

Friendship program could ease culture shock

New group to aid foreign students

By Becky Kelley
Emerald Contributor

Kumi Endo is nervous about speaking to strangers, afraid they might laugh at her English or not understand her, or that they may simply not like Japanese people.

Endo, a Japanese student studying political science at the University, said she would like an American friend to go places with and to ask advice about the University and academic concerns.

A new organization on campus may be able to help her find one.

Foreign Friendship Partners is a student-run group that pairs foreign and American students, with the goal of easing foreign students' transition to American university life. It also provides Americans with an opportunity to learn firsthand about other cultures.

Thus far, the organization has operated on a small-scale experimental basis. Next fall it will attempt to match every interested foreign student with an American friend, said Allyson Klein, one of the group's leaders.

Feelings of loneliness and isolation from Americans are common among foreign students when they first come to the University.

"Once school got started, the only friends I could hang around with were Japanese," Endo said.

Pawan Pradhan, a student from Nepal and one of the group's leaders, understands the challenges of being a new foreign student. Pradhan said he hopes the American friends can show their partners around

and introduce them to American culture "so that they don't spend the first couple of weeks absolutely lost."

Pradhan, a program assistant for the residence halls, said when he came to the University he discovered there wasn't much interaction between foreign students and American students in the dorms, and he wanted to change that.

The group held two informational meetings earlier this year and has now matched seven foreign students with American friends. The students will meet their partners at a social function later this term at the EMU. A barbecue is planned for the end of the term.

Interested students filled out a questionnaire, providing information on their academic and social interests. The students were then matched according to their interests and preferences as to gender and country of origin.

Next fall, Foreign Friendship Partners will promote its services at international student orientation so students can build their friendships throughout the year, Klein said. The group plans to hold monthly social functions which the partners can attend together.

Foreign Friendship Partners grew out of the University's Friendship Foundation, a 40-year-old program that pairs foreign students with host families in Eugene.

The host families are another source of support and friendship for foreign students, said foreign student adviser Margo Ramsing. Host families may invite students to their homes for dinner, take them shopping or on trips, and share American

holidays with them.

The foundation provides financial support to the friendship partners program. The group currently is applying for a grant and planning fundraisers to support its expanded activities next year.

The friendship partners program fulfills a social need, Ramsing said.

"Even though they're one of 17,000 (students) on campus, there still is an isolation," Ramsing said. "And if international students have made the commitment to study in U.S. universities, they want to meet Americans and they don't want to spend all their time with their own countrymen."

John Patton, one of the group's organizers, said he believes the program will give foreign students a more well-rounded and happier experience in Oregon.

One problem foreign students face is trying to integrate themselves into a student life at the University, Patton said.

"They meet a lot of the administration and a lot of the families ... but as far as getting out into an American student social life, it's kind of hard," he said.

Beyond friendship, the program promotes an international view and greater cross-cultural understanding, Klein said.

"I think we're kind of isolationist still, even in this day,

about people from other countries," she said. "You can learn so much from people from other countries."

Endo agreed. "If I match with a student who is interested in Japan, we can share our opinions and feelings or cultural differences, so it's going to be beneficial for both of us," she said.



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