Staff Volunteers Help First-Time Students Make Sooner Connections

The group gathered in an Oklahoma Memorial Union meeting room this spring was a diverse one—a financial aids counselor, a professor, a ROTC instructor, a campus policeman, a news service writer, representatives of dozens of University departments. They had come together for a half-day orientation to brush up on the OU facts and procedures that would enable each of them to serve as a special friend to a group of first-time Sooner students. They were about go beyond their regular duties to become “Sooner Connections.”

Volunteers for this new service to first-time students were asked if they would like to be given a Sooner Connection. Then during the pre-enrollment process, the students and their parents are invited to a 1½ hour session to make their special connections with the University. With the assistance of one of OU’s top senior students, the staff volunteer fields questions, offers survival tips, schedules campus tours, helps the students arrange for special needs, such as housing, financial aid, counseling, etc.

The students and parents are encouraged to ask anything and everything, from where to do their laundry to where to park—or attempt to park—their cars. Most importantly, perhaps, they are given the business card of their Sooner Connection and urged to “Call me if you have a problem—or just want to talk.”

“Whether we like it or not, the University of Oklahoma is a bureaucracy,” Adair says, “and these students will be dealing with bureaucracies for the rest of their lives. We not only want to help them adjust to the University but to teach them how to deal with the system, how to make it work for them, not against them.”

Knowing that a familiar face with a familiar name is just a phone call away when they return to the University in the fall is also a psychological advantage for strangers to the campus. Although each of them will acquire friends in various peer groups and be assigned an academic counselor and, in most cases, a residence counselor, the student affairs staff feels that many students will be reassuring by the presence of a fall-back friend, a University employee who knows the ropes and could run interference if life gets complicated.

“They may never need to call on their Sooner Connections,” Adair says, “and if they do, most of their questions will be pretty routine. But just knowing that someone is there if needed is comforting in itself. We don’t expect our volunteers to know all the answers, but they will know where to help their students find the answers they need.”

The Sooner Connections have been charged with personalizing OU, making certain that new students and their parents leave the campus after pre-enrollment feeling happy, relieved and satisfied with their choice of the University of Oklahoma, where they already have a friend with their special interests at heart.