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# A World of Differences

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## A World of Differences

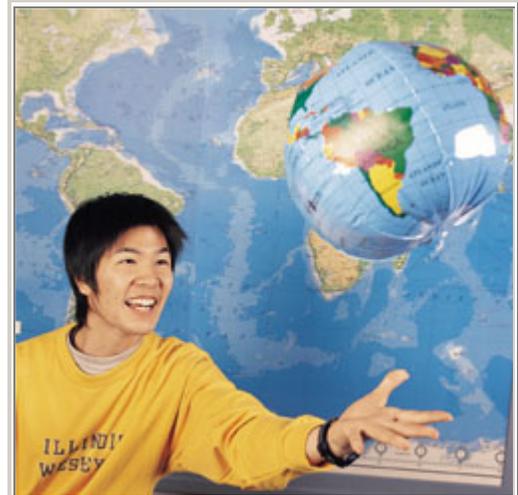
**International students rise to the challenge of adapting to their new lives at Illinois Wesleyan.**

**By Sarah Hedgespeth '04**

**Photos by Marc Featherly**

Seated in the middle of a Memorial Center meeting room, Mai Nguyen quietly listens to the strangers around her as they introduce themselves, explaining where they are from and why they have traveled from afar to be here on this rainy, August afternoon. When her time to speak arrives, the young Vietnamese woman's placid exterior gives way to express the strong emotions she is feeling.

"I'm sorry, I'm just so scared," she finally confesses, trying in vain to fight back tears. "I don't know anyone here or where anything is. I just feel so alone."



*International student Shinsuke Mizuno gets global.*

Nguyen and nine other first-year international students who are meeting for the first time together soon find out they are not so alone. Addressing the group, and attempting to calm their fears, is Petra Visscher, director of IWU's Study Abroad and International Student Advising office. This is the second year in a row that Visscher has led the program, designed specifically to help incoming international students ease into their new surroundings before the school year gets under way.

As they begin their first year of college, almost all students experience anxiety, homesickness, and stress. International students must deal with these emotions and many more. They must adjust not only to a new school, but also to a new country, a new culture, and, often, a language that has not been their primary form of communication.

The goal of the orientation, Visscher later explains, is to help the new students "become better acquainted with America, Illinois, Bloomington–Normal, and the Illinois Wesleyan campus." Over the next four days, the 10 students will attend sessions examining issues such as how their expectations for life in America may differ from reality, and the ways that American professors encourage and measure success in the classroom. Another workshop covers American mannerisms, including colloquialisms used in everyday conversations, proper table manners, and other forms of social etiquette.

The students are also prepared for more mundane and practical aspects of their new lives. At a later date, they visit a local bank to open checking accounts. On another outing, they undergo a "scavenger hunt" designed to help them negotiate the city bus system. Using only a town map, a bus schedule, and a series of clues, students must find their way to malls, supermarkets, and other commonly used places of business.

At night, the orientation switches gears to help students relax and get to know one another in a more social setting. During a dinner outing at a local Mexican restaurant, the students—many of whom have scarcely heard of a burrito or taco—laugh and joke as they puzzle over their menus. “It’s very spicy,” Japanese exchange student Mari Mori later comments. “I don’t know if I will eat it again, but it was fun to try.”

At the end of their orientation, IWU’s newest international students are noticeably more relaxed, enjoying the bonds of friendship they have formed with each other over the past four days. Yet they also realize that their journey at Illinois Wesleyan has barely begun. Next week they will begin the weeklong Fall Festival, an orientation for all first-year students. During that week, their first real challenges of adjusting to American college life will occur as they meet other new students, register for classes, and adjust to their living arrangements.

For her part, Petra Visscher makes it a point to stay in touch with all the first-year international students to ensure that they are adjusting to their new lives as smoothly as possible. It’s a job she’s well suited for, having been an international student herself when she left her home in the Netherlands to attend the University of Florida. Visscher tells Illinois Wesleyan’s international students to expect a mixture of emotions in their first weeks away from home.

“I tell them to give it time. Don’t phone home in a week and tell your parents, ‘I want to come back.’ I went through that—and I’ve been here now over 20 years.”

Visscher continues, “You go through cycles of liking or disliking your situation, and at times you can feel very lonely, but you need to realize that’s okay.” To counter those emotions, she encourages students to “take charge” of their freshman experience by actively seeking out what Illinois Wesleyan has to offer: “lectures, evening activities, performances, and the like.”

While Visscher encourages international students to assume a positive outlook, she knows that many will confront severe bouts of homesickness, even depression—especially during their initial months as students. Sophomore Teddy Chung vividly recalls those feelings.

