

International Students and Community Involvement in Tiffin, Ohio

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Situated in northwest Ohio, Tiffin is a small community of 18,000 residents and is the proud home of two institutions of higher learning: Heidelberg University and Tiffin University. Over the last several years a unique collaboration has developed among the two universities and the community's International Cultural Center (ICC). As most things do, this partnership began with a single idea and has blossomed into an ever-growing number of events and activities. Working closely together, these three entities have made concerted efforts to integrate the international student body into the greater Tiffin community. In doing so, the city has become "internationalized" in ways that have provided mutual benefits to the community and the international student population.

Who We Are

Heidelberg University (HU) is a private institution of higher education and prides itself on its strong liberal arts education and pre-professional programs. Heidelberg has an undergraduate enrollment of approximately 1,100 students with another 200 graduate students. Among its stronger academic programs are biological and environmental sciences, business, psychology and criminal justice, education and music.

Founded in 1888 and with a total enrollment of about 5,000, *Tiffin University* (TU) offers professionally-focused academic programs and grants the following degrees: Associate of Arts, Associate of Business Administration, Associate of Criminal Justice, Bachelor of Arts, Bachelor of Business Administration, Bachelor of Criminal Justice, Bachelor of Science, Master of Business Administration, Master of Education, Master of Humanities, and Master of Science. On campus and online courses offered.

The International Cultural Center is a resource center devoted to providing opportunities for residents in the community to better know, understand and appreciate the peoples of the world. It was created in 2003 and funded through the collaborative efforts of the National Machinery Foundation, the Kalnow family and Tiffin City Schools. The annual budget is supplemented by donations from local businesses and organizations.

Our Students

Cultural diversity in our community is somewhat limited. For that reason, when international students from more than 40 nations move into Tiffin each fall, we see it as a win-win for both the community and the students. Beyond their academic goals, students traveling to the U.S. to pursue their studies are also generally looking for ways to fine-tune their English language skills and to become familiar with American culture. While the universities excel in providing the academics, the local community is better suited to offer students a wider range of real-world opportunities to practice their language skills. It is also an ideal setting for experiencing authentic American culture, something that's simply not possible within the confines of a college campus.

Whether high school exchange students or international students at one of our universities, when these young people come to live in Tiffin, they are choosing to become part of our community and that's a win for the residents of our town. Whether it's through informal person-to-person interactions at a store or restaurant, or in a presentation for a service club or a class of fifth graders, we all benefit by being able to learn about and from these students.

Involvement in the Community

Among the most active partnerships have been those with the local K-12 schools, both private and public. Each fall we send classroom teachers a letter listing the home countries of our international students and inviting the educators to look for opportunities to incorporate cultural components as they design their lessons. During the year we receive numerous requests for students to visit classrooms. Often the guests are invited to talk about their homeland, holidays, food and daily life, but they have also been asked to share their talents in art classes (Chinese brush painting, origami, crafts), introduce a new game or sport in physical education classes, judge presentations in an international business class, share new perspectives in a current events class, and, of course, visit language classes.

Initially, most of our activities were designed around classroom presentations, but this has expanded dramatically in recent years to include non-profits and charitable organizations, as well as local businesses. As we continue to develop new ideas, we find that community partners are eager to be invited to collaborate. In early 2012, with an international student population on the rise, we met to discuss opportunities to showcase and honor the students who had traveled thousands of miles from home to study in Tiffin. This idea of selecting Tiffin out of all of the study locations around the world resonated with the group, and the slogan, "We Chose Tiffin" was born. This phrase is quite fitting, too, as the city of Tiffin itself is known as the "Education Community."

Each fall, Tiffin hosts the "Tiffin-Seneca Heritage Festival," and this is where we decided to unveil our new slogan as well as showcase the international students themselves in the festival's annual parade. Wearing "We Chose Tiffin" T-shirts with the name of the student's home country, our students proudly marched in the parade, passing out candy and carrying their flags and a banner with our slogan.

