

## ***Studenting S2E4: Finding Community as an International Student (Transcript)***

*Guests:* Aditi Singhal (Communications Assistant at ISS), Emily Love (Manager of Student Programming and Communications at ISS)

*Host:* Rosa

**ROSA:** Hi Aditi and Emily, would you guys be able to introduce yourselves and tell us a little bit about your position and international student services?

**ADITI:** I could start. I'm Aditi, I'm from India and I work as a communications assistant at ISS. I also study at McGill, so I'm studying psychology. My pronouns are she and her. And yes, that's a bit about me. Emily?

**EMILY:** I'm Emily Love. I'm the manager of student programming and communications at International Student Services since 2018. I use she and her pronouns, and I did my undergrad and grad at McGill. And because I had so many international friends at the time, I ended up working abroad for about eleven years and then I came back and here I am.

**ROSA:** Would you be able to tell us about some resources or events that are offered through international student services and other ways that international students can navigate building a community on campus at McGill?

**EMILY:** Sure. So I'm going to start that and then, Aditi, if you want to add more information by all means. So, ISS, we reach out to students the minute that they've accepted their offer to McGill. So we offer a series of pre-arrival webinars, they include immigration essentials, there's a welcome to McGill and Montreal life. We offer another webinar on accessing health care in Quebec, and in the winter we do a 'Winter 101 introduction to winter,' and in the summer we do a 'Canada 101' webinar. There's also a webinar for students who are bringing families.

Then also once they've been accepted., in 2020, when the pandemic hit, we launched a first friend program where we matched international students – and Canadian students as well – based on their level and their program and their time zone with another new student. This helped especially international students with issues like immigration in terms of visa offices being closed or biometrics, trying to get biometrics. So it certainly helped students sort of find an initial partner, a friend in their region, potentially.

We also have the buddy program, which Aditi administers, where we match new students with an upper year student prior to beginning the semester, and many of these new students go on to become buddy volunteers as well. It's also a great way to grow your co-curricular record. And we've had buddies be as little or as much involved; we've had a marriage, we've had a maid of honor at her best friend and former buddy's wedding. We also have an international student orientation, and we've offered foodie walking "bite sized" tours. We're hoping to offer some

meet and greets again this winter and next fall, and some online programming as well. Aditi, do you have anything more to add?

**ADITI:** Yes, exactly. Just adding on to what Emily said, throughout the month of September we did our bite sized tours, our foodie walking tours, and they were a way basically to ease the transition to life in Montreal for people who were probably visiting the city for the first time. I'd also like to add how ISS tries to reach out to international students.

So we have our monthly newsletters going on and especially our monthly newsletters for August, September and January, where we try to tell students what's going to come up in terms of classes beginning, in terms of immigration status related things, and also fun things to do in Montreal. So once they come here, they have a sense of what they can expect. Also, we have our ISS social media programming.

I'll specifically mention our Facebook programming, where we have days when we promote events and programming that's going on inside the ISS and also at other places and organizations that can be relevant and important for international students. We have "immigration tip Tuesdays," we have "wellness Wednesdays," we have "fun Fridays" where we highlight some fun things, again, going on around Montreal and what people can do over the weekend. So these are also some things that we do.

**ROSA:** Those sound like great programs and it sounds like a lot of fun, and as a current student, I also feel like these are great ways to kind of get to know other people, get to know Montreal and Canada.

So Aditi, it was mentioned that you are an administrator of the buddy program. I was wondering if you were actually a participant of the buddy program or if you knew anyone who was, like other students. I was wondering what your experience with it was, or if you knew of any experiences other students had and if it helped them kind of connect to the McGill community in a better sense.

**Aditi:** Sure. So, yes, I was in fact a participant of the buddy program in my first year. I was a new student who was matched with an upper student and that student is one of my closest friends today. So I can say that the buddy program did help me in getting connected with other people on campus. We also have testimonies from students because we send out feedback surveys at the end of every semester to both our volunteers and our new student participants in the program, so they can provide us feedback about the program and also their experience. So we've heard all sorts of positive things and also areas of improvement, and this is how I feel the program can help students feel connected to the McGill community.

Especially with our volunteers, what we do is we have a mandatory training where we go over the dynamics of intercultural communication, and where there are on and off campus resources, and making good referrals. So all these are really meant to equip our volunteers to

provide a helping hand, you know, to the new students in their first year and create a safer space for them so that they feel more connected to the community.

We also have four mandatory milestones that are designed in a way that keeps the buddies in touch with the new students throughout the semester. So for the past year, we've made it a bit flexible in terms of what kind of connection students can have. It could be virtual or in-person, depending upon what's comfortable and what's allowed by the government regulations. So through the means of the program, we've been trying our best to have students reach out to us and also find community at the McGill campus.

