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**WE ARE THE
CHAMPIONS**

25



THE LARGEST INTERNATIONAL STUDENT POPULATION IN UTAH

"How would you describe SUU in one word?"

"Welcoming, friendly, dynamic, vibrant and supportive."

These are the words of four international students enrolled at Southern Utah University. Though they all come from different countries, SUU is a unanimous home in the hearts of these T-Birds.

Southern Utah University has been welcoming international students since the 1950s, yet it wasn't until much later in 2015, that the International Student and Scholar Services Office was established. This division was created by former SUU President Scott Wyatt to ensure coordination and advancement of important international initiatives.

In 2014, before the program unification, only 378 international students were enrolled at SUU. But as time went on, SUU reached the number of 1,006 international students in fall 2024, giving it one of the largest international student populations among universities in Utah, despite its small size.

In fact, in terms of economic impact and enrollment, SUU is the third-largest university in the state, just behind the University of Utah and Brigham Young University, with an international student retention rate of 76.7%.

"We believe that happy students who are thriving are our secret," said ISSS Associate Vice President Stephen Allen.

As of the fall 2024 semester, there were students enrolled from 93 different countries, one of the largest numbers of countries ever to attend SUU. Students are increasing in number and recommending the university.

"I was recommended by my friend. She applied and also wanted me to apply," said Tashi Sherpa, a student from Nepal. "So I did it, and we got the visas."

Located in the Sharwan Smith Student Center, room 169, the ISSS office is open to all students. At any time of the day, many students can be found in this colorful, flag-decked area.

"I really think that is probably what makes this office so special. We've created this open door policy, like if you are struggling, or you want to talk about something, this is where you go," said Keri Romine, assistant director of ISSS.

One of the students who has taken advantage of ISSS and its open-door policy is Mio Takei, a student from Japan.

"I would say the school support is really good, because in my home university it's not like this. We don't have such good support, such as the writing center, the speech center or the international office," she said.

Other than the solidarity and energy of the university, some have also been attracted to the natural landscapes and various national parks in the surrounding areas. There is a reason why SUU is designated the University of the Parks.

Pénélope Campion, International Student Ambassador from France, explained why she decided to stay after her first year.

"I think my favorite memory was the first year I came, and the ISA took me to Cedar Breaks," said Campion. "I saw the sunset with random people, and that's how I fell in love with the place."

Alongside the establishment of the ISSS, the International Student Ambassadors organization was created in 2015 to help international students feel at ease and acclimatize to this new lifestyle.

This turned out to be beneficial, as at the time of its creation the majority of students participating in the ISA program were domestic. The ratio remained that way until 2022 when it equalized. Now, the international population is greater than that of domestic students.



ISA Trip to Cedar Breaks With 55 International Students

Actually, many international students want to bring the support they received to the next graduation class.

"When I arrived at SUU, I was so lost. Everything was new and I didn't know where to go and what to do, but the ISA helped me," said Campion. "I loved what they did for me and I wanted to be able to do what they did for me to other people and help them feel welcome here."

Responsible for picking up students upon their arrival at Harry Reid International Airport in Las Vegas, NV, ISAs are the first faces students see. This creates long-standing bonds and friendships between them. During fall '24, Campion and fellow ISAs brought 55 new international students to Cedar Breaks National Monument and Sand Hollow State Park to explore the world outside of campus.

"Our goal really is to make sure that the international students have a voice, and if they want to use it they can," said Romine. "We want our students to get out, get involved."

In addition, each semester the program hosts numerous events, showcases, excursions and service projects, like the international food fair, the Diwali festival or the Lunar New Year celebration. To provide students with extra support, acculturation and English intensive learning courses have also been set up at SUU.

"The university works hard to make sure that international students receive wonderful service. Faculty care about students and this has a profound impact on the quality of education and the student experience," said Allen. "They come to a new place and often study in a language that is not their native language. It is remarkable. The students I get to work with are vibrant and optimistic and it gives me a lot of hope for the future of the world."

Through the help and support they receive, students thrive in this new environment by making friends from all over the world and taking part in a wide range of activities.

"I like the school spirit at the basketball games or other events," said Coralie Flandrina, a student from Guadeloupe. "I feel like everyone knows each other and it's like a family."

"I liked the Scream event, because in Japan, we don't have such a big Halloween event," said Takei. "That was kind of special for me and that was organized by the school."

From exploring national parks to attending basketball games and from dressing up for the Scream to dancing at Forever Red, SUU has become a home for these students.

This is also the case for the faculty. Romine, who has been working for ISSS for 12 years now, can't bring herself to leave SUU and its students.

"I'll be honest, when I took the job I didn't actually think I would still be in it 12 years later," said Romine. "But it was bigger than me, and I am a much better person because I work here, and I'm able to work with the students that I do."

SUU has captured the hearts of students and staff members from the U.S. as well as across the globe.

"It's hard to watch them walk away, but very rewarding when they reach back out and say: 'Hey, I just got married,' 'Hey, I published a book' or 'Hey, I just had a baby.' That's probably one of the funnest things is the network of students that I've been able to stay connected to," said Romine.

"Do you have anything to say to students who are hesitating?"

"Just come to SUU, you'll like it."

-Written by Fanny Felixine