Coffee Talk for foreigners

International House conversations help international students

BY ALEX DRETLER
Contributing Writer

Though 700 international students attend Tufts, the challenges of integration can still be intimidating. To aid in overcoming issues of language and culture, the International Center has set up an inter-cultural conversation group.

Called “Coffee Chat,” its weekly discussions are open to everyone and led by students who live in the International House.

The inter-cultural conversation program was specifically set up to help integrate international graduate students into the Tufts Community. The program sets up partnerships between international graduate students and American faculty, staff, and students.

According to Monica Rodriguez, the International Student and Faculty Advisor and the head of the program, the partnerships are informal, volunteer-based, and meet for one hour a week. These partnerships are meant to help students improve their English and produce cultural exchange.

Previous discussion topics at Coffee Chat have included societal customs, politics, pets, and dating and marriage. During the discussion on societal customs, attendees discussed the different standards of personal space, how to greet people, and how to express affection in their various cultures.

To facilitate the discussions, handouts detail each topic. On the front, the theme is broken down into smaller questions. For example, the handout on Dating, Marriage, and Gender issues included the question: “How do marriage partners experience gendered roles in your country?”

Another question from this handout was: “Do you feel women are treated equally in your country?”

One discussion leader, junior Kei Shakamura, explained the usual procedures that the discussions take. “We go through the conversation topics, but we are flexible. If we go on a tangent, that’s alright,” Shakamura said.

The tone of the meetings is not always serious. The group holds special events for major holidays such as Halloween, Thanksgiving, and Christmas.

Halloween, for example, the group carved pumpkins while discussing the American custom of trick-or-treating.

The handouts also list popular American slang and abbreviations. On the dating and marriage handout, for example, ASAP, RSVP, UFO, and IQ were defined.

Waidehi Gilbert-Gokhale is Fletcher student who works part-time at the International Center and also helps to organize the program. She stressed the idea of partnership, as opposed to solely academic relationship.

“It’s not one person teaching the other,” Gokhale said. “They just get together to talk.”

She believes that this communication of differences is key. “That’s where the exchange is,” she explained. “Learning different things that are acceptable in different countries in certain

The weekly Coffee Chat provides an organized setting for the partners to meet. However, attendance is never mandatory. “It’s somewhere for the partners to gather, drop in as they can,” Rodriguez said. “And it gets the I-House involved.”

Although Coffee Chat was set up with the partnerships in mind, they are open and intended for the entire community. Rodriguez is eager for more people to get involved.

“We want to build diversity,” Rodriguez said. “It’s fun for internationals to meet other members of the community. They get to practice their English, but Americans learn about other cultures so it is fun for us too.”

Coffee Chats are every Wednesday from 12-1 p.m. at the I-House, located at 13 Sawyer Ave.