



## *News Release*

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## **32 Chinese Professors Study Active Learning at Century College**

For the first time ever, Century College this month has welcomed 32 Chinese professors who are here to study active learning strategies and immerse themselves in American culture. The professors all teach English at Soochow University, a highly selective institution in Suzhou, China, that has over 100,000 students and six campuses. The professors speak English fluently, but they have never been to an English-speaking country before. They are learning many English words and phrases such as “you bet,” “make my day” and “pick your brain,” which are not found in the textbooks.

“We are so impressed with the vitality and vigor of your culture,” Quanming Zhu, director and vice chair of the Soochow English Department, told Century faculty and staff this week during the visiting professors’ presentation on China’s architecture, culture and Olympic plans. “Century College is a place where our two cultures meet.”

The professors, who arrived in Minnesota July 10 and will depart Aug. 1, said their daily workshops at Century are teaching them that they can use service learning, group dynamics, research papers and lecture to guide student learning. Prof. Michele Neaton, coordinator of Century’s Center for Teaching and Learning, told the visitors that incorporating more active learning into their classrooms sometimes means

giving shorter lectures and then dividing the class into smaller groups for student-led discussion or projects.

“When teachers act as facilitators of learning, it helps students discover things on their own rather than simply absorbing what someone is telling them,” said Neaton.

During one active-learning workshop, Prof. Rob Jersak pointed out that students’ initial fears and anxiety can be minimized by introducing an ice-breaking activity such as tossing around a “question ball” that is actually a beach ball with questions written all over it. Students who catch the ball have to answer one of the questions on the ball, such as “What famous person would you like to meet?” or “What is your favorite animal?”

The activity was popular with the Chinese professors, who responded with smiles and enthusiasm when they caught the question ball. Their answers, characteristically, were very polite. For example, in response to the question about what famous person they would like to meet, one professor replied, “The president of Century College.”

In addition to the workshops and classroom observations, the visiting professors are also touring the Twin Cities and staying with about a dozen different host families on weekends. Different groups have visited Lumberjack Days, played miniature golf, attended play performances, gone to an evangelical Christian church service, toured the Science Museum, watched the Aquatennial milk-carton boat races, shopped at the Mall of America and checked out area garage sales.

“It’s been an incredible experience for our guests and for the Century community,” said Prof. Tracey Wyman, director of international education at Century. “We have all learned so much. And this is just the beginning.”

Wyman said two top officials from Soochow who visited Century this week, Vice President Ainsun Yin and International Education Director Xin Huang, indicated that they would favor more faculty, staff and student exchanges with Century in the future.

The process of Century being selected for the Chinese professors' visit began last fall when Century English Prof. Xuewei Wu taught at Soochow during her sabbatical leave of absence. Wu said Soochow leaders were impressed with Century's leadership in the area of active learning, and they were pleased with the college's detailed proposal for the visit. It was decided that the Soochow's 32 English professors would spend three weeks in training at Century, and then also visit Harvard University and the University of California Berkeley.

"We are so pleased and honored to host this visit," said Dr. John O'Brien, acting president of Century College. "It is recognition of Century's leadership in active learning, and a wonderful boost for our international education program."

The Chinese professors have been gracious in explaining their culture even as they soaked up American culture. Ling Zhang, a visiting professor with a PhD degree in modern Chinese literature, told a Century group this week that one word is central to Chinese life: harmony. She noted that the Chinese seek interpersonal harmony as well harmony between humanity and nature.

Drinking tea, she said, is important to Chinese people because it allows them to attain an "elegant, refined and serene atmosphere," in addition to improving their health. Tea houses, she noted, are places where people can meet to talk or simply relax.

Calligraphy, or handwriting with a brush and ink, inspires both competitions and performances, Zhang said. "We do not write with brushes any more in daily life, but many learn it and enjoy doing it," she said. "Brush handwriting shapes a virtuous character and creates a mental peace. It also teaches self-discipline and willpower because the training period is long and rigorous."

Prof. Lin Jin said during her presentation that planning for the Olympic Games has captured everyone's attention in China. She showed a slide of older people who have been learning English in community classes for the past four years so that they will be able to welcome people to the games. China also has undertaken a multi-billion-dollar program to improve air quality and eliminate the haze that used to hang over Beijing. As part of this effort, over a million cars have been banned from the roads and the cooking of food over charcoal grills also has been banned. Beijing Stadium, meanwhile, is being equipped with the most advanced technology.

Jin said the two events that are opening up China to the world are the Olympics and "the training program at Century College."



Photo: Quanming Zhu, director and vice chair of the Soochow University English Department, discusses Chinese handwriting with Dr. John O'Brien, acting president of Century College.