

Student Diversity Guide

Building Bridges to Asian American Students

We often assume that others are a lot like us. Therefore, we relate to them in ways that we find most comfortable, & we expect them to relate to us in ways we are most accustomed to. While language barriers are not at issue when relating to Asian Americans (AA), there are subtle cultural issues that may be at play as they interact with you. If these differences are not taken into account, you may unwittingly miss opportunities to connect deeply with them. These tips, while not comprehensive, suggest what may be going on in AA students & how you can more effectively engage them.

Recognize Asian cultural relational values. *Hierarchy:* You may notice AA students may be less participatory & assertive. Asian culture inculcates a strong sense of hierarchy & position. They will likely look to you, as an older leader, to take initiative in conversation & interaction. *Harmony:* Asian cultures value a high sensitivity to the community & its relational harmony. For example, many AA students feel that blurting out how they feel or what they think is selfish. It forces the group (& the group leader) not only to bear the weight of -- but also to respond to -- what is shared by the individual. (In their mind, this may distract people from the concerns of the group as a whole). To assert oneself in any way is felt to be self-serving & disrespectful to others. Therefore, some of the best contributions to a discussion may be lost because a leader does not know how to draw out AA. *Humility:* If a question requires sharing one's strengths or achievements, AA may be reticent to speak because, in a traditional Asian context, this kind of sharing would be considered arrogant boasting. (It requires the individual to rank oneself above the group. This differs from Western values which encourage individual self-assertion.) Therefore, taking a leadership role or strongly asserting one's opinion is very difficult to do in light of the Asian sensitivity to relational harmony.

Recognize they are bi-cultural. Recognize that AA students have both Western & Asian values swirling beneath the surface. Therefore, not every AA student will express all these values. Some AAs have caught the message that it is best to assimilate into dominant culture; therefore, they have learned how to be assertive & highly verbal. Others are self-aware of the Asian values tucked away deep inside; therefore, they have learned to step out of those values in a mixed ethnic setting. Most AA students, however, are not very aware of these cultural realities. They will be quiet, unassuming, & very compliant while not knowing why they are that way & how deep-seated Asian values engender those kinds of relational characteristics. That is why a lot of these explanations are stated in terms of how the AA is 'feeling' rather than what they are thinking. Most of the dynamics that AA students exhibit operate at a preconscious level that is deep-seated &, for most students, preverbal: that is, they can't even articulate themselves why they are feeling & acting the way that they do.

Suggestions:

- **Take initiative.** If they are wrestling with issues, it will be very hard for many AA student to take initiative with you or to share very freely with the small group. Take seriously your role & position as a small group leader in their life. They expect you to take initiative if you want to know what is going on. Take time one-on-one outside of small group to ask. By your taking initiative, they will be freer to share what is going on inside.
- **Entrusting leadership or contribution.** The key to drawing out an AA is **entrustment**. If an AA is entrusted by the a leader with the responsibility for leading or contributing something, then that AA has been freed up to do so without fear of appearing self-serving or disrespectful. So, for instance, if you hear something from an AA student that you wish others in your Small Group could hear, then entrust that AA with the responsibility of sharing it: "John, that's a wonderful testimony of God's work! Why don't you share that with the group next time we meet?" Then at the group meeting, as the leader, invite their contribution, "John told me something wonderful this afternoon. John, why don't you tell the group what you told me?" This frees up John to be open & contribute to the group without appearing to be motivated by a desire to draw attention to himself.
- **Appropriate naming.** In general, avoid putting someone on the spot by calling on them by name to answer more personal questions like "How are you going to apply this to your life?" or "How is God calling you to change your life in response to this session?" However, when the subject matter does not require a high degree of vulnerability, it is sometimes appropriate to call on the quieter AA student by name for a response. For instance, the question, "What did you think of what the speaker said about....." is not a threatening question.
- **Be aware of volume & proximity.** Without realizing it, we have a norm for the volume level with which we speak & for how closely we stand to the person we are speaking to. For the AA, volume tends to be a notch lower (quieter) than for the Caucasian, African American, & Latino. & the physical distance in conversation tends to be just a tad bit further away than what is typical for the non-Asian. This is rather hard to judge, but be sensitive so that you don't back your AA student to the wall by how close you are standing or how loudly you are speaking.
- **Don't tell the AA student, "I'm doing this.. because you're Asian..."** Most AA students will not appreciate hearing that at all. Simply be aware of the dynamics & relate accordingly.

