

UNDERSTANDING A NEW CULTURE

Like a fish swimming in water, Americans tend to take their own culture for granted. But for many international students, life in the U.S. is radically different from their previous experience. Here are some ideas for helping them adjust to a new environment:

Consider sponsoring a panel discussion on “How to Make Friends with Americans” at the beginning of the school year (or each semester). Here is a suggested lineup for your panel—a professor, an international student who has been in the U.S. for a year, and one or two American students (grad and undergrad). Ask each panelist to share two or three tips on how to best go about making friends with Americans – anecdotes are good, too. Allow time for questions from the audience. Note that it is important for the panel to meet before the actual presentation—to help ensure that their points cover a broad range of issues. .

Certain holidays are especially important within American culture. If possible, provide gatherings or parties that will enable internationals to taste a bit of this culture. For example:

- Independence Day– the 4th of July, gives a good time for a summer cook-out and fun outdoor activities. The fireworks make a great ending to an important time for friends and family to congregate together. What an opportune time to invite your friends to join in.
- When the time comes to celebrate Martin Luther King, Jr. Day, invite internationals to a special program which might include an explanation of Dr. King’s life by a local African-American pastor, music by the school’s Gospel Choir, food, some kind of game to help people get to know one another, etc.
- At Easter, it would be appropriate to sponsor a free showing of a film such as The Jesus film, “Jesus of Nazareth,” or “The Nativity.”
- Thanksgiving is a truly American holiday. It affords the opportunity to host internationals and share the Pilgrims part of the story and a program that highlights our thankfulness to God for his provision and blessings.
- At the end of fall semester, sponsor a Christmas party complete with food, games, gifts, and an explanation of the true meaning of Christmas. As always, if you intend to explain the gospel at your event, be sure to let students know ahead of time that you will have spiritual content. We never want to be accused of misrepresenting our objectives or using “bait and switch” methods.

As part of an English class or other meeting, explain some English/American idioms. Idioms provide unique windows into a culture. Simply take 25 to 50 of your favorite idioms, type them up on a handout and invite internationals to sit in small groups with your American volunteers and help them learn about our culture by learning to understand the way we use our language.

