

Weekly seminars help international students adjust to rigors of A&M life

By BRENT TROYAN
THE BATTALION

Studying abroad can be the adventure of a lifetime, but it can also bring loneliness, culture shock and academic failure.

An organization on campus is helping international and domestic students prepare for and cope with the psychological problems students often face when adjusting to another culture.

The International Students College Success Group offers free weekly seminars throughout the year, showing students how to adjust to living in a different culture and succeed in college.

Dr. Gisela Lin, a psychologist and counselor for the Success Group, sees a dual focus in the program.

"The main goal is to help students be successful, academically [while studying in a foreign country]," Lin said, "but it's also about the differences in culture."

The Success Group brings speakers and students together to discuss fundamental college survival topics and learning time management, goal setting and study skills. Lin said the first sessions target adjustments necessary to bridge cultural gaps, deal with conflicting cultural values, and learn cross-cultural communication skills, including non-verbal communication in different societies.

These adjustment sessions are helpful to international students and domestic students who plan to study abroad or enter international business.

"We prepare them for what's coming," Lin said. The first four to six weeks abroad are called the "Honeymoon Stage," a state of excitement and wonder. Then culture shock begins to set in with feelings of loneliness, depression and homesickness.

Toni Fudge, a Success Group co-leader, said the program provides some emotional support, but it focuses on social and academic support.

"It's a psycho-educational group," she said. Dr. Wade Birch, director of the Student Counseling Services, said he started the International Students College Success group eight years ago as an unstructured group for new international students. Students brought up issues they wanted to discuss.

"Dr. Lin has shifted the group to be more topical," he said. "We're still doing the same

thing, but we're doing it in a different way."

Now, the session topics are set in advance, and the sessions often begin with a video on the discussion subject. Birch said the set agenda relieves the pressure on a student to discuss ideas, and Lin believes the videos make open discussion easier.

"The videos give students a reference point [for discussion]," she said.

Birch said the Success Group, unlike International Camp or the International Student Orientation, has the potential to be a place for on-going discussions.

Lin said building trust takes time, but the students gain the opportunity to learn about new cultures and edu-

cate others about the norms and customs of their home country.

Lin has had her own experience with telling others about her culture and adjusting to America's culture. She studied at Tamkang University in Taiwan before moving to the United States for graduate study at Amherst College in Massachusetts.

Fudge said she believes the group is a benefit to domestic students. She said she encourages their attendance at the Wednesday evening sessions in the Learning Resources Department on the sixth floor of the Sterling C. Evans Library. The group maintains an open-door policy to all students regardless of their cultures.

Lin said she would like to offer more discussion sessions in the future, ones for new international students and ones for open discussion of cultural differences.

The Success Group offers a confidential setting for students to ask questions about American culture and express concerns about discrimination.

Lin, who has been in charge of the program for the past four years, said her experiences with the Success Group's students have been rewarding.

"This is something I really love to do," Lin said. "Seeing them make it through tough times, that is the reward for me."

Fudge said she looks forward to this year as an opportunity to learn about herself.

"The group is not just about integrating students into the academic community," she said. "It's about gaining an understanding about the environment and community we're in."

Birch said many domestic students are missing an opportunity to learn about themselves and their culture.

This is the fourth story in a series about support services available on campus. The series will run through the rest of the week and will highlight a different support service every day.

"When you talk to international students, you get a different perspective on our lives in America, and on what's valuable in life."

- Dr. Wade Birch

Director of the Student

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