Building Bridges to Black Students

Blacks are a diverse community in our society. Some are African-Americans with a long history of slavery & oppression going back over 10 generations. This long history affects their relationship with the dominant culture. However the Black community also includes Caribbean-Americans & more recent African immigrants such as Nigerians. These more recent immigrants have a different relationship with the majority American culture & even with African-American culture. Despite these different cultural backgrounds all Blacks are caught in our racially divided society. The racial assumptions commonly made in employment, policing, housing & other areas have an impact on all of them.

Recognize that Black history & experience impact everything.

Blacks, as a discriminated against minority, have learned to be careful about letting outsiders in. It is not unusual for Black students to be cautious in relationships because in the past they have been hurt by those who do not understand that their everyday experience is very different than what the mainstream media & culture assumes to be true. Over the course of a conference there is not a lot of time to build trust to overcome this reticence.

Recognize African American cultural relational values: Communication:

There is a high value in the African-American community of being direct in communication. Those who speak the truth are respected, & confrontation is often embraced. *Authority:* In the African-American church those who have been given power in the church are highly respected. One needs to show respect towards pastors & other leaders in the church & there is often a certain level of formality in this relationship. As a small group leader you will fall, in some ways, into this category for students. *Expression:* African-American culture is exuberant, which can be seen in music, dance, conversation, & physical interaction.

Suggestions:

- **Acknowledge different experiences.** Don't assume that everyone's experience of majority culture is the same. Welcome disagreement & other perspectives on reality. When you are giving examples or illustrations acknowledge that they are specific to you & to your cultural & family experience, not an experience that all have or even a typically "American" experience.
- **Expect that communication will be complex.** As an authority you will have respect, but trust in the relationship will take a lot longer. Being authentic & keeping it real will help trust grow.
- **Be sensitive to culture shock.** InterVarsity employs interactive learning, small group discussion & teaching. For Blacks exhortation & preaching are more natural so they may find it hard to hear from God. It may be difficult for black students to connect spiritually during musical worship as InterVarsity's style is different from their home church.
- **Demonstrate vulnerability.** In White culture you show interest in someone by asking lots of questions. For a Black student this can feel like an inquisition, which causes them to feel exposed & vulnerable. Be vulnerable first.
- **Learning together.** The Black church has a long tradition of bringing the gospel to bear on societal problems. This perspective deepens Bible study & scriptural application so that it reflects in a greater way the values of the Kingdom. Think about how what is being learned can apply to issues like racism, oppression & injustice in politics & economics. Being an advocate for these issues with your small group is one powerful way to care for Black students.
- **Above all, take initiative.** Don't ignore or avoid Black students out of anxiety that you may not be liked or that you may do the wrong thing. Such avoidance will be seen as racial disrespect or rejection.

Building Bridges to Latino Students

Within the diversity of the Latino community, there are a few things to keep in mind as you try to engage them.

Recognize Latino cultural relational values.

Honesty: Latinos have a way of being upfront about their opinions. They like to process in groups, & therefore will probably be engaged in the group dialogue. It would not be uncommon to have a Latino student be extremely direct in sharing their thoughts. They also like to challenge the thoughts of opinions of others, so if someone in your group has expressed an idea & they do not agree, it is likely they will say "I don't agree because..." This honesty is normal & highly valued in the Latino context but can sometimes be seen as argumentative. They are also very perceptive in whether or not someone is being honest & are put off by those who are not. They may even call you on it! *Expression:* Latinos highly value the freedom to express themselves, verbally as well as physically. Coming from a culture characterized by story telling, they will enjoy a small group that accepts liveliness in the sharing time. When given the space, they might respond to another member of the group with a word of encouragement, a hug, or other signs of affirmation. This is a way of expressing that inside they are in agreement.

Recognize that "Latinos" consist of many ethnicities & cultures.

