



# Safe Landing Program

## International Transfer Student Support



SAINT MARY'S  
UNIVERSITY



# PROPOSAL

## International Transfer Student Support Program 2018-2019

### Background

Saint Mary's is acknowledged as Canada's International University. In July 2016, the Globe and Mail profiled two Canadian universities which are taking internationalization to new heights, and Saint Mary's University ranked as one of the two.

Internationalization is well developed on campus in terms of student body, the curriculum, and diversity in teaching, research, and staff communities. Our students are part of a university where almost 35 per cent of its students arrive from destinations beyond Canada - a proportion of international students not matched by any other University in this country. There is also extensive international outreach by way of institutional linkages with universities around the world, and, in many cases, active inter-institutional collaboration is established and growing.




Students who join the University become a part of this international ecosystem with its potential to transform students' views of the world by having them connect and interact with other cultures, languages, and literatures in approaching complex global problems. It is a challenge for students new to Canada to navigate the system, and Saint Mary's has been a leader in recognizing and responding to the challenges for international student success. In the 2012/13 academic year, the International Student Success Committee was established on a three-year pilot basis. This project help the University recognize the complex transition process experienced by international students, and also discern the role of the institution in providing comprehensive support for making a successful transition. The current Strategic

Plan of Saint Mary's University sets Intercultural Learning as a strategic priority, and gives particular focus to the need for support services for international students.

As part of its internationalization strategy, Saint Mary's has established agreements with partner universities abroad that enable students to begin their programs of study at home and after two years transfer to Saint Mary's. Approximately half of the institution's international student population has come to Saint Mary's on a transfer credit basis, and each September, 200 to 300 of the new students arriving on campus are international transfer students. Traditionally these students were predominantly Business students, but since 2017 the group has expanded to include students in Arts and in Science. Discussions with partner institutions sending transfer students to Saint Mary's have led to the recognition that particular support services are needed for this group that are distinct from support needed by students arriving in their first year of study. In response to this, an initial program of support services geared to the needs of the first Arts 2+2 cohort arriving from BNUZ was piloted in 2017-2018. The response to the introduction of such a program was positive, and the Sobey School of Business as well as the Faculty of Science have expressed the wish to participate in an expanded version of the program on a go-forward basis.

Using the lessons learned from the 2017-2018 pilot with the BNUZ Arts 2+2 cohort, as well as the responses from Business and Science, the present proposal has been developed for the coming academic year.

## International Transfer Student Support Program *At a Glance*

		Implementation Status		Responsibility		
		In Place	New	Academic Faculties	Student Services	The Studio
Phase 1 Pre-Arrival  	Delivery of an EDUC 1000-level Academic Transition Course	✓	✓	✓		
	On-site information sessions and workshops	✓		✓	✓	✓
	Information guides prepared		✓	✓	✓	✓
	Online Orientation and Web Resources	✓		✓	✓	
	Access to selection of SMU syllabi and course materials, including academic texts		✓	✓		
Phase 2 Arrival  	Airport Pick-up	✓			✓	
	Arrival and Greeting Program		✓		✓	
	Communications set-up		✓		✓	✓
Phase 3 Life at SMU  	First Year Seminar		✓	✓		
	Academic Advising	✓		✓		
	Academic Learning and Communication Support	✓				✓
	Wellness and Student Life Support	✓			✓	
	Peer-Mentorship	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓



## Program Proposal

The proposed International Transfer Student Support Program is a coordinated, pan-campus, cross-Faculty program that supports students in the various aspects of their transition to Saint Mary's University. At present, no initiatives or programs on campus exist to holistically support international transfer students' academic success.

The International Transfer Student Support Program will support recruitment efforts, as the University will be able to demonstrate to partner universities that supports are in place for incoming students. The program will also support international student retention and success, as students will have the tools and resources to successfully transition to Saint Mary's.

The program will consist of three phases: *Pre-Arrival, Arrival, and Santamarian Experience*. It is proposed that this be named the *Safe Landing for International Students Program*.

## Phase One

### Pre-Arrival

In the year preceding the student's arrival to Saint Mary's, recruiters, faculty and staff from the University will provide resources to prepare new students. A combination of resources may be used such as online orientation through BrightSpace, Printed/Electronic materials (how-to guides), video chats and possible in-person information sessions.

For selected international 2+2 partnerships, such as that with Beijing Normal University Zhuhai, Saint Mary's University will send appointed Faculty of Education instructors to the students' home campus to provide transition support. These staff members would provide an orientation to Halifax as a destination and SMU as a university campus, and introduce teaching and learning standards in the Canadian context. This would include the delivery of a for-credit EDUC 1000-level class course by a designated faculty member, as negotiated between SMU and the partner institution.

