Students from around the globe celebrate their cultures at the Whitman School's annual International Day.
Japanese exchange student Kazuya Saitou arrived at SU with a head full of classroom English and a zest to make friends and immerse himself in American culture. But he soon discovered that his standard vocabulary and cache of structured sentences fell short of allowing him to successfully communicate with American students. “I couldn’t talk with people,” Saitou says. “I heard a lot of words that I had never expressed before.”

What’s up? Weird. Awesome—catch phrases of the typical college student became a confusing array of words he couldn’t interpret. “I thought, ‘Is this English?’” he recalls. Undeterred, Saitou found a way to adapt and build friendships by asking questions and initiating conversations. “Now, when people ask questions, I can answer,” he says.

Saitou’s story is a familiar one for many international students. Besides the rigors of intense study and being half-a-world away from their families, these students deal with such additional transition issues as assimilation with peers and adaptation to American idiosyncrasies. Although the English language is prevalent in much of the world and American culture seeps into other nations through the media, many international students encounter difficulties with both, leaving them feeling isolated. Gozde Demir ’07 of Adana, Turkey, wanted to join in conversations with American students, but initially struggled to find common ground. “They were talking about American television shows that I didn’t have any idea about,” she says.

During the 2004-05 school year, Demir was one of 2,200 international students at SU, from 115 countries, seeking not only an education in the United States, but also the opportunity to make American friends and learn about the culture. In turn, their presence allows American students to learn about different cultures. “Those students who are capable of crossing boundaries get a lot out of it,” says Sidney Greenblatt, assistant director for advising and counseling at the Lillian and Emanuel Slutzker Center for International Services, SU’s headquarters for international students. “They can learn about cultures, languages, and everything from food to creativity in various forms, including dance and music.”
To handle the needs of a diverse population, SU provides resources to help international students adjust to life in the United States. Opportunities are available to improve language skills, gather with other international students, and explore Central New York. The connecting thread for these resources is the Slutzker Center. Staff members are familiar with the international student experience and provide an extra measure of care.  “The most fundamental role of this office is to be the official University liaison with the immigration service and administer the government regulations allowing international students, scholars, faculty, and researchers to obtain non-immigrant visas to pursue their studies and maintain legal status,” says Patricia A. Burak G’96, director of the Slutzker Center.

Although keeping up with immigration regulations is a top priority, the center’s mission goes far beyond that. “It really has always—and continues to be—to support the life of the students and scholars,” Burak says. Once international students arrive on campus, they go through an orientation that includes briefings on health, personal safety, and cultural norms. “We try to get them acclimated to everything,” Greenblatt says. Their immediate needs—housing, telephone service, bank accounts, employment—are addressed by staff members and at weekly seminars. The center also hosts weekly English conversation groups led by English-speaking volunteers, which allow participants to develop language skills as well as friendships.

More than a setting for structured events, the center, located at 310 Walnut Place, is a homey sanctuary. “We try to create a welcoming environment for students,” Burak says. SU has welcomed international students since its founding, but it wasn’t until 1966 that a separate office was developed through the work of Virginia Torelli of the dean of students’ office. “There’s a long history to our respect for the diversity that international students bring and our appreciation for the global nature of our University,” Burak says. “Virginia recognized how important it was to develop the skills needed to help international students.” In 2000, the center took on new life with a $1.9 million endowment from Lillian Slutzker, a Hungarian native who owned Manny’s athletic apparel on Marshall Street along with her late husband, Emanuel. Over the years, the center’s staff has grown to a dozen—with backgrounds as diverse as the students they serve. Nine were born outside of the United States, and, among them, they speak 13 languages.

Erzhenia Boudayeva G’05 of Siberia, Russia, finds the center’s staff members a constant source of guidance. “This center is like home,” Boudayeva says. “I have family from around the world here.” When Boudayeva arrived at SU in May 2003, Burak contacted a local Russian couple and students to help Boudayeva with shopping and setting up her South Campus apartment. “I was thrilled when I got here and everybody helped me,” she says.

As students settle in and begin to accumulate such necessities as housing, cable television, and cell phones, they often discover the costs are higher than they expected. “Financial difficulties emerge relatively often,” Burak says. “No one really understands how expensive it is to live in the United States until they are here.” Boudayeva thought she would be able to frequent New York City, but soon discovered otherwise. “It’s so expensive,” she says. She was also concerned about medical bills if she became ill, even though she had health insurance. “We have no problem like that in Russia,” Boudayeva says. “If you have an emergency, a doctor will help you for free.”

