

CONVERSATION PARTNERS

International students are often lonely and desire an insider guide to Champaign-Urbana (and the U.S.) as they acclimate to their new reality. By inviting an international student to spend some time with you and/or your family, you will be meeting relational and practical needs and the student will feel they have a friend here in Champaign-Urbana.

The Conversation Partner Program was designed to address at least one, if not all, of these major felt needs of international students:

- ★ Improve English skills
- ★ Understand and adapt to American culture
- ★ Make meaningful, personal connections

WHAT IS THE ROLE OF A CONVERSATION PARTNER?

- ✓ Weekly be in touch with their conversation partner by phone or virtually
- ✓ Monthly meet in person (or virtually face-to-face)
- ✓ Commit to serving in this capacity for a minimum of two semesters
- ✓ Be consistent, compassionate and hospitable

This time should be simple and fun! Include the student in the activities you and/or your family are already doing and share aspects of your cultures with one another. This friendship will certainly benefit the student's grasp of English, but it does not need to be the primary focus. Listen to your partner's priorities and goals and determine together how your meeting times should be used.

WHAT SHOULD I EXPECT FROM IFI?

We commit to being a resource and support to you as you will be to the students. IFI Cincy will train and equip you to be the best friend and advocate you can be in both online and in-person settings. We pledge to follow up with you regularly, help you address student needs, and be a phone call or email away to discuss any difficulty you may face.



WHAT TIME COMMITMENT IS EXPECTED?

We ask you to interact by text or phone with your student on a weekly basis. We encourage you include your student in an activity that you and/or your family are doing at least once a month, or join an activity that he/she initiates. If your schedule allows you to interact with your student more often, we encourage you to do that! We match you with the expectation that you will maintain the friendship for two semesters (or if student is here less than that, for the time he/she is here). If the student is here longer than two semesters, it is up to you and the student to agree on whether or not to continue.

WHEN WOULD I BE NEEDED?

All year round! Most international students arrive in the fall, but we have requests for Conversation Partners throughout the year.

HOW WILL I AND/OR MY FAMILY BE MATCHED WITH A STUDENT?

After we approve your Conversation Partner form, we will schedule a time to set up your online profile. Once live, students will be able to read about you on our website and request to connect with you. If you are a single person, we will make sure to connect you with a student of the same gender. Once a student requests to connect with you, we will send you their contact info for you to initiate a connection. After you have connected we will set you up with a way to record your interactions from your phone (don't worry, we will help you!)

WHAT IF I AM UNABLE TO CONTACT THE STUDENT?

It can be very intimidating for an international student to make the first contact, especially if he/she is using a language that is not his/her mother tongue. Please do not give up after one attempt; try to contact the student several times. Most students prefer texting over email. If your texts don't work to connect, then try calling them. After you connect with them, consider using whatever app they prefer to text with, such as WhatsApp or Instagram. Sometimes it doesn't work out with a student and that's ok! If after these attempts you are still unsuccessful, please contact IFI so that we can either facilitate the contact or match you with another student.

HOW LONG IS MY COMMITMENT?

Since you are only asked to meet one time per month (minimum), we would like to see you continue your relationship with the student for at least two semesters. In an ideal situation, a friendship would develop and last until the student or you move away from Champaign-Urbana and beyond.



WHAT IF MY STUDENT RETURNS TO HIS/HER COUNTRY OR CAN NO LONGER MEET WITH ME?

Please let us know and we would be happy to match you with someone else! Remember, even if you can no longer meet in person, there are many ways in which you can stay virtually connected. Let us know if you would like some guidance on how to do this and which platforms to use.

DO THESE STUDENTS SPEAK ENGLISH?

Yes. Students must have a sufficient grasp of English in order to function in the university setting. If the person is the spouse of a student, his/her English may not be quite as good. However, as you interact with the student and/or spouse, he/she will improve their knowledge and usage of English. This would be a side benefit for the student and/or spouse!

WHAT TYPES OF ACTIVITIES WOULD BE SUITABLE?

If you are meeting with the student one-on-one, then just feel free to hang out – cook and/or share a meal together, go shopping, take a bike ride, etc. If your whole family is involved, invite the student for a family birthday or cookout, to attend a family sports game, or to a concert.

Contact Bill for more ideas at b.erickson@ifipartners.org.

WHAT ABOUT SHARING MY FAITH?

Your commitment to the student should be that of unconditional friendship and love. Please be sensitive to the fact that the students come from many different cultural and religious backgrounds and may have little or no previous exposure to Christianity. We hope that over time you will build a relationship of trust which would be an appropriate context for sharing spiritually. We ask that you not force spiritual discussion but be sensitive to the student and follow the leading of the Holy Spirit. In many cases, the students are very open to such discussions. It is appropriate to include your faith naturally as it relates to your life experiences.

Questions?

Contact Bill Erickson
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