

AGGIELIFE

THE BATTALION

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International cooperation

International students seek out venues to become part of the A&M community

By Nicole M. Jones
THE BATTALION

Driving on the right side of the road and learning to decipher the slow drawl of Texan speech took some getting used to for Shreyas Kumar when he first arrived in College Station. A native of India, Kumar came to Texas A&M three months ago to begin his graduate studies in the computer science department.

Because Kumar was familiar with the English language prior to his arrival, his assimilation was not very difficult. He and his wife temporarily lived with other graduate students, who provided guidance during their first few weeks in the new college town.

Kumar wasted no time becoming saturated in the "other education" at A&M. He is vice-president of external programs for the International Student Association and is involved in the India Association. Kumar is also an Ambassador of Goodwill, who promotes awareness of India, through The Rotary International, his sponsor.

But many international and exchange students have difficulty getting involved in the American culture with the ease that Kumar has exhibited. For this reason, the study abroad office has created programs to deal with the specific needs and concerns of A&M's foreign students.

International Exchange Partners was created to match incoming international exchange students with current A&M students, mainly based on their age and activity level, said Laura Weber, a study abroad adviser. Even with the recent establishment of the program, about 90 Aggies responded to the requests for partners for about 40 exchange students due to arrive before the Fall 2003 semester, Weber said.

"The program was designed to encourage Aggies to step out of their comfort zone and be open to international students," Weber said.

Aggies who participate in the International Exchange Partners program can be the link that helps the foreign students adapt to Aggieland, Weber said. By simple actions of offering rides or inviting the students to social gatherings, they can become more involved, Weber said.

"When you're a freshman, it's hard to come to A&M and get acclimated to college life," said Shankar Annamalai, a senior mechanical engineering major. "(As) an international student, you're in a very different cultural environment."

Annamalai, the president of Aggie International Ambassadors, said "the bottom line is encouraging people to be friendly to international students."

AIA aims to help students experience global culture abroad and at A&M, Annamalai said.

International students and the A&M International Board have tried to better integrate foreign students, Annamalai said.

"I feel that international students sometimes don't get the 'Aggie experience,'" Annamalai said. "They don't experience the same things a typical domestic student would."

Setting up house in a new country can pose many difficulties when trying to adapt. Hyun Sung (Bill) Kim, a graduate computer science student, first came to the United States when he was 18 through an exchange program at the University of California at Davis. For Kim, communication was the biggest obstacle to overcome during his first two years in the United States.

"In Korea, they teach us how to read (English), but speaking and listening are not taught," Kim said. "When many Koreans get here for the first time, they have a hard time communicating with others."

A cultural difference Kim noticed when he came to the United States is how Americans interact with each other.

During a morning jog in California, a man ran by Kim and said, "What's up brother!" This is a common greeting among some Americans, but the expression puzzled Kim. "Why did he say that to me?" he had asked himself as he recalled the situation. "He's not my brother."

"America is so friendly," Kim said. "In Korea you don't speak to people you don't know."

Martin Taarnhoj, an exchange student from Denmark, had visited the United States several times with his family before coming to A&M to study management. The main difference he noticed when he came to A&M was the openness regarding religion. Taarnhoj said this contrasted with how the Protestant faith is downplayed in his home country.

"Particularly here in Texas, I found that people



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are very religious," Taarnhoj said, "and that came as a culture shock to me."

Even though Taarnhoj does not appear to be foreign, he gives himself away as soon as he says one word.

"I don't want to abandon my accent," he said. "It's nice to have something that makes you different."

Taarnhoj, who decided to live on campus during his time at A&M, described staying in Moses Hall as "good fun."

"I'm so glad that I decided to stay in the dorms," he said. "You're right in the middle of everything."

Some international students crave the opportunity to become involved in activities, but they just need some guidance, Weber said.

"The 'Aggie experience' is always there - you have to take the first step to get it," said Meera Alagaraja, an international graduate student in the

Department of Education and Human Resource Development.

Kumar said more orientation programs designed specifically for international students would help them learn more about A&M. This would help them become familiar with common terms, such as "uncover" and "maroon out," he said.

Most international students are graduate students and have less opportunities to experience traditions such as Elephant Walk, Kumar said.

"People should not assume that international students automatically get involved," he said.

Domestic students to become worldly and international students to adapt successfully to the culture of America and Aggieland, the groups must mix and make an attempt to learn more about each other.

"It's a two-way road," Annamalai said, "and the flow is equal on both sides."

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