Along with the practical side of adapting to daily life, international students must pass an English test before they start classes. Those who do not score well may attend the English Language Institute at University College, which helps students improve their English through concentrated study. Boudayeva spent eight months at the institute before entering Maxwell classes. “The teachers were tough, but it works,” she says.

When they need help with coursework, international students can find assistance at the Tutoring and Study Center, a fee-based service that provides tutors and workshops to all students on campus. The service draws both international students seeking help and those looking to become tutors, creating a link between American and international students. Stephen Moore G’00, G’06, a graduate assistant at the center, helps instruct tutors on various learning and teaching styles in different cultures. Take, for example, student-teacher interaction in Asian countries as compared to the United States. “In those countries, the teachers do all the talking,” Moore says. “Students read the text, listen to the lecture, and give the information back on a test.” Hadi Lazuardi ‘04, G’06, an information management major from Jakarta, Indonesia, grew up in an environment where a student speaks only when called upon. “I have to get adjusted so I can speak my mind like American students,” he says. “I actually wish I could be more like them.”

International students must also adapt to the pace of the language in the classroom while trying to understand advanced classroom content. Jane A. Neuberger, the study
center’s director and a former French major, recommends students initiate conversations with English-speaking students. “Listen to the flow of the language and practice speaking every day,” she encourages them. “That processing speed gets faster as you begin to operate in the second language.” The language was easy for Gautam Jayaprakash G’05, a computer engineering major in the L.C. Smith College of Engineering and Computer Science, who arrived from Mumbai, India, where most of the city’s children are taught in English. But, on his first day, his thick accent, though I was speaking, I realized people couldn’t understand what I said, even hampered conversation with an immigration official. “I thought it was difficult to transition, but that caught me by surprise.”

Some words are used. For example, in India, he says, “we use the word ‘on’ as a verb. Here you say, ‘Turn on the light.’” In India we say, “On the light.”

While breaking down language barriers and acclimating themselves to the American classroom are important to achieving their goals, many international students also seek to explore American culture and develop American friendships. “International students come here primarily to mingle with local students, expand their horizons, and get more life experience outside their classes,” says Cavinda Caldera G’05, who left Colombo, Sri Lanka, in 1994 to study at Western Michigan University and came to SU in 2000. Attempts to join in are not always easy. Saitou says some of his American friends thought Asian students tended to hang out in groups, which made them less approachable. “They find it difficult to cut into conversations with Asian students,” he says. “International students think it’s difficult to cut into conversations with American students. It means we have to take initiatives if we want to make friends.”

SU’s Evangelical Christian Chaplain T.E. Koshy G’69, (see “Consistent Caring,” page 16) knows firsthand the difficulties international students may have in making friends. As a graduate student who arrived from Kerala, India, in 1965, Koshy saw other international students leave campus before finishing their coursework, unable to cope with the culture shock and the turbulent times of the 1960s. “That’s when I began praying,” Koshy recalls, “and I could hear that inner voice saying, ‘Why don’t you do something to make a difference?’” He began by inviting students to his home for meals to build friendships, something he needed. Forty years later, Koshy still gathers international students for meals, but the location has changed and the mission has grown. During the academic year, a crew of volunteers with SU’s Evangelical Christian Ministries organizes a weekly luncheon in the Noble Room at Hendricks Chapel for international students and the campus community. Between 100 and 150 people share home-cooked meals and a convivial atmosphere. The evangelical ministry also coordinates picnics, welcoming dinners, graduation dinners, and trips to area tourist attractions for international students. Another ministry program places students with American families who open their homes for visits or meals. Koshy hopes the programs offer a way for the lonely to establish connections. “By befriending and caring for these international students, we are really building better relationships across the world,” Koshy says.

The Slutzker Center also reaches out to students through programs that keep them connected to each other and allow them to share their cultures. One such event is the International Thanksgiving Dinner, which origi-

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Rules Reflect Security Changes

THE LILLIAN AND EMANUEL SLUTZKER CENTER FOR INTERNATIONAL SERVICES is the link between the University and U.S. Bureau of Citizenship and Immigration Services, which grants international students visas to study in the United States. Center staff members are well versed on the many stringent government regulations. “Since September 11, 2001, the rules have become enormously complex, with much more serious responsibilities and consequences for both the institutions and the students,” says Patricia A. Burak G’96, the center’s director. After the 9/11 terrorist attacks, for instance, young men from Arab and Muslim countries were required to report to an immigration office. Center staff members arranged four van trips to the Thousand Islands immigration office in Northern New York. “None of them got into trouble and they went through it with a minimum of anxiety and fear,” Burak says.

