

INTERNATIONAL FRIENDSHIP PROGRAM



participant handbook

INTERNATIONAL FRIENDSHIP PROGRAM

PROGRAM OVERVIEW

The International Friendship Program began in 2004 and was first known as the American League of International Friendship Encounters, or American LIFE. The program changed names in 2013 although its focus remained the same: connecting international students with MU community members.

This cross-cultural friendship program provides international students in their first semester at MU with a more intimate and authentic experience of American culture. In return, American volunteers learn about another country and culture, develop cross-cultural competencies and help foster a global community at MU.

The International Friendship Program is beneficial for all participants, but it is an especially important service for MU's international students. Adjusting to American culture is not easy for international students, as they may feel isolated for many reasons: cultural differences, language barriers and more. In fact, an estimated 80 percent of international students never set foot in an American home while visiting the United States. This program aims to change that statistic, one student at a time. The International Friendship Program helps alleviate initial anxiety international students may have about living in America by providing a friend who serves as a cultural mitigator.

MU'S INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY

International students make up about 6.4 percent of MU's total enrollment and come from approximately 100 countries around the world (international.missouri.edu/facts). The International Friendship Program aims to give these international students a sense of belonging at Mizzou upon arrival at the university. International students, like all students at MU, are an asset to developing graduates into engaged global citizens. The program strives to facilitate global engagement among members of the Mizzou community to help everyone gain a more sophisticated way of looking at the world.

PROGRAM OBJECTIVES

- Foster positive intercultural relationships between new international students and MU community members.
- Help international students learn more about and adjust to American culture.
- Provide important social support for and extend hospitality to international students during their initial adjustments to life in America.
- Supplement the International Center's support services for international students (e.g., immigration advising, document processing, orientation programming).
- Offer all students an opportunity to learn about new cultures and how to communicate in a diverse society.
- Encourage American students to study abroad to gain additional cross-cultural understanding and new perspectives.
- Raise international awareness, promote international education and contribute to the university's comprehensive internationalization efforts.
- Give student participants a place to fit in to the international community, as engagement in extracurricular activities increases student retention rates.

PARTICIPANTS

The International Friendship Program pairs each international student with an American volunteer. International student participants range from first-year undergraduates to doctoral students. The only eligibility requirement is that they are in their first semester at MU. American volunteers include MU students, staff, faculty and Columbia community members.

HOW IT WORKS

Students and volunteers interested in the program apply online to participate in the International Friendship Program. The application deadlines are Sept. 1 for the fall semester and Feb. 1 for the spring semester. International Center staff match international students with American volunteers based on the information prospective participants provide in their applications. Staff take level of study, hobbies and interests, and other preferences into consideration when matching pairs.

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WHAT PARTICIPANTS SAY

“I love learning about different cultures. I see this program as a way to make friends and connect with others who are different from me.” —Shekinah Doze, American volunteer

“One of my friends from the American LIFE program is a music major and I learned piano for eight or nine years in China. There is no piano here, so I haven’t played in six or seven months until I met her. She invited me to the practice room where we share the pieces and play the piano together. It’s really cool and fun to play, too! We talk about music and go to concerts.” —Si Chen, international student

OVERVIEW OF COMMITMENTS

To have a rewarding experience, participants must fulfill the program commitments. Participants who put in the time and effort necessary to develop relationships with their partners will have a more positive International Friendship Program experience. The program encourages partners to spend time with one another by hosting events and suggesting activities, but it is the participants’ responsibility to take advantage of these opportunities. Program participants are asked to make the following commitments:

PARTNER INTERACTION

Partners should meet with each other at least once a month, although more frequent meetings are highly encouraged. American partners are asked to initiate the first two or three meetings of the semester as international students are adjusting to life in America. Later in the semester, international partners should initiate contact with U.S. partners to arrange a meeting.

INTERNATIONAL FRIENDSHIP PROGRAM EVENTS

The program offers events throughout the semester to provide easy ways for partners to interact with one another. Typically, there is one large event in the fall semester and one in the spring, and all partners are encouraged to attend. In addition to these large events, the International Friendship Program also offers casual opportunities throughout the semester to bring together participants and create a sense of community within the program. These small events are a great opportunity to meet other program participants and develop a deeper connection to the program.

PROVIDE FEEDBACK

The International Friendship Program will send mid-semester and end-of-semester surveys to learn about participants program experiences. The International Center wants to make the program better for everyone, so participant feedback is important. Participants are also encouraged to contact the program coordinator immediately if they experience any problems in the program.

