

How to Sponsor an International Student Event

There are many ways to involve international students with Americans on campus and in the community. If American *students* want to become friends with individual internationals, the easiest way is to attend an international social event on campus, (International Student Clubs often have meetings open to all nationalities.), or take the initiative with the internationals in their classes. The easiest way for American *families* is to contact the foreign student advisor on campus (or the dean of foreign student affairs) and request his/her help. **College host family programs** are often greatly in need of American families in the community with whom they can match interested foreign students. Social events should be structured so that people are encouraged to mix and get acquainted in a relaxed atmosphere.

If an international student event is to be sponsored by your campus ministry, a student committee should plan the program which could include time for getting acquainted informally (a brief get-acquainted game can help here), some time for the foreign students to share something from their culture or personal experience, and time for the Americans to do the same. It should be publicized through school papers, bulletin boards, cultural clubs, etc. Personal invitations to internationals should be followed by a letter and phone call, with an offer to pick them up. Encourage each American student attending to find and bring one or more foreign students.

Such events can also be used evangelistically, so long as you let internationals know ahead of time in your publicity that there is going to be a short talk on a spiritual issue related to Christianity (so they don't feel trapped). It is essential that there be a **discussion** following the presentation where non-Christians can genuinely feel that differences of opinion are listened to and that they are accepted as persons. For example, an international tea could be planned for the beginning of each term. The primary purpose would be for Christian students to make initial contact with internationals on a social level. The secondary purpose would be to stimulate interest among American and Christian international students who would like to pursue our ministry of friendship.

Coffee, tea and refreshments can be served following the discussion so that individuals can again converse in a relaxed way. Christian students can then pick up where the discussion left off, engaging non-Christian students in further dialogue about the Gospel. The Americans should be carefully instructed to befriend their overseas companions and to arrange another time to meet, before the function is over. For example, invite them to Sunday dinner. Instruct them to at least exchange names, addresses, phone numbers and to tell the international that they will call. A guest book also helps in follow-up.

If the social event is to be sponsored by a group of Christians in the **community**, a home with a large living room, as close to campus as possible to ease transportation difficulties, is the best place for it. Students from the peer ministry team may also participate and are often the best means of making the initial contacts with the internationals and bringing them to the event. Or an American faculty member, a Christian international student, or even non-Christian internationals known through individual friendships may be the best people to advertise the event and bring other foreign students. The event itself can be organized and planned by community folk, similar to the way students would (see above), and a faculty, peer minister or campus or congregational pastor could lead the program.

Care must be taken to help students or community people develop personal friendships with foreign students after such events so that they are not simply isolated experiences for the foreign student. This is the basic problem with the well-intended traditional American Thanksgiving Dinner. American families love to celebrate Thanksgiving in a social way by inviting members of the family and occasionally non-family members such as international students into their homes. With such lavish feasting and social interaction, foreign students' expectations of a "home away from home" usually soar and, if the American

family does not continue the relationship in the months following Thanksgiving, unnecessary and unintended disappointment or resentment can build in the heart of the international.

This principle applies to any social event for foreign students. It is important that Christians be oriented to the importance of initiating friendships with internationals there so that they will continue afterwards. This is part of the "cost of discipleship" involved in this kind of ministry. The events are to be a springboard to lifestyle friendship evangelism. The former without the latter is like a preface without the book! This main purpose should be emphasized in the planning, in the publicity among Christians, and by a meeting for the Christians following the event to decide who will follow through with which foreign student. A vital part of such meetings should be extended specific prayer, both for international students and for Christians who often need as much support and reassurance from the Lord and from each other in this effort as the foreign students need friends and a home away from home.

If there is sufficient response, continue with a series of monthly international teas in the community or supper-discussions in a home near the campus. A committee to pray for, plan and evaluate these is essential. A peer minister, an understanding faculty member or the campus or congregational pastor should lead the studies. These discussions should be simple, informal and educational. They should be led by the same person each time in order to establish rapport. You cannot preach at international students or you will lose them. A series that has been used very effectively for several years is: "What is Christianity?" "Who did Christ claim to be?" "What did He teach?" "What was His attitude toward others?" "Why did He die?" "Was He a failure?" and "What is a Christian?" (on how to become a Christian).

Where social events of this kind are successful, they are always marked by a spirit of prayer, sincere commitment to long-term relationships with internationals, and people's willingness to invest time and energy to include international students in their lives and activities.