

Friendship Family Program



 MINNESOTA STATE UNIVERSITY MANKATO
participant handbook

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Program Overview

The Friendship Family Program has played a large role at Minnesota State University, Mankato for many years. The Friendship Family Program provides support and opportunities designed to assist international students during their adjustment period by connecting them with Friendship family volunteers in the community. The program works to help Minnesota State Mankato students have the best experience in Mankato, while also connecting our domestic participants to students from all parts of the world.

This cross-cultural friendship program provides international students with a more intimate and authentic experience of American and Minnesotan culture. In return, American volunteers learn about another country and culture, develop cross-cultural competencies and help foster a global community in Mankato.

The Friendship Family Program is beneficial for all participants, but it is an especially important service for Minnesota State Mankato's international students. Adjusting to American culture is not easy for international students, as they may feel isolated for many reasons: cultural differences, language barriers and more. An estimated 80 percent of international students never set foot in an American home while visiting the United States. This program aims to change that statistic, one student at a time. The Friendship Family Program helps alleviate initial anxiety international students may have about living in America by providing a friend who serves as a cultural mitigator.

Minnesota State Mankato International Community

International students make up about 10 percent of Minnesota State Mankato's total enrollment and come from approximately 90 countries around the world (<http://www.mnsu.edu/international/statistics.html>). The Friendship Family Program aims to give international students a sense of belonging in Mankato and help them feel more connected to their adopted hometown. The program strives to facilitate global engagement among the Mankato community to help everyone gain a more sophisticated global perspective.

Program Objectives

- ❖ Foster positive intercultural relationships between new international students and Mankato community members.
- ❖ Encourage more understanding and adjustment to the "American way of life" within homes, families and the community.
- ❖ Provide important social support for and extend hospitality to international students during their initial adjustments to life in Minnesota.
- ❖ Supplement the Kearney Center's support services for international students (Kearney Center offers immigration advising, document processing, and orientation programming).
- ❖ Offer all students an opportunity to learn about new cultures and how to communicate in a diverse society.
- ❖ Raise international awareness, promote international education and contribute to the university's comprehensive internationalization efforts.

Who can participate?

The Friendship Family Program matches one to three international students with their Mankato Community volunteer.

Mankato Community “families” can be any type of family! We only ask that you live close enough to Minnesota State Mankato to physically meet with your student, and that you approach this relationship with an open mind and heart.

Families could include:

- Married couple
- Unmarried couples
- Single Person
- Family with children
- Same-sex couple
- Families of any religion
- Families originally from the U.S.
- Families originally from other countries
- Anyone over the age of 18 who is interested in sharing their life in Mankato with an international student is welcome!

Minnesota State Mankato international students tend to be students in their first semester, but the program is open to all.

How it works?

Students and volunteers interested in the program apply online to participate in the Friendship Family Program. The application deadlines vary by semester, but are typically set about two weeks after the beginning of each semester. Kearney Center staff match one to three international students with American volunteers based on the information prospective participants provide in their applications. Staff take area of study, hobbies and interests and other preferences into consideration when matching pairs.

What participants say...

“Being in the Friendship Family Program was a great experience. I learned a lot from my family about the culture in the United States and they also learned about life in my country.” – Sonia Zigre, Ivory Coast

“I personally appreciate FFP for providing opportunities, which can reduce stress of international students and leave a good impression of the US with them after they go back to their home countries.” – Adib Rahmani, Afghanistan

“Sharing our family life with international students is a rewarding learning experience on both sides. We meet them as strangers and they soon become part of our family and many remain lifelong friends.” – Terri and Ron Prange, Mankato Community volunteers

“Our lives have been greatly enriched by international students as we have known them, worked with them and enjoyed entertainment and social times with them over our many years here. It has been rewarding to learn more and more about the great, wide world in which we all live together and the wonderful, interesting, loving people with whom we share it.” – Francis and Evelyn Hatfield, Mankato Community volunteers

Overview of Commitments

To have a rewarding experience, participants must fulfill the program commitments. Participants who put in the time and effort necessary to develop relationships with their partners will have a more positive Friendship Family Program experience. The program encourages partners to spend time with one another by hosting events and suggesting activities, but it is the participants’ responsibility to take advantage of these opportunities. Program participants are asked to make the following commitments:

Partner Interaction

Partners should meet with each other at least once a month, although more frequent meetings are highly encouraged. American partners are asked to initiate the first two or three meetings of the semester as international students are adjusting to their class schedule and living situation. Later in the semester, international partners should initiate contact with Mankato Community volunteers to arrange a meeting.

