



GLOBAL FRIENDSHIP PROGRAM

International Student & Scholar Guide

**ECIR is an intentional international intercultural interfaith
living learning community**

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Introduction to Our Global Friendship Program (GFP)

Welcome to the Global Friendship Program! You are about to embark on the exciting and rewarding journey of meeting students and visiting scholars from around the world. Your particular journey will involve engaging other cultures while sharing your culture, learning about religious or spiritual traditions unlike your own, or discovering there is more than one way of organizing and governing society. In any case, we believe this journey will be a challenging and rewarding experience.

The Ecumenical Center & International Residence, serving the University of Michigan—Ann Arbor, is an *intentional international intercultural interfaith living learning community*. ECIR offers students and visiting scholars a home away from home and a variety of residential and educational programs. Our Global Friendship Program helps international students and scholars, as well as American individuals and families, connect with and learn from each other while studying or pursuing their undergraduate, graduate, or post-doctoral studies. The program was created to nurture and facilitate long-lasting friendships across cultural, religious, and political boundaries that often separate international students and scholars and members of the dominant culture and/or host community.

The basic purposes of our GFP are *change and respect*—changing ourselves and respecting those who are different. This is so important it bears repeating: our GFP is about changing our attitudes towards those who are different and learning to understand and appreciate those differences. We believe it is possible, even necessary, in our globalized world, to overcome fear through the power of cross-cultural friendship. Our program facilitates connections and provides opportunities for long-lasting relationships or friendships based on respect. *Participants in this program are expected to respect the religious, cultural and political beliefs of others and to refrain from trying to change them.*



An Overview of Our GFP

International students are paired with a local friend from the community (a family, couple or individual) for an academic year. Local friends provide an informal introduction to life in the United States, while students/scholars help their American friends learn more about their cultures. A successful friendship relationship is dependent on a shared effort.

Both American friends and international students/scholars go through the same application process (both forms available online). All are encouraged to participate in an orientation prior to being matched. International students, scholars, and their spouses may apply. Participants may make specific requests about matching preferences but an important part of the program is open-mindedness and flexibility. Thus, if requests cannot be fulfilled, participants are asked to be flexible.

Since the number of students interested in the program is always higher than the number of local friends willing to participate, it's likely that some international students/scholars will not be matched.

Matching is based on hobbies, special interests, etc. that students and families have in common based on their application forms. If friendships don't work for any reason, participants may contact the GFP Coordinator to discuss concerns and a possible new assignment.

As an international student interested in this program, you are probably excited about being matched with a local friend. You may be matched with someone who does not necessarily match your typical image of an "American." Developing true friendships by breaking stereotypes is an important goal of the program.



GFP RESPONSIBILITIES & EXPECTATIONS

Guidelines for Participation

1. Carefully read orientation materials concerning the GFP with the option of participating in an orientation.
2. Communicate regularly with your American friend. Return phone calls, emails, etc. and make sure to make time in your schedule. GFP expects international friends to plan one activity per semester with their American friends
3. Any activities which involve admission fees, costs, etc. are usually at your own expense unless discussed in advance.
4. Contact the GFP Coordinator and your American friend about changes in address, phone or email.
5. Respect your American friend's religion, beliefs, values and customs.
6. Be open to cultural differences, appreciate cultural diversity, and commit to developing a cross-cultural friendship.
7. Contact the GFP Coordinator if you have questions, encounter difficulties in your friendship, or cannot fulfill your responsibilities in the program.
8. Complete an evaluation at the end of the year. Notify the GFP Coordinator as to whether you want to keep the same friend, be matched with a new friend, or no longer want to participate in the program.

Limitations of the GFP

*The GFP is **not** designed or intended to assist international students/scholars in addressing housing, academic, immigration, employment, or financial needs or concerns. Help with such matters is available through the University of Michigan International Center. Similarly, international students are not expected to provide child care, language teaching, assistance in the home, etc. that is not entirely voluntary in nature. Furthermore, the GFP is not a dating service and should not be treated as such. Finally, this is not a "host family program" involving "home stays" or "live-in situations.*



MEETING YOUR AMERICAN FRIEND

Welcome Orientation

The Welcome Orientation (WO) gives American friends and international students/scholars an opportunity to meet with each other along with other students and families in the program. If you or your friendship host family cannot attend the WO, we suggest that you contact each other within 1-2 weeks to make other arrangements to meet.

Generally, it is suggested that the first meeting take place in a public place near campus. If you are not clear on directions or time please contact your friendship host family to make sure you understand the arrangements. If you feel uncomfortable meeting your friendship host family alone for the first time, invite a friend to come with you, but make sure to ask the friendship host family first. As a common courtesy, please refrain from inviting friends to every activity or meeting.

Keeping Your Connection

With nearly 35,000 students on campus, the University of Michigan—Ann Arbor is able to provide hundreds of activities and events throughout the year, many of which are available to the public.

Whether it's an athletic event, a musical performance, a guest speaker, or one of the many cultural nights put on by international student organizations, there are many possibilities to get together with your friendship host family right on campus! Of course we encourage you to get together for activities off campus as well since there is much to see and do in the Ann Arbor community and beyond.