**ROSA:** So, you've already mentioned how the buddy program kind of gets students a segue into getting resources and referrals at McGill and out of the McGill campus area. I was wondering, for both of you, if you had any resources that could ease the transitions for students when they come to McGill, if you guys had any that you could think of right now that International Student Services offers.

**EMILY:** So as I mentioned at the beginning, the pre-arrival webinars are a nice welcome, if you will, to McGill meeting immigration advisors. There's always an opportunity for the students to connect with each other at the end of the webinars, which can be sometimes quite popular. And as I mentioned, the first friend program and the international student buddy program, it's just a nice way before the semester starts to connect with other students and staff and to learn more about McGill before orientation even. And then again, we have welcome events throughout orientation specifically for international students. Aditi, do you have more to add?

**ADITI:** Yes, I think, for sure! So as I mentioned, through our Facebook programming especially, we do promote a lot of off campus resources, for example, Je Choisis Montreal, webinars, and programming for international students. Also for Anglophone, or English speaking international students – non francophone international students – in Montreal. So that's one thing that comes right off the top of my head.

**EMILY:** Also over the summer, we – well Aditi – posted sort of like a tour of Montreal through our Instagram page. So for students getting ready to come, it was a nice Montreal experience through pictures on Instagram.

**ADITI:** Yes, I discovered many different nooks and corners of Montreal I didn't know through that project, so that was really nice.

**EMILY:** Oh, and if I can add another – just to emphasize again – in the pre-arrival webinars, the Immigration Essentials Workshop with our immigration advising team is hugely popular. We usually have 300 to 500 students that attend each of those webinars, or register, I should say. And what they go over is how to apply for the CAQ, how to apply for the study permit, and all of

the steps involved. Because, I find for a lot of students the idea of immigration it's novel, it's new and it's daunting. Even, you know, for McGill students and McGill professors it's an intimidating process. But the advisors and the advising team here make it accessible and understandable. And so we really encourage new admits to come to these webinars so that they don't feel overwhelmed as they're preparing and planning to come to Montreal in Canada.

**ROSA:** So, to Aditi, I have a question. Being an international student from India, I was wondering what your experience has been like attending McGill as an international student and what are some tips and tricks you have for other international students, coming as a member of international student services, for finding their community and building that community here on campus?

**ADITI:** Sure, yeah, that's a very meaty question. So as an international student – I think from my personal experience, I don't want to speak for all international students – but for me, I face and I feel many concerns and many challenges that other students may not even have to think about. So, for example, the obvious higher tuition fee, or lack of an immediate family doctor, the constant worry about maintaining the legal status in Canada and getting used to the healthcare system and other things – taxation – everything.

So those are some very big, general concerns that always occupy space in my mind. Another major challenge was coming here and getting used to the culture of academics, which is very different from where I come, the teacher-student relationship and the dynamic was also very different. I think especially with regards to this teacher-student dynamic, McGill provided us during the orientation – one of the programs covered this – as to the difference between the Asian teacher-student dynamic and the Western teacher-student dynamic. It was very informative for me, so that's just an example of how different things can be and major adaptations that are involved.

Specifically, with regards to McGill I would say the key is try not to be overwhelmed despite how difficult it can get, because it does get a lot easier! If I go back to my first year self, I would just say, “Don't fret too much, it's going to get easier. You're going to set the milestones and you're going to achieve all of those.” And it gets easier once you start getting the hang of things and you realize all the resources that are there for you, sometimes even a call or even a click away. So my tip would be to have faith in yourself. Try to not let things get the best of you and just make this conscious effort to, you know, get to know the resources that are available, and to reach out.

**ROSA:** That is definitely a tip that I would also tell my first-year self coming in, to have a bit more faith in myself and I'll get more used to things. I was wondering if International Student Services also had any upcoming events for later on in the year that you would want to let students know about, that would help them build community or find a community on campus?

**EMILY:** Well, right now, as COVID has dictated over the last year and a half--two years now--everything is always kind of up in the air. So, we're currently in the process of scheduling our winter term programs and webinars, and just now we got approval to go forward with our winter break club. It is an annual tradition and we have a gingerbread house making contest, and Montreal Tourism comes to talk about all there is to do in Montreal over the winter holiday period.

In terms of events in the spring, again, because of how COVID and the pandemic has dictated the rules and regulations and moving forward and backwards, our in-person events we tend to schedule about a month ahead, but most of our immigration programming and advising is online. That being said, appointments are both online and in-person. In terms of programming that we've done so far in-person, Aditi has led the bite-sized tours, which we are hoping to offer again in January as part of orientation.

