

Regional

Building bridges with Chinese universities

A number of Chinese scholars are visiting Southern Illinois University Edwardsville as part of an academic exchange program with Chinese universities. To learn more about China in general – and Chinese higher education in particular – I met with them as a group. They are: Lu Zhang from the Computer School at Shenyang Aerospace University, who specializes in network security. The second was Qu Deye, who is an environmental chemist from Northwest Normal University and who specializes in atmospheric pollution and sludge. The third was Bo Liu, from Northwest Normal University in China, who is a specialist in intercultural communication and linguistics. On why she came to SIUE, Zhang was very clear.

"First it is a very rare and a very good chance for me to improve my English, especially my spoken English," she said. "Many Chinese people learn English when they are just like me, 30 years old, so I cannot speak it very well. So I think this is a very good opportunity. And the second reason is I wanted to visit the U.S. and I wanted to know how the western educational system works."

Deye said that there are bridges being built between Chinese universities and SIUE. "I am observing the teaching, the lecturing, the research skills and how the teachers and students communicate," he said. "I have been enjoying the process."

Liu, who has been teaching English in China, expressed her interest in learning more about western styles of teaching.

"I am very curious about the American classroom dynamics, and also I have some colleagues working with me at Northwest Normal University," she said. "They have very good skills and ways to encourage students to get involved in the classroom."

Throughout their personal experiences they have found similarities – but also differences – between the two educational systems. For Deye, the presence of a syllabus is a huge difference.

"The syllabus is a great part of the teaching here," he said. "The professor will introduce the syllabus of the whole semester to the students so the students can know what the course is about and the content of the course and the arrangement of every week so they can tell what every week is about." The use of syllabi is not a common practice



Photo by Michael Nathe

Chinese scholars being interviewed for Segue. From left to right Lu Zhang, Qu Deye, Bo Liu, and Aldemaro Romero Jr.

in Chinese universities.

Another big difference these Chinese scholars found had to do with the classroom atmosphere.

"People can talk freely about anything about the subject and about the course content and the professor will give an opinion on those comments," Liu said.

"This interaction between the students and teachers is great."

Zhang specializes in network security, which, of course, is a major concern around

the world. I asked her if she thinks that we will ever reach the point where we can really secure our networks. Her response was a categorical no.

"The only efficient way I think is to change our passwords frequently," she said, adding that even encryption can be broken by high-level hackers.

Deye works on industrial pollution, which is a very big issue in China.

"Generally, pollution is a very serious problem in China," he said. "The good

news is that we are raising environmental awareness. We have a five-year plan for pollution control. We are focusing on the particulates in the air that can be harmful to human health. For the soil we are focusing on the organic matter and organic heavy metal pollution."

Given the big strides China has made in the last few years, together with their globalization efforts, learning English in that country has become more and more important.

Aldemaro Romero Jr. College Talk

"I think we have the biggest number of English learners in the world in China," said Liu. "Unfortunately, I don't think that our English educators do a very good job because many of the English learners are good at writing and reading, but they cannot speak and they are not good at listening comprehension and communicating with other people. I think that is the big problem with English education in China."

Since their experience at SIUE is the first time any of them had been to the United States, I asked them what has surprised them the most about the country.

"Maybe the self-confidence of the people," Zhang answered. "Everybody looks very self-confident. I think it really encourages me because you know Chinese people are always shy. I will not look at other people's eyes, but here in America everyone will just look at your eyes and smile and they smile very frequently. I think it's very good." Deye added that he is impressed with Americans' attitudes about life.

"On the weekday you usually work very hard, and on the weekend you relax in a park or around the river. You can do anything you like with your kids or your wife. In China you might find it is really difficult to do such things," he explained. "The parks may be filled with many people so you can't find a place to sit and relax. Here you can do a lot of things very differently than in China."

Liu also finds a lot of differences when it comes to the American way of life. "The emotional well-being of people here is quite different," she said. "Here people are always at ease, they are relaxed. I know that everyone has pressure, everyone is stressed, the work, the life, the family, but here you just enjoy your life. It is different."

Aldemaro Romero Jr. is the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. His show, "Segue," can be heard every Sunday morning at 9 a.m. on WSIE, 88.7 FM. He can be reached at College_Arts_Sciences@siue.edu.