U. of I. evolves as it adjusts to huge increase in international students

By Jodi Cohen

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Linda Fotzler bought the Armory House, a private dorm on the University of Illinois campus, in 1973, the year after she graduated.

The students who lived there were predominantly men, and there was quite a bit of partying.

Her current challenge is much different. Instead of controlling parties, Fotzler is encouraging her residents — nearly 70 percent of whom come from abroad — to socialize. She's concerned they're too isolated and not getting what they want: "to interact in a more personal way with American students," she said.

"Everyone is trying to figure out how to adjust to the number of international students," said Fotzler, who is working out details of a scholarship program for U.S. students, with the hope that more will move in and spark interaction. "We are starting to look at it and say, 'What sort of opportunity is there to make this a good situation all around?'"

International students now make up 15.5 percent of undergraduates at the U. of I.'s Urbana-Champaign campus, up from 4 percent a decade ago. Nearly 1 out of every 10 freshmen in this fall's class — more than 600 students — are expected to come from China. Of the 110 residents planning to move into the Armory House, about 60 are from China.
The students will discover an evolving campus and community, one that now includes karaoke clubs and Chinese restaurants where the menus illuminated behind the counter are written only in Chinese. Locals say there are more imported cars on the roads, many of them driven by international students. The campus branch of a local bank employs Mandarin-speaking tellers, and students can join numerous Asian-specific clubs devoted to everything from business to badminton.

The increase in international students has also brought challenges, both academic and social. One of the biggest has been finding ways to bridge the social divide between international and U.S.-born students, and to encourage the international students to enjoy a full college experience, complete with football Saturdays and student clubs.

The new students will arrive with a head start over their predecessors. This summer, U. of I. for the first time sent a team to conduct freshman orientation in three Chinese cities, one of many recent reflections of the university's growing investment in China and the recognition that students need more attention. The university also has added classes and workshops to help students navigate topics ranging from understanding American football to the culture of American-style dating.

What’s more, about 100 new international students in the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences are enrolled in a course on cultural differences, before even setting foot on campus. The two-credit course — "Success in LAS for International Students" — began online in late July and will continue through September with face-to-face meetings.

The class will explore subjects including "the meaning of critical thinking" and "how to successfully step outside of your comfort zone," according to the syllabus.

During that initial class, students were introduced to the concept of culture shock and were given examples of the initial questions they might have about U.S. students' customs — ranging from "Why do they eat so much pizza?" to "Why did they ask how I’m doing if they didn’t even wait around for the answer?" said the professor, Nicole Lamers, who was hired as the university's first international education specialist a year ago.

The course is intended to prepare students "not only for the cultural differences but for the academic differences — giving them the vocabulary to know what to expect," Lamers said. "When international students have a more successful experience, they are more likely to open up and work together, and that allows our domestic students to benefit from that diversity we have."

Two years ago, the U. of I. commissioned a survey to gauge international students' satisfaction. About 3,000 students responded, and the results were eye-opening.

The survey suggested the university was falling short in a couple of key areas. Students did not feel welcomed when they arrived in the U.S., and they were disappointed by the difficulty in making American friends and overall lack of integration into U.S. culture.

While U. of I. had been hosting older graduate students for decades, the younger students have different needs. Most have never been away from home, now thousands of miles away. On top of being homesick, they can find the culture and the language confusing. Simple but necessary tasks, like opening a bank account, can be overwhelming.

And their expectations are high, partly because they are paying about $50,000 a year to live here and go to school, an amount that includes an added university fee for international students.

In response to the concerns, the university has been implementing easy fixes and longer-term solutions. The university plans to welcome students as they land at O'Hare International Airport and funnel them onto charter buses to take
them to campus — at the students’ expense.

The counseling center now has Mandarin-speaking staff, and the career service office is adding an employee specifically to help international students. Tech support plans to hire foreign-language speakers, at least to start the school year.

Even the athletic department is trying to help. The football team last fall offered Football 101: "Learn American football from the Illinois players" and discounted game tickets for international students. They plan to do it again in September.

