

UR senior discusses study abroad in D.C. | Campus Times

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Senior Isthier Chaudhury, a Chinese and Chemical Engineering double major who participated in a language intensive program at Peking University in Beijing, attended a panel discussion in Washington D.C. on Wednesday, Jan. 19 to discuss the benefits of studying abroad. The panel featured four students who had studied abroad in China with the help of an assortment of different scholarship programs.

The event coincided with the 10th anniversary of the Gilman Award, a scholarship for college students who are underrepresented in abroad programs to go to non-English speaking destinations, as well as Chinese President Hu Jintao's visit to the U.S. as part of President Obama's efforts to inspire positive exchange with China. The event was part of Obama's new "100,000 Strong" initiative to send one hundred thousand American students to study in China. The day before the event, Chaudhury met with other invited students — all of whom studied in China — at the State Department to be briefed on the event and to share their study abroad experiences.

The next day, before the panel started, Michelle Obama invited Chaudhury and the other Gilman scholars to a small personal reception where she talked about her views on studying abroad.

"She was a surprisingly strong supporter of study abroad," Chaudhury said. "The personal experience made her seem much more like a real person, not just a political figure on TV." He went on to express that the talk was especially powerful since the First Lady was unable to go abroad when she was in college.

The First Lady hosted the panel event at Howard University. Students who had received various scholarships talked about going to China and earning the scholarships that allowed them to do so. While Chaudhury did not talk on the panel, he and the seven other Gilman scholars (two of whom did participate) visited local area schools to talk about their study abroad experiences in China. One of the main messages of the events, which Michelle Obama was intent on emphasizing, was that financial need should not be an issue in students' ability to study abroad.

In addition to the Gilman Award, Critical Language Scholarship, Fulbright Fellowships, and National Defense Scholarships already in place, China is also offering 10,000 scholarships for American students.

Chaudhury expressed appreciation for the Center of Study Abroad on the UR River Campus.

"[The office] was incredibly helpful and supportive with applying for the Gilman — going over essays, and generally helping me get abroad."

Jacqueline Levine, the director of the Center of Study Abroad, expressed optimism for UR Gilman applicants.

"Recently we've been very aggressive with the number of students applying for the Gilman," she said.

Statistically, the Gilman Award is one of the easiest awards to obtain, with 30 percent of applicants receiving some form of financial assistance. According to a press release on the UR website, nearly 50 percent of all UR applicants receive funding from the Gilman fund. Any student eligible for the Federal Pell Grant, a financial aid option available to undergraduate students, is also eligible for the Gilman.

Levine hopes to encourage prospective study abroad students to apply for the Gilman Award.

"Many students can use the Gilman as a stepping-stone to get other awards and grants," Levine said. "the process is not nearly as intimidating as it appears."

UR Gilman scholars have done some great things as part of the "give-back" condition, a stipulation

that requires participants to contribute to their communities upon returning from abroad — some give talks or start projects, among other ventures.

One scholar translated the Study Abroad Office's parent's guide and another has become practically a spokesperson for the Gilman foundation. In addition to meeting Michelle Obama and attending the panel event in DC, Chaudhury also has given a number of talks in Rochester and one in New Hampshire.

Ricciardi is a member of the class of 2013.
