Student ambassadors travel to China, as part of “Pitt to You” program

As the start of the school year approaches, most incoming students are preparing to make new friends, adjust to a new roommate, and manage their newfound freedom. For incoming international students, however, the transition to college life is much more daunting. They must adapt to a new culture, become more proficient in a new language, and overcome the homesickness that comes with being so far away from all that is familiar.

In an effort to ease such a transition and to instill an early sense of belonging among incoming international students, the University of Pittsburgh launched the “Pitt to You” program this past summer. Through the program, 11 current Pitt students served as “ambassadors,” traveling to Beijing and Shanghai, China to welcome new students to the Pitt community. Student ambassadors were joined by several University staff members, including Provost Patricia E. Beeson, Ariel Armony, director of the University Center for International Studies (UCIS), Sara Jones, assistant director of the Office of International Services, Sarah Popovich, program manager in the Office of Cross Cultural and Leadership Development, and Eddie Macham, area coordinator in the Office of Residence Life.

“I hope that, as a result of the ‘Pitt to You’ program, Chinese students will feel that Pitt has already invested in their success,” said Popovich. “I hope that these students will have some peace of mind that, when they get to campus, there will be people they know, and relationships they can count on.”

In each city, the Pitt to You program hosted special alumni receptions to facilitate connections among incoming students, current students, Pitt alumni, and University administrators. The Distinguished Alumni Reception in Beijing, hosted by Pitt alum and Chinese business executive Frank Ning, served as the marquee event of the trip. The event, held at Ning’s W Hotel, featured remarks from Ning and Provost Beeson.

In both Beijing and Shanghai, student ambassadors and University staff facilitated “Welcome to Pitt” workshops for both incoming undergraduate and graduate students to share valuable information and resources that would aid in students’ acclimation to Pitt.

“I’m so happy I was able to play a small role and advise these young students as they enter Pitt this upcoming fall,” said student ambassador Peter Zheng. “What I hope people understand is that international students are just like you and me: students with dreams, students with courage, students with excitement, students with fear. Don’t fear them or alienate them. They’re Pitt Panthers just like us, and being a Panther means creating an inclusive environment where all Panthers can succeed together, no matter our background.”
The trip also offered countless opportunities for students to connect with one another during sightseeing excursions, including Tiananmen Square and the Great Wall of China in Beijing, and the City God Temple and the Zhujiajiao Ancient Water Town in Shanghai.

“On these excursions, incoming Chinese students were tasked with sharing the history of the various sites we visited,” said Macham. “So, while our domestic students were educating their mentees about Pitt, they were also expanding their own horizons and learning more about China.”

Indeed, while the primary focus of the trip was to provide Chinese students with the resources and connections needed to thrive, the trip also offered an important developmental opportunity for domestic students.

“Many of our domestic Pitt students had never left the country, so for them, this was a really eye-opening experience,” said Popovich. “I think traveling in general makes you more resilient. As a result of the trip, I think students are more confident and skilled at problem-solving. And, just as important, they have become more empathetic.”

While the trip proved to be mutually beneficial for both domestic and international students, it is the connections formed between them that will ultimately have the most impact.

“The enthusiasm of the students while we were in China has continued to grow as Orientation draws closer,” said Macham. “We have a scheduled reunion during the first week of classes, along with some exciting events and excursions throughout Pittsburgh. But, most important, our student ambassadors are excited to continue to serve as a support system for our new students.”

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