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Nashua, Beijing students explore biotechnology

By *TINA FORBES*
Staff Writer

NASHUA - From studying the biotechnology industry at MIT to experiencing an authentic American Chili's, Rivier and Beijing university students are now halfway through a new exchange program hosted by the Nashua university.

"This is the first year we have done the exchange with Beijing. It's going great so far," said Mark Meehan, Rivier professor and associate vice president for global engagement.

The biotechnology course pairs 10 Rivier University and 10 Beijing City University students as they live in dorms, complete lab work and travel from the U.S. to China. Rivier professor Dr. Joel Stake is co-teaching the course with Dr. Liu Yanli, a biotechnology faculty member in Beijing.

The students just completed the course component Stateside, which included excursions to biotechnology facilities at MIT and Harvard, and a little tourism.

The Chinese students and faculty arrived in Nashua on July 12.

"The students went to Boston and did the Freedom Trail, and Legal Seafood. They also went to Chili's, to see American culture," said Meehan.

"Watching them was amazing. They were laughing, talking, using a 'snap chat' application to translate," said Meehan. While some students spoke both Mandarin and English, the translation apps were a big help, he said.

Each group is mixed-gender, though female students dominated nine to one. "It's great to see more women in STEM," said Patricia Garrity, River spokeswoman.

Meehan said the Rivier and Beijing students are majoring in biology and nursing.

"Now they're in China, it's flipped," he said. Students will visit biotechnology companies in China, finish the biotech course, and take in the sights with such as the Great Wall of China and Tiananmen Square.

"We have a really purposeful approach to China as a university. It's one of the leading countries in the world. Students will be working with Chinese nationals and Chinese companies for the rest of their lives," said Meehan.

Meehan brought his expertise as a seasoned international business consultant to the university when he came on board three years ago to help head the new Office of Global Engagement.

The Beijing exchange is the latest program to sprout from that office, which tries to provide students and faculty a global perspective in business, academics and culture.

With a total student population of 2,520, the international student population at the private Catholic university stands at nearly 20 percent with 500 students, and more expected in fall, according to Garrity.

The University of New Hampshire, which has a similar international outreach office, has 485 degree-seeking international students out of a total student body of 14,761, or 3.3 percent.

"Essentially, we facilitate global engagement with Rivier University with student and teaching exchanges, partnerships and speakers," said Meehan.

"Senegal is a big one for teaching trips, and Costa Rica, the U.S. Virgin Islands. For study abroad, we have 11 locations now. We usually have a couple students in Italy, Ireland, Australia, China, all over," he said.

Before the Office of Global Engagement was created, Rivier hosted international students and sent students abroad, but there was no formal channel.

"This is really Sister Paula's vision; she really wanted to see it expand globally," Meehan said of Rivier's President Sister Paula Marie Buley.

Now with an established program, international students have an easier time navigating their way to Rivier, and Rivier students can go abroad to study and take internships.

"International students are attracted to New England because it's synonymous with higher education. They also know Boston, and there are strong international communities in Nashua," Meehan said.

International students have internship opportunities here too, such as from local technology companies, he said.

"We're really beyond institutional relationships. The Rivier students are now seeing China with their Chinese friends. This is what education is supposed to be; not just in a classroom, but experiential learning. They're learning about other cultures with students from other cultures. It's an adventure," he said.

Meanwhile in Nashua, Rivier now has a cricket team comprised of Indian, Bangladeshi and American students.

Later this summer, Meehan will MC the Indian Independence Day celebration in Nashua on August 15.

And as the city prepares to welcome up to 50 Southeast Asian refugees this fall, Meehan has been in touch with the refugee placement agency to offer Rivier's help.

"Nashua is a great city, and a great city needs a great university. As Nashua grows and connects and globalizes, Rivier is a part of that," said Meehan.

Tina Forbes can be reached at 594- 6402, tforbes@nashuatelegraph.com or @Telegraph_TinaF.

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