It is important to note the Latino experience is extremely different for each culture. For example "Latino" can be used to describe a fourth generation, English speaking bi-racial Puerto Rican from the inner city of Chicago or a second generation, bi-lingual, white Argentine from an upper middle class suburb. Obviously the experiences that these two students have had & the way they approach being in a small group of people who are from majority culture will be different. Be aware that because of

their experiences they may or may not have difficulty trusting you as their leader or the rest of the group members. *As Latinos in America they are also bi-cultural*, so they will exhibit signs of having both North American & Latino American values. For example, although family plays such a crucial role in decision-making, you may have a student in your group speak in a way that sounds very independent & individualistic. This student cares about what their family thinks, but the American value of freedom & individual choice makes more sense to them. They have two sets of values that conflict in some areas & are in harmony in others, so they will have to choose.

Suggestions:

- **Don't be surprised by anything they say.** Latino students tend to be unpredictable in the way they will respond to questions or comments. But if they have an opinion it will probably come with some energy behind it. Try to stay neutral; let them know in some way that they have been heard.
- **Ask questions, affirm them & challenge them.** If you have the opportunity to speak with the Latino student in your group one on one, take that opportunity to ask them if they are enjoying the track &/or small group. Engage them in a dialogue (two way) on what you are learning. *If you feel like you understand where they are coming from feel free to affirm them & challenge them.* They will respect you for your honesty & welcome a lively discussion.
- **Look over the guide to Roman Catholic Students.** A large majority of Christian Latinos are Catholic. Although you should not assume that everyone is, it is safe to say that it is likely. The resource on Catholics would be worth looking at. If the students are protestant, it is highly likely that they grew up in a Catholic church & may have strong opinions against Catholicism. At any rate, Latino culture is rooted in & impacted by Catholic theology & traditions.

Building Bridges to Roman Catholic Students

During the past eight years, InterVarsity has developed strong partnerships with & ministries on Catholic colleges & universities. We rejoice as we find & partner with like-minded believers who are committed to establishing witnessing communities at these institutions. Because many of our staff & volunteers come from Protestant traditions, we've written this guide to help us serve the Catholic students among us more effectively during training events.

Major in the majors.

Our fellowship & ministry together grows from our common commitment to Jesus & is circumscribed by InterVarsity's Basis of Faith & Purpose Statement. Legitimate & significant differences do exist between Protestants & Catholics around areas such as the nature of the sacraments, the church, & teaching authority. In the context of a conference, however, focus on our shared commitments as believers (e.g., the Basis of Faith, the Apostles & Nicene Creeds, our Purpose Statement), rather than our differences.

Help students get closer to Jesus.

Our overall goal is described in our purpose statement: to establish & advance witnessing communities on campus who follow Jesus as Savior & Lord. Our goal is not to call students into or out of any specific church tradition. It is a relationship with Jesus that changes students, & He will lead them in appropriate decisions about denominations, local churches, theology, etc. in his own timing.

Be aware of incorrect assumptions.

Catholics in our ministry often have their faith questioned. Many Protestants assume that one can't be a Catholic & a committed follower of Jesus. This simply is not correct. In fact, there are evangelical believers & also unbelievers within both Catholic & Protestant churches. As a small group leader, you have power to challenge these kinds of incorrect assumptions & prejudices in your small group members (& the responsibility to challenge these kinds of assumptions in yourself.) As minorities in our midst, Catholic students are constantly wondering if they will be welcome or not. Your attitudes & actions can demonstrate they are.

Suggestions:

- **Demonstrate cross-cultural welcome in language.** Protestants & Catholics use different language to talk about their faith. If you are unsure what a student is expressing, ask them to clarify & define terms for you. For example, Catholic spirituality tends to be more process oriented – which leads to humility in discussions about the state of their faith & salvation. Protestants often “hear” this as a lack of faith or as doubt, although it isn't. Calvinist theology (which much of evangelical Protestantism embraces) emphasizes the “assurance of faith” which can smack of arrogance to Catholics, as they understand issues of salvation are in the hands of God. Another example: Catholics (& many other students from “churched backgrounds”) will speak less of a “conversion/born again” experience & more of a “my relationship with Jesus coming alive” time in their life as childhood information about Jesus becomes a living relationship with Jesus. (You may want to use this language for churched students whose relationship with Jesus isn't yet real, rather than the language of “conversion”, if God leads you into an evangelistic conversation.)

