

## LEARNING ACROSS CULTURES

The foreign student's first priority is, of course, his or her academic studies. Many students, however, would like to expand their educational experience to include learning about American politics, economics, environment, and culture. One of the most effective ways to accomplish this is by getting to know and sharing activities with American hosts in the community. In addition, foreign students are a resource to Americans who want to learn about other countries and cultures.

The relationships that develop between hosts and foreign students tend to foster a new appreciation for how others live and view the world, and can contribute to achieving one of the principal values of the cross-cultural experience: cultural self-awareness. Because we learn so many of our basic assumptions, values, and behavior patterns at an early age, we rarely think about them as we conduct our daily lives. We tend to assume that most of our behavior and beliefs are "natural," that is, universally experienced. Cultural self-awareness allows us to see that our way of doing things is but one of many different, equally "natural" ways. The ability to accept those differences helps in building relationships with people from other cultures.

## GETTING IN TOUCH

You have made the decision to develop a friendship with a foreign student, a friendship that may continue long after the student returns home. If this is your first experience with a for-

ign student, the following suggestions may be helpful.

When you receive the name and address of your student from the local organization or foreign student advisor, write a welcoming letter or call the student as soon as possible.

For the first visit, many hosts invite students to share a meal or an afternoon or evening conversation. A written invitation can prevent misunderstandings about the precise time and place of the meeting, travel arrangements, and how long the visit will last. Usually hosts provide transportation for the first visit. If you are unable to do so, provide clear and complete written instructions on how to find you and what public transportation is available.

## GETTING TOGETHER

Don't be surprised if your guest is late. Americans may "live by the clock," but this is not true in many other cultures. In some, for example, the time on the invitation implies one should arrive an hour or more later. In others, an invitation is extended several times before it is accepted. Exchange phone numbers with your student so arrangement can be confirmed.

Ask the student what name you should use when addressing him or her. It may take practice to pronounce some names correctly. You will want to tell the student how to address you and your family members as well. Learning a few words of greeting in the student's language can be fun and is always appreciated.

In many cultures, guests are offered coffee, tea, or a cool drink as soon as

they arrive. If your custom is to serve beer or cocktails, it is important to have nonalcoholic beverages available for those whose religion prohibits or culture discourages the use of alcohol.

Many foreign students are not accustomed to having pets inside the home. Until you know how the student will react, it is advisable to keep pets at a distance.

Students can be lonely, especially when they first arrive in this country, and they may enjoy talking about their family and friends. If you have children, include them in the conversation. Students often enjoy children because they are easier to converse with and may “substitute” for brothers and sisters at home.

## GETTING ACQUAINTED

**B**efore meeting the student, try to become familiar with his or her country: location and size, form of government, the capital and other major cities, major religions and holidays.

Information about the country may provide clues to the student’s cultural background. Although it is impossible to become familiar with all the cultural differences, be aware that major differences are likely to exist. The student will be your best resource for learning about his or her culture and many stimulating discussions can occur as you explore cultural differences together.

Be prepared for questions about our form of government and how it works, local history, and major trends in American society. Questions about your lifestyle and what Americans believe in and

value are common and equally important.

Just as differences in customs and culture stimulate conversation, so do explorations of world events and how they are viewed from differing perspectives. While neither we, as Americans, nor the foreign students are necessarily experts on the positions taken by our respective governments, we can learn a great deal by discussing what lies behind governmental actions and how we, as individuals, view particular events.

## AT MEAL TIME

**S**haring a relaxed, unhurried meal is a time-honored way for people to get acquainted. Customary ways of serving and eating differ from culture to culture, so a few hints may contribute to ensuring that these times are pleasant.

Since food restrictions exist in many cultures and religions, you should ask your guest when you extend the invitation if there are foods he or she cannot eat. Some students are vegetarians, some eat no pork or pork products, others no beef or shellfish. Many hosts find that chicken is a “safe” meat to serve and that rice is a good choice because it is a staple in many countries. Fruit juice, soft drinks, tea, or water are usually preferred to milk, which is rarely served to adults in other countries. Rich desserts, for which many Americans have a special fondness, are often unknown abroad and your guest may prefer a piece of fruit or simply a cup of tea at the end of the meal.

