

OASIS helps international students adjust

By Claire Wiseman | IDS | April 13, 2011

Circled around a conference table at the Leo R. Dowling International Center, a group of international students discussed a topic of concern: making American friends.

On butcher paper, some students drew images of what they thought of as "American." Featuring landscapes with cacti and pine trees, hamburgers and diverse faces, the pictures varied with the people. And as they drew, the students discussed their feelings and experiences.

Outreach and Support for International Students and Scholars provides psychoeducation and group services for the University's international student community. Through group discussion and skills building courses, the program aims to help international students adjust to life in a different country.

Minkyong Shin is the program's coordinator and a Ph.D. student in counseling psychology in the School of Education.

"Many of the international students feel like when they come to America, the structure or framework that they had for interacting with people is turned upside down," Shin said.

The program is a joint project with the international center, the Center for Human Growth and the Office of International Services.

International center Director Sandy Britton said a survey conducted by the center revealed a specific desire among international students to make more American friends. Britton said this could be attributed to a language barrier or to general communication problems.

Cara Maffini is a Ph.D. student in counseling psychology and an OASIS facilitator. Maffini said many of the group discussions this semester have focused on communication skills.

"It's not the language; it's more the colloquialisms," Maffini explained.

Rather than a lack of specific English language skills, it's the cadences of American English that sometimes keep them from speaking up in class or group work, Maffini said. During OASIS sessions, students practice interrupting, asking questions and approaching groups of people. The goal is to develop better interactions with others in the IU community.

Maffini is originally from northern California, where she said she experienced a diverse cultural environment that inspired her to study the mental health of international students.

Maffini said she's seen many students come to OASIS after negative experiences. Whether based on prejudice or discomfort in social situations, these can leave students feeling outcast. She said she tries to improve their experience by listening carefully and expressing concern.

But there are hurdles to jump.

Britton said the idea of psychological services often carries a negative connotation.

"The notion of therapy and counseling doesn't fit every culture," Britton said. Group facilitators work to break down barriers. Maffini said much of this involves reassuring students that it's okay to be uncomfortable after traveling to a new country.

Domestic students participate as well.

Undergraduates, both international and American, are involved in the sessions and provide a range of perspectives during discussion.

Maffini recalled the time a Russian student spent his small group time discussing cultural differences with two Chinese students from different regions of their country. She said she

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wishes more domestic students realized the potential for learning and growth represented by international students.

"I've learned as much from them, if not more, than they've learned from this," Maffini said.

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