The CAU-OSU joint program is a new partnership formed between OSU and China Agricultural University. Chinese students now have the opportunity to study two years in China, and two years at Oklahoma State University. This new cooperation will allow these students to graduate with a bachelor’s degree in agribusiness from both CAU and OSU.

The first group of students arrived in the fall of 2015. Although the students had already completed their English requirements, a major adjustment period was anticipated once the students arrived at OSU. The agricultural economics department and the college took this into consideration and planned accordingly.

The new program needed a strong as well as sensitive hand to guide it as it developed in its early stages. Arakssi Arshakian, the Academic Program Coordinator, and graduate of the OSU International Studies Program, was the perfect candidate. Arakssi was well aware how difficult the first few weeks would be for the new students, with so many lifestyle changes and cultural differences. The CAU-OSU students needed someone to look to for help. It was determined that a mentoring program would be a useful tool to help these students adapt in a quick and effective manner.

Four OSU juniors were selected to become the first CAU-OSU student mentors. The students went through an orientation where they were informed about Chinese culture, as well as the responsibilities they would be taking on in the coming year.

Each mentor group consists of four to six CAU-OSU students. The mentors are responsible for creating innovative activities that expand cultural awareness, assist with educational needs, and integrate American culture with Chinese culture through social activities. When asked the question: “How does becoming a CAU-OSU student mentor expand students personal leadership skills?” Arakssi answered, “The relationship between the mentor and the mentee creates an opportunity for the mentors to practice reliability, responsibility, and maturity while on the road to success at OSU. Mentors are able to improve their communication and interpersonal skills, assess needs in different situations, and react to them. Mentors are able to expand their network and connect with the broader student community. I believe that the more you give, the more you can receive back from the experience. For in helping others, you help yourself along the way too.”

Throughout the year, some of the activities that expanded cultural awareness were attending football games, participating in the international expo, and enjoying a Thanksgiving dinner hosted by Professor Paul Weckler’s family. Although culture was a major part of the mentor program, the program also focuses on education. Group study nights assisted students with learning about typical American study techniques. A visit to the Payne County Fair allowed students to learn about American livestock, and a cooking demonstration taught the students and mentors about traditional Chinese cooking. Social activities throughout the year allowed students to have fun while learning about America. Some of these activities included eating steak at Texas Roadhouse, attending the Aggie-X Tailgate, and participating in homecoming activities.

Weekly reports and meetings kept Arakssi and the mentors in close contact, allowing Arakssi to guide the mentors as they encountered different obstacles. By analyzing the successes and failures of different activities, Arakssi was able to determine what improvements should be made as the program continues to expand and the department prepares for the arrival of the next cohort in fall 2016.