

## Dr. Iona Sarieva

The Center for Teaching and Learning Excellence is proud to highlight Dr. Iona Sarieva, whose work in the Bridge Program focuses on guiding international students through both academic and cultural transformation.

Many of her most meaningful teaching moments happen as students adjust to studying in a new language and culture while also navigating the transition to university learning. As their instructor and academic advisor, she describes it as both “an obligation and a privilege to guide them through the uneven path of adjusting to the new cultural environment.” In that process, students reflect not only on the new culture around them, but also on their own culture and identity.

One of Dr. Sarieva’s favorite approaches is encouraging students to connect personal experiences from their home culture with their new cultural observations. Through discussions, presentations, and projects, students align their reflections with those of other international students and with scholarly theories. In doing so, they become what she calls “cultural detectives,” observing, questioning, and reflecting on the world around them. These explorations often lead to many “aha” moments. For Dr. Sarieva, the greatest reward comes later, when former Bridge students return to share their personal and academic achievements, and she sees their confidence grow as they become part of the Saint Leo community.

Her research focuses on the pedagogy of the autonomous learner and on designing teaching strategies that allow students to show their best potential. Recently, she has been exploring ways to guide students in the ethical and meaningful use of AI in their learning, particularly for non-native English speakers developing both language proficiency and digital skills.

Among her proudest accomplishments is leading the Bridge Program to earn a ten-year accreditation from the Commission on English Language Program Accreditation (CEA)—a recognition grounded in research-based pedagogy, strong curriculum design, and collaborative faculty support.

Ultimately, what fills her cup is witnessing the transformation of her students when they “find their voices in a new world.”

Her guiding words reflect the philosophy behind her work:

“Students don’t care how much you know until they know how much you care.”