Friendship Family Program Events

The program offers events throughout the semester to provide easy ways for partners to interact with one another. The program will host three casual events that will be a time to meet your matches and start building a sense of community within the program. These casual events are a great opportunity to meet other program participants and develop a deeper connection to the program.

Provide Feedback

The Friendship Family Program will send mid-semester and end-of-semester surveys to learn about participants’ program experiences. The Kearney Center wants to make the program better for everyone, so participants’ feedback is important. Participants are also encouraged to contact the program coordinator immediately if they experience any problems in the program.

Participant Expectations

Mankato Community Volunteers

As a Mankato community volunteer, it is important to remember that this may be your international partner’s first time in the United States. Your partner might not know many traditions, values and perspectives that are commonly known among people familiar with American culture. Remember to be

patient as you introduce your partner to various aspects of American life and to remember that you also have the opportunity to gain an in-depth understanding of another culture. With these things in mind, here are a few expectations the Friendship Family Program has for its American volunteers:

- ❖ **Be a Friend.** Even people from different cultures can tell if you are not genuine in your commitment to get to know them and be a friend. This partnership is a good opportunity to practice empathy, thinking of yourself in another person's situation. Your international partner may be homesick from time to time and facing challenges that go with living abroad. Try to treat them as you would want to be welcomed in a new place far from the comforts of home.
- ❖ **Share resources.** You are likely much more familiar with the Mankato community than your international partner, so share resources you know that might be helpful to them. Teach them where to go to find things to do on campus, festivals you like to attend, places to rent bikes, where to catch the Mankato area busses, etc. These resources will help make your home a home to international students as well.
- ❖ **Represent your culture.** Be prepared and willing to explain cultural difference between American culture and the culture from which your partner comes. As a program participant, you are an ambassador of American culture. Think about attitudes and values strongly present within American culture, but be open to learning about other ways of thinking from your partner.

Additional Program Expectations include:

- Commit to one semester of participation in the Friendship Family Program.
- Contact your assigned student within the first week of receiving their contact information.
- Initiate at least the first two meetings between you and your partner.
- Attend the three Friendship Family events throughout the semester as you and your partner are able.
- Complete the mid-semester and end-of-semester surveys to provide feedback about the program.
- Understand the two-way learning experience of this program. Ask your partner about their culture, family and what they wish more Americans knew about their country.
- Maintain regular communication with your partner. Even if you only meet once a month, check in to see how they are doing at other times.
- Follow the [Golden Rule!](#)
- Contact the Kearney Center if you have any questions or concerns related to the program.

The Golden Rule

You will understandably have information and resources you are eager to share with your student. There are, however, boundaries that must be maintained in order to protect the security and wellbeing of all program participants. That said, you should **never** offer your students:

- Academic advisement
- Financial resources
- Housing
- Immigration information
- Job information

If your student requests any of these things, please direct them to the Kearney Center. That's what we're here for! 😊

International Students

Although you are new to American culture, you also have an important role to play in this partnership. While your Mankato Community partner will initiate contact with you at the beginning of the semester, you should also show commitment to the partnership by responding to your partner's communication and initiating contact later in the semester. You also fulfill a teaching role in this program: You are able to share about your culture with an American who may have never traveled outside the United States. Your friendship could be the most exposure to another culture your partner has experienced. With these things in mind, here are a few expectations the Friendship Family Program has for its international student participants:

- ❖ **Be a friend.** Treat your Mankato Community partner as you would treat your friends back home. While developing friendships across cultures can seem uncomfortable at first, with time and effort from you and your partner, your friendship will become stronger.
- ❖ **Engage with your partner.** Don't hesitate to ask your partner questions, as they wouldn't have signed up for the program if they didn't want to be a source of support as you adjust to life in American. Feel free to invite your partner to activities you normally do (dining, shopping, campus activities). The more you interact with your partner by asking questions, sharing concerns and inviting them into your life, the more likely they are to do the same for you.
- ❖ **Represent your culture.** Your partner will likely be curious about your home country, its traditions, language and culture. Share pictures, stories and any information about your home that your partner might want to know. Take this partnership as an opportunity to share the pride you have in your home country.

