Global Perspective

New Program Spreads Agriculture’s Roots

By Kimberly Marselas

International transfer students from China Agricultural University meet Testudo at the College of Agriculture and Natural Resources’ Fall Bash. Ten students are participating in the first year of the program, which came together after three years of work by faculty and university administration.

Photo by Edwin Remsberg

Ten students from China will spend the next three semesters learning all they can about topics in agriculture and natural resources, thanks to a fledgling program that enables some of their nation’s best students to earn a University of Maryland degree.

Students in the 2+2 program spend two years studying at China Agricultural University, then transfer to Maryland’s College of Agriculture and Natural Resources for another two years, leading to a bachelor of science.
The result, says Dean Cheng-i Wei, is a program that provides “reciprocal knowledge” benefiting Maryland students and faculty as well as their Chinese counterparts.

Located in Beijing, China Agricultural University, or CAU, is China’s top agriculture school. The idea for a program linking CAU and Maryland began when CAU President Chen Zhangliang met with Maryland President Dan Mote in 2005. A memorandum of understanding outlining the transfer program was drafted, but it never got off the ground. When Wei arrived at Maryland in 2007, he collaborated with Ray Miller, the college’s director of international programs, to make it a reality.

CAU students must earn high marks on China’s national entrance examination for admittance. Those chosen for the Maryland transfer program are handpicked by CAU officials, but before beginning classes here, they must earn admission to the university as any other international student would.

Zhen An, from Henan Province, home of the famous Shaolin temple, says he wanted to study in the United States because it “has the most-developed higher education system.” He knew about Maryland through co-education programs with other schools in China. He doesn’t have specific career plans yet, but hopes to enroll in a doctoral program after earning his degree from Maryland.

“Study is sort of a time consuming journey for me,” he says. “The amazing point of the journey is the uncertainty, even though uncertainty often brings frustration. There are countless X-factors waiting for a foreign student like me.”

The initial cohort arrived last fall, and future groups could be larger. Wei says their presence will help meet university goals to increase the percentage of students from underrepresented groups, provide a more global environment and enable Maryland graduates to have a keen understanding and appreciation of social and cultural differences.

“By attending classes with these 2+2 undergraduate students,” says Wei, “our American students will learn about the Chinese culture, develop international friendships and be exposed to their strict study ethics.”
Ray Stricklin, associate professor of animal science, has visited Beijing and lectured at Chinese universities. In his role as acting assistant dean for academic programs, he helped the Chinese students enroll in their first courses and is part of their faculty support system. Although they are permitted to study in any of the college’s six departments for undergraduates, Stricklin says, most are focusing on agricultural and resource economics, food science and plant science.

Some students have asked Stricklin to exceed the usual 17-credit course load. He drew the line when one student requested 23 credit hours. Participants are, after all, encouraged to become a part of the university community and take advantage of the university’s location.

“In terms of their enthusiasm, it is infectious,” Stricklin says. “They seem to appreciate the opportunities they have here and that really makes one happy to work with them.”

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