Following the parade, the students volunteered at a booth where they assisted guests with applying international flag tattoos. The response was overwhelmingly positive from not just the students, but from community members as well. Many people commented that they had no idea that Tiffin had such cultural diversity and that the students came from so many countries. This fall will be our fourth time in the Heritage Festival parade, and each year our group grows; even returning students are excited to walk in the parade and visit with the community again.

Having been warmly received by the community at the parade and festival, we felt energized to do more to integrate the international students into the community. We turned our attention to developing a reception to formally welcome the international students to the city. In 2013, we hosted more than 200 community members and students at the first annual "Tiffin Welcomes the World" reception. Guests were welcomed by the mayor and our state representative from Ohio's General Assembly.

The city of Tiffin has limited diversity and this is true of the types of restaurants available as well. When we presented an idea for a German *Suppe und Brot* event to a local restaurant owner, she was excited to partner with us. When the tickets for the soup and bread event sold out in just a few days,

we were all thrilled. Guests enjoyed samples of four authentic German soups and homemade breads, and the evening included a short presentation about German food and culture. Both the patrons and restaurant owner were so satisfied with the event that another was planned for the spring of 2014. This time the dinner featured Saudi Arabian cuisine. Everything—from menu consultation to entertainment in the form of traditional dances—was done by Saudi students from the universities. After two such highly regarded events, we have developed a great relationship with the restaurant and the owner has invited us to schedule a full calendar of five themed dinners this year.

Another wonderful community partner has been our local public library. As most libraries do, our local branch has regularly scheduled story hours for children as well as book discussion groups for adults. Building on that success, we asked about introducing a cultural component into these activities. Now several times a year, we invite international students to share a story from their own culture with the kids. This is typically accompanied by a cultural craft or game. Although we liked the idea of a book discussion groups, we were told that attendance was minimal, so we proposed a new idea: an international panel discussion.

Our first panel consisted of four Saudi Arabian students and we were pleasantly surprised at how well attended and well received it was. The evening was advertised as an “everything you always wanted to know about Saudi Arabia but didn’t know whom to ask” event and that seemed to do the trick. By the end of the discussion, community members were asking questions such as, “So, if I wanted to have you over for dinner sometime, would that be something I could do?” We could not have been happier. Even sensitive topics regarding the criminal justice system and the treatment of women in Saudi Arabia were handled with care. We believe the audience gained a better understanding of the beliefs that are behind some of the laws and practices that are perceived as unusual to many Americans.

In light of the positive community attendance at the Saudi panel, we scheduled a second panel discussion. This time the focus was on Venezuela, selected due to the ongoing crisis at that time. At this event, the panel featured a retired professor to provide the historical background of the situation, three university students from Venezuela and a longtime Tiffin resident who is a native Venezuelan. In an attempt to present both sides of the situation, we were fortunate to be able to conduct a live interview via Skype with a pro-government supporter living in Venezuela. While emotions ran high, it was again very informative for the community members, and many of the attendees expressed sympathy for the students who had family suffering through the crisis. Though scheduled for only one hour, the conversation lasted for nearly two. People simply didn’t want to leave.

What’s in the works for next year? We are planning world coffee, tea and cocoa tastings at a local coffee shop and we are organizing a downtown cultural festival that will feature ethnic foods at local restaurants, and international games and crafts for kids as well as ethnic musical entertainment. We continue to develop our event calendar and programs to celebrate the diversity present in our community, and in turn, sharing this cultural richness with residents young and old.

While not every community has an International Cultural Center, there are ample opportunities to establish and nurture relationships among the universities, the international students they host, and organizations and groups in the community. It goes without saying that the international students themselves benefit from being involved in organizations beyond the college campus. We believe that a true American cultural experience does not take place within the confines of a dorm or a classroom, but rather in the homes and places frequented by community members.

About the Authors

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