

NEWS

UNIVERSITY OF SCRANTON

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SCRANTON--Imagine going to a college halfway across the world--one with a culture, language and customs that are unfamiliar and sometimes even bizarre.

This is what many international students face in coming to the University of Scranton for the first time. It can be difficult adjusting to both a new academic format and a different way of living and socializing, especially during those times when American students and their families are celebrating holidays like Thanksgiving.

In comes the Friendship Program, designed by Peter J. Blazes, recently appointed director of international student affairs. Blazes, along with Thomas P. Hogan, Ph.D., dean of the Graduate School, felt the need for a loosely structured program that would help foreign students adjust more quickly to the American culture.

Blazes and a committee of seven, which includes people from the University and well-respected members of the Scranton community, invited about 60 local families to participate in the program. Letters of invitation were also sent to around 300 University faculty and staff members.

Participation involves giving a student moral support and friendship. Blazes said that a program such as this "needs to be loose," and that families only need be willing to share their home, "say on a Saturday evening; and maybe talk on the phone or go shopping with the student."

Families can also choose to open their homes to students at holidays, giving them a place to stay and an opportunity to learn about American festivities and customs.

Besides initiating foreign students into the American way of life, this program allows members of the Scranton community to glimpse life in other countries. According to Hogan, "The Friendship Program is something we knew we've needed for several years, not only for the students but also for the community. This is an opportunity for contact on a first-hand basis."

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Blazes said that the program provides a chance to "compare different cultures--we learn, they learn. It's a mutual benefit."

So far, about 37 families are fully participating in the program, with about 15 others agreeing to host a student for the holidays.

David L. Tressler, executive director of the University's McDade Center for Technology and Applied Research, teaches an M.B.A. course that includes many foreign students. He became interested in the Friendship Program because he was concerned about what happened to these students during the holidays.

He feels the University should display a "welcoming spirit" towards these students and that they should be treated in an adult manner with the same courtesy extended to them as would be shown to a visiting business dignitary. Tressler will be sponsoring a student from Bolivia, and sees it as an opportunity for him and his family to learn about the student's culture.

Students and sponsors got a chance to meet at an international student welcoming reception and buffet held in September. The reception highlighted the cultures of Egypt, Lebanon, Pakistan and Türkiye. Students bought special ingredients and, with the help of ARA Food Service employees, prepared traditional meals to serve at the buffet. A farewell reception in the spring will focus on Chinese culture.

The two receptions are the main functions that the University sponsors for international students. The International Student Club publishes the newsletter "Nexus" twice a semester, and special interest clubs, such as the African American Society, Gaelic Society and India Club sponsor their own functions and events.

This year, 170 international students from 35 different countries are enrolled at the University. The students range in age from 20 to 32, and are enrolled in nine graduate and 14 undergraduate degree programs. Fifty-two percent of the students are involved in the M.B.A. program.

This semester, the following countries are represented: Belize, Bolivia, Brazil, Cameroon, Canada, Columbia, England, France, Germany, India, Indonesia, Iran, Ireland, Italy, Jamaica, Japan, Kenya, Korea, Lebanon, Malaysia, Mexico, Netherlands, Pakistan, Palau, Panama, the People's Republic of China, Peru, Singapore, Spain, Taiwan, Tanzania, Thailand, Türkiye, the U.S.S.R. and Zambia.

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"This year we have an exceptionally good group of international students with greater diversity in terms of academic programs and countries represented," Hogan remarked.

Blazes added that the United States must be a part of the world community and one of the main goals of the Friendship Program and other international programs is to promote basic understanding across cultures. In that respect, Blazes feels the University of Scranton is doing very well at this stage, as is evident from the number of international students enrolled here.

Nationally, there were 407,530 international students attending U.S. colleges in the 1990-91 year, a 5.3 percent increase from the previous year, according to the "Chronicle of Higher Education." The largest influx occurred in the number of Asian students, who accounted for 56 percent of the total. Last year, Pennsylvania ranked seventh in the nation, with 17,571 international students. For the second year in a row, the most popular field of study was business and management.

Amir Siddiqua, an undergraduate student from Pakistan, said that he came to the University to earn a degree in electronics engineering because he heard that the University's programs were expanding and growing. He had talked to various professors over the telephone and found them helpful.

In terms of how American students first reacted to him, Siddiqua said, "It was hard for the American students to understand my culture, because they had never come across anything like it before."

Siddiqua found a cultural gap of his own when he first came to Scranton. He told friends of his shocking discovery--a couple engaging in a public display of affection--something that is forbidden in his country.

Since this episode, Siddiqua has dealt with other quirks of life in the United States, but feels it is important for people in every part of the world to learn about foreign cultures.

He thinks projects like the Friendship Program are a good idea because they help foreign students overcome language problems and make it easier to get involved with students from the U.S.