

BRIDGING THE MILES: Fostering Growth through Academic and Cultural Exchange

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Students and faculty from Beijing City University arrived at Rivier University in early July 2015 to take part in the first half of Integrative Biotechnology, an applied biotechnology course team-taught by faculty members from both institutions. The result of a partnership established in summer 2014, this course combined students from both universities and was taught on both continents.

“Our alliance with Beijing City University, a leading university in Chinese biotechnology education and research, enables students and faculty from both institutions to experience our rich, vibrant cultures and to live and learn alongside their peers in the United States and China,” says Sister Paula Marie Buley, IHM, President.

The exchange partnered ten Rivier students with ten Beijing City students—teaming up in the lab, visiting biotech firms, rooming together in the dorms, and gaining insight into American culture and points of view on biotechnology. All the Chinese students spoke some English, but only one American student spoke Chinese.” The students used Web-based translation applications to help bridge communication gaps and quickly became friends.

Rivier’s Integrative Biotechnology course components included several lab experiments involving DNA barcoding for several species of fish and GMO (genetically modified organisms) food testing. Students presented their lab results and discussed technological adaptations to understand how their research might be applied to global business ventures. Learning outside the classroom included visits to NE Biolabs in Massachusetts, the MIT Koch Institute for Cancer Research, and Boston cultural and tourist sites.

At the end of the first week, the entire group traveled to Beijing for the second half of the course. The 15-hour flight from Newark to Beijing was a learning experience in itself; this was the first international trip for many of the Rivier students.

In Beijing, Dr. Liu Yanli instructed the students, who spent another week working in cross-cultural lab teams, visiting Chinese biotech companies and exploring biotechnology from the Chinese perspective.

While in China, the class visited an international business incubator, an organization that encourages and supports innovation. Entrepreneurs can pitch, research, and start new businesses with the organization’s resources and backing. “Chinese students are very focused and rules-oriented,” says Rivier Assistant Professor and Director of the Biotechnology Program Dr. Mary Stewart. “Our exchange exposes Chinese students to America’s very creative and entrepreneurial spirit—something China is working to more fully cultivate within their culture.”

Rivier students returned from China with a new perspective and appreciation for their U.S. circumstances and educational experience. They cited greater freedoms in social and educational settings, greater time efficiencies through modern conveniences like washing machines and pre-kitted lab materials to maximize in-class learning.

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Each student gained new insight. Dora Deab '19 shares, "The Chinese were so open and excited to learn about America." "They were very hospitable to us," adds Samantha Holmes '17. "It was a great experience." Jacqueline Deleon '16 notes, "There was a lot of beauty in China—from the building architecture in Beijing to the plentiful roses on the university's inner-city campus to the colorful and artful presentation of their food dishes." Taking in the full experience, Marissa Drouman '17 says, "I learned that the Chinese dream is to have the American dream."

"The exchanges and dialogue between Rivier University and Beijing City University communities focused on issues that greatly impact both of our societies," says Dr. Stewart. "These experiences helped inform and develop students' skill sets and cultural competency."

A shared outcome among students is the desire for more global engagement opportunities and to travel more so they can gain an understanding of other cultures. "It was just two-and-a-half weeks, but we all got so close," says Deleon. These Rivier students are still in contact with their Beijing City University friends—relationships they hope will last their lifetimes. ■