



GLOBAL FRIENDSHIP PROGRAM

American Individual & Family 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 one another while studying or pursuing their undergraduate, graduate, or post-doctoral studies. The program was created to nurture and facilitate 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 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

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

Both American friends and international students/scholars go through the same application process (both forms available [online](http://www.ecir.org/educational-programs/cultural-engagement/global-friendship/) at <http://www.ecir.org/educational-programs/cultural-engagement/global-friendship/>). All are encouraged to participate in an orientation. 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, level of commitment to the program 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.

International students and scholars may have an image of a “typical American.” Americans may also have misconceptions about different countries and cultures. Developing true friendships by seeing beyond these preconceived notions is an important goal of the program.



GFP RESPONSIBILITIES & EXPECTATIONS

Guidelines for Participation

1. Carefully read orientation materials concerning the GFP and attend the welcome orientation if available.
2. GFP expects participants to plan one activity per semester with their GFP friends. Communicate regularly with them. Return phone calls, emails, etc. and make sure to make time in your schedule.
3. Any activities which involve admission fees, costs, etc. are usually at each person's expense unless discussed in advance.
4. Contact the GFP Coordinator and GFP friends about changes in address, phone or email.
5. Respect your GFP friends' religions, 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 students or scholars, be matched with new students/scholars, or no longer 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 or/and ECIR. Similarly, friendship host families are not expected to provide child care, language teaching, financial assistance, 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 WITH YOUR INTERNATIONAL FRIENDS

Welcome Orientation

The Welcome Orientation (WO) gives GFP matches an opportunity to meet with one another along with other participants in the program. If you or your friends cannot attend the WO, we suggest that you contact one another 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 GFP friends to make sure you understand the arrangements.

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 international friend 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.

Throughout the year, organizers of the Global Friendship Program plan activities specifically intended for GFP students and families. We encourage you to attend these events. These are simple, stress-free ways to get together with your friendship host family and also meet other people who share an interest in learning about different cultures! If you have ideas for GFP meetings or activities or wish to be involved in planning GFP events, please contact the GFP Coordinator at ECIR.

Suggestions for Getting Together

Even if you are a long time resident of Ann Arbor participating in GFP for the first time, you are probably excited about the opportunity of being matched with international students/scholars. You will undoubtedly learn a lot about the cultures of your international friends. Be creative, do something you all enjoy, or try something new! Your international friends will likely have ideas about things to do together, but you may wish to make suggestions as well. For example:

- Invite your students/scholars to dinner with your family. Ask them to bring pictures of home and family.
- Take your international friends to visit your grandparents or extended family, if possible. Talk about family relationships in the US. Ask how the elderly are regarded in their countries.
- Watch a favorite TV show and discuss it. During an election year, consider watching the election results together.
- Go shopping! Try a supermarket. Point out bargains and generic brands, explain unit pricing, how to weigh produce, how to get a check-cashing card or discount card, etc.
- Watch a big game on TV and explain what is happening if your students/scholars are not familiar with the sport. Also do the reverse: watch a game that is popular in the students/scholars' country and ask him/her to explain it to you.
- Visit your children's or neighbor's school. Explain the system of education in the US and compare this to the system of education in your students/scholars' home country.
- Stop by the local police station or courthouse. Explain the difference between town, city, county and state governments. Discuss the role of law enforcement and public servants in the US and compare to that of your students/scholars' home country.
- Visit the library or a bookstore. Choose a book you'd all like to read and discuss over coffee.

- Go to an amusement park or a mini-golf course. Especially fun with kids!
- Think about events that may be “uniquely American” in which you could include your students/scholars (pumpkin carving, 4th of July parade, dying Easter eggs, weddings and graduations, Super Bowl party, etc.)

Additional Activities

- Picnics, potlucks & backyard barbecue
- Farm visits
- Walking, hiking, biking
- Sailing, canoeing, boating
- Flea market, garage sales
- Shopping at a large mall
- State parks
- Visit a neighboring town
- Social/civic groups
- Doing voluntary or community service
- Board games
- Movie theatre
- Horseback riding
- Ice-skating, cross-country skiing
- Concerts, musicals, plays
- Zoos, museums
- Fishing, camping
- Local/state festivals

It is important to talk about expectations of the program with your GFP friends. Discuss the 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.