“I had been studying English from an early age [in Korea] and knew a lot about the culture coming into it. I expected it to be easy,” Chung says. “But those first few months, I was pretty depressed.”

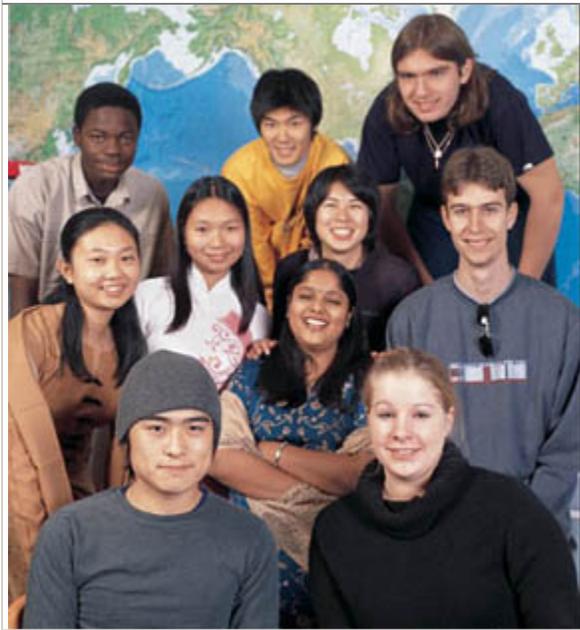
According to Visscher, her office and Counseling Services are always available to consult with students dealing with adjustment problems. “Students stop by to talk about problems all the time. Others though, they keep it inside. They don’t tell anybody.”

“As long as you keep everything inside, not even admitting to yourself that you’re depressed, the problem grows,” Chung agrees. “At least it did for me. When I admitted it, I came to grips with everything, and I realized that I didn’t have to feel this way.”

The silver lining for students who’ve had a hard time adjusting to University life is that “once you learn how to cope in a situation like this, you can always find friends and live anywhere,” says Visscher. She adds, “Illinois Wesleyan is a great environment for international students to

learn those coping skills. It's small enough that you get personal attention, and friendly enough that you can meet a lot of different people and find the support that you need to succeed."

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*New Arrivals: The incoming first-year class of international students include: (front) Yusuke Hirakawa, Nadine Wolff; (second row) A-Zin Oo, Mai Nguyen, Suneeti Gupta, Mari Mori, Nikolay Stoyanov; (third row) Debo Olaosebikan, Shinsuke Mizuno, and Victor Antonov.*

Among the 48 international students now enrolled at the University, most look at their IWU experience as a very practical means toward achieving future goals.

For 16-year-old Nigerian scholar Debo Olaosebikan, those future goals involve physics and electrical engineering. He says that going abroad for college is very common among Nigerian students because, while one could study subjects like literature or history at home, his country's schools lack the technology necessary to train for fields like science or computers. Other students, including chemistry/biology double major Nguyen or English major Nadine Wolff from Germany, chose to study in America to improve their English skills.

The University's more intimate size and its reputation for academic excellence are two of its strongest selling points for prospective international students, according to Paul Schley, director of International Admissions at Illinois

Wesleyan.

"My counselor actually selected IWU for me," says senior Awo Osei-Anto from Ghana. "I really wanted to study in the U.S. and applied to a number of schools, but Illinois Wesleyan seemed to be the best fit for me. Some students in Ghana apply to schools that are too advanced for them, and others to schools that are beneath them, but IWU has a great academic reputation and was looking to diversify, which was big for me."

Among Illinois Wesleyan's faculty, international students have reputations as hardworking, productive scholars. "We are proud of the high academic achievement of our international students while they attend Illinois Wesleyan," says IWU President Minor Myers jr. "Given their records, we always expect them to graduate with honors on their way to Ph.D.s."

However, as with other aspects of their life at Illinois Wesleyan, academic success for international students is often hard-earned and requires an intense period of adjustment. Many of the students come from education systems where they have a single exam at the end of the semester, and they are unprepared to deal with the term papers, quizzes, experiments, and exams that are staples of American college coursework.

“I was shocked during the first week here because of the huge amount of homework,” says Nguyen. “I spent my Labor Day weekend in the library, while all my friends [from Illinois] went home!”

Satish Lohani, a sophomore from Nepal, agrees that getting used to Illinois Wesleyan classes can be a struggle. “In Nepal, I only had one to three exams a year, and we weren’t allowed to participate in class,” he says. “Class was much more formal. The teacher spoke, and you gave him your full attention, never speaking yourself. Initially, participating during class was very weird for me.”

