Freeman student builds community far from home

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Hailing from Bangalore, India, Keerthana Swamy (MACCT ’25) served as president of the South Asian Graduate Association (SAGA) for the 2024-2025 term.

When Keerthana Swamy (MACCT ’25) arrived on Tulane’s campus as a graduate student in the spring of 2024, it was her first time in New Orleans — and in the United States.

Drawn to Freeman’s small class sizes and high ranking as well as the opportunity to work toward CPA licensure, Swamy had travelled from Bangalore, India, her hometown, to pursue a master’s degree in accounting.

“It was a culture shock,” she recalls. “I didn't know anybody here, I had no family here and I'm the first person from my family to be in the United States.”

To build a community far from her home, Swamy turned to Tulane University's South Asian Graduate Association (SAGA).

Led by students from across the university, SAGA serves graduate students from Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, the Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. Through cultural showcases, networking opportunities, community service projects and informal social events, the organization helps students connect with those who share similar backgrounds.

"Coming to university in the United States is a totally new experience for a lot of international students, and SAGA helps them feel like they truly belong," Swamy says. "It gives them a chance to network and talk to people and share memories from back home."

Swamy originally joined SAGA as a member but was so inspired by the club's mission that she decided to run for the association's presidency. After being elected president for the 2024-2025 term, she worked to create an inclusive community and educate the wider Tulane community about South Asian heritage and traditions.

Although SAGA represents South Asian students, anyone can join regardless of their nationality. "We have a lot of people come and attend the events, even if they're not from a South Asian country," Swamy says. "Tulane students and faculty really want to learn and understand other cultures. They want to be aware and involved."

As president of the 100-member organization, Swamy led initiatives to help SAGA members acclimate to life in the United States. She worked alongside advisors Justin Reid and Alice Popescu from the Office of International Students to develop campus tours and information sessions. She also ran cultural events to celebrate South Asian festivals and hosted social gatherings so SAGA members could get to know one another.

During SAGA's sunset social, for instance, students observing Ramadan were invited to celebrate Eid Al-Fitr by breaking their fast at sunset. During another of SAGA's events, attendees painted diyas, small lamps used in religious ceremonies throughout India.

Swamy says these kinds of cultural events help international students find a sense of place on campus. "International students often feel homesick and miss their festivals and traditions, but events like these help everyone feel welcome," she

says.

Taking on additional responsibilities as a graduate student could be a challenge, but for Swamy, it was worth the extra work.

“Planning events can be kind of hectic because we are all graduate students, and we are all in different departments — some are downtown, some uptown,” she says. “But it is so worth it when the event comes together and everyone's happy and celebrating and enjoying."

“For one social event, we collaborated with the Lavin-Bernick Center to create a game night,” she adds. “We had yard games, Indian food, dancing and karaoke. We even dimmed the lights so that shy members would feel comfortable on the dance floor. Seeing people from different cultures coming together to play and have a competitive spirit was one of my fondest memories.”

Swamy was inspired to pursue a leadership role at SAGA in part because of the warm welcome she received upon her arrival at Tulane. She credits her advisor Guoyong Wu, the Freeman School’s assistant director of graduate education, with helping her adjust to life in New Orleans.

“He really went above and beyond for me, helping me find housing and explaining where my classes would meet,” Swamy says. “That’s what I love about Tulane. People are so hospitable, and they’re so open to helping you find your way around.”

Swamy graduated from the Freeman School on May 16, and her family made the journey from India to New Orleans to see her receive her diploma. It was their first time in the United States.

For Swamy, welcoming her family to the place she’s learned to call home was the best way possible to celebrate her time at the Freeman School.

“My journey at Tulane has been incredible,” she says. “I've grown in so many ways, and I'm so very happy about my decision to come and study here.”