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MCC helps acclimate foreign students to U.S.

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By Huan Vo

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Moving overseas means confronting different languages, strange foods and unfamiliar cultures.

For three international students at Mesa Community College — Gabriela Adair of Mexico, Alaa Alsaeedi of Iraq, and Kedkarn Phanwiryarat of Thailand — these barriers would be more difficult had it not been for the help they got from the school.

Emigrating from Mexico in 2002, Adair wanted to do something that would make her proud. She didn't want to stay in Mexico and follow her father's footsteps in business. Arriving in Tempe, reality soon hit. She realized she needed to overcome the hurdle in communication.

Her English was not adequate enough, which explains her first job in a Mexican food restaurant. "It was more comfortable for me because everyone speaks Spanish. ... Then I started to look for other types of friends, not just Mexicans," Adair said.

Making friends and hanging out helped Adair learn U.S. culture as well as English, but that wasn't not enough. "I need to go to college and be more proper. Eventually I got a job. ... I am the only Hispanic in the company," Adair said. "That's why I feel the need to improve and talk and write better English."

Alsaeedi's difficulties in adjusting involved U.S. customs and traditions.

Currently living with his family in Mesa, Alsaeedi immigrated to the U.S. in 2008 for three reasons.

"First, I tried to protect my family (from) the war, gangs, and (criminals). Second, I am looking for safety, stability in the USA. Last, I could arrange my life for the better, and I trust that the United States supports human rights. ... I am comfortable about the future of my children here," Alsaeedi said.

Being a college student has its own perks, as he learned about U.S. society from his instructors at MCC. In addition, humanitarian organizations and his community helped him learn more about American traditions and customs.

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Phanwiryarat had difficulties getting used to a new culture. Common greetings, especially a handshake and a hug, perplexed her.

"In Thailand, we're not allowed to touch each other," Phanwiryarat said. "First time I came here and said, 'Hi,' to my friends, and they hugged me, it was a hard time to me."

Now living in Tempe, she came to the U.S. in 2011. She didn't speak much English in Thailand, but practice and help from friends improved her English and confidence in communicating with English speakers.

To help international students like Adair, Alsaeedi, and Phanwiryarat, MCC has established an International Education Program, which "has advisers dedicated to assisting them with all aspects of living here, from academics to living accommodations and beyond," said Kathryn Sheffield, resident faculty in the MCC English department. She teaches three English as second language classes.

MCC hosts a variety of activities and field trips that help students become acquainted with a new environment.



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