Additional program expectations:

- Commit to one semester of participation in the Friendship Family Program.
- Follow all program rules:
 - Under no circumstances may you ask for money from the family assigned to you.
 - It is your responsibility to pay entrance fees or other costs for any activity in which you decide to participate.
 - Under no circumstances should you move into the home of the family assigned to you.
 - You may only stay overnight at your Friendship Family's home if they invite you for a holiday, special event, or overnight trip.
- Respond to your partner's initial contact within 48 hours of receiving it.
- Attend the three Friendship Family events throughout the semester as you and your partner are able.
- Complete the mid-semester and end-of-semester surveys to provide feedback about the program.
- Understand the two-way learning experience of this program. Ask your partner about their culture, family and what they wish more Americans knew about their country.
- Maintain regular communication with your partner. Even if you only meet once a month, check in to see how they are doing at other times.
- Contact the Kearney Center if you have any questions or concerns related to the program.

Program Events

Friendship Family Program Meet and Greet | early in the semester

Meet your partner and other program participants for the first time. After you receive your partner's contact information, make plans to meet each other at this first event. Kearney Center staff and Friendship Family Student Ambassadors will be present to meet you as well. Light refreshments provided.

Friendship Family Program Potluck | mid-semester

Each semester, the program hosts a potluck. Everyone enjoys sharing a meal and learning about each other's culture through food, so the Friendship Family Program coordinates a time to share our favorite dishes with one another. This event happens roughly three weeks after the first event. Friendship Family Program provides paper products, utensils and drinks.

Friendship Family Celebration | end of semester

Enjoy light refreshments with Friendship Family Program participants and celebrate getting to know your partner(s)! Use this time to line up future plans with partners and ask about plans for finals week and beyond. Also, use this time to give feedback to the Friendship Family Student Ambassadors or Kearney Center staff.

Building Your Friendship

First Meeting

If you can't attend the Meet and Greet, you should arrange your first meeting with your partner in a public place on or near campus, such as the University Dining Center, library or local coffee shop. Keep it casual and friendly. When scheduling the meeting, be sure to give detailed directions and a specific time. Use email or texting to confirm the meeting and clarify information.

Things to Keep in Mind

Taken from the Ball State University Friendship Family Handbook: Family Edition 2017-2018

Weather: If your student is from a warmer climate, Minnesota winters may be challenging! Offer suggestions about suitable clothing to help them stay warm and activities that will help them stay healthy during the long winter months.

Language: Many friendship family students are enrolled in the Intensive English Program and may still be learning English. Many of them are hoping to practice English with their friendship family. Don't let language barriers scare you – with lots of practice it will get easier.

Religion: Religion is an important part of American culture for some families. It is okay to invite your student to religious activities as a way of experiencing American culture. Just be sure to clearly state the nature of the event and allow your student to choose whether or not they wish to participate. **Do not proselytize.**

Timeliness: Many cultures do not value timeliness the same way the U.S. does! Keep this in mind when meeting with your student. Don't be surprised if they are late and don't interpret it as a sign of disrespect.

Gifts: If you offer a gift/food/refreshments/etc. to your student and they refuse the first time, you may want to offer a few more times. In some cultures, it is considered polite to refuse an offer 2 or 3 times before accepting.

Paying: If you would like to pay for your student's meal or ticket, great! However, you are in no way obligated to pay for them, and the expectation is that students will cover their own costs. If you invite your student to an activity they will need to pay for, it is a good idea to let them know the cost ahead of time.

Pets: Some international students may not be used to having pets. Be sure to introduce your pets slowly and give students tips on how to handle your pet.

Firsts: This may not be your student's first time in the U.S. They may have transferred from another college or been here during a previous time in their lives. Be sure to ask them if this is their first time in our country. If it is not, ask them about their previous experiences and what they liked and disliked.

Suggestions for Forming a Strong Relationship

from the [*Duke International Friends Program Participant Handbook*](#)

- Be sure your friend knows your full name, email address and phone number.
- Become familiar with the cultural background of your friend, the geography of their home country and a few facts about it. Ask questions, but also do some of your own research.
- Ask your friend about dietary restrictions based on religious or cultural preferences and practices.
- Be flexible about when you can get together.
- Make sure that when you invite your friend over that they understand the date and time they are expected to visit and for how long. Provide transportation whenever possible if your partner does not have a car.
- Include your partner in whatever you are doing: cookouts, service clubs, community festivals, fairs and holidays, political meetings or activities.
- Invite your partner to include other American or international friends on occasion.
- Remember that some students are shy and quiet; some are not as proficient in English as others; some like to listen more than talk about themselves.
- Be careful about jokes. Humor is one of the final components of language acquisition. However, don't be afraid to laugh together about misunderstandings.
- Understand that your Student's academic schedule may at times prevent acceptance of your invitation; be aware international students tend to be very dedicated and generally do not socialize during exam week or the time prior to a major test or paper.
- Be aware of your Student's non-verbal gestures and cultural moves; if you have questions, contact the Kearney Center.
- Remember that the purpose of the program is for cross-cultural friendship and exchange; your friendship should be a two-way street.
- Be open, be yourself, ask questions and enjoy the experience of getting to know someone from another culture.