Ideas for Getting Together

Whether you recently arrived in the US, have transferred to Michigan from another state, or have been in Ann Arbor for a long time and are just now choosing to participate in the GFP, you are probably excited about the opportunity of being matched with a local family/individual. You will undoubtedly learn a lot about the US "through the eyes of a local resident." Be creative, do something you both enjoy, or try something new! Your American friend will likely have ideas about things to do together, but you may wish to make suggestions as well. For example:

- Enjoying a picnic
- Walking, hiking, or bicycling
- Visiting parks or memorials
- Playing board games
- Going to a movie
- Ice-skating or cross-country skiing
- Attending concerts, musicals, plays
- Visiting zoos or museums
- Hunting, fishing, camping
- Taking in local/state fairs or festivals
- Attending spectator sporting events
- Going to restaurants/cafés
- Shopping
- Visiting a neighboring town
- Going out for coffee
- Doing voluntary or community service
- Celebrating a birthday or holiday
- Attending a religious or spiritual ceremony

It is important to talk about expectations of the program with your American friend. Discuss what kinds of activities you like to do and how often you would like to get together, as this will help to limit misunderstanding and frustration.



AMERICAN VALUES AND ASSUMPTIONS

This section introduces some potential causes for misunderstanding in cross-cultural relationships

Below is some information about dominant values in the US. As you read and reflect on these values, remember that they are not necessarily right or wrong, they are just different. Additionally, these are generalizations about American culture; you may find individuals in the US who do not subscribe to these values. As with any culture, US citizens come from many different cultures and traditions.

For the most part cultural values and assumptions are invisible, underlying the way in which people think and act. Though it is difficult to separate yourself from your own cultural values, having some knowledge about the foundational values of the country in which you now live may prevent or minimize frustrations and tensions with your friendship host family.

Individualism, Independence, & Privacy

Americans see themselves as individuals who are responsible for their own situations in life. Personal needs and desires often take precedence over the needs and desires of families and society. There is an emphasis on self-fulfillment and self-discovery. Parents give many choices to their children and instill personal responsibility, even at a young age. Children over 20 years often live independently of their parents and pay their own living expenses. Americans allow their children to have their own possessions and their own rooms or apartments when they can afford it. Privacy and confidentiality laws protect adults, even adults within the same family.

Americans assume that most people need time to themselves. In some cultures one rarely spends time alone, and translations of the word “privacy” have negative connotations of being outcast or isolated. In contrast, some Americans have difficulty understanding people who always like to be with others and may perceive them to be “clingy” or “dependent” – words which have somewhat negative connotations. Americans may be perceived as friendly upon first meeting, but difficult to open up and get to know personally.

Egalitarianism

Even though there are inequalities and prejudice in our society, most firmly believe that “we all are created equal” and that every person deserves some measure of respect. It follows that all people should have access to the same opportunities regardless of race, religion, gender, age, marital status, sexual orientation, national origin, socio-economic status, mental or physical disabilities. This is a foundational belief in the US and is the basis for many laws and workplace policies.

The US may function less hierarchically than some countries. Americans may be uncomfortable with obvious displays that indicate social status, such as honorific titles or being bowed to or deferred to. Americans show respect and make distinctions in more subtle ways, such as by tone of voice, order of speaking, or seating arrangements.

Children are often allowed to “discuss” their parents’ decisions. Questioning professors may be acceptable, and bosses may go out of their way to be approachable by helping with some of the less desirable work or joking during business hours. Americans chitchat with cab drivers, restaurant servers, store clerks, doctors, or anyone else they meet in daily interactions.

Achievement & Action-Oriented

Americans value hard work and continually want to improve their situation. They may feel that they never achieve enough and should always keep bettering themselves. Some Americans are very competitive. They may seem to be busy, and bored when sitting around and “doing nothing.” Individuals who “work their way up from the bottom”, who “stand out from the crowd”, who do something first, the longest, or the best, are admired. Ultimately people are defined by what they do in life, not by the family or economic situation into which they are born.

Informality

Americans use first names quite often, even with people who are older or those whose social position is higher. Most people, regardless of their social position, are at times very informal in the way they speak, behave, and dress (even the President!). Relationships between students, teachers, and coworkers are often casual. Informality is often valued as it creates an image of egalitarianism.

Time Orientation

Americans speak of “using” time well, of not “wasting time” and of “saving time,” while in many cultures time is just something that happens. We value organization and punctuality. We make lists of things to do, carry calendars and schedules, and feel best knowing that time is used constructively. Even leisure time is planned. Efficiency is highly valued; hence many popular magazines are full of suggestions on how to be more efficient in cooking, cleaning, maintenance, raising children, etc. Americans are generally less concerned with history and traditions than people from countries whose history goes back several centuries. While the US tends to be very future-oriented, other cultures have greater reverence for the past. We value new things and ideas more than the old, and products are often advertised as “new and improved”. We believe that we can and should improve our situation, as in the phrase “don’t just stand there, do something!”

Directness

“Let’s get to the point” and “Let’s lay our cards on the table” are examples of American directness. Assertiveness and honesty are highly valued, and we often tell the truth about our situation even though it may put us in an unfavorable light. Other cultures are more concerned with “saving face”, and may say something indirectly or state it more positively in order to avoid shame and embarrassment.



A FINAL GFP WORD

When cultures come together, misunderstandings can sometimes be difficult to avoid. However, every misunderstanding is an opportunity to learn something new. An experience that begins with frustration or discomfort can turn into a valuable learning experience, and may even seem funny as you look back on it. It is important to be open to learning from successes and mistakes and sharing with others. After all, this is what the program is all about!



Source: Althen, Gary. *American Ways: A guide for foreigners in the United States*. Intercultural Press, 1998, 2003, adapted.

May you be richly blessed with friendships through our Global Friendship Program (GFP).

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