

INTERVARSITY



FRIENDSHIPS WITH INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

**CROSSING CULTURES
HERE AND NOW**

**LISA ESPINELI CHINN
AND BRIAN HART**

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1 INTRODUCTION

Haruki was deep in thought. He fingered the blue invitation card he had picked up in the student union. Earlier, he had overheard two of his American classmates talking animatedly about attending the party mentioned on the card. *If I go, he thought, it will be a good chance to meet American students. But I do not know anyone going to the event, and I am afraid no one will talk to me there.*

As a matter of fact, he had been on campus for two whole months, and no one had taken any initiative to talk to him. Although his English was quite good, he was not all that confident about how he would do in a party setting.

Haruki let out a deep sigh, picked up his coat, threw the card in the wastebasket, and headed toward his dorm.

You do not have to go very far to reach the world. God, in his sovereign purpose, has brought the world to your campus and neighborhood.



► WHAT IMPACT CAN INTERNATIONALS HAVE?

The United States hosts more international students than any other country. There are over one million internationals from more than 200 nations studying in the US—more than we have ever had before. This provides us with incredible opportunities to connect with internationals while they are here, on virtually every college campus in America. It is much easier for us to reach them while they are in the US than for us to travel to all of their homelands and effectively communicate in the local language, especially since most international students learn English before arriving.

Nearly all internationals come from countries in the 10/40 Window, a region in the Eastern Hemisphere between 10 and 40 degrees north latitude where people have very limited access to Christian messages and resources. India has the most unreached people groups in the world. China is second. Very few in Saudi Arabia have heard the good news. However, China, India, and Saudi Arabia send more international students to the US than any other countries.

It is likely that, in the next 25 years, many of these students will occupy leadership positions in government, business, and education around the world. The Kauffman Foundation reports that 25 percent of US tech company founders are foreign born, and more than half of them originally came to the US as international students (source: tiny.cc/immigrant-edu). Elon Musk, who is from South Africa and the cofounder of PayPal and CEO of Tesla, Inc. and SpaceX, graduated from the University of Pennsylvania. Kofi Annan, a Ghanaian, Nobel Peace Prize winner, and former UN Secretary-General, graduated from Macalester College. Brother Bakht Singh, from India, became a Christian while studying at the University of Manitoba in Canada. He then spent decades planting churches and preaching to thousands across India and around the world.

As North American Christians, we have an unprecedented opportunity to develop friendships with international students—to be God’s ambassadors without leaving home.

Top Sending Countries

1 China	8 Brazil	14 Nigeria	20 Venezuela
2 India	9 Japan	15 Germany	21 Hong Kong
3 Saudi Arabia	10 Mexico	16 Kuwait	22 Malaysia
4 South Korea	11 Iran	17 Nepal	23 Colombia
5 Canada	12 United Kingdom	18 France	24 Thailand
6 Vietnam	13 Turkey	19 Indonesia	25 Spain
7 Taiwan			

SOURCE: OPEN DOORS 2016

World Leaders Who Studied in the US

- Former President of Bangladesh **Iajuddin Ahmed** studied at the University of Wisconsin.
- Belizean politician **John Briceño** studied at the University of Texas.
- Former President of France **Jacques Chirac** studied at Harvard University.
- Current Prime Minister of Israel **Benjamin Netanyahu** studied at MIT.
- Italy's former Minister of Economy and Finances **Domenico Siniscalco** studied at Johns Hopkins University.
- Current Prime Ministry of Japan **Shinzō Abe** studied at the University of Southern California (USC).
- Jordan's King **Abdullah bin Al-Hussein II** studied at Georgetown University.
- Kenyan Nobel Peace Prize winner **Wangari Maathai** studied at the University of Pittsburgh.
- Former President of Lithuania **Valdas Adamkus** studied at the University of Illinois.
- Former President of Mexico **Vicente Fox Quesada** studied at Harvard University.
- Former President of the Philippines **Gloria Macapagal Arroyo** studied at Georgetown University.
- A longtime Minister of Foreign Affairs for Saudi Arabia, **Saud Al Faisal**, studied at Princeton University.
- Current Prime Minister of Singapore **Lee Hsien Loong** studied at Harvard.
- Former Minister of Justice for Thailand **Suwat Liptapanlop** studied at Purdue University.

There are hundreds of other examples!

► WHAT ARE INTERNATIONALS LIKE?

Like American students, many internationals take rigorous tests and compete with others to have a place on campus. They are bright and focused on their academic goals. One leading sending country describes its overseas students as “possessing academic brilliance, all-around personality, creative and persuasive skills to succeed.” They are acquainted with life in North America through the Internet, films, TV, and music, and through observing the many North Americans they may have met who are living, studying, or working in their country. They are curious to see if what they have been told about Americans is true.

In addition, they are open to new ways of learning and living. They try new experiences and are more receptive to new ideas in the US than they were back at home. Many come with preconceived notions about the people and foreign policies of North America.

In many ways, their lives are like yours. They wear jeans and T-shirts. Some of them play the same video games you do (and perhaps are better at them!). Many text their friends and listen to music on their phone while they walk across campus. A good number are well-traveled and world-savvy, speaking more than two languages.

They live in your dorm or apartment complex, eat in your dining hall, sit in your classes and your computer lab. Some of them are your teaching assistants.

They exhibit a wide range of spiritual attitudes. Many come from backgrounds in which they learned little or nothing about Jesus. Some think he is a God only for Westerners. Many are strong adherents and advocates of their faith.

Others, however, come from strong Christian contexts and are here with an opportunity to decide to make that faith their own. And some come with a vibrant relationship with God already in place, eager to grow and make a difference in other people's lives. My (Lisa's) own life has been changed by the love and vision of Christian international students.

They have modeled to me a strong faith, humility, and dependence on God. They have expanded my worldview and encouraged me in my walk with God. They have so much to offer to the body of Christ in North America. Their friendships are valuable. Seek them out. They too need a friend.

The world has come to you!



2 BEGINNING STEPS

▶ HOW DO I BEGIN TO ENGAGE THIS WORLD?

Start with one international at a time.

Xiao Min’s life was going on successfully, and he was proud to have the opportunity to study in the United States. He said, “In my country I never got a good chance to know Jesus. I did not believe—I was educated not to believe anything other than science.” On his US campus, however, he met some Christians and started attending a Bible study. Although he did not like reading the Bible by himself, he loved asking questions about it and discussing it with friends.

