals
- Help plan and attend campus cultural events
- Represent the college's study abroad and international programs at select off-campus international and cultural events
- Speak at information presentations to students, parents, high schools, etc
- Plan peer mentor-led events for the college's on-campus international week
- Provide culture-related articles from their exchange experience for the college's exchange Web site and the international student organization's online newsletter
- Help college international services staff man tables at special college study abroad events (orientations, admissions events, family weekends, visitors to campus etc.)
- Provide additional ideas for promoting and increasing student exchange awareness on campus
- Nominate future international student peer mentors
- Provide ideas for additional functions for the international student peer mentors

This list was provided by Hubert L. Prevost, Jr., director of the Office of Cooperative Education, National, and International Student Exchanges at The University of Tennessee at Chattanooga.

Training Mentors

Once mentors are selected, some are required to attend formal training sessions. At UWEC, a summer week-long course trains mentors on intercultural communication, registration procedures, and international student concerns.

At IUPUI, mentors attend training sessions in the spring to learn the particulars of the program. They also are required to take a one-credit, 10-week course on mentoring techniques each semester, along with mentors from other programs. Additionally, each mentor is assigned a “responsibility area”: orientation, outreach, or welcome assistant. This work can be applied to the program’s required 200 service hours per year.

Kuchins offers his buddies some less formal instructions: “Remember, this is not a dating service. Your responsibilities include picking up your buddies from the airport, touring San Francisco, and introducing them to your friends. Don’t expect to be best friends, but if you do make the connection, that’s great.”

Honing Leadership Skills

Both mentors and mentees have opportunities to gain important leadership skills. At IUPUI mentors present workshops to mentees. One innovative team devised a scavenger hunt to introduce campus resources; mentees scurried around math assistance offices, tutoring centers, and student employment offices to retrieve specific objects.

Veteran peer guides at UWEC provide training for new recruits, meet with international visitors, and take leadership roles in residence halls.

Several programs offer students a chance to be part of their executive boards. At SFSU, some 20 to 30 domestic students join the IEEC officer corps each year. Durham served as a vice president of EASE in his senior year, helping to select new mentors, and Paul Petrick is currently director of public relations on the KSIM executive board.

Mentees join in, too. “Because mentees see their mentors involved in various activities, they’ve gotten involved in campus activities and taken on leadership roles in ways I’ve never seen before,” Lemons says.

Challenges

Although partnerships usually work out well, homesickness, schedules, or personalities sometimes get in the way. Also, international students often tend to congregate with one another, precluding interaction with U.S. students. Language barriers can also present problems.

American idioms can create humorous situations. At Kent State an international student inquired why his partner kept asking him to repeat everything. His mentor, on the other hand, was wondering why his mentee kept repeating himself. The culprit turned out to be the phrase, “you can say that again.” They both had a good laugh when the mentor, realizing the source of



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the misunderstanding, explained the phrase meant he was agreeing with the mentee.

Advantages for Mentees

“The programs help international students get off to a good start and get through the semester or year successfully,” Lemons says. “They are more aware of expectations and available resources and gain a social network.”

Kuchins agrees: “They get to improve their language skills and learn the finer points of our culture. We want them to know our people and feel part of our city.”

Mentees also get help with practical things. Petrick helped his graduate Chinese mentee obtain his driver’s license, but there were a few hairy moments, like the time the new driver made a wide turn and wound up on the curb. The EASE program provides bedding, towels, and cell phones for purchase by mentees so they don’t have to scramble for these essentials when they first arrive.

Mentors Gain a Lot, Too

Confidence. Teamwork. Language skills. Expanded networks. These are just some of the perks for mentors, some of whom go on to careers in international education.

Future study abroad students are eager to learn more about the country they’re going to visit and make connections, some of whom they visit when they travel on their breaks.

“Some students come from small towns with little diversity,” Memaj says. “This opens their world. They become more active and gain confidence. And because our program is student run, students can help make decisions.”

Lia Rich became a mentor at Loyola University after returning from a year abroad in Australia. “My experience there opened up my global interests.” She had mentees from Singapore and Amsterdam. “Without this program, I would not have experienced any diversity at Loyola.”

Ollendyke enjoyed her lunches in 2006 with her German graduate student, where they conversed half in English and half in French. This helped increase her language proficiency to prepare for her stint in France the next year. Ollendyke also hung out with his friends. They still keep in touch.

“Being a mentor gave me more confidence and an opportunity to share my love of the university,” Durham says. “And it let me take a step back and reflect on my own experiences in Denmark. It helped me see how similar college students are, regardless of where they come from.” **IE**

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