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Global Community

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Global Community

A record number of international students join the IWU family.

Story by KIM HILL



Xinyi Zhang (far left) and Ruttanun Vilailuck get to know Pam Reece, deputy city manager of the Town of Normal, at the home of Dave '73 and Lis Hiltabrand. (Photo by Marc Featherly)

Welcoming the largest number of first-year international students in IWU history, a cadre of staff and students helped the newcomers acclimate to life on campus.

The incoming Class of 2018 includes 74 international students (compared to 49 last year). Fifty-three of those students are from China. University officials attribute the growth to several reasons, including the growing Chinese middle class; alumnus Adam Guo '10, an International Admissions Representative in China; and the word-of-mouth recruitment of Illinois Wesleyan alumni influencing young people in their personal circles of friends, family and co-workers.

International Student and Scholar Advisor Reenie Bradley leads the way in building confidence and helping calm jitters among the new students. International Student Orientation is the first in a host of programs and activities throughout the academic year. The formal orientation program takes place over five days. This year Bradley was assisted by 14 current international students offering their best 'been there, done that' guidance.

"Our goal in orientation is just to get everyone's confidence up before the Americans arrive," said Bradley, who has worked with international students for 21 years. From mundane but critically important activities such as banking and shopping, to bowling and tasting root beer for the first time, the new students take small steps in adjusting to campus life before tackling classes and homework assignments.

"I think what gets us off on the right foot is that I simply ask for their trust before the students even get here, and in return I'm honest and I ask for their honesty, too," said Bradley. Email exchanges between Bradley and the new students the summer before their arrival helps to answer basic questions, but no matter how much she prepares them ahead of time, the blue skies and the quiet tranquility of IWU's campus are still marvels for those

who have lived their lives in cities with poorer air quality, more noise and hotter temperatures than central Illinois.

“The cultural adjustment is a process, and even though today’s international students are tech-savvy, well-traveled and ready to go compared to students in years past, who showed up with little more than the clothes they traveled in, there is still adjustment,” said Bradley. As the fall semester progresses, Bradley and the first-year international students talk openly and often about the process of adjustment.

“They will get through it, but it has to happen at their pace,” Bradley said. “I think they handle homesickness better than the American students because the international students have been preparing for years. Homesickness can sneak up on the domestic students, who just kind of go off to college without thinking about it very much.

“College is a cultural adjustment for everyone, so when you think about it that way, all of our first-year students, regardless of background, have a lot in common,” Bradley added.

Finding commonality with her classmates was important for Brigitta Jakob ’17, who assisted with this year’s orientation for the new international students. Jakob had been a high school exchange student in Iowa, where she was first introduced to Midwestern friendliness. “When I see a stranger, I am throwing smiles everywhere so I can make as many friends as possible,” said Jakob, a native of Indonesia. “I tell the new students not to just group together all the time with their same nationality. That slows the adjustment process. If I hang out with only the other international students, that doesn’t enrich my knowledge about my surroundings.”

Connecting with the other new international students usually happens first. That was the experience of Analeigh Dao ’16 from Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. Dao recalls the Friday night bowling event during International Student Orientation as the ‘epiphany moment’ when she realized she had much in common with new friends from China, Morocco and Germany.

“We were all so terrible at it,” she said of her group’s first experience hurling a brightly hued, 16-pound resin ball down a wood lane. “We were so bad all we could do was laugh, but it was so much fun. I think it was the first time I realized ‘I am not alone in this’ and I knew I could succeed here.”

To read more about international students and the admissions process, [click here](#).