



Amici della Cultura Italiana: Passing the Torch in U.S. Universities

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What does it mean to be Amici della Cultura Italiana? For many young people it means being part of a fast-growing network of student-run Italian clubs promoted by the Coccia Foundation, a non-profit organization dedicated to Italian culture

Amici. It's an Italian word that we are all familiar with, translating to "friend" in the English language. For Italians, use of the word amici encompasses various ideals and values: loyalty, respect, love, and even famiglia. So what does it mean to be Amici della Cultura Italiana? For many young people who are currently studying at universities in the United States, it means being part of a fast-growing network of student-run Italian clubs sponsored by the [Coccia Foundation](#) [1], a leading non-profit organization dedicated to Italian culture.

More importantly, these Amici – men and women of a wide variety of ethnicities – are spearheading a movement among students who are committed to preserving the heritage of Italy and its people in America.

Established several years ago by a several students attending [Seton Hall University](#) [2], [Montclair State University](#) [3], and [Fairleigh Dickinson University](#) [4], all in New Jersey, the Amici della Cultura Italiana began as a small social network that brought together young people with a passion for Italian culture. Thanks to the guidance of Coccia Foundation advisors Cavaliere Joseph Coccia Jr., Founder, and Ralph Contini, Executive Board Member, the founding students quickly organized and mobilized other like-minded young people. Since then, the student-centered umbrella organization has expanded to encompass 20 Italian clubs in universities from New Jersey to South Carolina, with seven more clubs slated to join in 2009.

The Amici students take sole responsibility for the management of their clubs, hosting fundraisers, conceiving and executing a wide variety of cultural events, and providing services to those in need within their university communities. One might find these young people learning to make mozzarella in kitchens run by Italian chefs, holding Italian conversation sessions at a crowded table in their favorite trattoria, collecting food items for the less fortunate, participating in races to benefit medical research, acing their latest Italian language exam, or hosting an authentic Italian carnivale celebration.

Over the past three years, almost 300 Amici club members have attended the [National Italian American Foundation](#) [5]'s annual Gala and Convention in Washington, D.C., thanks to financial sponsorship from the Coccia Foundation. The students also aided the organization with a major initiative to collect Italian language, reference, and history books for universities, high schools, and grade schools that lack sufficient supplies.

It seems that there's nothing the Amici clubs can't tackle – they're having a great time doing it and they're often rewarded for their unceasing hard work. Through the Coccia Foundation, many students have had the opportunity to study abroad in Italy and receive scholarships that will allow them to further their education in the field of Italian Studies. In 2008 the Coccia Foundation began a new Sponsored Scholarship program in which families, businesses, and organizations may sponsor an annual \$2,000 scholarship to be presented to a graduate student pursuing Italian Studies at a



university of their choice, which will directly benefit Amici members far into the future. Appropriately, the donors become part of an exclusive group known as Circolo degli Amici.

“We support the Amici financially, through matching funds and scholarships, and sometimes we offer advice in regards to their events and programs. But for the most part, these young adults are doing it all on their own. Their dedication and their great ideas continuously amaze me and aid us in our mission of passing the torch,” says Cav. Joseph Coccia Jr., whose commitment to the Amici network began with the hope of encouraging the creation of strong relationships between American students in the Italian Studies field and strengthening their ties to Italy itself.

While Felix Sergio, a Coccia Foundation Executive Board member and the official liaison between the students and the organization, maintains active communication with each Amici club throughout the school year, Cav. Coccia is debriefed on each group’s activity during meetings held twice per semester. Representatives from each club attend the meetings to report on topics including membership, events, finances, and future plans. The Coccia Foundation also invites guest speakers, faculty, and parents to each meeting, which are held at each Amici club’s home university in turn.

And the best part of these meetings isn’t listening to the students discuss their club’s latest outing or their next big project, it’s discovering the enthusiasm they have for the Italian culture. These Amici are so aptly nicknamed as Italy is La Bella Paese – their loyalty, respect, and love for Italian culture can not be more deeply felt. And the sense of famiglia extended to those who join them, well, it would make our amici across the Atlantic quite proud.

Related Links: <http://www.cocciafoundation.org> [6]

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[1] <http://cocciafoundation.org/>

[2] <http://www.shu.edu>

[3] <http://www.montclair.edu>

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[5] <http://www.niaf.org>

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