- **Demonstrate cross-cultural welcome in prayer.** Catholic (& many mainline Protestant & new Christian) students may not have much history with out-loud, spontaneous or “popcorn” style prayer. Allow for silent & spoken prayer in a small group setting & give permission for them to pray silently. You might want to use a piece of scripture or a written prayer that everyone can recite together as part of your prayer time for those who come from a more liturgical setting. Another practice is to pass a Bible around the circle – when you have the Bible then you are to pray – aloud or silently – & when you are done praying then you pass the Bible on.
- **Affirm the gifts Catholic students bring.** The Catholic church maintains a stronger witness than most Protestant churches in areas such as the respect for life/pro-life movement, issues of peace & justice, & the care for the poor & needy. Catholics often have a grasp of the mystery of the Divine & a level of awe in worship that can enrich us all. Protestants owe a debt to modern Catholic activists & writers who enrich our discipleship (e.g., Mother Teresa, Henri Nouwen) & need to recognize that Catholics have better stewarded our common pre-Reformation heritage of the Church (e.g., people like Augustine, the early martyrs & missionaries of the church, & many of the greats of Church history like Clement, Tertullian, Athanasius, Jerome, Theresa of Avila, etc.)

Building Bridges to Fraternity & Sorority Students

Greek students on the college campus often find themselves in a cultural flux. In Western society they typically represent the majority culture & often highlight some of its stereotypes. At the same time, this student numerically is more of a minority on campus & an even greater minority in the Christian groups on campus. They are not usually ethnic minorities, but are defined by their unique experiences, pressures, lifestyles, living situations & close-knit community.

Historically within InterVarsity, Greek students have been poorly represented & often condemned as a pagan culture that is unreachable. At the same time, they may be the most “churched” group on campus. Coming from predominantly middle-class America, 70% of undergraduate Greek students have a church background of some type. You will find that a great amount of Greek students do not walk with Christ because of negative past religious experiences, unwillingness to submit to the demands of Lordship at this point in their life or the over-saturation of worldly influence & desires in their life. Very few will be so for reasons of disbelief or atheism. The following tips may be helpful as you try to engage this student group:

Recognize the strengths as well as weaknesses of their society. They know their stereotypes. They expect you to see them as shallow, alcoholic, greedy, lustful, irresponsible, exclusive & overly driven people. They also expect you to not pay attention to the positive qualities: philanthropic, motivated, risk-takers, team players, leaders, loyal, sacrificial, communal, intelligent, influencers, & very relational. Force yourself to look beyond the Hollywood depictions & newspaper articles to the reality of this society.

Suggestions:

- **Try not to be intimidated by them.** Greeks love to hangout in groups & at times can be intimidating, even when they are the minority. These are confused, hurting, & needy students like any college student. Sometimes they just work harder to put on a front for others to see.
- **Innocent until proven guilty.** Don’t label them as the stereotypical Greek until you have gotten to know them. Don’t treat them like pagans.
- **Give some room for fun.** Like anyone they love to have fun. At times they will be a little louder, rowdier & more excitable than the rest of the group. They will also need to be given time & room to let off steam. They will need & desire adequate time to hang out as a group.
- **Don’t lure them away from their surroundings.** Instead of asking them to move out of the house or spend more time away from their friends, we need to send, equip & encourage them to view their Greek chapter/house as an awesome mission field.
- **Focus on the heart.** Many will have lordship issues to deal with as Christians. If you attack the lifestyle first they will become defensive & slow to change. Focus more on the heart issues & let God soften them. In time, their heart will rule their mind & the choices they make will be for the right reasons, not just to follow some rules/standards we have set.
- **Entrust leadership to them.** They are natural leaders. Give them opportunities to do so. Be willing to work with them on some lordship issues as they grow instead of holding off all leadership until we feel they are worthy.
- **Challenge them.** Greeks are not scared off by a challenge. They are often motivated by being challenged to take a step of faith, work on aspects of their life, step into leadership & to share Christ with others. Greek students can be great evangelists.
- **Ask about Greek life.** They love being Greek. They love talking about their experiences & stories. This can often soften them up & show genuine care at the same time. Know that the answers may be a little scary at times.

