


# ENGAGING AND EMBRACING YOUR INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

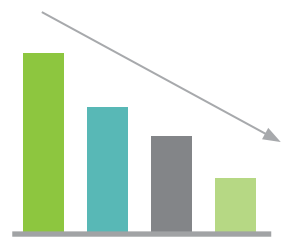


*International student enrollment at U.S. colleges and universities is at an all-time high, and shows no signs of slowing.*

Schools want to increase their international enrollment to bring more dollars, more diversity and more cross-cultural competency to their campuses. But bringing international students in is only the start. Retaining them is essential to long-term success, for both school and student. International students who fully engage in campus life, embrace the opportunity to socialize outside their own ethnic group, and create meaningful friendships, will be happier, more well-adjusted, and better ambassadors for your school.

Unfortunately, that type of engagement does not always come naturally. Research has shown that simply having international students on campus does not lead to intercultural interactions. According to a report published by the Global Perspectives Institute (GPI), “International Students rate their sense of community significantly lower than their U.S. peers.”<sup>1</sup> The reality is that the same cultural differences that are the driving force behind the push for internationalization can be a roadblock if not addressed properly. Language, educational and social differences often unintentionally lead to segregation and a feeling of disconnect.

For this reason, it is extremely important to offer structured social activities designed to help international students become more actively engaged with both the school and its community. As the authors of the GPI report state, you need to create opportunities for “Encounters With Difference” that enhance the international students’ sense of community.



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# INTEGRATION IN ACTION

Miami University, in Oxford Ohio, is one school that is working diligently to create “**Encounters with Difference.**” They offer a variety of programs designed to immerse their international students more fully into the campus and community. These activities range from social to educational and are designed not only to help acclimate the students to the American culture but to allow them to share their own.

Sarah O’Connell, International Student Advisor at Miami University, offered insight on some of their more successful activities.



## *NationaliTea*

Miami’s signature event is its weekly **NationaliTea** program. Every Monday, groups of students get together to share their own cultures and interests and learn about those of others. Although the University contributes the meeting space and the funding to cover food, drinks and supplies, many of the events are initiated and run by diverse student groups. Past topics have ranged from Syrian History and Culture, to Chinese Medicine, Jewish Holidays, Eid-Al-Adha (an Islamic festival), to American staples like Halloween and Thanksgiving. The real value of this event, O’Connell says, is that “Students feel empowered to talk about their traditions and cultures. It helps them feel supported and gives them a chance to share. It is clear that it helps this place feel a little more like home.”



## *Global Buddies*

Whereas the NationaliTea program facilitates group interaction, Miami’s **Global Buddies** program is one-on-one. American students who are accepted into the program are paired with an international student who becomes their “buddy” for the semester. Buddies are required to meet informally for at least an hour a week, and are encouraged to participate together in ISSS sponsored activities. “We try to encourage our buddies to attend different events together throughout the semester,” said O’Connell.



## *Global Neighbors*

**Global Neighbors** takes integration a step further by engaging the community beyond campus borders. Signature events for participants include a large Thanksgiving dinner in the fall and a traditional American picnic in the spring. Students and community members are seated among each other to encourage conversation and getting to know one another.



According to O'Connell, the goal of these programs is **two-fold**:

***to promote cross-cultural awareness for all students on campus (both domestic and international) and to create a sense of home for their international students.***

"Through programs like **NationaliTea** that seek to educate our students about both American and International cultures and identities, and programs like **Global Buddies** that seek to foster friendship across cultures, we really want to encourage the students to step outside their comfort zone and seek to learn about difference," elaborated O'Connell.

"NationaliTea becomes a weekly chance to get some food, learn about culture, and chat with both old and new friends. Thanksgiving is a time when students can interact with community members in Oxford, as well as interact with staff and faculty outside of a classroom or office setting. This further supports the students' sense of home and promotes our overall goal of internationalizing both Miami University and our little corner of the world here in Oxford."



# WHAT OTHER SCHOOLS ARE DOING

Innovative, cross-cultural programs are taking place all around the country. We did some digging on the web to get an idea of some of the other types of activities schools are hosting. Here is a sampling of what we found:

## IN THE COMMUNITY

West Virginia University offers an **International Cultural Education Program** that gives their international students the opportunity to visit local schools and share information about their culture with local children.

See More WVU programs at  
[http://oiss.wvu.edu/program\\_and\\_events](http://oiss.wvu.edu/program_and_events)

## ON CAMPUS

Lesley University sponsors an annual **International Game Night** in January at the start of the second semester. New and returning students bring and play games from all over the world, share stories and start to build common bonds.

See more Lesley programs at  
<http://www.lesley.edu/international-students/programs-and-events/>

## ON THE ATHLETIC FIELD

The University of Illinois ISSS department teams up with Campus Rec to host an **"Indoor World Cup."** Students from different countries form teams and face off in a fun 6-on-6 tournament.

See more University of Illinois programs at  
<http://www.iss.illinois.edu/involved/events/>

**The more engaged international students are in their host community, the better the outcome.** Hopefully some of the ideas presented here will spark new ideas. If your school already hosts organized activities for your students, don't be satisfied with the status quo. And if your school does not actively host activities to make your international students feel more at home, there is no better time than the present to start.

## ABOUT TERRA DOTTA

Our mission at Terra Dotta is to offer the very best products and services in higher education software. We are committed to delivering a user-experience that transforms the way our clients operate and engage with their constituents. We accomplish this through the continual deployment of best-in-class technology, and the focus we place on mutual trust in each and every one of our business relationships. These values form the Terra Dotta difference. For additional information please visit [www.terradotta.com](http://www.terradotta.com).