Another stumbling block to class participation can be language. Madoka Yamazaki admits that, so far, she has been afraid to talk in class. The young Japanese woman is taking a variety of classes at IWU (rather than focusing on a major during her one-year stay in the U.S.), but she has yet to speak in any of them. Although her fellow students have never commented negatively about her English-speaking skills, Yamazaki worries that she would not be able to effectively communicate an opinion in class. “It makes me very nervous of what the other students will think of me,” she admits.

Although Yamazaki’s fellow Japanese exchange student, Yusuke Hirakawa, had spent considerable time in America before coming to Illinois Wesleyan, he also expresses frustrations about language. “It’s still hard to understand the other students in my classes,” he says. “It is almost like they try to impress the professor by speaking quickly, and I cannot understand them. But talking with my friends Nadine [Wolff] and Mari [Mori] is comfortable. They pace themselves and do not use words I would not know. People pacing themselves around me is very important and helps a lot.”

International students can also feel frustrated at times about the liberal arts aspect of Illinois Wesleyan’s curriculum. “In Nigeria, after tenth grade, students choose either the sciences or the arts, and study only within their chosen area,” Olaosebikan says. “Sometimes, going to a liberal arts college frustrates me, since I haven’t taken anything but science since ninth grade. I just get mad that I can’t take what I want to take and have so many gen-ed requirements.”

It’s often only later in their educations, or even after graduation, that international students come to appreciate the broad background of subjects they were exposed to at IWU. Esteban Lizano ’01, who was an economics and business major from Costa Rica, recalls a class he took his first semester on Russian literature.

“There were political science, psychology, English, and history majors taking the class, and they all had different takes on the readings,” says Lizano. “It was eye-opening, and I came to appreciate the liberal arts. It made for some very interesting conversations, and it was great when I began to feel confident enough to add to those conversations in an intelligent way.”

Diana Imaka, a 1996 economics graduate from Latvia, is also grateful for her liberal arts experience. “It was lovely that I could take up dance classes and art...I would not give up for [anything in] life the opportunity to dance jazz, to do ceramics, or study psychology. It was simply brilliant.

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While IWU's international students strive to "fit in" to the University community, it is the differences in their cultural backgrounds and worldviews that makes them such a valuable presence on campus, according to Professor of Sociology Teodora Amoloza.

"We are teaching today tomorrow's leaders, and tomorrow's leaders cannot be effective if they cannot understand the world from a multi-dimensional perspective," says Amoloza, who is director of International Studies at IWU. That's why international studies courses are so important to the curriculum, she believes, and why the campus community needs international students to present fresh perspectives in classroom and social settings.

Nikolay Stoyanov, a freshman from Bulgaria, is quick to offer his perspective on U.S. values, as represented in the typical American supermarket. Upon visiting such a store, Stoyanov said he realized the "depths of American materialism" and the emphasis placed on acquiring possessions. "Visiting stores here kills the joy of shopping," he declares.

Satish Lohani was glad to find his opinions were welcome when he wrote a column last year for The Argus, discussing Illinois Wesleyan, politics, and the world from his perspective as an international student from Nepal. Many of his columns dealt with issues from his home, informing the campus community about his country and the challenges it faces.

International students also find a rewarding connection to the campus community by becoming language tutors. New students Mari Mori, Madoka Yamazaki, and Yusuke Hirakawa are Japanese tutors, and Nadine Wolff tutors German.

When speaking of his tutoring job, Hirakawa's face lights up. "I felt very happy to hear an American student speaking to me in my language, instead of it being the other way around," he says.

Having confidence in what they have to offer the Illinois Wesleyan community is a key to success for international students, according to Awo Osei-Anto. Many international students find that trying to adjust can be as simple as letting others see their personalities, learn about them, and really get to know them.

"I am not a shy person, so adjusting for me was not very hard," Osei-Anto said. "All you have to do is open up. It's easy to say, but can be hard to do. Once you open up, though, everything is easier."

That is exactly what Mai Nguyen has found to be true. The most important lesson she said she's learned since her first day of orientation is that "kindness yields kindness in return." To commemorate the anniversary of the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks this past fall, some of the women from Nguyen's residence-hall floor put up patriotic decorations. After helping to deck the halls with red, white and blue, Nguyen hopped in the shower. When she returned to her room, she was greeted with a Vietnamese flag hanging alongside all the American decorations. She later learned her floor mates had ordered it online to show her that they cared about her and her heritage.

“I couldn’t believe it. I was so surprised,” she says. “Flags from my country are hard to get, so I was so happy that my new friends had done this for me.”

Nguyen has been spending a lot of time with her new friends, going to the school’s Homecoming dance with them and eating meals together. She’s not lonely anymore and is, in fact, enjoying some of her newfound independence.

“[Adjusting] isn’t as hard as I thought it would be,” Nguyen says. “It’s very scary at first, and it takes some time, but it’s not so bad.”