Building Bridges to Commuter Students

Commuter students, like most student groups, are diverse. Some four year commuter students could have gone to a residential campus financially or academically but chose to stay home for personal reasons. However, financial reasons often keep students at four year commuter schools. Students can be at community colleges for a variety of reasons as well...personal, academic, financial or for a particular program. Some community colleges are feeder schools into four year commuter campuses in the same areas or typical state schools. There is a wide age range among commuter students, who are often very busy. They can be working 20 hours a week in jobs that have a bit of responsibility. They may be driving 30 minutes one-way to campus. Often they have family and church responsibilities, so InterVarsity might be a third or fourth priority. They may be less likely to understand InterVarsity distinctives. Sometimes living at home can lead to some immaturity but life experience, etc. can mature them in other ways. Not having left home can cause students to view InterVarsity as a continuation of youth group, which may not have been missional or challenging. Commuter students are intelligent but may have temperaments that aren't as academically oriented and have enjoyed active hands-on ministry as well as classroom learning about ministry.

Suggestions:

- Use ministry examples that don't just reflect the residential campus.
- Realize that the college experience for these students is different and is often in the fast lane as opposed to more leisurely or reflective.
- These students value relational building at camps and conferences since that can be in short supply in their college experience because of time constraints.
- Respect the life experience of these students.
- Respect the local church involvement of these students.
- Respect the financial burdens many of them have and the sacrifice it may be for some of them to attend a training event.
- Challenge them to make time for Jesus in quiet time, small group and evangelism even though it is a struggle to make that happen.
- Challenge them to reflect on their lives as well as to develop a Christian mind.

Building Bridges to International Students

What do we know about the nearly 590,000 international students in the US who come from virtually all 195 world countries? 60% percent of them are from Asia, with India, China, South Korea, and Japan as the 4 leading countries of origin. The top 3 majors, accounting for 50% of enrollment, are business & management, engineering, math & computer sciences. On the surface they probably look a lot like you: sporting Jeans & i-pods, texting their friends, computer savvy, watching American Idol and CSI. Their religious attitudes however vary greatly: they may be from a Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu, or atheistic background; or they may be nominal, evangelical, or very conservative Christians. They attend your bible study because they are spiritually seeking, looking for friendship, wanting to improve their English, or a mixture of all 3. Fortunately, you do not have to become an expert of world cultures and or religions to welcome internationals into your group. The following suggestions about *Building Relationships* and *Leading Bible Studies* with Internationals should get you well on the way in interacting with and enjoying this diverse group of people.

Building Relationships:

- **Be a learner.** Don't assume anything. It's O.K. not to know where Trinidad/Tobago is; but it's not O.K. to pretend you do. Internationals can tell if you're faking it ☺ - Instead, ask questions and listen to the answers with interest.
- **Ask questions, but don't interrogate.** Make the exchange mutual: "I'm originally from Flint, Michigan, but my family lives in Wisconsin now. Where is home for you?"
- **Create a welcoming community.** Many internationals are painfully aware of differences in cultural and relational dynamics, and many report feeling left out in an American group. Try to integrate them into your conversations; be aware of idioms or references to pop culture and/or sports that may require an explanation. Talking only about people you know, high school experiences or football leaves internationals with little to say. Singing a foreign language song or serving an ethnic snack will communicate: "We care; we are willing to step outside of our comfort zone to make you feel welcome." Also, be aware of practical needs like transportation. Many internationals do not own cars and may need a ride to the meeting but hesitate to bother you by asking for a ride.
- **Build authentic relationships.** Realize that what happens when you do stuff together (the relationship) is as important for the international to learn about Jesus as the time you spend studying the Word together. Provide opportunities to see Christianity fleshed out. Invite them to join you in playing sports, shopping, watching a movie, or even spending the holiday with you (many international dorms close over breaks). That will build a relationship of trust and open doors to invite your international friend to group activities, service events, or conferences.
- **Realize that internationals spend many hours studying** because they need extra time to compensate for limited English proficiency or because they feel the weight of obligation to get good grades to keep their scholarships and meet the expectations of their parents who are making great sacrifices to send their kids to the US. Thus they may not have the same amount of time and money available to participate in all group activities and/or conferences.