But his interest in God plummeted when his mother became ill back in his home country. He asked God to heal her, but she died, and Xiao Min became angry with God. He realized for the first time in his life how helpless and powerless he was. He was trying to prove that God did not exist while at the same time calling on God for help. Recognizing the contradiction, he said, “At that time, inside my heart, I admitted God existed, but he didn’t like me—and I didn’t like him!”

His Christian friends stuck with him during his time of great skepticism and discouragement. They didn’t push him to believe in God or to cheer up; they just walked with him. Xiao Min later said, “They were the light in my dark life.”



4 out of 10 international students have
no close American friends.

SOURCE: JOURNAL OF INTERNATIONAL AND INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION, JUNE 2012



The university campus can be a very lonely place for both North American and international students but is often even more so for internationals, who have been uprooted from their family, social network, and culture. Particularly in the first few months after they have arrived, they may experience jet lag, serious culture shock (the emotional and physical response to cultural dislocation due to the absence of familiar cues and the presence of multiple and confusing new signals), or stress related to understanding the nuances of a new language.

When I (Lisa) first arrived on my campus as an international graduate student, I was impressed with how friendly the people were. They asked me, “How are you?” all the time. I answered by telling them how I was, all the time, until I noticed that they were not paying attention to all the details of my response. It did not take long to figure out that “How are you?” was not really a question. It was more of a greeting, to be answered by a quick “Fine” or “Real good.” I learned to give the expected response, but then I began to wonder, *Are any of these people really interested in how I’m doing? And how do I make friends in this culture?*

There are so many opportunities to form friendships with international students on campus. Xiao Min met Christians who took the initiative to get to know him and welcomed him into their campus fellowship. Similarly, you have a unique and strategic opportunity to welcome the world into your life and the life of your campus group or church—one person at a time. But where do you start?

► WHERE DO I MEET INTERNATIONALS?

They are in your classes and academic departments.

INTERNATIONALS IN YOUR CLASSES



About one in every 20 students at US colleges and universities is an international student.



In some fields, like engineering and business, numbers are even higher, with one in five being an international (source: Open Doors 2016).

Consider going with other Christians to meet international students. There may be events on campus to attend (e.g., international coffee hour) or activities sponsored by international student groups like the Muslim Students Association, the Indian Student Association, or the German club where you can naturally meet them. Drop by the international student office and find out what international events are happening. Or if international students congregate in certain areas of the campus, go and meet them there.





However, you do not want international students to think you are targeting them (you would not want that done to you either), so be careful how you approach them and how you ask your questions. You are not God's secret agent. Neither are you an insensitive peddler who pushes the gospel on people. You are a witness to what Christ has said and done, and so you are held to a very high standard of honesty and integrity. You walk and work under the Holy Spirit's leadership. (For help on this point, read through InterVarsity's "Code of Ethics for Christian Witness," which you can find at tiny.cc/evan-ethics.)

Going to where internationals are is especially important with those you just met or who recently arrived in the US. That may include visiting the temple, mosque, or shrine where they worship. It is usually best to develop good friendships before inviting your international friends to your church or campus fellowship (unless they ask to go, without being prompted). They may go once to be polite but may experience a lot of cultural dissonance that may cause them to avoid going back. If you first develop a close friendship, then you can more easily discuss your friend's experience and any concerns after the church or fellowship visit. Also, quickly inviting internationals you just met to Christian events can make it seem like you are targeting them and care more about their conversion than about them as a person. If you are part of a diverse campus fellowship or church that is very welcoming of internationals, then you may be able to bring your new friends (especially Christians) sooner. But the best way to connect with international students is to meet them in natural and spontaneous settings on campus, keeping alert to God's timing and open doors.

► HOW DO I GET STARTED?

Develop a healthy curiosity about people. A good reminder is *ask, don't assume*. You may meet international students from countries you are not familiar with. Take this opportunity to learn about other peoples and cultures. One international student lamented the fact that she had been in classes where nobody bothered to sit by her or get to know her. She felt that even her contributions in class were ignored. That international student in your class or neighborhood is a potential gold mine of information, culture, and experience that will change the way you see the world.



Personal space varies significantly by country, according to a *Washington Post* report on a *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology* article. For example, when meeting strangers, a Romanian prefers to stay about 4.6 feet away while someone from Argentina is comfortable as close as 2.5 feet (the US distance is 3.1 feet). In a close relationship, Romanians are comfortable being much closer, at 1.6 feet, just like Americans. However, close Saudi Arabian friends prefer being twice that distance away (source: tiny.cc/personal-space). You don't need to memorize the distances for each country; just pay attention to someone's non-verbal clues. If an international comes closer to you than you're comfortable with, resist the urge to take a step back (since moving away signals disinterest). If you approach an international who backs away, stop moving forward. And avoid touching internationals (especially of the opposite gender) unless they initiate.

When introductions are made, pay attention to the person's name and

Pronouncing Mandarin Chinese Names

Since Chinese characters are rarely phonetic, the pinyin system was developed using the Roman alphabet to represent Chinese sounds. Here are a few pinyin characters that can confuse English speakers:

“x” sounds similar to “sh” in English
 “q” sounds similar to “ch” in English
 “zh” sounds similar to “j” in English
 Visit tiny.cc/ch-pinyin for more details.

Ghanaian Names

Children in Ghana may be given three or more names (not just a first and middle name). One may refer to birth order, twin status, or an ancestor. Another may denote the day of the week on which they were born. For example, “Kofi” is a name given to boys born on a Friday, so we know that former UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan was born on a Friday. For more details, visit tiny.cc/gh-names or Wikipedia.

how it is pronounced. If you need help in remembering, ask the international student to write it down for you. (You may also need to write your name for them, if it is unusual or difficult to pronounce.) Some international students have adopted Western names, making it easy for you to remember, but they appreciate it when someone takes the time to learn their native name.

Ask general questions about classes, upcoming school activities, world events, or the weather. And open-ended questions are best. For example, “Where are you from?” is much better than “You’re from India, right?” as they may actually be from Pakistan or Nepal and annoyed that everyone thinks they’re from India. Further questions may include: “How is school different here than back at home?” “What do you miss most about your country?” “What do you think about North American sports?” “What does your family enjoy doing?”