Suggestions for Get Togethers

- Cook a meal
- Watch a favorite TV show or movie
- Go to a movie
- Go to the farmers market
- Hike at Rasmussen Woods, Seven Mile Creek or Kiwanis Recreation Area
- Attend a sporting event or watch one on TV
- Relax at a coffee shop downtown
- Rent bikes and ride on the trails in and around Mankato
- Shop downtown or at the mall
- Exercise
- Visit the public library
- Grab pizza at Pagliai's or go to the Hub Food Park for lunch
- Attend a concert
- Check out campus decorations and parade during homecoming
- Get ice cream from Dairy Queen or Mom and Pop's on a warm day
- Take a drive out Minneopa State Park and see the bison
- Study at the library or a coffee shop
- Take in a movie at the [Stompers Cinema](#) on campus
- Check out <http://www.greatermankatoevents.com/things-to-do> for events around Mankato
- Check out <https://mnsu.bookitcalendar.minnstate.edu/MasterCalendarMNSU/MasterCalendar.aspx> for events around campus

Conversation Starters

from the Florida Institute of Technology International Friendship Program Handbook

It can be hard to start a conversation with a complete stranger, particularly one whose cultural experience may be extremely different than your own. To help you get started, here are some questions you can use to break the ice and get to know your partner and their culture better.

Relationships

- How do you define friendship?
- What are your expectations for friendship?

Family

- What is your family like?
- What responsibilities do different members of your family have in the home?
- How does your family celebrate special holidays? What do these holidays celebrate or represent?
- Describe your extended family.

Food

- What dietary restrictions do you have? Are there special reasons for them?
- What is the main meal of the day in your culture?

- Is mealtime a time when your family gathers together?
- What is your favorite meal, and how do you make it?

Daily Life

- What is an average day like where you're from?
- How do you travel to work or school? How long does it take?
- How often do people in your country go to the shopping mall or grocery store?
- What do people in your country typically do after a long day at work or school?

Education

- What is the educational system like in your country?
- What language(s) are you required to learn in school?
- Describe a typical day at school; how is it scheduled?
- What are the educational backgrounds of your family members?

Leisure activities

- What is the most popular sport in your home country? What sports do you like?
- What leisure activities do families enjoy?
- What hobbies do you enjoy? Do you play a musical instrument?
- Does your family go somewhere special on vacation?

Lessons Geared Toward Enhancing Cross-Cultural Understanding

"Cross-Cultural Dialogues: 74 Brief Encounters with Cultural Difference" by Craig Storti

- Don't assume everyone is the same.
- What you think of as normal behavior may only be cultural – a lot of behavior is universal, but certainly not all. Before you project your norms on the human race consider that there may be more than one way to do something.
- Familiar behavior may have different meanings – smiling, for example, exists in all cultures but does not always mean the same thing. Just because you recognize a given behavior, don't assume you understand what it means.
- Don't assume that what you understood is what was meant – all communication is filtered through our own cultural lens, which is not the same lens used by people from another culture.
- You don't have to like or accept or adopt a behavior that is different from yours; however, understanding where that behavior comes from and what values underlie it can help you to be respectful of any differences.
- Most people do behave rationally; you just have to discover their rationale.

Ethical Considerations

Guided by the NAFSA: Association of International Educators statement of ethical principles, the International Center is committed to upholding the welfare, safety and best interests of the university's international students. We strive to provide high quality programs and services for everyone involved in the international community. As participants in the International Friendship Program, you are also held to these high standards, as you are important members of the international education community at Minnesota State University, Mankato.

According to these ethical considerations, you should not offer or encourage your partner to indulge in drug or alcohol use. Respect for the law and policy is one of NAFSA's top ethical considerations, and upholding this ethical matter is of vital importance.

If you feel as though a program participant is not meeting these expectations, please contact the Kearney Center immediately at (507) 389-1224.