

Connections key to international students feeling at home

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BELTON—When Kanishka Upreti arrived at the University of Mary Hardin-Baylor from India, she remembers not only how excited she was, but also experiencing severe culture shock.



Kanishka Upreti is a senior psychology major from India. (UMHB Photo)

Kanishka, who was raised as a Hindu, was stumped when her Old Testament professor instructed students to open their Bibles to a verse in Psalms. While other students flipped to the middle of the Bible, she had no idea where to start.

“I knew UMHB was a Christian university, but I didn’t know we had to

study the Bible,” she said.

This year, 106 international students from 35 countries selected UMHB. For many of them, life as a teenage international student includes facing many challenges like language barriers, social and cultural differences, religious differences and academic dissimilarities.

One of the things many of them suffer from is feeling isolated—miles away from family, friends and all things familiar.

During her entire freshman year, Kanishka lived in Austin with relatives and took an Uber back and forth to campus in Belton every day. Not only was it a massive \$160 daily dent in her budget, but living so far from campus made it difficult to connect and make friends.

For her sophomore year, Kanishka moved just minutes away from campus, and she quickly found herself meeting more people, making new friends, and joining in activities.

She participated in Missions Emphasis Week, the Psychology Club and Bridges International, a social group that promotes connections between international and domestic students.

Kanishka helped organize the annual multicultural program two years in a row. She cooked Indian food, dressed in traditional Indian attire, performed a Bollywood-style dance and offered henna hand drawings.

‘Find ways to help them connect’

This year, she serves as international student representative for the Student Government Association at UMHB. Her platform was “helping international students build connections on campus.”

“I know that there’s a gap. A lot of our international students feel very

isolated,” she said. “So, hopefully, we can find ways to help them connect.”

Elizabeth Tanaka, director of UMHB International Student Services, agrees international students often take a while to break out of their comfort zones. Some students are better at plugging in, like Kanishka, who has thrived since becoming active on campus. Others, take a little longer.



Elizabeth Tanaka, director of UMHB International Student Services, with Kanishka Upreti, a senior psychology major from India. (UMHB Photo)

“International students tend to socialize only with those from their home country,” she said. “It’s understandable, because that is their comfort zone, and so much here is new. But this tends to isolate small groups of students who become dependent on each other rather than becoming part of UMHB as a whole.”

The international students who take an active role in becoming a member of the campus family have experienced great success, Tanaka said.

“They are happy and busy because they get invited to do many activities, even just going to H-E-B with American friends,” she said. “They also tend to be academically successful, because they are at ease with hearing English at a fast pace, and they have friends to study with.”

Tanaka and her team seek ways to help international students get involved, while acknowledging the multiple reasons they choose not to. Sometimes, they are shy about making a mistake in English and “appearing foolish,” she said.

Another reason is because in their free time, instead of joining into activities on campus, they are using Facetime or Zoom to talk with friends back home rather than trying to make new friends in the United States.

Cultural differences also come into play, Tanaka added. Many international students are not as comfortable taking initiative as their American counterparts.

“Someone has always told them what to do, when to be there, ... and they are just fairly passive about anything that is not a requirement,” she said.

Participate in campus activities

During her international student orientations, she stresses to students that they will have a much more fulfilling experience, both socially and academically, if they will just attend activities.

“Get a couple of people from your country to go with you,” she advises international students. “Even if you sit on the sidelines and do nothing for a while, it will get easier and easier to interact.”

She urges international students to give American students a chance to get to know them and build a friendship.

“Say ‘hello’ to someone from your class that you see outside of class. Say ‘hello’ to your professor. Go to a sporting event,” she suggests. “Everyone is there for the same purpose, and no one will ask you to do anything other than watch and applaud.”

Tanaka pointed out some of the ways UMHB encourages international students to get plugged in, including the International Orientation Day her office offers each semester before classes begin.

The Baptist Student Ministry hosts events such as Texas Night for international students to familiarize themselves with “all things Texas.” The BSM also has an international committee that hosts events such as learning to bake a cake and game night.

Bridges International publicizes regular meetings for international and American students to build friendships, and the library has hosted events specially for international students.

“We will continue to offer as much as possible in hopes of catching the elusive students who are looking for a way to plug in and take advantage of activities,” she said.

She has observed often a single student, who is the only one from his or her home country, participates more often and becomes comfortable on campus much more quickly than those who have a bigger “comfort zone” group where they can hang out.

“The single students tend to live on campus longer, too, because they don’t have a group to rent an (off-campus) apartment with, and I think that encourages more participation as well,” she said.

From isolated to involved

Tran Ho Bao “Cherry” Le of Vietnam started classes at UMHB from her laptop, sitting inside a small room she rented from a family friend in Dallas. It was fall 2020 when COVID-19 was surging, and many students opted to take classes online. She missed out on touring campus. There was no Cru Camp and no Welcome Week.



Tran Ho Bao ‘Cherry’ Le is a junior nursing major from Vietnam. (UMHB Photo)

“Technically, I didn’t know anything about UMHB,” she said. “That was not what I imagined of college—not at all.”

Because she didn’t experience college the way she envisioned that first year, she considered transferring, but she decided to give it another try “in person.”

Cherry applied for a summer job as a student worker with the UMHB Center for Academic Excellence and was hired. She moved into Burt Hall, enrolled in summer classes and went to work, helping with Cru Camp. She

finally got to experience all the things she missed that first year.

When she started classes in the fall, a friend who served in the Student Government Association suggested Cherry run for the international representative position.

This year, as a junior, she helped design sets for Stunt Night and is involved in Bridges International. During one of her Christmas breaks, she joined other students from around the country for the Vision Conference in Washington, D.C.

This past semester, she attended a fall retreat at Burnet with Bridges International. She's also been involved with the college group at Taylor's Valley Baptist Church in Temple.

Getting involved was not easy for Cherry, but she is happy she pushed herself out of her "bubble."

"I realized that friends do not define us. I do not see them as American or international friends. I just see them as friends," Cherry explained. "You can just go out there and make friends with people —any of them. If you're nice to them, they will be nice back."

Looking over the last two years on campus, Cherry is thankful she found the courage to open her mind to new experiences, and she hopes to inspire other international students to do the same.

"I feel like UMHB is my family now, and I would love to have other international students feel and experience the same things that I have."

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