► WHAT CAN WE DO TOGETHER?

The first couple weeks an international student is in your country are the most critical for starting friendships and meeting their needs. Ideally, you would first meet students as you pick them up at the airport. Every international student I (Brian) know remembers and appreciates the person who picked them up when they first arrived. You could volunteer with the college and other campus or community organizations that are already helping international students get settled. Any unmet needs provide additional opportunities for you to help. Do new internationals need coats, boots, or other climate-appropriate clothing? Can you show them how to use the bus system or other mass transit? Do they need rides to grocery or department stores, or help buying books and other supplies for class?

These initial connections are great for building friendships and passing on Jesus' love and should not be used for giving away tracts or evangelizing (especially if you are volunteering with a university program or secular organization).



Find quick tips on reaching international students during New Student Outreach (NSO) at tiny.cc/3by3.

Internationals may feel hesitant to accept help when nothing is requested in return. For example, students I (Brian) knew wouldn't take furniture I was giving away, so I instead sold it to them at really low prices so they felt like they got good deals (and owed me nothing more). The small income provided scholarship funds to help international students attend an upcoming campus fellowship conference. Expect internationals to ask why you are helping them, and be ready with your answer. Emphasizing mutuality will also help to deepen the relationship in ways that nothing else can.



Food is an international currency that can be used anytime. Invite your international student friend to share a meal with you at the cafeteria or a nearby restaurant. If you can cook in your home, invite the person to enjoy a simple meal with you. But be sensitive to food restrictions. Ask ahead of time what dietary rules your guest may have due to religious convictions or personal preferences.

As the friendship progresses, the international student may want to return the favor and invite you over for a meal also.

If your new friends have no plans for the holidays, consider inviting them to celebrate with you and your family. This may be the only chance they will have to experience Thanksgiving or Christmas in a North American home. The experience will forever be instilled in their memory. I (Lisa) am very grateful for my American classmate who invited me to spend my first Thanksgiving with her family in Michigan. I had my first snow sighting and an elaborate Thanksgiving meal. Now, years later, I still treasure the memory of the warm welcome and generosity of my hosts.



Be specific when inviting internationals to a home-cooked meal, holiday celebration, event, or activity. Let them know what to expect. Students (especially those who just arrived in the US) may not have the cultural background to fill in missing details (like what they should wear or bring and how critical it is to be right on time). Having someone drive or walk them to a place they've never been will also be less stressful than them finding their way on their own.

Also, consider inviting them in groups. Most internationals come from communal cultures. Students may feel more comfortable entering into a new experience with friends from their region of the world. A group can help each other debrief or translate if one person didn't understand something that happened or was said. Some internationals will bring their friends without being asked and without notifying the host, so plan meals and events to accommodate more students than just those who RSVP.

If the school and organizations don't have fun events for international students that you can join, consider creating your own group gatherings. Providing a guided tour of your town or city, hosting a Super Bowl party, skiing or ice skating, or visiting a farm for pumpkin carving and exploring a corn maze can be fun. Holiday weekends like Labor Day, Martin Luther King Jr. Day, and Presidents' Day can be good times for daylong (or overnight) hiking, an amusement park, or big city international food and shopping trips early in the school term before students get too busy with classes. You can get to know your international friends better (including while you travel to the event and back) and will likely meet some of their friends they bring along. These can be purely fun activities for building friendships without any Christian content. If you do have any Christian elements at your event, be sure they are fully disclosed on invitations and other publicity. You would not like being invited to an ice cream social, only to arrive and discover the event really involved listening to a sermon and spending an hour discussing a book you haven't read.



► HOW CAN I BE A GOOD HOST?

Begin by asking God to enlarge your heart to be hospitable to people from other cultures. Here's a helpful definition: **Cross-cultural hospitality is making room in your heart and life to include others who are different from you.**

Hospitality has very little to do with the size of your apartment or the quality of the meals you can cook, but everything to do with the size of your heart. Many international students never visit even one American home during all their years of study in the US. You don't need to wait until everything is perfect before inviting them over. They will appreciate seeing what everyday life is like for you, and many miss their multigenerational families back at home.

Hospitality has very little to do with the size of your apartment or the quality of the meals you can cook, but everything to do with the size of your heart.

In Acts 10, Luke records Peter's conversion to cross-cultural ministry. Peter was a devout Jew who followed strict dietary rules. He fell into a trance and saw something like a large sheet being let down from heaven to earth with all kinds of four-footed animals on it, as well as reptiles and birds. A voice told him to kill and eat. But Peter said, "I can't do that!" He probably was thinking about how unclean and impure those animals are. No Jew in his right mind would eat such things.

But the voice spoke to him again: "When God says that something can be used for food, don't say it isn't fit to eat." Peter was confronted with a new definition of what was clean and unclean. From then on, "clean" would be defined by this heavenly voice and not by Peter's cultural biases.

But Peter was not quickly convinced. Even after the vision and the voice came to him three times, he was still greatly puzzled. The account tells us that while he was wondering about the meaning of the vision, Gentile servants

were already at the door asking for him to come and meet their master, Cornelius, a foreigner. Cornelius had had an earlier vision telling him that God had answered his prayers and that he should send for Peter. The Gentile was more receptive to the good news about Jesus than the Jew was ready to share it!

When Peter finally met Cornelius and his household, he shared his cross-cultural conversion: “Now I am certain that God treats all people alike. God is pleased with everyone who worships him and does right, no matter what nation they come from.” He then proceeded to speak about the good news of Jesus. It was not about food after all! It was about God changing Peter’s heart.

It was about exposing his prejudiced heart. It was about God calling the shots in expanding his kingdom. It was about inclusion, as we read in Ephesians 3:6: “And the mystery is this: Because of Christ Jesus, the good news has given the Gentiles a share in the promises that God gave to the Jews. God has also let the Gentiles be part of the same body.”

All of us, like Peter, have unrecognized prejudices lurking in our hearts. Ask God to expose any prejudice in your heart that would keep you from reaching out cross-culturally, remembering that God forgives proud attitudes, ethnocentricity, and a sense of cultural superiority.

Matthew 9:35-36 records this story: “Jesus went to every town and village. He taught in their meeting places and preached the good news about God’s kingdom. Jesus also healed every kind of disease and sickness. When he saw the crowds, he felt sorry for them. They were confused and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.” As you go about your life on campus, God will open your eyes to internationals around you who may be feeling harassed, helpless, and lost. They need compassion—your compassion.