"There are a lot of adjustments we have to make as a campus, so the onus doesn't all fall on the students," said Nicole Tami, the university's director of International Student Integration, a position added a year ago. "It's been an adjustment all around," including for the faculty, she said.

She provides faculty with a two-page guide on how they can support students, with tips that include turning on English subtitles when showing a video and limiting the use of culturally specific examples such as TV shows or sports jargon. Another guide provides tips on pronouncing common Chinese surnames.

U. of I. professor Gary Xu, a native of Nanjing, China, started teaching at the university in 2001. Back then, the 250 spots in his East Asian literature class were filled almost entirely by American students. Now, about half of the class is international students, most of them Chinese, he said.

He has mixed feelings about the change. "English proficiency is a big issue," he said. "It is getting harder to teach these courses."

Even the incoming students acknowledge that language use is among their biggest concerns. During the recent online class, conducted entirely in English, several students said they were apprehensive about speaking the language — particularly with each other.

"We might feel weird speaking English instead of Chinese in front of other Chinese students," one student said aloud.

"I can't agree more," said another, typing the response in the comment area.

When Xu came to the U.S. as a graduate student, there were so few Asian students that he was forced to make friends from around the world. His best friend came from Cleveland.

He and others said the increase has led to less integration, as international students can more easily fall into a comfort zone with peers from their home country. Chinese students tend to sit together in class, speak Mandarin to each other and eat at the many Asian restaurants on campus, he said.

"There are a large number of students that don't go outside their group," Xu said.

Venus Fan, an Asian-American junior from Palatine, said the perception is that international students want to stay among themselves.

"They kind of want to do their own thing, and the rest of us don't know how to approach them," Fan said. "There is kind of a divide."

Even so, on a recent summer day, Fan was sipping bubble tea with U. of I. senior Rachel Park, who has been in the U.S. since middle school but whose family still lives in South Korea. They met at church.
Three years ago, Zixin "Sunnie" Huang arrived at the U. of I. eager to make American friends.

She chose Illinois, in the Midwest, because she figured there would be fewer international students than on the East or West coasts, and she would be forced to use English. She lived in the Illinois Street Residence Hall, or ISR, her freshman year, a dorm near the engineering school that has been nicknamed International Student Residence Hall.

Now a senior majoring in accounting, Huang started at U. of I. in 2011, the year that undergraduates from China outnumbered Chinese graduate students for the first time.

Huang was intent on fitting in. In her first business school class, she studied her classmates' interactions to better understand how to argue her position.

To make small talk with her Illinois peers, she searched online to find the English names for talk show host Jimmy Fallon and the hit TV show "Gossip Girl." She had watched them at home in Guangzhou, but only knew the names in Chinese.

Early on, she picked up the phrase "bar crawl," though three years later, she still can't understand why students would want to move from bar to bar. She would prefer to play badminton and go to one of the karaoke clubs. Nearly all of her friends are other Chinese students.

"It has been a little bit of a struggle," she said.

U. of I. has dozens of programs around campus to help bridge the divide, said Tami, who works with the international students.

For example, a six-session program called "Interconnect," held last spring, addressed various cultural issues, including dating and the history of New Year's resolutions.

Sophomore Yuwei Liu, who grew up in Chongqing, in southwest China, said she appreciated the help. But she needed more, she said, and decided to join a new student group, the Intercultural Community Development Initiative. The group, started last spring, aims to bring together domestic and international student leaders to promote inclusion and understanding.

"We are aiming to help students get involved in American culture," Liu said over dinner at Illini Tower, the private dorm where she lived freshman year with a Chinese roommate.

Liu is also a member of the Chinese Students and Scholars Association, one of the campus's largest student groups. As the number of Chinese students has increased, the group has added specific clubs for students interested in dance, film and photography. There is a Chinese orchestra and the Chinese News Agency, which reports on campus news relevant to the Chinese community.