Starting a Conversation

Starting a conversation for some is a challenge. Below are some suggested conversation starters on a variety of topics.

Relationships

1. How do you define friend and what do you generally expect from a friend?
2. At what age do couples typically marry? How do people meet their spouses?
3. Are workplace relationships formal or informal?

Family

1. What responsibilities do different family members have at home?
2. How common is it for women to work outside the home?
3. How does your family celebrate special holidays? What does the holiday represent?
4. How often do you see your extended family? Do they live nearby or far away?

Food

1. What dietary restrictions do you have?
2. What is the main meal of the day? Is the meal at a time when your family is together?

3. Can you explain how to make one of your favorite meals?
4. What do you like/dislike about food in the US? What do you miss the most?

Daily Routine

1. What is an average workday like?
2. What is transportation like? How do people travel to work? How do children travel to school?
3. How often do people go to a shopping market or grocery store?

Education

1. What is the education system like in your country? Describe a typical day at school.
2. What languages are you required to study, if any?
3. What are the educational backgrounds of your family members?

Leisure Activities

1. What is the most popular sport in your home country? What sports do you like?
2. What activities do families enjoy in their leisure time?
3. Does your family like to take vacations? If so, where?
4. How do you spend your time in the US compared to when you are in your home country? Have you developed new hobbies/interests since coming to the US?

Ethical Considerations

Respect

The Global Friendship Program aims to increase friendship and cultural exchange between international students/scholars and community members. We subscribe to the values and policies set forth by NAFSA: Association of International Educators, an organization of professionals working with international students/scholars. We encourage those who participate in our program as US American friends to subscribe to the same values and policies.

The following is excerpted from NAFSA's Standards and Responsibilities in International Educational Interchange: *"Community workers related to religious and political groups must recognize that the religious and political beliefs of any foreign people in the United States are important parts of their culture and merit the respect of Americans and the effort by Americans to learn about and understand them. Religious and political groups can perform a service by providing opportunities for foreign students and scholars to observe and join in mutual inquiry into beliefs and practices. However, there must never be any attempt to proselytize, and any invitation to a foreign student or scholar to an event sponsored by a religious or political group should clearly indicate the nature of the event and its sponsorship."*

While it is acceptable to discuss religious concepts if all are comfortable doing so, arguing or proselytizing does not communicate acceptance or interest in the person or their culture.

Drugs & Alcohol

The use of non-medical drugs is illegal in the US, although such use may be legal in certain foreign countries. You should not offer or encourage your international friends to indulge in any form of illegal drug use, nor should you use any type of illegal drugs.

Many international students/scholars do not use alcohol because of cultural and religious beliefs. As a friend, you should respect and honor these beliefs by not offering alcoholic drinks to your students/scholars when entertaining. Refer to the international students/scholars registration forms which may provide important information regarding dietary restrictions. Also, you should not offer alcohol to a student under the age of 21 in any circumstance. If one or more of your international friends is over the age of 21, you should not allow him/her to drink excessively nor should they be allowed to drive a vehicle while under the influence of substances.

Gender

The American individual and family registration form includes single individuals as well as couples and families with children. When an application is received from a single female/male, it is the policy of the ECIR to match that individual with international students/scholars of the same sex. This policy has been established as a consideration of different cultural beliefs concerning gender issues. As a friend, you should be sensitive to differences in values and beliefs regarding this topic. Finally, this is not a dating service and should not be used as such.

Cultural Values & Assumptions

Culture is the lens through which an individual views the world. The values and assumptions that one holds are highly influenced by one's culture. Often the differences are deep-seeded and invisible, and difficulties can arise when one does not see and/or understand these differences. We encourage you to research and read about your international friends' home countries/cultures, as this will help facilitate a successful and rewarding relationship.



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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