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Camaraderie

SIS has a reputation for toughening up its students, and through this process, many end up being lifelong friends.

Ask any SIS student – no matter if he has spent four weeks or four years in the school – what has struck him most, and his answer will inevitably be the camaraderie.

It comes not just from a small, tight-knit group of students, but also from acts of selfless volunteerism that pervades the school, as undergraduates from different backgrounds pull one another up over a demanding schedule. From the first week in SIS, students find themselves quickly learning to work together with fellow undergraduates in a project-based curriculum that stresses teamwork.

Within three weeks of taking a course on basic Java programming, for example, students are expected to code and produce an online shopping cart. Besides mentoring from instructors and lecturers, SIS undergraduates get additional support by asking fellow students to teach them, as they get their hands dirty with programming code, some for the very first time.



Notes Ernest Cai, an SIS freshman and diploma holder without prior IT knowledge: “Some of us are from a JC or poly where we did not take programming as a course, so it’s a steep learning curve, straight from the start. If not for friends who are here, guiding and helping and basically toughing it out together, I’d have given up.”

Throughout their time at SIS, students are pushed through a demanding schedule that packs in projects that involve both IS and other modules like business, social sciences and economics. This means teams must all row together, or they risk failing to deliver. It is not uncommon to spend late nights in school, and in many cases, spending entire nights with one's project group to complete an assignment.

Serene Ngian, a second year SIS student, recalls sleeping in her sleeping bag several times at one of the school’s study rooms, taking her turn along with her teammates to catch a wink while the project was being completed by her friends overnight. “Some weeks I spend seven days working in school,” she says. “It’s only friends that keep one another going.”



As Year 1 tends to be the toughest time for many SIS newcomers, seniors are always ready to lend a helping hand. The school has formalised peer-to-peer learning, where stronger students, say, in programming, are selected to be mentors for students who need extra training outside class. To hook up, students can simply visit the school website to look up the names of these peer mentors.



Yet, the peer-to-peer learning that breeds such strong comradeship is not just found in a formal setting. Walk around the SIS building, for example, and this spirit of volunteerism is clear for many to see. Says Ernest: “Sometimes, you sit there (at the study area) and a senior will ask you if you are working on a particular course and try to point you in the right direction. The seniors’ advice is the most important. Even as a Year 1 student, you can see the SIS family bond. It’s not superficial – it’s a small school where everyone knows everyone and everyone helps everyone.”

His classmate Wilfred Phua agrees. “It’s like a bunch of guys going through NS, through really tough times. By being through thick and thin together, the bond is special.” It is a bond, SIS students say, that is not easily understood by outsiders. But it is one respected by observers.

Notes second-year SIS student Muhammad Husain: “We’re always wanted by the other students (in joint projects), because we are 24/7, we work hard. I think that’s a good thing.” The bond extends to professors who burn the midnight oil with their students during crunch time. Students often get in touch with professors who stay on late in school, or online, to advise them on projects.

Says second-year student Aiswarya K. R.: “You can see profs online on their MSN at 12 midnight and you can message them to ask them for help if you are stuck with a project. The instructors are very helpful and they also sometimes help us book seminar rooms so we can study in them late in the night,” she adds.



SIS students have a sense of belonging and this comes from the camaraderie that is so much a part of the student culture within the school. Some students have used the phrase “bonds that bind”, which comes from a common experience and from the way they reach out to support one another.

Ties That Bind

Falling in love and finding your best friends on campus are some of the things students find time for, despite the busy schedule at SIS.



When the two of them first met, they were in disagreement. He was arguing that IT didn't matter any more in giving businesses an edge, while she was saying it still did.

From that class discussion during a course in IS101 three years ago, Tay Kang Xun and Olivia Chiu got to know each other so well that they were soon dating. The two are just one of several SIS couples who have found not just good friends and project buddies, but soul mates, in school. It is testament to the fact that, despite the time spent on work, students do find time for a drink at the Ice Cold Beer bar after a gruelling project. Sometimes, they also find the opportunity to fall in love.

In Kang Xun and Olivia's case, they found love way back in Year 1, when they first argued about IT in class. What do they see in one another? Both think the other is smart. "She's very good in her arguments," recalls Kang Xun. Olivia thinks of him just as highly: "He's a walking encyclopaedia... he complements me as I am more issues-based, he is more about substance. And he's very reliable."

The two work regularly on projects, as other SIS students do regularly. Course work, in the form of projects that involve planning, coding and presentation, are the norm in SIS, and Kang Xun and Olivia find ways to juggle their roles in both dating and working relationships. Says Kang Xun: "We find that we can also work together, and we understand each other what to do professionally." Olivia adds: "For example, we have different projects, I'm good at presentation, but in coding, he's better and we give and take."



The two make sure that they do spend time away from talking about schoolwork. A trip to the movies, for example, would involve no talk of school projects. They make sure they do not spend all their time in school as well, so they visit one another's place on weekends for dinner. "Sometimes, we make sure we do not talk about work at all," says Kang Xun.

Ties that bind are very much part of the student life in SIS, a close-knit community where pretty much everyone knows everyone else. Not just for those in love, the school fosters a culture where students end up finding friends that last not just for one project or one term, but sometimes years after. Sometimes, ties are forged through course work. Other times, it is through common interests.

One group of Apple fans in SIS, for example, based their entire final year project (their IS480 course), on an iPhone 3G application that lets users find the nearest bank and its services using the global positioning system.



Says Paul Ng, of Team Kaizen: “We basically came up with the idea because we were all a bunch of Apple fan boys... we wanted to jump on the iPhone hype bandwagon. I wasn't sure at first of everyone's working style, as I had not worked with everyone before this project. I learnt how to adapt to the working style of others.”

It's the kind of bond that stays after one leaves school. SIS alumni Ray Yap likens it to the bonding in National Service, where common hardship ensures a common experience that is not easily forgotten. The business analyst at Shell Marine still meets up with friends from SIS every week or two. “Some of my closest friends are from SIS,” he declares.