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Rivier students recount Chinese exchange

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NASHUA - After returning from Beijing, Rivier University students said the new global exchange program gave them new career goals that would take them beyond America's borders.

The summer course melded American and Chinese approaches to teaching biotechnology by hosting the first half of the class in New England and the remainder in China.

Biology majors Kristin Perry, 19, and Dora Deab, 24, were among the 10 American students involved in the program.

"It really opened my eyes to different cultures," said Perry. After the experience, she said she's interested in a career that could take her abroad.

Deab said a lot of the big biotech companies are in China. "So it would be great to start working there, but it is a really tough field to get into."

Through Rivier, the course paired 10 American students and 10 Beijing City University students, who lived in dorms, completed lab work and traveled from the U.S. to China.

Rivier professor Dr. Joel Stake led the course with Dr. Liu Yanli, a biotechnology faculty member in Beijing.

The Chinese students spent time in Nashua first, arriving July 12. They completed the course component stateside, which included excursions to biotechnology facilities at MIT and Harvard, and a little tourism. Deab said the students really enjoyed the biotech company in Cambridge called New England Bio Labs.

While Rivier students wanted to take their guests to the White Mountains, plans were scrapped because of the timing of Bike Week. Instead, Deab said they went to the Merrimack Outlet Malls.

"They went shopping for like eight hours," she said. "They really liked Boston too. They went to Faneuil Hall."

Deab said while touring lab facilities, faculty from Beijing used the American labs to inform a remodel back home. "The headmaster of the school program was writing down lists of machines they'd like to have in school, and taking pictures."

Toward the end of July, the roles were reversed and all 20 students went to Beijing where the Chinese students showed the Americans how they operate.

Deab said what surprised her most was how they were received. "They were all very welcoming and very open to us," she said.

The culture within the lab took some adjusting though. "They have different procedures. They don't use gloves, they don't use masks, nothing like that," said Perry. "They sterilize with newspaper, and we sterilize with reusable towels. They use newspapers because they recycle them."

In terms of tourism, Beijing students organized excursions for the group to the Great Wall of China, Tienanmen Square, botanical gardens and a traditional tea ceremony.

"I loved the botanical gardens. I loved the Great Wall too, but it wasn't what I expected at all," said Deab, explaining that particular trip emphasized the difference in attitudes toward personal space and privacy.

"I found it interesting, I found out a lot about their culture," said Perry.

The two said the language barrier wasn't too bad, and that they picked up a little Chinese.

Some of the Beijing students made bracelets for Deab and Perry while they were together.

"It was a very emotional sendoff when we left. We definitely made some lifelong friends," said Perry.

The students are able to stay in touch using an app called WeChat, one of the most popular messaging apps in China with 600 million users.

Now preparing to go back to class at Rivier Sept. 8, the students said they might try to plan another academic adventure abroad through the university's global engagement department.

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