Entering a new college atmosphere, no matter your background, comes with many emotions. It's often exciting and scary to sleep in a different place, eat different food and make new friends. As a student who has studied abroad, I can testify that the anxiety and excitement involved in this transition is amplified when you are an exchange student. Walking into class your first day becomes an entirely different kind of intimidating when English isn’t your first language. Finding sheets for your dorm, rides from the airport and a social circle to explore isn’t easy when you’re new in town.

At MSU, the new student-led program Fostering Relationships between International, Exchange and Domestic Students (FRIENDS) helps to ease the confusion for exchange students while helping MSU students explore other cultures. FRIENDS is an exciting way to broaden participants’ cultural horizons and make our school more welcoming to all students. The program has completed two semesters successfully.

Hannah Wilson, a senior majoring in history and economics, was inspired to start the FRIENDS program after her semester abroad at Hallym University in Korea. She found their program of pairing incoming exchange and local students to be effective and helpful in her travels. Upon her return to Bozeman, she realized MSU did not have such a program. She partnered with Griffin Ruehl, a senior in chemical engineering and liberal studies (global and multicultural option), as well as the Office of International Programs, to assign incoming exchange students buddies from MSU.

Based on students’ interest and foreign language study areas, each MSU student is paired with an incoming exchange student before the exchange student arrives. Through email correspondence, the exchange student is able to connect and discuss any questions about packing and what to expect. At the start of the semester, the pair can explore campus, buy books, and attend events together as they get accustomed to the semester to come.

Although the program spans only two weeks at the beginning of the semester, many students remain friends after the program ends—some even become roommates. “It is short-term, requires little administrative work and can be as extensive as the pair of students wants it to be,” explained Wilson.

Caroline Lima Salles de Souza, a chemical engineering junior from Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, reflects positively on the program. “Knowing that there would be someone here to help me in my very first steps gave me peace of mind to face whatever I had to face here,” said Salles de Souza.

Lara-Louise Kunik, a junior from Germany studying American studies, also enjoyed the program. She reflected that the
FRIENDS program made her more excited to come to Bozeman and, after her arrival, it made it easier to make friends who were not study abroad students. According to Kunik, one of the hardest parts of studying abroad is adjusting to cultural differences. “It is nice to know that there is someone you can rely on. If you need help with anything, you can just ask your buddy. It gives you a sense of safety,” said Kunik.

Rhuel reported that these responses are common. The FRIENDS after-program surveys have provided almost only positive feedback, an impressive feat considering the youthfulness of the program. When asked about his hopes for the program’s future, Rhuel stated, “…my biggest goal for the program is longevity. There have been programs like this that haven’t lasted…that is why we chose to make this program shorter to lessen the time commitment.”

It’s clear that the FRIENDS program brings a much-needed resource to exchange students in a simple, effective and fun way. Because it is created and maintained by students, the program is relevant to the community and manageable for students’ busy schedules. It also allows MSU students to make connections if they intend to study abroad in the future.

MSU is working towards becoming a more diverse campus, yet it remains easy to go through four years of college without interacting with people from many different cultures. This cultural isolation is not representative of the rapidly globalizing workforce or life in general and, without exposure to other cultures, students are missing out on a major educational opportunity. The FRIENDS program provides that opportunity in an informal and exciting way, and stands as a great new asset to the MSU campus. This is a program MSU needs to nurture to promote a diverse campus and community.

Greta Robison is a senior studying geography, Native American studies and cultural studies. She writes regularly for the Exponent, MSU’s student school paper, and has a passion for cross-cultural experiences. When she’s not studying, she enjoys working at MSU’s Women’s Center, making food, playing her harp and reading.

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– CAROLINE LIMA SALLES DE SOUZA, exchange student from Brazil