

International Students' Journeys to Drake

Story by Erin Hassanzadeh

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Leslie Mamoorian travels from Des Moines to Kuala Lumpur, the Malaysian capital, every year. It's a 9,227.7-mile journey.

She arrives at schools in the southeast Asian country lugging stacks of pamphlets and pictures of bulldogs wearing capes and crowns. She hauls pictures of college students covered from head to toe in splattered paint.

Mamoorian's job resembles the craft of an artist or a storyteller.

"What we're trying to do is help students envision Drake University without ever setting foot on campus," Mamoorian said, who has been recruiting students in Malaysia for over 25 years.

"Many students cannot visit Drake, so they hang their hats on you as an individual to describe campus, rather than being able to come here to judge it himself or herself," she said.

Mamoorian's job as an international admissions counselor is to attract students from the largest cities across the globe to Iowa.

Drake was founded in 1881 and welcomed international students to its campus within five years. These students were primarily from China, Japan, Armenia and Iran.

The international student population at Drake has shifted. Of the 283 international students recorded in the fall, 127 were from Malaysia. China had the second largest concentration, totaling 52 students. Students from 50 countries are currently represented at Drake.

"I have no doubt that our actuarial science program is the top recruiting tool for international students," Mamoorian said.

Approximately 95 percent of the Malaysian student population at Drake is studying actuarial science.

“When I researched schools, Drake’s actuarial science program was one of the top in the states and because I was pursuing that degree, I wanted to come here,” Jeremy Leong, a senior actuarial science and finance double major from Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, said. “Plus, the recommendation from my hometown friend who attended Drake really made it my top choice.”

Drake’s partnership with international schools and strong relationship with international alumni helps to sustain a steady international enrollment.

“One of the most important things in recruiting students is having alumni students who have been very happy here and have told other potential students,” Mamoorian said. “If they didn’t have good experiences, we wouldn’t be experiencing this success today.”

Drake works with institutions abroad to approve classes and credits to make it easy for students to transfer their classes to Drake. The most popular situation is for students from Malaysia to complete two years of actuarial science at a Malaysian college and then transfer to Drake to finish their degree.

Mamoorian and two other international admissions counselors work with students until they step off the plane. The Drake International Office then takes over.

“It’s not like loading up the car and driving to Drake,” Mamoorian said. “When students step off the plane after a 36-hour journey, they’re really discombobulated. I think one of the most valuable things that Drake does is to pick students up from the airport.”

Carlyn Marron is the assistant director of the international office.

“When students get here, they want a lot of hands-on help. They want someone to help set up their cell phone plans or someone to take them shopping for bedding,” Marron said.

Because of cost and the sometimes 40-hour travel time, Leong did not visit campus before deciding to attend Drake.

“I was expecting campus to be larger. Des Moines is small, peaceful and quiet compared to my hectic lifestyle in Kuala Lumpur,” Leong said.

Joclyn Ong is a senior actuarial science student from Penang, Malaysia.

“I come from a really, really small place. My school was the size of Olmsted (Center). When I first came to Drake I thought, ‘Wow, this is big,’” Ong said.

Something that is hard to combat is the distance from families, friends and their native culture. Both Ong and Leong have not been home since arriving in Des Moines in the fall of 2011.

“Skype is your best friend when it comes to long distance communication with family and friends,” Leong said. “I Skype them once a week to stay updated on what is happening back at home.”

While both Ong and Leong cite missing their families and traditional Malaysian foods, they plan to apply for permanent jobs in the United States after graduation.

“There are more opportunities here than back home, and that’s why we came to school here. I would like to stay here to work,” Ong said.

There are opportunities for international students to work in America post-graduation. The Curricular Practical Training program allows international students to work in the United States for a year in their area of study. The government-sponsored STEM program allows student work visas to be extended an additional 16 months if students are working in a science, technology, engineering or math-related position. On average, two graduating students each year stay permanently in the United States.

“I would prefer to stay, but if I go home, I have Malaysian food and my family,”

Leong said.