

Date: 10/11/2025

International Enrollment Assistant at KIC – Intercultural Engagement (Development)

For the past two year and a half, I have been working as an International Enrollment Assistant at the Kearney International Center. In this role, I help prospective students from around the world with applications, transcripts, scholarships, and general admission questions. Most of my work involves email communication, but I also interact with students through virtual calls and sometimes in person. The students I assist come from many different cultures and backgrounds, which means I have to be careful in how I explain processes, respond to concerns, and provide guidance.

I first heard about the job from Melan, an Honors alumnus who used to work there. When he decided to move on, he referred me. More than ten students interviewed, but in the end, Uday and I were the ones selected. Going into the job, I knew MSU had a diverse campus, but I didn't realize just how wide and complex our international student population was until I started. I began by shadowing the previous IEAs to learn the processes, and now I am the senior and only student IEA left, since the office has recently hired a full-time replacement. Looking back, I truly appreciate Alissa Morson for giving me this opportunity and trusting me to represent KIC in such an important role.

This job has taught me that intercultural communication is not just about language, it's also about having patience, being clear, and showing empathy. At first, I didn't realize how much cultural background shaped communication. Some students rarely replied to emails or were hesitant to ask questions, and I used to assume they just weren't interested. Later, from advice from one of our immigration advisors, Paulina, also seeing patterns in communication, I realized that in many cultures, asking too many questions or challenging instructions can be seen as disrespectful. Once

I understood that, I began inviting questions directly and reassuring students that it was okay to ask for help. Seeing them open up over time made me realize how important it is to adapt, not just expect others to adjust to me.

I also became more aware of power dynamics in my role. Even though I was a student worker, I represented the university to many new students, which gave me a certain level of authority I hadn't thought about before. That awareness made me more intentional with how I communicated being approachable but professional, using a calm tone, and making sure my guidance came across as supportive rather than intimidating. I learned that respect doesn't just come from position, it comes from listening, understanding, and treating every question seriously.

In addition to helping international students, I also got the chance to work alongside students and staff from diverse backgrounds. At the end of each semester, our office would host a potluck where everyone brought homemade dishes from their culture. I enjoyed trying food from all over the world (except pork, since it isn't allowed in my religion), and those gatherings helped me appreciate how food itself can be a way of sharing culture and building community. At first, I caught myself comparing flavors and thinking some dishes were too plain or unfamiliar. Over time, I recognized that as a small form of ethnocentrism judging things through my own cultural lens. I've since learned to approach those moments with curiosity instead of judgment, asking about the history or ingredients behind dishes instead. That mindset shift helped me grow toward ethnorelativism, where I value difference as something to learn from rather than something to rank.

Language was another area of growth. Even though English is the main language we use, I quickly realized that tone and phrasing mattered just as much as vocabulary. Some students understood the words but missed idioms or humor, while others struggled with long instructions. I started simplifying my emails, breaking them into smaller steps, and avoiding slang. I also made it a

point to greet students in their native language whenever I could, saying “Selam” or “Ni hao” made a visible difference. Those small gestures helped me connect with students better and reminded me that language is more than communication, it’s recognition.

One highlight from my job came during Summer 2023, on the 4th of July. I was invited by Olivia, a graduate assistant and friend, to her grandparents’ home about 25 minutes away from Mankato. Their farm had horses, rabbits, cats, dogs, pigs, and more, which I found fascinating. She introduced us to her family, and we were served a big buffet of American dishes before ending the night with fireworks. That day reminded me how intercultural engagement isn’t always formal; sometimes it’s about being welcomed into someone’s traditions and getting to experience life from their perspective.

Another highlight came in Fall 2023, when my immigration advisor, Paulina, assigned me to be an Orientation Peer Mentor after seeing my potential and the work I had done at KIC. I assisted with the smooth check-in of new international students by verifying documents and guiding them through the process. I also proctored placement tests and helped create a welcoming, supportive atmosphere during orientation sessions. One moment that stood out to me was meeting a few students from Ethiopia, I greeted them in Amharic, my native language, and their faces lit up with joy. That small exchange reminded me how powerful it is to make people feel seen and at home, even in a new place.

Looking back, these experiences have shaped my personal philosophy of intercultural engagement. I’ve learned that it means more than helping international students it’s about creating spaces where people from all cultures feel respected, supported, and included. It requires humility to recognize biases, openness to learn from others, and the courage to step outside my own comfort zone. These qualities matter because they’re what make collaboration possible. When

people feel respected and heard, they're more likely to share ideas and perspectives that lead to better outcomes. For me, creating those spaces starts with small actions like listening fully before responding, making sure quieter voices are invited into the conversation, and being mindful of how cultural differences might affect participation. I try to model the same openness I hope to see in others, whether I'm helping a student, leading a club meeting, or working on a team project. Over time, I've learned that inclusion doesn't happen automatically; it takes intention and consistency.

Going forward, I want to take these lessons and apply them not only in my campus leadership roles but also in my future career. Whether I work in engineering or technology, I know I will collaborate with people from many different cultures. My time at KIC gave me a strong foundation in how to communicate across cultures with respect and empathy, and I want to keep building on that by creating inclusive environments wherever I go.