PARTICIPANT EXPECTATIONS

AMERICAN VOLUNTEERS

As an American volunteer, it is important to remember that this semester might be your international partner’s first time in the United States. Your partner might not know many traditions, values and perspectives that are commonly known among people familiar with American culture. Remember to be patient as you introduce your partner to various aspects of American life and to remember that you also have the opportunity to gain an in-depth understanding of another culture. With these things in mind, here are a few expectations the International Friendship Program has for its American volunteers:

- **Be a friend.** Even people from different cultures can tell if you are not genuine in your commitment to get to know them and be a friend. This partnership is a good opportunity to practice empathy, thinking of yourself in another person’s situation. Your international partner may be homesick from time to time and facing challenges that go with living abroad. Try to treat them as you would want to be welcomed in a new place far from the comforts of home.
- **Share resources.** You are likely much more familiar with the MU campus and Columbia community than your international partner, so share resources you know that might be helpful to them. Teach them where to go to find things to do on campus, festivals you like to attend, places to rent bikes, where the Walmart express is downtown, etc. These resources will help make your home a home to international students as well.

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- **Represent your culture.** Be prepared and willing to explain cultural difference between American culture and the culture from which your partner comes. As a program participant, you are an ambassador of American culture. Think about attitudes and values strongly present within American culture, but be open to learning about other ways of thinking from your partner.

Additional program expectations:

- Commit to one semester of participation in the International Friendship Program.
- Contact your assigned student within the first week of receiving their contact information.
- Initiate at least the first two meetings between you and your partner.
- Attend the International Friendship Program semester event, and other small events throughout the semester as you and your partner are able.
- Complete the mid-semester and end-of-semester surveys to provide feedback about the program.
- Maintain regular communication with your partner. Even if you only meet in person once a month, check in to see how they are doing at other times.
- Contact the International Center if you have any questions or concerns related to the program.

INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

Although you are new to American culture, you also have an important role to play in this partnership. While your American partner will initiate contact with you at the beginning of the semester, you should also show commitment to the partnership by responding to your partner's communication and initiating contact later in the semester. You also fulfill a teaching role in this program: You are able to share about your culture with an American who may have never traveled outside the United States. Your friendship could be the most exposure to another culture your partner has experienced. With these things in mind, here are a few expectations the International Friendship Program has for its international student participants:

- **Be a friend.** Treat your American partner as you would treat your friends back home. While developing friendships across cultures can seem uncomfortable at first, with time and effort from you and your partner, your friendship will become stronger.
- **Engage with your partner.** Don't hesitate to ask your partner questions, as they wouldn't have signed up for the program if they didn't want to be a source of support as you adjust to life in America. Feel free to invite your partner to activities you normally do (dining, shopping, campus activities). The more you interact with your partner by asking questions, sharing concerns and inviting them into your life, the more likely they are to do the same for you.
- **Represent your culture.** Your partner will likely be curious about your home country, its traditions, language and culture. Share pictures, stories and any information about your home that your partner might want to know. Take this partnership as an opportunity to share the pride you have in your home country.

Additional program expectations:

- Commit to one semester of participation in the International Friendship Program.
- Respond to your partner's initial contact within 48 hours of receiving it.
- Attend the International Friendship Program semester event, and other small events throughout the semester as you and your partner are able.
- Complete the mid-semester and end-of-semester surveys to provide feedback about the program.
- Maintain regular communication with your partner. Even if you only meet in person once a month, check in to see how they are doing at other times.
- Contact the International Center if you have any questions or concerns related to the program.

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PROGRAM EVENTS

INTERNATIONAL FRIENDSHIP PROGRAM MEET AND GREET | early in the semester

Meet your partner and other program participants for the first time. After you receive your partner's contact information, make plans to meet each other at this first event. International Center staff will be present to meet you as well.

INTERNATIONAL FRIENDSHIP PROGRAM SEMESTER EVENT | mid-semester

Each semester, the program hosts one large event to bring together participants for a fun activity. Past events have included pumpkin carving and a trivia night. Watch your email for details about the upcoming event and make plans with your partner to attend. Attendance is highly encouraged, though not mandatory.

FRIENDSHIP CELEBRATION | end of the semester

Enjoy refreshments with other International Friendship Program participants to celebrate the end of the semester. Partners will have the opportunity to share about their experiences in the program. International Center staff will also ask participants about ways the program could be improved in the future.