Phase One is designed using a framework derived from Maslow's *Hierarchy of Needs*. Pre-arrival orientation will first focus on what is termed the "physiological needs" of students. Subsequent phases of the program will help students on their journey to the highest level of Maslow's *Hierarchy*, described as "self-actualization", by helping them deal with the conceptual challenges they encounter while at university.

### Practical Challenges

Before students can begin to focus on the academic component, they must first have their basic necessities taken care of (shelter, food, etc.). Information guides and information sessions will be developed to help students make the best informed decisions when it comes to setting up life in Canada.



The International Transfer Student Support Program will orient student on topics such as, finding proper accommodations (typical cost, appropriate standards, avoid rental scams), shopping for food in Halifax (international grocers), Canadian culture, cultural expectations/differences.

In certain contexts such as BNUZ, faculty and staff will travel to the BNUZ campus to teach and provide in-person guidance.

### **Challenges Related to Academic Learning**

Faculty and staff will prepare students for the academic environment they are about to enter. Topics will focus on, the Canadian educational context (norms of a classroom, traditional vs progressive education, student centred learning, range of information delivery tools, academic integrity and culture shock).

Effort will be made to provide students with visuals (live or video) as to what a typical classroom will look like at Saint Mary's. Helping the students visualize themselves in the environment will help to reduce anxiety.

### **Phase Two Arrival At Saint Mary's**

Using feedback from current students (including BNUZ Arts 2+2 Program students, see Appendix) a more sophisticated airport pick up program should be put in place to coordinate student's travel itineraries to Canada and to have arrival supports in place.

As part of Phase 1, students will be told about communication challenges which may occur once arriving in Canada (no data coverage, connecting to Wi-Fi, understanding how to travel to campus). The Arrival Program will aim to reduce anxiety about travel and arrival in Canada.

### **Arrival Programming**

Working collaboratively with the International Student Centre efforts will be made to design a "Safe Landing Program" which will collect student's travel plans, and if possible co-ordinate students to travel to Canada together.

Efforts will be made to simplify the University's airport pick up program and to create a system which is reactive to travel delays and issues, 24/7 for the first weeks of each term.

Various student groups have expressed interest in creating welcome teams to greet students at the arrivals terminal. The arrival program would encourage groups be on site at the airport to welcome students and help get the students to campus.

### **Phase Three The Santamarian Experience**

The academic Faculties, Student Services and Academic Learning Services will collaborate in offering an integrated, holistic program of support for student success.

Preparedness for academic and personal success will focus on certain core components; building peer mentor relationships, reducing stigma to use support resources (faculty office hours, writing centre, SASS, Counselling Centre) and helping students persist in the Canadian educational system.

This phase will focus on assisting students to assimilate in to the Saint Mary's culture so they may begin to develop meaningful relationships with faculty, staff and peers.

### **Implementation**

To put these phases in effect a planning and delivery team will be created. Working to develop the components of each phase the team will



create:

- A plan, timeline and schedule for 2+2 support programs
- An academic monitoring system for academic success- both at the home institution and Saint Mary's
- A database of faculty members who are empathetic to the needs of international students. Student will be encouraged to register for courses with these faculty members to support the academic transition.
- A plan to identify the needs/information required of students pre-arrival, on arrival and throughout study.

### **Administrative Support Structure**

A joint effort will be made to work across campus to engage departments who have expertise in working with international students. Members of this support group could include:

- Academic Advising
- Student Services
- Studio for Teaching and Learning
- The Language Centre
- Academic Learning Services
- Senior Advisor, China Affairs

### **Learning Outcomes**

Learning Outcomes of the International Transfer Student Support Program will be categorized in to Academic and Student Life.

#### **Academic Learning Outcomes**

1. As a result of in-person orientation, students will be able to identify areas of difference between the Canadian educational system and the education system of their home institution.

2. As a result of in-person orientation, students will be able develop a sense of the educational context they will be learning in, and understand challenges they could face.

3. By Phase Two students will be able to recall academic support services they can use to assist in the learning process.

4. By Phase Three, students will recognize that in the Canadian education system asking for help is not stigmatized.

5. As a result of in-person orientation, students can apply their knowledge Canadian classroom expectations to confidently contribute in classes.