3 OVERCOMING OBSTACLES

► IS ENGLISH LANGUAGE A HURDLE?

Many international students speak English as a second or third language. They are required to pass an English proficiency test before being accepted to a degree course on any US campus. Some are comfortable speaking English, but not everyone has the same level of verbal fluency. Be sensitive to your friend's level of English. If you feel something was not understood, be ready to repeat words or clarify with simpler terms. When necessary, speak slowly (but not loudly), or write it down (as some understand written better than spoken English). Google Translate can help with difficult words. Encourage and affirm your friend's effort in speaking in English. You will be more patient and sympathetic if you imagine yourself learning a new language in another country and trying to converse with a native speaker!

The English language has many idioms and slang that may not make sense to an international student. For example, you may need to explain expressions like, "Can't wrap your mind around it," "Don't put all your eggs in one basket," "You don't have to bend over backwards for this," or "The ball is in your court."





Consider asking an international friend if they would teach you their language in exchange for you helping with English. Even those good in English often want to get better. Students may need help with proofreading, presentations, and/or informal conversation skills.

A group of Christian students on a West Coast campus began friendships with international students by volunteering to be English conversation partners. One North American student wrote, "My conversation partner had a lot of questions, especially about God. She recently expressed her desire to know more about Jesus. I hope to be able to answer her questions. By the way, her English has improved a lot since we have been meeting, and I have picked up some Chinese words along the way!" Check with the international student office or fellowships on your campus as well as local churches to see if anyone has such a program you can participate in.

► WHAT SHOULD WE TALK ABOUT?

Jesus started a conversation with a Samaritan woman (a foreigner and an outcast in the Jews' eyes) with a need wrapped up in a question: "Would you please give me a drink of water?" (John 4:7). It was not a trick question. Jesus was thirsty! Like Jesus, you may start a conversation with a genuine request: "Do you have notes from last week's class?"

You may encounter some international students who are hesitant to engage in a conversation with you. Don't be discouraged. This may happen because they do not feel confident about their English, or they are suspicious about your intentions (they may not have met any friendly North Americans), or they have cultural hesitations. In order to avoid questions about your motivation, talk with someone of the same gender. Don't be pushy; be respectful of their linguistic ability and their social readiness.



For tips on being a conversation partner, visit tiny.cc/3by3.

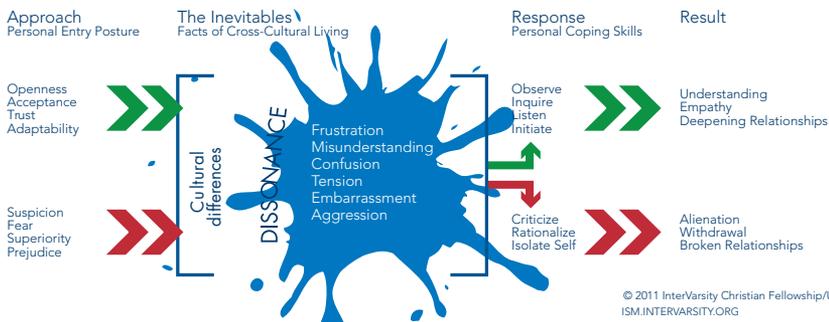
As you listen, watch for appropriate times to share your perspectives. You may be a minority person living in a majority culture and can empathize with the feelings of marginalization. Or you may have lived or studied abroad and had similar experiences of culture shock and the need for cultural interpreters. Or perhaps you identify with the person's questions about the meaning of life, God, Jesus, and forgiveness. Be willing to explain North American ways, but be eager to learn about your friend's society as well.

And don't be dismayed if things fail to work out the first time around. Remember that this is a cross-cultural encounter. You may make some cultural blunders, like offering bacon to your Muslim friend or beef to your Hindu vegetarian friend, or being too casual and greeting your friend with a slap on the back. Your international student friend may in turn make cultural mistakes, such as walking into your room without knocking on your door, holding your hand as you walk together, or not realizing that people have to wait in line.

► HOW DO I DEAL WITH MISUNDERSTANDINGS?

Become an eager culture learner, and you will find yourself greatly enriched by the friendship. Approaching interactions with openness, trust, and acceptance can help avoid issues, whereas feelings of suspicion, fear, and superiority can lead to greater tensions. Frustrations and disappointments are often the result of your expectations not being met, so examine what such feelings reveal about you and your cultural norms. Responding to uncomfortable situations by asking questions and listening can increase your understanding and deepen friendships (the green arrow path in the diagram below). However, being critical or walking away won't help (the red path in the diagram).

APPROACHING DIFFERENCES



When crossing cultures, refrain from making hasty judgments. A behavior may not necessarily be wrong or right—it may just be different! We quickly attribute motivations to actions we see (often without realizing it), but those assumed motivations are often wrong, especially in cross-cultural interactions. Assume people's intentions are positive, or ask what they meant by a particular action or phrase. Be patient with your new international friend and with yourself as you are both learning each other's culture. Better yet, agree to be each other's cultural informants. Help your international friend with the do's and don'ts of your culture as they assist you with avoiding faux pas related to their culture.

Many times, the best "teachers" of your own culture are those from outside the culture, as they see it from a different perspective. They may describe it in a fresher and clearer way than you would because you live and breathe it daily.

They notice things that you take for granted, and may ask helpful questions, such as, “Why are people always in a hurry?” “Do you always have to make an appointment to see people?” “Why do you have special homes for older people?” Borrowing their eyes for a moment will help you see your own culture and critique or explain it in a new way.

Being able to laugh at yourself (and your culture) is an important trait in crossing cultures. You can admit that it’s a bit strange that we put ice in our drinks when it’s below zero outside. You can try to explain the various celebratory slaps between players when their sports team does well or discuss other observations internationals have of American culture. Share funny stories of your own cultural blunders and misunderstandings. Laughter is a universal language.

Hot topics will unavoidably come up in conversations. For example, the international student may criticize our government’s policies. Do not be quick to defend them. Listen attentively. Your friend’s comments may help you understand how the rest of the world regards our country and see perspectives you had never considered before. We each have a certain way of seeing the world, but it often takes meeting someone who sees the world differently from us to understand our own worldviews. Friendships with international students can help us see ourselves—and the world around us—more accurately.



