Dear Friends of SoS,

It’s hard to believe we’ve been in China almost a month, and in Jishou almost two weeks! Time really flies during Summer of Service, and we’ve been doing our best to take pictures, walk and hike about the city, and otherwise make the most of our all-too-brief stay in northwestern Hunan.

I’ve had the pleasure of meeting with many of the Princeton teachers during the past week, and we’ve talked about classroom management, class goals, grading—everything we took for granted when we were middle- and high-school students. Teaching is no easy job, and SoS helps us all to realize just how tirelessly many of our teachers and professors have worked on our behalf.

I’ve enjoyed observing the Princeton teachers in the classroom and in our shared apartments, where we grade exams, discuss lesson plans and essays, and map out extracurriculars and other student activities.

I thought I might give you a brief snapshot of our day. In the mornings the teachers rise around 7:00 and prepare for lectures, which last from 8:00 to 10:00. Our program is divided into four levels—the Eagles, Hawks, Owls, and Robins—and each is taught by two or three Princetonians. Precept, a vaunted Princeton institution we’ve imported to Jishou, runs from 10:00 to noon, and teachers then break for lunch with the students or on their own. Teachers also meet with each student once per week in a twenty-minute individual session, structured as a conversation about current events or Chinese and American cultures.

Afternoons are filled with extracurricular activities—including the Cooking, Game, Sport, and Outdoor Clubs—and dinners in town. On Thursdays we host a meal in one of our apartments for all the teachers and some of the students, and on Fridays we screen a movie on the fifth floor of the Computer Science building. Last week was Pirates of the Caribbean, which our students seemed to enjoy a great deal!

As you can see, we’ve been keeping ourselves busy in Jishou, and we want to be sure that each teacher has time to understand the city on his or her own terms. This weekend we’ll travel to Feng Huang, a local tourist city about an hour away, and get a better look at the countryside. The best part about Hunan life is the newness of even the most workaday activities: basketball, tea, and a stroll up the mountain take on new meaning in the context of the region’s rich history and diverse cultures.

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Inside this newsletter you’ll find thoughts and stories from the 2010 SoS team, as well as a sample of student work. I’d like to take this opportunity to thank you once again for your involvement with Summer of Service since its inception in 2006. The program began with a single promising idea, and it has grown into a program with indelible impact with the support of friends like you. We hope you’re enjoying your summer, and we look forward to reaching out again as our Jishou program comes to a close!

All best from northwestern Hunan,

Chris Schlegel
Summer of Service 2010 Staff Leader
Dear Princeton in Asia Family:

Five years ago, a recently returned PiA intern came to our office with a crumpled up napkin and a question: “It’s possible to do so much good with so little. Why aren’t students doing more of this?”

That student was PiA summer intern Rory Truex ’07. The napkin, on which he’d scrawled ideas on the plane ride back from China, was the blueprint of what became the Summer of Service (SOS) program. And the answer to his question, once the overworked PiA staff had had our John F. Kennedy moment, was “More should be done. If not us, then who?”

With Rory’s inspiration, we set out to establish a cultural exchange and English teaching program with Jishou Teachers College in Hunan province. The genesis of the SOS program five years ago was vintage PiA: it served the needs of a rural community in one of China’s neediest provinces; it championed the talents and irrepressible spirit of 10 Princeton undergraduates who were determined to learn about China; it leveraged longstanding PiA relationships in Asia; and it was infused with an entrepreneurial spirit. We were entering largely unchartered waters, with a new model for group summer internships in a place that few foreigners visited. We weren’t sure what to expect, or whether there would be classrooms or students when we arrived. The only things we could be certain of were the chili-pepper spiciness of Hunan food and the need to pack plenty of Pepto Bismol.

We needn’t have worried. The arrival of the SOS-ers was greeted with pomp and circumstance, carried on local TV, and made headlines in the local papers: Extra! Extra! Over the course of the summer, our students signed autographs, were invited to pickup games of basketball where the scoreboard read China v. USA, and were asked to be master of ceremonies at weddings of people they’d never met. In short, they were a local sensation.

Now in its fifth year, the SOS program continues to be sensational for both communities involved. It has served over 55 Princetonians and 500 Jishou Teacher’s College students, with an ever-widening ripple among its participants and their communities. For PiA, it has become a flagship program and an ideal example of what our organization stands for: a service ethos, a commitment to personal diplomacy between the US and China, and a leanly run program that makes an indelible impact on participants in both East and West.

The SOS program could not have been launched without the financial support and succor of the Princeton Class of 1948—whose mentorship, engagement and generosity fueled the pilot program and have nurtured SOS in its first five years. We are incredibly grateful for our partnership with the Class of 1948 and proud of the accomplishments of our SOS participants in the past five years. Together with the Class of 1948, these 55 Princeton students epitomize Princeton University’s intergenerational commitment to service and exemplify the aspirational motto: “Princeton in the nation’s service and in the service of all nations.”

Of course, the success of such a program is best captured in the testimonials of its participants. I hope you enjoy the attached newsletter dispatched from our SOS summer interns in Jishou and find their words as compelling as we do.