6. As a result of Phase One and Two, students will feel confident in their decision to attend Saint Mary's, and will feel prepared to face the challenge of studying abroad.

#### **Student Life Outcomes**

1. As a result of orientation (in-person, online, print material), students will demonstrate sound decision making when choosing suitable accommodations.

2. As a result of Phase One, students will prepare appropriately to handle initial technology/communication challenges when arriving in Canada.

3. By Phase Two, students will understand culture shock and recognize the normal period of adjustment they will experience.

4. By Phase Three, students will show their ability to make connections with other international and domestic students.



## Appendix

### BNUZ 2+2 Arts Cohort Consultation

On March 2, 2018, around half of the inaugural Arts 2+2 cohort met to have lunch and discuss their experiences during their first seven months at Saint Mary's. The consultation was facilitated by:

Dr. Esther Enns, Senior Advisor for Teaching and Learning  
Bill Bu, Senior Advisor for China Affairs  
Dennis Mills, Student Transitions Specialist  
Jonathan Shaw, Educational Developer for Intercultural Learning

The guiding question for this meeting was: *How can we welcome and support the 2018 cohort from BNUZ?*  
The following is a summary of a semi-structured discussion.

### Pre-Departure

#### Questions and Concerns

- Will (NES) professors speak too fast to students to understand?
- Will students be able to use the CMS when they arrive?
- Students are not sure how SMU/Canadian degrees are structured; especially in terms of how majors work.
- Cultural knowledge and social etiquette is a major cause for anxiety.
- Will classrooms be run differently there? What should we expect?

#### Comments and Suggestions

- Put incoming cohort in touch (via social media, etc) with previous year's cohort
- Peer mentor program should be established
- Students need advice/support before they register for courses (while still in China). They need to learn more about mandatory and elective options, and for setting up their third and fourth year courses to ensure they graduate on schedule. They need an overview of the general structure of degree programs, as well as specific advice for their particular majors.
- If students are taking a SMU class in Zhuhai before joining the cohort in Halifax, the faculty member should follow Dr. O'Malley's example and offer an informal weekly drop-in meeting (Also see While at SMU > Suggestions)
- Students would feel more at ease if they better understood the conventions of interacting with NES peers and professors before coming to Canada. They need more experience, including simulations and role playing. A phrasebook would be a good reference for understanding idiomatic and informal language as well as paralinguistic cues.
- Set up a way to sell textbooks to next cohort
- (see While at SMU > concerns) A course on "Western Perspectives" could provide some context for the kinds of issues students will encounter in their classes. It could introduce students to some salient issues that are often highlighted in class in the West, such as equality, social justice, inclusiveness etc.



## Arrival

### Questions and Concerns

- Long wait for study permits in Toronto; wait times ranged from 30 mins to 2 hours +
- Students need to use international roaming to use SMS/place calls en route
- This trip can be stressful for many students.

### Comments and Suggestions

- Ensure connecting flights are booked to allow for study permit wait in Toronto
- Have a returning student (Cora volunteered) coordinate booking flights so they could travel with most of the incoming cohort.

## While at SMU

### Questions and Concerns

- Interacting with NES is a lot different than expected. EFL classes didn't prepare students for real interactions.
- Students need to get over the sense of shame they associate with accessing academic support, including the Writing Centre.
- Many feel their English proficiency is not strong enough for academics at SMU
- Support for students with questions/problems with their major declaration.
- Social isolation remains, even after adjustment phase of culture shock. Canadian peers seem to have very different interests, and are passionate about issues for which the Chinese students lack background or are able to connect to life in China. This is especially around issues of equality and social justice.
- After arrival, students become aware they lack a general frame of reference or context for issues grounding their area of study. The "Western" approach seems alien, and people seem to "think differently" here. How can the "inner lives" of these two cultures be so fundamentally different?
- There is no major event on campus to celebrate Chinese culture

### Comments and Suggestions

- Could every student be assigned to a "major mentor"? Could there be, for example, a designated IDST Mentor and a Psychology Mentor?
- Other teaching faculty at SMU have a weekly drop-in (following the example of Dr. O'Malley's class at BNUZ), where students could come for advice, work on homework and assignments, etc.
- Compile a list of social media groups for student to join (e.g. Chinese Student Assn, Speak Up, International Students, SMUSA etc)
- Help spread the word about Int'l Student activities and events on campus
- Work on more ideas to help new students build self-confidence and get involved in social activities. New students need to learn to be more assertive.
- BNUZ students could lead in the organization of a Chinese cultural festival at SMU



**Safe Landing**  
for International Students