► WHAT EXPECTATIONS DO INTERNATIONALS HAVE OF FRIENDSHIPS?

In one online survey of 100 students across multiple universities, 80 percent of Americans said they try to get to know international students. However, most Americans said they didn't put in any extra effort in reaching out to internationals compared to connecting with Americans. On the other hand, the majority of internationals surveyed thought most Americans were not trying to get to know them. And they (internationals) felt that they were the ones initiating most of the time. Internationals also observed more cultural differences between themselves and Americans, and most felt Americans did need to put in more effort to befriend internationals (source: tiny.cc/if-survey).

Americans sometime assume internationals are not interested in friendship because they seem more comfortable and talkative with students from similar cultures. However, their quietness toward Americans may be because they are embarrassed by their English, they don't know what to say, or their culture is initially cooler toward strangers. Making friendships across cultures takes time, so don't give up too soon.



Internationals are often pleasantly surprised when Americans they meet are really friendly and helpful. Such friendliness and disclosure typically only come with closer friendships in their cultures. So internationals may feel that their American acquaintances are closer friends than they actually are. That can lead to confusion or disappointment if such friendships don't grow, or they may view us as shallow. The best way to find out is to ask your international friend how friendships are formed in their culture.

Culture significantly affects friendship expectations. For example, many Americans value individualism and privacy. We may prefer to do things on our own instead of asking for help. Someone from a more collectivist culture may want to do everything with her best friend, or will put her friend's needs before her own. Time- and task-oriented Westerners may want to briefly stop by the home of an international friend to drop off a helpful gift, but those from event- and relationship-oriented cultures may insist or expect that their Western friends stay for tea, dinner, and hours of conversation.

► HOW DO I HELP INTERNATIONALS THROUGH STRUGGLES?

Like American students going away to college for the first time, internationals may be dealing with homesickness, trying to manage their finances and time, figuring out their identities, making career plans, finding friends, dealing with relationship problems, and experiencing health concerns. However, they also face several additional challenges.

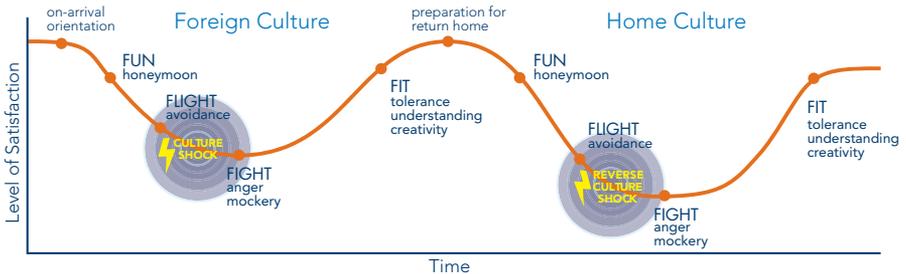
For example, international students face much larger academic differences. Some are used to lectures and one end-of-the-year test. In the US, university classes may have completely different grading schemes. Internationals may be unfamiliar with pop quizzes, graded homework, projects and presentations, or class participation grades. There is added stress when the teaching isn't in their native language, as they may have to spend hours translating each lecture to understand what it means. Also, in some academic systems plagiarism is acceptable, or rules against it may not be enforced (similar to drivers in the US not getting tickets for going just a little over the speed limit). Students may not realize they can be kicked out of North American universities for quoting

references without citing the sources. And failing school not only forces an international student to go home in most cases, but it also causes them to experience deep shame for having returned home without a diploma. That fear of failure can lead some internationals to spend all their waking hours doing classwork and research, resulting in a lower quality of life.

Life in a new country can be exciting and fun. However, this initial honeymoon period doesn't last forever; everyone eventually experiences culture shock. International students need to know that it is completely normal to sometimes feel anger, frustration, loneliness, or a desire to run away and hide even a year after arriving. Stress and anxiety from culture shock can even produce physical symptoms like headaches, stomachaches, and trouble sleeping. Typically, the more different their home culture and language are from their new country, the more culture shock they experience (East Asian cultures and languages are very different from American culture and English).

In 1963, Jeanne and John Gullahorn developed the W-curve hypothesis model shown in the chart below. It illustrates how one's mood and comfort level change based on the time spent in a culture. There are no numbers on the chart because adjustment rates vary from person-to-person and can even differ among areas of one individual's life. That means a student may fit into his new academic surroundings in the first two months, but it may take him six or 12 months to be more comfortable in social situations.

STAGES OF TRANSITION



Lisa Espineli Chinn & David Pollock © 2011 InterVarsity Christian Fellowship/USA

ISM.INTERVARSITY.ORG

"WHILE THIS W-CURVE AND THE LYSGAARD U-CURVE THEORY THAT IT'S BASED ON ARE NOT PERFECT, THEY DO HELP PEOPLE IDENTIFY WITH A TRANSITION STAGE WHEN THEY ARRIVE IN A NEW COUNTRY AND WHEN THEY GO BACK HOME."

I (Lisa) discovered, over years of using this simple diagram, that it helps



generate much-needed entry and reentry conversations, processing, and understanding of what people may be going through. People may skip one stage altogether but will relate strongly with another. Many find it freeing to name what they are experiencing. You can share this diagram and its explanation with international students by giving them *Coming to America* booklets (tiny.cc/c-t-a) soon after they first arrive. Bookmarks showing this chart and the Approaching Differences diagram (from earlier) are also available (tiny.cc/bkrmk). Some international students stop adapting to the new culture too early. They try to escape the stress by spending most of their time with other internationals from their country or region. That's okay for a time, but, as the quote below indicates, they need to move beyond the "flight" stage to have a good experience in North America.

Encouraging international students to expand their social network beyond students from their countries of origin may help to limit the negative effects of acculturative stress. This is a considerable challenge for international students who come to campuses with large numbers of fellow students from the same country. Although students may find it comforting and easier to make friends and connections with people from the same country, developing social ties with a more diverse group of students is important in adapting to studies and life in the United States. (Source article: "The Interplay of International Students' Acculturative Stress, Social Support, and Acculturation Modes," files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1052843.pdf).

International students who spend most of their time with others from their



country or region of the world never fully adapt to US culture. They may not realize this until they get a job in America and find that it is difficult to succeed due to their insufficient understanding of US culture.