BUILDING YOUR FRIENDSHIP

FIRST MEETING

If you can't attend the Meet and Greet, you should arrange your first meeting with your partner in a public place on or near campus, such as a dining hall, library or local coffee shop. Keep it casual and friendly. When scheduling the meeting, be sure to give detailed directions and a specific time. Use email or texting to confirm the meeting and clarify information.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FORMING A STRONG RELATIONSHIP

from the Duke International Friends Program Participant Handbook

- Be sure your friend knows your full name, email address and phone number.
- Become familiar with the cultural background of your friend, the geography of their home country and a few facts about it. Ask questions, but also do some of your own research.
- Ask your friend about dietary restrictions based on religious or cultural preferences and practices.
- Be flexible about when you can get together.
- Make sure that when you invite your friend over that they understand the date and time they are expected to visit and for how long. Provide transportation whenever possible if your partner does not have a car.
- Include your partner in whatever you are doing: cookouts, service clubs, community festivals, fairs and holidays, political meetings or activities.
- Invite your partner to include other American or international friends on occasion.
- Remember that some students are shy and quiet; some are not as proficient in English as others; some like to listen more than talk about themselves.
- Be careful about jokes. Humor is one of the final components of language acquisition. However, don't be afraid to laugh together about misunderstandings.
- Be open, be yourself, ask questions and enjoy the experience of getting to know someone from another culture.

SUGGESTIONS FOR GET TOGETHERS

- Cook a meal
- Watch a favorite TV show or movie
- Go to a movie

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- Go to the farmers market
- Hike at Rock Bridge State Park (be sure to find Devil's Icebox)
- Attend a sporting event or watch one on TV
- Relax at a coffee shop downtown
- Rent bikes and ride on the trails in and around Columbia
- Shop downtown or at the mall
- Exercise
- Visit the public library
- Grab pizza-by-the-slice at Shakespeare's for lunch
- Visit the Magic Tree around the holidays
- Attend a concert
- Check out campus decorations and parade during homecoming
- Get ice cream from Buck's Ice Cream Place on a warm day
- Take a drive out to Cooper's Landing
- Go to a free Crafternoon at the Craft Studio
- Study at the library or a coffee shop
- Attend the International Welcome Party
- Navigate Shryock's corn maze in the fall
- Take in a movie at the True/False Film Fest in the spring
- Check out stufftodo.missouri.edu for events around campus

CONVERSATION STARTERS

from the Florida Institute of Technology International Friendship Program Handbook

It can be hard to start a conversation with a complete stranger, particularly one whose cultural experience may be extremely different than your own. To help you get started, here are some questions you can use to break the ice and get to know your partner and their culture better.

Relationships

- How do you define friendship?
- What are your expectations for friendship?

Family

- What is your family like?
- What responsibilities do different members of your family have in the home?
- How does your family celebrate special holidays? What do these holidays celebrate or represent?
- Describe your extended family.

Food

- What dietary restrictions do you have? Are there special reasons for them?
- What is the main meal of the day in your culture?
- Is mealtime a time when your family gathers together?
- What is your favorite meal, and how do you make it?

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Daily life

- What is an average day like where you're from?
- How do you travel to work or school? How long does it take?
- How often do people in your country go to the shopping mall or grocery store?
- What do people in your country typically do after a long day at work or school?

Education

- What is the educational system like in your country?
- What language(s) are you required to learn in school?
- Describe a typical day at school; how is it scheduled?
- What are the educational backgrounds of your family members?

Leisure activities

- What is the most popular sport in your home country? What sports do you like?
- What leisure activities do families enjoy?
- What hobbies do you enjoy? Do you play a musical instrument?
- Does your family go somewhere special on vacation?

LESSONS GEARED TOWARD ENHANCING CROSS-CULTURAL UNDERSTANDING

"Cross-Cultural Dialogues: 74 Brief Encounters with Cultural Difference" by Craig Storti

- Don't assume everyone is the same.
- What you think of as normal behavior may only be cultural — a lot of behavior is universal, but certainly not all. Before you project your norms on the human race consider that there may be more than one way to do something.
- Familiar behavior may have different meanings — smiling, for example, exists in all cultures but does not always mean the same thing. Just because you recognize a given behavior, don't assume you understand what it means.
- Don't assume that what you meant was understood — you cannot always be sure of how others are interpreting your behavior.
- Don't assume that what you understood is what was meant — all communication is filtered through our own cultural lens, which is not the same lens used by people from another culture.
- You don't have to like or accept or adopt a behavior that is different from yours; however, understanding where that behavior comes from and what values underlie it can help you to be respectful of any differences.
- Most people do behave rationally; you just have to discover their rationale.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Guided by the NAFSA: Association of International Educators statement of ethical principles, the International Center is committed to upholding the welfare, safety and best interests of the university's international students. We strive to provide high quality programs and services for everyone involved in the international community. As participants in the International Friendship Program, you are also held to these high standards, as you are important members of the international education community at MU.

According to these ethical considerations, you should not offer or encourage your partner to indulge in drug or alcohol use. Respect for the law and policy is one of NAFSA's top ethical considerations, and upholding this ethical matter is of vital importance.

If you feel as though a program participant is not meeting these expectations, please contact the International Center immediately.