- **Invite them to share in the group by serving or leading** – This will increase their ownership and commitment. You may have to ask them more than once and express that their contribution is really needed. Give internationals a ‘job’ in the group. Even seekers can participate by sending out emails, helping with set up, etc

Leading a bible study:

- **Create an atmosphere of inquiry.** Internationals are careful not to offend. They want to learn about the Bible but are afraid to make mistakes. Inductive bible study works well. Be careful not to let the believers ‘overwhelm’ the seekers by giving all the answers, discussing esoteric things, or by attempting to answer all the seeker’s questions in one meeting. Consider starting an I-Gig, an investigative bible study for internationals. Start with even just one person and ask him/her to invite some friends along. You’ll be surprised at how fast your group may be growing.
- **Give extra time to reflect on the text.** Ask if there are unknown English words or religious language/ theological concepts that the international is unfamiliar with. Ask them to rephrase what they think the text says. If English is a real barrier, consider using an easy English translation (such as the NIRV) or a bi-lingual translation.
- **Invite verbal participation.** Don’t put them on the spot, but do invite them to make a contribution to the group discussion. Asian students in particular (with the exception of Indians) often express that they find it difficult to speak in a group because everyone speaks so much and quickly and they don’t get a chance. So invite them in by asking: “I’d be interested in hearing your thoughts, Lin.” They may not be ready to respond during the first few meetings but continue to invite contributions. (See also the section on Asian cultural values in this guide.)
- **Create an atmosphere of response.** Realize that an international may take months or years to clearly understand the Gospel message. Some start being unsure about the existence of God; others have rudimentary or incomplete ideas about Jesus. Give opportunities to express what they are learning but don’t pressure. Becoming a follower of Jesus is a journey with many steps and many small decisions. One way to help the international and you plot their spiritual journey is to ask group members to identify themselves with a character’s attitude towards Jesus in a story: Are you like the crowds: curious; the disciples: following Jesus; Zaccheus: reaching out to Jesus?
- **Worship, prayer and testimonies showcase God’s power and presence.** Many internationals express that during worship and prayer times God touches their hearts, and that they sense that Christians are relating to a personal God. Testimonies are a great way to demonstrate how God is at work in a person’s life on a day-by-day basis and answers the question many internationals pose: “What it is it like to live as a follower of Jesus?”.
- **Be aware of international believers’ cultural expectations.** International Christians may be used to bible teaching rather than bible discussion and may feel that the study is too ‘open ended’. Talk to them in private and let them know that this is a bible discussion not a lecture, but make sure that you give a well prepared summary of the main points of the passage at the end of the meeting.

Building Bridges to Caucasian/White Students

Although many of the students that are involved in InterVarsity are White and generally comfortable with the way we do ministry, there are still ways we can build or break trust with them. These are just a few thoughts about the experiences and backgrounds of our Caucasian/White students.

Recognize White cultural values. Individualism: White students probably won’t mind being called on individually to answer questions in small group or being given credit for their individual ideas and contributions. They will come up with personal (individual) applications and obedience points related to what they are being taught, but may have a harder time applying the materials to their chapter (community) or families. Authority: In general, trust needs to be earned by the leader—it is not automatically given to you. There may be a time of trust building between you and the students before they will really let you in. They will not respond well to you speaking authoritatively to them before you have built trust. Most will appreciate you being vulnerable with them about your faults/struggles.

Recognize diversity among Caucasians. Depending on where the student grew up or currently lives, they may have different perspectives and preferences. White rural students may like being out in nature more than White suburban students. White students that grew up in another country or in a context where they were the racial minority will have a unique perspective. White students that are in Greek houses will be different from non-Greeks. Some White students have lived in higher income communities while others have lived in lower income communities.

Recognize their history connected to race and ethnicity. Most Caucasian families did not regularly talk about race/ethnicity or celebrate their own ethnic backgrounds. They think that they don’t have anything to contribute to conversations about ethnicity because their food is not considered “ethnic food” and they are not included as “people of color” in racial definitions. These terms add to the feeling of being “non-ethnic”. This week for the students may include their first exposure to diverse worship styles or being led by people of color in bible exposition or small groups. Also, because of their strong individualism, they will generally be unaware of racial structures and systems in their lives that have helped them or hurt them. It will be a big jump for them to go from acknowledging and wanting to change individual behaviors to acknowledging and wanting to change entire systems and ways of doing things.