Let your international friends know they can come to you for help, and share your phone number and social media contact information. That may require adding margin to your schedule, or it may mean sacrificing your plans at the last minute when an international friend comes to you with a problem. One non-Christian student, Sudha, visited a campus international student fellowship a few times when she first arrived in the US, but she didn't continue going. Two years later she showed up again and wanted to talk with a fellowship leader. She was dealing with a crisis and didn't know where to find support. Sudha remembered the caring, helpful people she met at the fellowship and knew they would help her (which they did). While other international students can provide some support, friends from the host culture are usually more familiar with dealing with car accidents and traffic tickets, navigating the healthcare system and insurance claims, filing income taxes, buying and selling cars, and addressing similar matters.

► HOW CAN WE CONNECT WITH SO MANY INTERNATIONALS?

You can multiply your efforts by meeting internationals in groups and bringing American friends with you. Look for events that have already been planned before creating your own. This saves effort and frees you to spend more time with internationals and less on logistics. For example, one group of American students and ministry volunteers attended a hayride jointly sponsored by an international student fellowship and an off-campus church. They met many internationals there. At least one of the Americans befriended several international students and has been meeting with them on a regular basis.

I (Brian) was invited to join an Indian friend at a festival/holiday celebration

sponsored by the Indian Student Association. My friend was really excited to see me there and introduced me to many of his Indian friends. Since I was the only White person in attendance, several attendees asked me why I was there, which led to more conversations. Apparently, my visit to their celebration created a very favorable first impression. Even days after the event, a group of Indian students (whom I hadn't met at the festival) recognized me on campus and stopped to talk.

While early in the semester you may focus on meeting many internationals, hopefully some of those acquaintances will become closer friends. You will only be able to develop a few close friendships, in part because internationals often ask more of their close friends than Americans do. If you meet more internationals than you can befriend, introduce them to same-gender friends of yours.

Two summers ago, six college students from one campus returned from different short-term missions trips. When they reconnected, they discovered one thing in common: they all wanted to reach out to international students. Their experience abroad opened their eyes and enlarged their hearts toward this often-overlooked student population. Today they lead their InterVarsity group in organizing events specifically for international students.

Consider working with the Christian international students in your church or fellowship. Their cultural sensitivity and proximity, spiritual insight, and shared experience with internationals will help you navigate the internationals' world. Your partnership with them will bear fruit in your life and theirs.

Plan gatherings that help internationals meet potential friends from the host culture. For Thanksgiving meals, coffee houses, or conversation hour events, consider having an American host at each table. Find local residents in the same fields that some internationals are pursuing and ask them to be both mentors and friends. Volunteers from your church could serve as host families to international students (providing housing is rarely needed these days, and is almost never long term). Many students live with extended family back home and may miss interacting with children and older relatives. Hosting them in your home once a month (perhaps Sunday afternoon) for a meal and conversation can provide them with a welcome escape from campus.

4 SPIRITUAL CONVERSATIONS

► ARE THEY INTERESTED IN SPIRITUAL MATTERS?

Swati's interest in Christianity started when she was seven years old, back home in her predominantly Hindu country. Riding her bike one afternoon, she noticed a church and stopped to look in. She saw people praying and waiting in line for something (they were having Communion). She stepped inside.

The priest asked if she was a Christian, and without a thought she said yes. Then, knowing she had lied, she quickly slipped out. But that interest in church would remain with her. When she first visited the United States, she immediately noticed a small church by a park. She wrote, "Soon it became a routine for me to go there after my walk, when all was quiet and no one was there. I would walk in, pray—talk to God—and almost every single time sing 'Silent Night.' That was the only Christian hymn I really knew."

Years later she returned to the United States as an international student. She met other Christians at the international student orientation who welcomed her and introduced her to the International Christian Fellowship group on campus. During their spring retreat, Swati made a decision to follow Jesus. She wrote,

It has been a long journey since my first interest in Christianity was kindled as a child. I feel the hand of God traveling through these years, and when he knew I was "ripe" he placed me in the right hands—hands of International Christian Fellowship members, who introduced me to the Bible and the life it had to offer.

I feel reborn again. I now have a hope, a friend, a Father to whom I can go anytime to seek comfort, advice, love, forgiveness and rest. It is a privilege to have Christ, my Abba, in my life.

God is bringing students like Swati to your campus.

► WHAT DO THEY BELIEVE?

International students come from diverse backgrounds, religious beliefs, and understanding of spirituality. You may wonder if you need to master all the world religions to begin reaching out to international students

Studying the belief systems of the major religions is not a must for starting a friendship cross-culturally, but it is helpful. Check the web or your local bookstore for resources on different faiths and how



Christians are to relate with them. Your best teacher may be someone from that religion, your international student friend. Ask questions about faith: *Do you believe in God? What kind of God do you believe in? Where do you get information about your God? What difference does your religion make in your daily life? Is your God knowable? How do you please God? How important is faith in God in your life? What is humanity's purpose on earth? What happens when you die? Does it matter how you live your life on this earth?*

As you meet people from other faiths, be willing to engage them in true dialogue. InterVarsity's "Code of Ethics for Christian Witness" (tiny.cc/evan-ethics) says that true dialogue means "we acknowledge our common humanity as equally sinful, equally needy, and equally dependent on the grace of God we proclaim. We seek to listen sensitively in order to understand, and thus divest our witness of any stereotypes or fixed formulae which are barriers to true dialogue." And, even as they ask questions, you will be surprised how your own Christian faith will be strengthened as you wrestle with what your international friend is asking you.

Resources on Religions

- Order the Pocket Guide to World Religions by Winfried Corduan (tiny.cc/pgwr).
- Download religion profiles from ISI (tiny.cc/religion-pr).

► HOW DO I INTRODUCE THEM TO JESUS?

“Children, you show love for others by truly helping them, and not merely by talking about it” (1 John 3:18). Your acts of friendship, hospitality, and love, as well as connecting them with Christian fellowship and church community, will speak volumes.



Briefly mention your Christian activities when they naturally come up in conversations (for example, if they ask, “What did you do this weekend?”); don’t hide that you are a follower of Jesus. If your friends ask about your personal experiences, share them in terms that they would understand (for example, something in the sermon that influenced you, answered prayers, a song that helped you connect with God, etc.).

