

Bridging the Gap

An international friendship program helps CALS students reach across borders, right here on campus



PHOTO BY JOAN FISCHER

International support:
Food science major
Hannah Fenton (bottom left) carrying BRIDGE partner Kanokwan Duangkunarat, of Thailand; and Jenny Falt, from Sweden (bottom right), carrying her fellow landscape architecture student Sherry Yang.

Food science major Hannah Fenton gratefully recalls the kindness shown to her during the three years she and her family spent in Thailand. “I know what it’s like to live in a foreign place and to feel lonely and in need of a friend,” she says.

That’s why Fenton joined BRIDGE—short for “Building Relationships in Diverse Global Environments”—a campus program that matches U.S.-born Badgers with students from around the world. “I wanted to give international students the love, support and guidance that I had when I was in Thailand,” says Fenton.

Last fall Fenton was paired with Bangkok native Kanokwan “Kim” Duangkunarat, who credits BRIDGE with helping her make the most of her five months in Madison. “Before I came here, I thought that the international students would be treated differently,” Duangkunarat says. “However, I was wrong.”

The feeling of “fitting in” she describes is at the heart of BRIDGE’s mission. Offered through International Student Services (ISS), BRIDGE seeks to ease the transition of foreign students to campus

while giving U.S. students the opportunity to connect as cultural ambassadors. Each semester an interview process matches international and domestic students according to their interests and gathers these pairs into teams of 14 to 20 students.

To cultivate participants’ leadership and cross-cultural communication skills, each BRIDGE team is assigned to design and host a special event for the others. Past activities have included tours of research labs, visits to a traditional Wisconsin farm, a trip to a corn maze, and even a tailgate party at Miller Park.

After a focus group of CALS undergraduates revealed that many students appreciated the diverse origins of their peers in the classroom but were unsure how to connect socially, CALS administrators reached out to ISS to sponsor a college-specific BRIDGE team.

Now in its fourth semester, the CALS team has attracted students from all corners of the globe, including Germany, Brazil, Malaysia, Singapore and China. Participants have included majors in biochemistry, animal sciences, microbiology, and community and environmental sociology, though the program welcomes international students from non-CALS majors as well. Inspired by CALS’ success, two other colleges on campus are sponsoring college-specific teams this year.

“Now I have many good friends from different countries,” says Duangkunarat. “I have learned that UW-Madison is a really great place to study and live.”

Meanwhile, Fenton has enjoyed seeing her campus through the eyes of students for whom their time here is study abroad. “My favorite question to ask them is, ‘How do you like Madison?’” she says. “I enjoy showing them my favorite things and hearing about their new adventures as well.”

—MASARAH VAN EYCK

For more information about BRIDGE, visit <http://apps.iss.wisc.edu/bridge/>.