I believe we're doing one of the mountain and all the winter activities that happen at the top of the mountain, and then a foodie walking tour that will explore some of the food culture of the plateau area, like the bagels and the chocolate scene and the chocolate history, the food history. And we've heard a lot of great feedback that students who participate in the bite-sized tours end up meeting friends that they continue to develop further lifelong friendships with. It's a nice, informal activity where people literally meet new people at the beginning of the semester, and I find that some of those friendships have a really good lasting potential.

So we'll see what comes up in the spring or the winter semester, depending on weather and regulations. Also traditionally, over the summer, we used to do (pre-COVID) weekly or monthly exploring Montreal groups. So we've done things like the Jazz Festival, the comedy festival, the food trucks. And so again, we'll see what the summer 2022 looks like and hopefully we'll be able to explore the city as a group of international students again. Aditi, you're welcome to add anything that you think is relevant.

**ADITI:** I think you said it all really.

**ROSA:** As a foodie myself these events are very enticing, and I was wondering if these events were strictly reserved for international students or would other McGill students be able to participate?

**EMILY:** So the webinars and the immigration workshops, a Canadian student wouldn't be interested in that because it's simply not relevant to their experience. But the social events, it depends. Traditionally, you know, we like everyone to integrate together. But again, if the numbers are lower, our first priority will be international students. But there are times where people want to bring a friend, and again, if the restrictions in the numbers and capacity enable us to have everyone come, that's fine. I don't like to say no to people coming to our events.

**ADITI:** Yeah, and I will also add to that, from examples from this year's bite-sized tours we did prioritize new first year students. But again, if we had space – and as Emily said, people want to bring friends—and if we have space we can accommodate current international students too.

**EMILY:** And that being said, actually, for orientation in Fall 2021, we invited both cohorts of Fall 2020 and Fall 2021. Especially because of students from Fall 2020 who didn't have the same opportunity to meet students in person. So, we targeted both cohorts.

**ROSA:** That sounds great! I will definitely keep an eye open to see when the next foodie events are from international student services. You both already mentioned the social media campaigns, listservs and Facebook. Would you both be OK with giving a shout out to your social media pages and how students can sign up for them?

**EMILY:** Aditi, you can take the reins on that.

**ADITI:** I think with the newsletters, newsletters are sent out to all international students. And if those newsletters are specifically about orientation, they're sent out to all newly admitted international students. I think with that, the only thing I would say is please check your junk mail box, and right now I guess we have an 'other' inbox and a 'focused' inbox, so please check everything because you will be receiving it you might just not come across it.

For our social media, yes, you can follow us on Instagram I guess we go by ISS McGill. We also have our Facebook page, International Student Services by McGill University. We also have a Facebook group, so this is for all the participants of the International Student Buddy Program, so both volunteers and students are welcome to join this Facebook group. And yeah, we use that Facebook group to promote some of the events and programming that we're doing. And again, the role of the Facebook group is also to foster community within the participants of the buddy program, and they do reach out to each other when they have to.

**ROSA:** So as our final question, I was wondering how international students were able to make a connection and join the communities with the broader student community.

**EMILY:** You know, it's funny, just about a week or two ago we posted the International Students Citizenship Chart and it went pretty viral. There were over 1000 likes and over 100 shares and comments on the McGill Facebook page, and it showed over 150 countries of students that are represented here at McGill with the number of students from each country. And so you saw students in the comments trying to connect with the other students from their countries, you know, "Oh, 186 students represented, where are you?" But unfortunately, our office can't share those emails with people because of strict Quebec confidentiality laws.

But you know, Aditi and I both talked about the buddy program and the first friend program and our social events, the bite-size events, we had a pumpkin carving event in the fall.

And, you know, in the summer I find that we tend to get a group of students who keep coming back and they develop a camaraderie, if you will, by continuing to come to these events over the summer.

I mean, I think what ISS does is we facilitate these events so that people can come and meet new people. Then once people feel like they've made some connections, then students take that and make them their own. Aditi, you're welcome to talk about personal experience or what you've seen by facilitating some of these events.

**ADITI:** Yes. So with regards to the events I'll say by going on the walking tours, I did see there were different dynamics and different tours. Sometimes people were talking to everybody, sometimes people had their favorites and they were talking to them. And recently I was going onto campus and I just saw a duo who were two people who were there on the bite-sized tours and they were walking together and chatting. So I was happy to see that after two months, they're still friends and talking to each other, which was really nice.