Plan for the first meal to be simple (easy for you to prepare and serve and easy

for the student who is trying to learn your customs.) If you start the meal with a prayer, song, or silence, continue to do so, but explain the custom to your guest.

Conversing while eating is not the custom in all cultures. A quiet guest may be exhibiting cultural patterns from home and may be embarrassed to be asked questions intended to promote conversation during a meal.

Inquiring about customs that relate to food, meal preparation, and serving in the student's culture may help the student feel comfortable about asking similar questions or you.

## KEEPING IN TOUCH

Some foreign students have commented that they feel Americans are insincere. Mistaking American friendliness for friendship, they are disappointed when relationships do not take on a deeper meaning. In many other cultures, friendship is reserved for a very few people, is based on mutual love and respect, and involves unlimited obligation. In the United States, close friendships certainly exist, but Americans also have many "friends," among whom the foreign student may be only one. Talking about how friendships develop in the United States may help the student achieve a realistic view of what can be expected of his or her American friends.

Many students feel keenly the loss of their friends and relatives when they leave home. It is important, therefore, to keep in touch with the student so he or she feels wanted and accepted. A brief

note, phone call, or birthday card can help remind the student that, even if you haven't seen each other for a while, he or she has not been forgotten. In time, students create a new life here, and feelings of loneliness and uncertainty abate.

During the student's first visit, you will probably discover there are things you would enjoy doing together. Include the student in your activities such as church or club meetings, sports or cultural events, and holiday celebrations or picnics. Again, a written invitation, followed by a phone call, helps your guest understand the event. Be sure to indicate dress, beginning and ending times, and whether the event includes a meal.

Students may be reluctant to accept invitations during busy school periods, so do not be disappointed if the student must decline in favor of a test or term paper. Make it clear that he or she is not obligated to accept every invitation and can turn down an invitation when it interferes with academic schedules.

Some hosts invite students to attend church with them. It is especially important to tell students they can decline if they prefer not to attend religious services. Proselytizing is not acceptable; it is hoped that all hosts and students will respect each other's religious beliefs. Students should always be informed in advance if a program or event will be religious in nature.

## EASING ADJUSTMENT

When students leave home to study, they are beginning a new life, often alone. Adjustment to a new culture

and environment is not accomplished in a few days; to the contrary, it can take a year or, in some cases, longer.

People who enter a new culture almost inevitably suffer from disorientation. The physical and social environment contains much that is new and hard to understand. It takes time to learn how to get around, do laundry, buy food and other necessities, and become comfortable with the new society. It is exhausting and difficult to speak in a second language, understand the meanings that lie behind spoken and non-verbal language, and learn new behavior. The cultural differences encountered, and an inability to comprehend them, produce a pervasive sense of insecurity.

When entering a new culture, a person is separated from the people and circumstances that define one's role in society and may experience, in varying degrees, a loss of identity. The Impact of this disorientation is generally termed "culture shock." Culture shock can manifest itself in a number of ways: headache, upset stomach, irritability, homesickness, and so on. Eventually it will disappear, except in very rare cases. Hosts can do much to ease the student's adjustment and culture shock by being aware that this is a normal and "real" experience that most sojourners encounter. They can provide assistance by listening patiently and offering support when it is needed.

## **KNOWING WHERE TO STOP**

**A**merican hosts are not responsible for financial support nor, in most cases, does the student live with hosts. There are other areas of the student's

life, as well, which the host is not expected to handle. The foreign student adviser on campus is responsible for assisting students in the following areas:

- Employment restrictions
- Immigration and visa problems
- Academic problems with professors, advisers, and administrators
- Financial problems

Hosts can be helpful in locating medical services or assistance for family or marital problems if the institution does not provide these services to foreign students. They can also help find apartments, purchase needed items, and provide practice in speaking English. If students ask you questions concerning major medical, financial or other problems, however, always refer them to the foreign student advisor.