Cultural Exchange Circle aims to reduce effects of culture shock

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Contributing Writer

For me, an American living abroad for most of my youth, the prospect of coming to America for college was exciting, and yet in a certain sense frightening. I eagerly awaited coming back to the proverbial “homeland” which I had left at age nine. But at the same time, I knew that it had changed, even from the month-long visits I made every summer, and coming to the United States would be almost like moving to another foreign country.

Due to some conflicts in travel arrangements, I was unable to attend the international orientation program which Tufts sponsors for students in my situation, and other foreign national students. When I first arrived at Tufts, I desperately wished that I had been here. Those international students who had made it to the orientation already had a base from which to expand, and a network of friends from similar backgrounds.

Lacking this bond that the other international students shared, I found myself stuck in the chaotic frenzy of freshmen those first weeks. For some time, I sought out and gravitated to international students, and those with experiences like mine. Needless to say, I had my fill of the “Spanish” and “German” scenes and enjoyed myself simply because I had found other people who were having the same problems that I had in adapting to American life.

But after international orientation, no one was making an attempt to unify the different communities on campus, or to address the problems of these individual communities. There were still international students struggling to deal with phone companies, and the shock of the “commercial” nature of America. Certainly each group could turn inward with its problems, but there was not a communal effort to really help one another.

This is where sophomore Saskia Meckmann steps into the picture. Having lived in France as an American since she was five, Saskia suffered through culture shock her freshman year, as most international students did. She found comfort within the international orientation group, and eventually the French circle, but she was not satisfied with the way the community divided itself as the year evolved.

Meckmann wanted to do something to help the incoming freshmen and other international students adapt to this country and to discuss their common bonds, almost as a continuation of international orientation. She felt that students of particular nationalities and from certain communities needed help in assimilating their members and in solving their culture-related problems.

As a result, Meckmann, with the help of English lecturer Susan Carlisle and sophomore Lora Defelice, formed the Culture Exchange Circle, sponsored in part by the International Center. The group is aimed primarily at incoming freshmen and students who have lived abroad for any length of time, but students interested in other cultures are also encouraged to get involved. Meetings will address the state of the international and intercultural communities on campus and the different aspects and stages of culture shock.

The group aims to attract any students with international ties who may be looking to join the organization for the camaraderie and informal discussion the group offers.