I'll also add with the buddy program, we've set the program up in such a way that a buddy volunteer can be matched with up to five new international students. So oftentimes what happens is if all those five new students agree, they often meet up together. So apart from being connected to an upper year volunteer, they're also connected with other new students. And we also had our online socials during the summer where we had different trivia set up, so getting to know Montreal, and I had a few people join in a number of times so they got to know each other too. So we had these monthly socials. And yeah, so those are some personal anecdotes I have seen from the work.

**EMILY:** Can I add two programs that I didn't mention before? We have a program that we administered for about the last four summers, it's the McGill UQAC (University of Quebec at Chicoutimi) French Immersion Program. Aditi is a former participant! And pre-pandemic, and hopefully summer of '22, we're hoping that the program will go back to being in person. Because what happens is, it's a fully funded French immersion program for international students at the undergraduate level and also graduate students in engineering.

And what they would do is they would go to Chicoutimi, they'd stay with the host family and they would take these immersive French courses in the morning, and then they'd do these activities all through the Lac Saint Jean region. Definitely, from the reports that I heard, people absolutely form friendships with each other and other students from across Canada and really improve their French so that they could be able to stay in Quebec if that's what they wish to do after graduation.

Another resource that I failed to mention before, was that we have a local wellness advisor for international students. So for students who may be feeling isolated or, you know, not connecting or maybe stress about immigration experiences they can reach out to her. Her name is Jos Porter, and she does one on one counseling, if you will, or advising students about transitional issues and a number of other topics as well. You can find all the information for how

to sign up and what types of services she offers, and programs as well, through the Student Wellness Hub.

Aditi, I don't know if you wanted to add anything about the McGill UQAC program since you were a former participant.

**ADITI:** Yeah! So with the UQAC program, I was part of the online cohort, so it was a very interesting experience because it was actually very tough. Even the fact that it's not graded or anything, I mean you're just there to learn and not to worry about grades too much. So if you can ignore your grades and actually spend your time learning, it was a pretty immersive experience, even if it was online because we had three hours of daily classes with additional optional cultural activities and fun activities, everything in French. So it was a really nice experience. I would say difficult, tough, but a nice experience.

**ROSA:** That sounds like great tips and great programs. Jos Porter was actually on our Local Wellness Advisor episode last semester, so they were able to tell us a lot of great things about international student services and getting access to resources as well.

Aditi, would you be able to tell students some tips, especially first year students and second year students if it's their first time on campus, how you were able to kind of make friends coming out of COVID, outside of like international student services programs? I know those're often things students are confused or worried about being like, "How do I social network after coming out of COVID? What is McGill like?" And as an upper-year who seems to have great resources and tips, I was wondering if you had any for the first years.

**ADITI:** Yeah, outside of ISS, I would say go to any events or programs organized by the university, be it departments, be it the student societies. Those are like the best and easiest ways to get involved. The only thing is that you need to reach the websites or, you know, those registration links. That's the most you have to do, and you can look out on myInvolvement for these kinds of events. What I like the most about these university-held events is: One, they're usually on or around the campus and you get to meet other students like you who are equally clueless about, you know, making friends and wanting to make friends. And obviously, McGill students, you can also find someone from your country. One event that I went to that was not from ISS, I found a person who came from literally the same apartment that I lived in India. So that was really interesting. So, yeah, finding people like that. I would also say getting involved with student societies. Another tip would be to also reach out to your classmates, through Facebook groups or anything you might find a person that you really connect with and then you can start hanging out with them later on.

You know, Montreal has really great cafes, so if you're going to want to go out for coffee or for brunch, there's a lot to do. So you can find a buddy! It depends, if you want to meet a lot of people you can go to places where there will be a lot of people, but if you just want to have low-

key one or two friends and just hangout I think reaching out to your classmates could be a good way.

**EMILY:** Also, UA, university advancement, they – generally – every summer organize a series of McGill send offs. When they were in person one of our former student workers at ISS, he met his roommate at one of the send offs, and that's a great way to meet people in person. Hopefully they'll be going back to in-person in 2022. So that's another place to meet people from your – they do it regionally or by country, or in the U.S. they do it by city.

**ROSA:** Yeah, that's so cool. It seems like the world is so big, and yet it's actually so small, everyone's kind of interlinked to each other. I think, Aditi, that was like a great comment you made that everyone, every McGill student, is equally clueless and just wants to meet someone new. And so I think those are great tips for first years and second years who might be a bit more intimidated to kind of reach out and make the first gesture to get to know classmates or other people on campus.

I want to thank you both so much for coming on this episode about creating a community for international students. Thank you, and everyone should go follow your social media campaigns, and – if they're international students – look out for your listservs. Thank you both.