

## **Enhancing the International Student Experience with Student Led Initiatives**

By Kelly Slater, University of North Georgia

During my junior year at the University of Mississippi (Ole Miss), I got to know and became close friends with many international exchange students. They had all decided to study abroad in the U.S. to improve their English skills, and were taking Intensive English classes, direct enrollment classes, or a combination of the two.

The more I asked these friends about their experience studying abroad at Ole Miss and how they thought their English was improving, the more I kept hearing similar replies. They were satisfied with their classes, liked their instructors, and enjoyed being at Ole Miss. However, they often expressed that they didn't have many opportunities to meet and connect with domestic students and practice their English in a more casual environment. One South Korean student even said that she had been at Ole Miss for several months, but that I was the first American person that she had become friends with. This really surprised and saddened me. I realized how important this was, especially for students who were studying English only and had only fellow international students as classmates.

I wanted our international student community to be more connected to the broader Ole Miss student community so that they would have more opportunities to practice and improve both their English skills and cultural understanding. I saw this need and wanted to do something as a student to help meet this need, so with a small group of friends and classmates who were willing to help, I began organizing cultural activities (e.g., bowling night, picnic at a local lake). Within a few months, the attendance at these events rose from around 20 students per event to well over 100. This growth in our group led to the creation of an actual registered student organization on-campus, which we named the International & American Student Alliance (IASA). This organization would eventually grow to have nearly 1,000 members, including international exchange and degree-seeking, as well as domestic, students.

IASA organized a variety of social and cultural events each semester, including an International Festival, monthly student-led cultural

presentations, forums for international students to share their experiences at Ole Miss, and mini-language lessons. In addition to these events, we continued to notice needs within the international student community and created specific programs that were targeted around them.

The Conversation Partners program served as a way to help international students meet and connect with domestic students who were learning the international student's native language. For example, if we had a Korean student participating in this program, we would try to pair them with someone who was learning Korean. We would also try to pair students based on their personalities, hobbies, and majors when possible. In the event that none of our domestic students were learning an international student's native language, we would pair that international student with someone who was interested in learning more about that culture or region. Each domestic Conversation Partner was paired with one to two international students. Domestic students were encouraged to meet on a weekly basis with international students to help each other practice language skills and to help their international student partner experience American culture.

One of my favorite stories from this program is about a domestic freshman who had little knowledge of Korean culture, but was taking their first semester of Korean and signed-up to be a Conversation Partner. He was paired with a Korean exchange student and they quickly became good friends. They both liked music and dancing, and decided to join a K-pop dance student organization on-campus together. They also bonded over a mutual love of watching and playing basketball. By the end of the semester, they had become very close and their friendship had given them the opportunity help one another improve their language skills.

Another need that we noticed was that many of our international students were very eager to study English. They wanted more opportunities to practice and improve their English skills in addition to their formal language classes. Out of this, we created a program called English Clusters, which were essentially free, non-credit, informal classes open to any student, faculty/staff, or community member. As of Spring 2018 when I graduated from Ole Miss, this program had grown to offer around 20 different English Cluster classes at a variety of days/times on a weekly basis for a semester-long period. Class topics ranged from skill-focused to

cultural-based, and included classes such as Pronunciation Skills, English Skills for International TAs, and Cooking with English. Each class was led by an Ole Miss undergraduate or graduate student volunteer. Many of these leaders were education majors who wanted some informal experience teaching and working with international students. For them, this gave them the opportunity to gain cross-cultural awareness that they might not have otherwise received, even in the teacher education classes. Other leaders included those who were working at the on-campus writing center, majoring in English, or wanting to someday teach English as a Second Language (ESL) abroad. We provided regular training to these student leaders, helped them to design and plan their classes, and provided support to them throughout the semester.

A significant number of our international students regularly attended at least one English cluster and we received a lot of positive feedback. At the end of one semester when I was gathering student feedback about the program, I remember a Japanese exchange student telling me how much she had benefited from our English through American Music cluster. She had always enjoyed listening to music, but was intimidated by songs in English because she could not understand many of the styles and lyrics within them. Throughout the semester, the leader of that cluster, who was a music major, guided students through various time periods and genres of American music, as well as select popular modern and classic songs. Because of this cluster, she said that she became more confident in her ability to understand, and deepen her appreciation of, American music.

One of the biggest aspects of IASA that made it unique was that it was completely student led. While we did have two faculty advisors who regularly offered advice, suggestions, and assistance as needed, all of our activities and programs were created and planned by students. Throughout my time leading IASA, I saw an incredible number of students, both international and domestic, rise up and volunteer to lead an English cluster, help organize an event, take on a leadership role, etc. Not only did it provide students unique opportunities to gain cross-cultural awareness and valuable experiences, IASA also allowed connections and lifelong friendships to form that transcended languages and borders.

**Kelly Slater** is currently Program Coordinator of the Chinese Flagship Program at the University of North Georgia.