Since the implementation of the new rules, staff members and students also deal with increased paperwork and a new government computer program, the Student Exchange Visitor Information System (SEVIS), which tracks international students. With the help of SU’s Computing and Media Services office, the Slutzker Center implemented the web-based system and ensures that records are up to date. “For example, a student cannot change majors without getting approval from a designated school official in this office,” Burak says. “If there are any clashes, a student could be deemed illegal and immigration could ask him or her to leave the country. Fortunately, we have not had that happen.”

—Kathleen Haley

nated through Koshy’s work and has offered international students a traditional turkey dinner annually for 25 years. The event, sponsored by Hendricks Student Affairs, and the Slutzker Center, is a highlight of International Education Week. In 2004, the week’s programs also included a celebration of Eastern European culture and a review of dances from around the world. “We are very vested in programming to educate the rest of the campus and the community about issues related to cross-cultural communication and differences,” Burak says. The center also works with the International Center of Syracuse, a community group that organizes dinners with American families, summer picnics, and excursions to the Syracuse Symphony.

Students also turn to campus organizations to find their niche. “I was involved in every activity you could imagine,” says Gozde Demir, who received the 2004 Outstanding Emerging Leader Award from the Office of Greek Life and Experiential Learning, the first international student to receive the honor. Demir, a dual major in supply chain management at the Whitman School and international relations at the College of Arts and Sciences, joined such organizations as the Turkish Club, the Entrepreneurship Club, and the Muslim Student Association. She also joined a sorority. “I don’t recommend the rush process to other international students unless they are confident,” Demir says. “It’s a really tough thing not to be accepted. As an international student, you already feel excluded from other things.”

Students note that part of the difficulty is discovering what interests they share with American students. Jayaprakash, for instance, cites allegiances to different sports. “People from India know a lot about cricket and soccer,” he says, “so it’s tough to talk about baseball and football.” Some find it hard to even broach a conversation. “You don’t know if you will offend someone if you say something,” Lazuardi says. “When I speak to my Indonesian friends, basically I can say anything and joke with them because I know they won’t get offended. When it’s not my culture, I back off a little.” The difficulties can be even harder for the children of international students. Burak estimates that about 100 international students bring their families with them. “The complexities of caring for children here are enormous,” Burak says, noting the families are affected by schooling, day care, health care, and other issues. Four months after arriving at SU, Boudayeva was joined by her teen-age son, Aldar. “I am very sociable and can adjust to every situation,” she says. “For my son, it was very hard. He wanted to go home very much.” However, as a student at Nottingham High School, Aldar made friends, joined the swim team, and quickly picked up English. “He adapted, but it was still difficult for him,” Boudayeva says.

Looking to meet people with similar interests, international students naturally gravitate to students from their home countries. A variety of international clubs exist on campus to foster camaraderie. Lazuardi, who was president of the Indonesian Student Association, enjoyed being part of the organization and conversing with other members in
Paola Castellani G’05, of Rome, Italy, takes a break from her studies at the Maxwell School.

their native language. “It’s kind of nice when you have people from the same country, but at the same time you’re not living the real culture if you just keep hanging out with the same people,” Lazuardi says.

Paola Castellani G’05 of Rome, Italy, an international relations student at the Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs, saw the opportunity for discovery and didn’t go through the culture shock that others may experience. “It depends on the mindset that you come in with,” Castellani says. “If you go to a different country expecting to find similar things, of course you’re going to be disillusioned. Being open to new things makes the whole difference.”

International students recommend the University develop more programs, attracting both American and international students, to help break the ice. The Association of International Students at SU (AIS5U) works toward that goal as part of its efforts. The organization is for students whose cultures are not represented by a separate campus organization, and it also brings together various international groups to organize events. “We try to explain international culture to Americans, show what other countries are all about, and give people a chance to show their talents and cultures,” says Jayaprakash, who was president of AIS5U in 2004-05. A highlight of AIS5U’s programming is Medit-Arabian Night, which started several years ago as a celebration of Mediterranean cultures and evolved into an international festival.

For those interested in living among students of different cultures, the Office of Residence Life offers both interna-