If a spiritual conversation does get going, find out what your friends understand about Christianity. Many internationals have misconceptions about what being “Christian” really means. For example, some don’t differentiate between those following Christian/Western culture and true disciples of Jesus. Others don’t realize that Christianity started in the Middle East and that people from any culture can follow Jesus. Don’t go into too much detail unless they keep asking questions.

You can also invite international student friends to investigate Christianity by reading and studying the Bible with you. Encourage them to also read the Bible in their native language (find Bibles at tiny.cc/ibible). Many international students have not seen or owned a Bible for themselves.

One graduate student from China, upon receiving a Bible as a gift at a Christian meeting, exclaimed, “A Bible! I’ve never touched one before! Thank you so much. I will read it!”

However, international students do not become Christians when they first read the Bible or hear the gospel (except in cases of rare miracles). Their spiritual journey is a process. When researchers interviewed 2,000 new Christians, they discovered that each student in this generation goes through the same five thresholds as they put their faith in Jesus.

(source: *I Once Was Lost* by Don Everts and Doug Schaupp tiny.cc/iowl).



Outreach Bible Study Guides

- *Starting International Small Groups* has 4 short trainings plus Bible studies on each of the 5 Thresholds of Discovering Faith; it can be used with both Christians and non-Christians (tiny.cc/sisg).
- *I-GIG Guides (International Groups Investigating God)* include sections on understanding the Bible plus step-by-step instructions that even first-time Bible study leaders can follow (tiny.cc/igig).
- *Exploring the Bible* has 14 studies with many helpful notes (tiny.cc/etb).
- View or download 200+ free Bible studies written for international students (tiny.cc/bible-s).



The first threshold is going from distrust of Christians to trusting a Christian. How does that happen? It comes from a student's authentic friendship with a true follower of Jesus. The next four steps to following Jesus are (2) becoming curious about Christianity, (3) being open to change, (4) seeking Jesus, and (5) becoming a Christ-follower. The steps do not always happen in this order—for example, an international student might become curious before making a Christian friend—but a student's faith journey almost always includes all five steps. To learn more see *Starting International Small Groups* (tiny.cc/sisg) or the 5 Thresholds in an ISM Context web page (tiny.cc/5t). In the final analysis, God is the one who draws people to himself. He is sovereign and can choose many different ways or a combination of ways to bring people to faith in himself. These thresholds help us to understand God's movement in someone's heart.

► WHAT IF THEY ARE NOT INTERESTED IN SPIRITUAL THINGS?

What if your international student friend is not serious about spiritual things? What if she or he does not become a Jesus-follower while in North America? Will you continue being a friend? Of course! Your friendship is not conditioned by their acceptance or rejection of Jesus.

Your friendship is based on mutual respect and commitment to each other. You have discovered and developed a variety of interests. So even if your friend does not share your spiritual beliefs, you can continue to enrich and enjoy each other's lives. And who knows? Maybe down the road he will take steps toward Jesus, or possibly his family members will.

A graduate student in the Midwest wants her young son, back in her country, to learn about Christianity, even though she herself is just beginning to learn about Jesus.





A professor in Asia had a positive encounter with a Christian English teacher in his country. That opened the way for his daughter to have Christian hosts when she came to North America as an international student. Her Christian exposure eventually led to her own understanding of the claims of Jesus Christ.

Many international students return to their home countries without making a commitment to Jesus. But they will return with a different view of Christians because of the quality of friendship they experienced with you. They will return home with hearts soft toward God.

Paul reminds us in 1 Corinthians 3:6 that the Lord has assigned to his servants different tasks. He writes, "I planted the seeds, Apollos watered them, but God made them sprout and grow." Your part may be at the front end or the middle of the spiritual journey of an international student. But whatever role you play, it is God who will bring life and lasting fruit.

5 NEXT STEPS

► WHAT IMPACT COULD MY FRIENDSHIPS HAVE?

Friendship with an international student is a life-changing adventure. You will become more globally conversant. Your international friend will be more informed about North American life, worldviews, and values. You and your international friend will acquire new cross-cultural skills. You may expand your culinary choices, while your international friend may begin to appreciate North American cuisine. You will feel God's pleasure as you obey his commands in Leviticus 19:33-34: "Don't mistreat any foreigners who live in your land. Instead, treat them as well as you treat citizens and love them as much as you love yourself. Remember, you were once foreigners in the land of Egypt. I am the LORD your God." In return, your international friend will experience genuine Christian love and hospitality.



Recognize that their road to faith may be long and that it may take many people and events to bring them to a place of trust in Jesus. Maybe you will be the person who helps your friend make a decision to trust and follow Jesus. Your friend will have experienced reconciliation to God, and you will have gained a brother or sister in Christ!



Remember Xiao Min? The Christians continued to love him in the midst of his doubts and discouragement. They continued to pray for him. After quite some time, he became a follower of Jesus. He still has many questions, but he says, "If God opens the doors for me, it means he accepts me as I am. If God opens the door for me, he will also show me the way." For Xiao Min, his Christian friends have made the difference between a life of despair and a life of faith.

Look for the Harukis, the Xiao Mins, and the Swatis around you who need a Christian friend. Perhaps, because of you, Haruki would not hesitate to attend the party. He might even invite you to go with him! God is bringing the world to you. And a life-changing adventure with God and your international student friend awaits you!

► STORY: MY TRANSATLANTIC FRIENDSHIP

As an international graduate student in American history at Kent State University in Ohio, I was invited to join a faculty Bible study on just my fifth day in the US. There, Marc found out about my college ministry experience in the Netherlands and immediately asked me to help him set up a graduate student chapter of InterVarsity on campus.

I joined Marc the next week at a welcoming party for international students. Soon after, he invited me to his home, where Pam cooked one of her numerous fantastic dinners. I attached great value to their inclusion of me (and many others) in celebrating their family highlights including dinners, outings, and the birth of their youngest daughter. The many moments of games and the silliness of children bound us together. I appreciated their genuine interest in the experience of living abroad, as Pam had done that too. And of course, the service of taking me to places I could never have reached without a car, including several airport trips, was priceless. It happened so often! One of the lasting legacies was my commitment to provide hospitality by creating a guest room once I owned a house (which I have now done).

“In contrast to the family’s happy curiosity, my diary shows frequent disappointment because few others showed similar interest in me.”

