

Feeling at home from across the globe

Peer guide welcomes international students, forms lasting bonds

Story by Rachel Streich, Chief Copy Editor

When Marlieke Meyer began the semester with international student orientation in Centennial Hall, she saw an unfamiliar group of new students from all over the world. But there was one face she recognized.

Her peer guide, who previously introduced herself via video, helped her forget her jet-lagged state of grogginess after traveling from the Netherlands with activities and adventures around Eau Claire.

Meyer also met friends who she said have continued to make UW-Eau Claire a comfortable environment at this point in the semester.

"It's a great way to meet other people and get to know each other and see what the campus and the city is like," she said.

Peer guides are students who help a group of around six to 10 international students navigate many aspects of campus during their orientation week, from registering for classes to finding academic buildings.

Yet for peer guides like Katie Jancik, a junior kinesiology major, the experience doesn't end there. Jancik has continued to build relationships with students she met and has supported them throughout the semester.

As an upperclassman, Jancik said she recognizes how difficult it could be for some international students to make important social connections when they're not freshmen.

"A lot of them ... are coming into a new university and a new environment not knowing a single soul, and most juniors and seniors have their friend groups established," she said.

That's why Jancik told her group of eight students, "If you ever need me for anything, I'm here." From being a study buddy to a fountain of advice, Jancik has been willing to help.

Meyer and Jancik live in the same dorm and bonded after meeting at orientation. Meyer said Jancik gives her rides around town, which she said has been helpful, and she is not used to being in an environment where so many people have cars as their main means of transportation. Meyer said Jancik has also been a help for the little things, such as knowing what to do with a check, which she doesn't encounter in the Netherlands.

She said it has been beneficial to know someone she can go to right where she lives, as opposed to just her international student adviser.

"It's good to have your connections set out, not just for practical things but for social things," Meyer said.

Jade Sax, a student from England studying finance, also met Jancik outside of her specific group during orientation and started spending more time with Jancik and her peer guide as she got into the rhythm of classes and campus life. She said forming these bonds has made it easier to get to know others and adapt to Eau Claire as the semester goes on.

"It's easier to make friends here than it is even at home," she said.



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Sax said building relationships with Americans after the first week has enhanced her experience at the university, in addition to meeting other international students.

In her first semester as a peer guide, Jancik has also been able to have new experiences with those in her group, such as a recent dinner together. While most other peer guides had studied abroad or were international students themselves, Jancik said she was somewhat of an anomaly because she had found out simply through a friend's suggestion.

Ever since becoming close friends with a student in her dorm from South Korea her freshman year, she has personally gotten to know several international students. This year she wanted to work with students and make more connections on the same level as them.

"I didn't want to be a leadership role, but I wanted to be more their friend," she said.

At a certain point, Jancik said the formality of the peer guide relationship fades and both people can learn from each other.

Sarah Vowels, community outreach coordinator at the Center for International Education, was a peer guide during her sophomore year at Eau Claire and said she had an invaluable experience and learned more about the CIE, ultimately leading her to her current position on campus.

She said getting to know international students and helping students allows peer guides to gain skills in areas such as intercultural communication during training for orientation and beyond.

Jancik said she has gained cultural awareness through her continuing friendships and a deeper understanding of others' backgrounds and views.

"I love learning about different cultures," she said, "and I feel like my interpersonal skills have improved a bit, being more understanding of different sides of things."

She said being a peer guide has given her even more of a global perspective.

"I know people from all over the world and I value the experiences that I've had with them, the memories, definitely the food," she said.

In the future, Jancik said she hopes to be a peer guide for her remaining semesters at Eau Claire, and the ongoing opportunity is one she won't soon forget.

Vowels said new international students also remember their peer guides years after meeting them, even if their bond was not as close.

"Everyone still knows exactly who their peer guide was because it was their source of information and help," she said.

Although the length of the peer guide experience is only two weeks at the end of the summer, which give the student service learning hours and a stipend, students like Jancik go beyond the one-time commitment and training.

"It's something we can't really train peer guides on," Vowels said. "Friendship isn't really something we can teach someone about, but it happens anyway."