Once a week, some students gather for English Corner, an opportunity for international students to practice English with American students. The Armory House plans to test out a "language table," a concept tried by some student clubs and coffee shops where native and non-native speakers can practice English and another language.

To further help international students, the popular public speaking course Communications 101 now has sections reserved for non-native English speakers.

Yueyang Chen, 18, who will be a sophomore this fall, took the course in the spring. About 10 of the 15 students in his section were from China. For the final exam, he successfully delivered a wedding toast.
"I had a great first year here," said Chen, of Shanghai, who said he got involved in many student groups, including an a cappella singing group and the China Studies Forum. "My English improved a lot after coming here because I was trying to hang out with native speakers and was just trying to learn the authentic uses of English."

University officials say most international students overcome homesickness and other obstacles. Fully 97 percent of Chinese freshmen return for their sophomore year, higher than the university's overall retention rate.

The towns of Champaign and Urbana have a combined population of about 124,000 people. Having nearly 10,000 international students, including an influx of about 5,000 students from China over a decade, has had an obvious effect.

By one estimate, international students contributed nearly $1.1 billion to the Illinois economy in 2012-13 through tuition and living expenses, much of that in the Urbana-Champaign area, according to NAFSA: Association of International Educators.

"We have benefited enormously culturally and financially from our international population," said Craig Rost, executive director of the Champaign County Economic Development Corp. "We have a much broader cross-section of high-quality restaurants. We have a lot of housing growth at the higher end. Those factors lead to a good, solid increase in our economy that you wouldn't have if the state school that was here was not international."

Visit Busey Bank, founded in 1868 in Urbana. The campus branch, on commercial Green Street, now has three Mandarin-speaking employees. On a recent day, a teller explained to a student how to change his address on an account, while a personal banker helped a visiting scholar with a deposit. Both conversations were in Mandarin.

"If we see a customer is having communication difficulties, we will approach them and start talking to them in Chinese, and they feel more comfortable," said Yitong Peng, the branch manager, who moved to the U.S. in 2005 from Qiqihar, a city in northeastern China. "For some students, their English is very good — but they do feel more comfortable talking to people from the same country. They say, 'I feel at home here.'"

At the popular One apartment complex near campus, fliers are printed in Chinese and the website has a Chinese-language translation. The maintenance staff has been trained to take off their shoes when entering Chinese students' apartments, following Chinese custom.

About a third of the 1,500 residents at the One North and One South complexes are from China, said Mitchell Smith, a senior vice president at The Scion Group, which owns the properties. The complex employs two Mandarin-speaking student workers to help residents.

"We really started figuring out ways to be more accommodating to international students about four years ago," Smith said. "It's a huge part of the student body. It is no different than saying there are a lot of students in the Greek organizations, so we are going to advertise or focus programming on the Greeks."

Car dealerships also have responded. Ben Quattrone, executive manager of Honda BMW of Champaign, said his dealership has sponsored Chinese student group events and a table tennis tournament, for example, just as they would sponsor a kids' soccer tournament to capture the minivan market. He also has hired Mandarin speakers.

"You fish where the fish are," Quattrone said. "I would say that as students go, it is more likely that an international student buys a BMW than a domestic student."

For some international students, the price of a car here is "a better value" compared with what they would pay for the same car at home, he said, citing the example of an $80,000 car in Champaign selling for $150,000 in China.
While there have been Asian grocery stores and restaurants in Champaign-Urbana for years, students said the food has become more authentic. They joke that the exception is the two-story Panda Express that replaced a bookstore this past spring, directly across from the landmark Alma Mater statue.

Jiahui "Joyce" Yu, a recent graduate, and other students also are capitalizing on the market. Yu, 24, has fledgling businesses to help international students store their belongings and sell their used cars.

But, Yu said, the biggest change since she arrived in 2010 has been "in people's minds."

"When I was a freshman, I really don't think American students would get to know Chinese students. Why bother? ... It wasn't necessary," Yu said. "Now ... international students have become such a big deal. So people's minds are getting more open. That is the biggest change."

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