Marc and Pam’s acceptance and genuine joy in this mutual friendship made me feel so much more at home. Our friendship matured by continuously asking deep and difficult questions, often wrapped in hilarious exchanges. Marc and Pam encouraged their guests to share stories and practices of their country of origin, which is an important way to connect, and they were not taken aback when their guests addressed the shadowy sides of American life. Marc helped me move from being an observer (of American culture) to becoming a participant (in intercultural exchange). From Marc’s questions I also realized that I was deeply interested in the way culture shapes life

(and faith) and in the question of which universal aspects connect people from different parts of the world.

We were fortunate that we could continue our friendship after I graduated and returned home to the Netherlands. Shortly after returning I invited Marc to be one of my witnesses at my wedding. His presence was a great gift and solidified our friendship. Moreover, my research job in an institute for American history provided a frequent excuse to drop in at Marc and Pam's home. I saw their family develop, the children leave for college, and I hosted them during visits. During my college years, I dreamed of taking my own children to this great nation (even though they were still in the future). In 2008, my family explored the territory I had lived in with such great pleasure and profit. The six-week trip made such an impression that they repeatedly asked to do it again.

The friendship has now lasted for almost three decades, and I am grateful for all the support and memorable moments. It has worked because we worked together, with me in a kind of junior partner role, and because of Marc and Pam's enduring interest. It has encouraged me to be more purposeful, to see the adventure of a faithful life, and to take risks in trusting, obeying, pursuing, and testing. So, my advice would be to build international friendships by taking lots of time to listen and question one another, and by sharing hospitality; [those practices] have harvested the fruits of this fine friendship till this very day. Thanks, Marc and Pam, for an enduring and enriching friendship.



► WHAT DOES GOD WANT ME TO DO?

Here are some questions on this booklet for reflection or group discussion.

- A. What thoughts and ideas stood out?
- B. What else (if anything) do you need before stepping out in faith to make friends with international students?
- C. Which internationals came to mind as you were reading?
- D. What next step does God want you to take?
- E. Who can you loan/give this booklet to once you've finished reading it?
- F. Who may God be calling you to talk with and encourage to develop friendships with international students (for example, a friend, Sunday school class, small group, campus fellowship, church group)?
- G. Who can join you or provide prayer support and accountability for your next steps?

► WHERE CAN I LEARN MORE?

Overviews

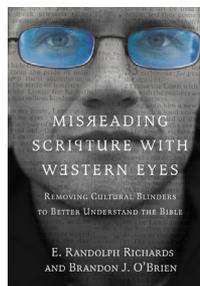
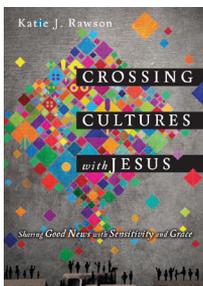
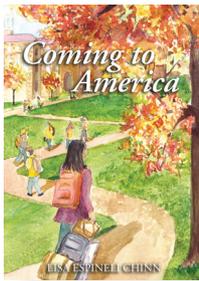
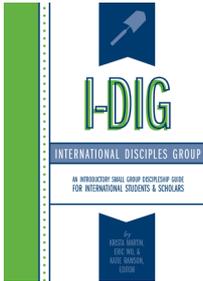
- Find quick start guides (called 3x3s) on several international student ministry topics (tiny.cc/3by3).
- Watch a video about an American student meeting international friends and leading a small group of them to discover what the Bible says (tiny.cc/int-video).
- Discover many online resources for international student ministry at InterVarsity (ism.intervarsity.org) and at ReachingInternationals.com.
- Find resources and connect with others through the ACMI network and annual training conference (acmi-ism.org).

Crossing Cultures

- Help new internationals adapt by sharing *Coming to America* booklets with them (tiny.cc/c-t-a).
- Learn more by reading *Crossing Cultures with Jesus* by Katie J. Rawson (tiny.cc/ccwj) or *A Beginner's Guide to Crossing Cultures* by Patty Lane (tiny.cc/bgcc).
- See the Bible through a non-Western lens after reading *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes* by Kenneth E. Bailey (tiny.cc/jtmee) or *Misreading Scripture with Western Eyes* by E. Randolph Richards and Brandon J. O'Brien (tiny.cc/mswe).

Discipling Christian Internationals

- Lead or coach an I-DIG International Disciples Group (tiny.cc/idig).
- Prepare internationals to return home using the *Think Home* workbook (tiny.cc/t-home) and *Back Home* devotional guide (tiny.cc/b-home), both by Lisa Espineli Chinn.
- Help internationals grow in leadership by using a series of articles and training videos (ism.intervarsity.org/leadership).



As North American Christians, we have an unprecedented opportunity to develop friendships with international students, to be God's ambassadors without leaving home. This booklet shares stories, foundational approaches, and practical steps on developing friendships with international students. It is a quick-start guide to help college students, friends, pastors, small group members, and volunteers connect with the more than one million international students on US college and university campuses right now.

REVIEWS

"I love it! It is extremely accessible, answers what I feel are the most frequently asked questions, and calms some of the most frequently held fears/anxieties about engaging in friendships with internationals. The direction, guidance, and suggestions are very practical and easily applied in the contexts students will find themselves in."

-Michael Hughes, *InterVarsity staff minister*

"Bravo! I really like the booklet. It is succinct, practical, and positive. The stories of the various students are realistic and help readers see that these students are real people who are on a journey, not simply potential converts."

-Clare O'Leary, *Director of SIL/LEAD Community Programs and Wycliffe missionary for 35 years*

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Lisa Espineli Chinn is a former international student from the Philippines. She graduated with a degree in foreign service from the University of the Philippines and has a master's in communications from Wheaton College Graduate School in Illinois. For 14 years she served as the National Director of International Student Ministry for InterVarsity Christian Fellowship/USA. Her publications include the *Think Home* reentry workbook, *Back Home* reentry devotional guide, and the *Reentry Guide for Short Term Missions*.

Brian Hart was first inspired to reach out to international students after a summer of teaching English in China. He worked for more than seven years as a full-time engineer while volunteering and leading a growing InterVarsity international student fellowship at the University of Kentucky. Over the past 11 years, he has led the national communications and resource work for InterVarsity's International Student Ministry. He has served as editor of several ISM publications and is the lead author and editor of the new *I-GIG (International Groups Investigating God) Participant's and Leader's Guide*.

Order this from the InterVarsity Store at: tiny.cc/fwis



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