We look forward to keeping you posted as we seek to expand the reach of the SOS program to other deserving areas such as rural Cambodia, Vietnam, and Laos. “Scaling up” successful models such as SOS is, I gather, in vogue among not-for-profits these days. And yet it’s the words of Margaret Mead that come to mind when I think of the outsize impact of a small program like SOS, which rests on one-to-one diplomacy and the individual talents of students whose imaginations aren’t limited to what’s possible or what’s been done before:

“A small group of thoughtful people could change the world. Indeed, it’s the only thing that ever has.”

Wishing you all the best from a stunning autumnal Princeton,

Anastasia Vrachnos,
Executive Director
Meet the SoSers

Astrid Stuth
Student leader; Princeton ’11. Astrid was a participant on the 2009 program; she’s put her East Asian studies background to good use in Jishou, where she coordinated (along with her fellow teachers) a beginners’ English-language curriculum. Astrid is a graduate of the United World College in Hong Kong.

Peter Florence
Princeton ’12. Pete is a former football player, a chemistry major, and a proud native of San Francisco (part of “NorCal,” for those who don’t know). Pete has served as a student leader on a Princeton University Pace Center “breakout trip” and has interned for NASA.

Emma Schultz
Princeton ’12. Emma is an engineering student at Princeton who has participated in her major’s “Engineering without Borders” initiative in Africa. She is a proud native of Illinois.

Wendy Lang
Princeton ’13. Before she even entered Princeton, Wendy conducted chemical engineering research in methods of oil extraction from microalgae—although you’ll have to ask her what exactly that means! She is an engineering student at Princeton and one of three freshmen in SoS this year.

Nikolai Kapustin
Princeton ’13. A man of many academic talents hailing from the great state of Wisconsin, Nikolai has served as a lifeguard in his community—and he loves China’s seafood! He is also a cheese connoisseur.

Victor Li
Princeton ’13. Victor emigrated to New Zealand from China at the age of six. He is an avid eight-ball pool player and is also extremely good at ping pong. Victor has volunteered extensively throughout the Auckland, NZ, area.

Megan Telles
Princeton ’11. Megan is a rising senior and a sociology concentrator from northern California. She has worked extensively for Business Today at Princeton, an all-student-run financial magazine, and has traveled throughout Latin America.

Ann Niehaus
Princeton ’12. Ann is a dancer on campus and a Woodrow Wilson School major from New York, NY. She is also a multi-sport athlete, and in her spare time she has helped raise money for an educational project in Afghanistan.

Henry Barmeier
Princeton ’10. Henry is a recent graduate of the Woodrow Wilson School and a Rhodes Scholar. He intends to study policy methods for streamlining the production and encouraging the consumption of sustainable foods.

Emily Gass
Princeton ’12. Emily is a rower extraordinaire who competed at Nationals. She has already been to China and who looks forward to returning! She plans to concentrate in East Asian Studies.
A week ago, I would not have expected to be overwhelmed by the urban bustle of Langmusi, a growing, but still sleepy, town of several thousand in the middle of rural Gansu province.

After spending three days camping out on the surrounding grasslands, however, it was a bit of a shock to be back in the “city.”

Our adventure began on July 6 with a two-hour horse ride from the middle of town into the countryside. For several (myself included) this was the first time sitting on the back of a horse. We arrived at the nomads’ tents a little after noon and collapsed on the yak-dung strewn grass, nursing sore butts, knees, groins and egos. The nomad guides who accompanied us—effortlessly—on the trek probably thought we were a pathetic bunch. All in all, the horseback riding provided a great challenge, and a great dose of humility.

Over the next two days, we got a flavor of life on the Chinese grasslands. The nomads we lived with tended large herds of yaks and goats, putting them out to pasture during the day and keeping them close to the tents at night. The camp was guarded by two ferocious dogs, each trained to attack up to three wolves at a time. At night, we dozed off to yak grunts and the metronomic barking of the dogs.

Our second day on the grasslands was highlighted by a hike up the absurdly steep “eagle mountain.” From the peak at 4,200 meters, it felt like we could look out forever at pristine green hills and white crags jutting out into the clouds. Aside from the occasional sea of sheep or yaks on a distant hillside, the landscape was vacant. Who knew there was so much empty space in a country of 1.3 billion?

During the last two days of the trip, we saw both rain and sunshine. We went over two miles in the sky and descended to sea level. We dwelt with nomads, Tibetan monks, rural Muslims, and Gansu urbanites. We saw buildings composed of bricks and twigs and buildings that were impressively modern. We journeyed amongst yaks, sheep, cows, and attack dogs. The great variety of humans and beasts and sceneries and experiences was remarkable. And they all existed within a few hundred kilometers in a small corner of the Gansu province of China.
After a nice and sweaty nomad camping adventure in Gansu we are finally settling into our teaching positions in Jishou. It was really exciting to set up our apartments and gather in our first smells of this glorious city. Unpacking my bag for a six-week stay and hitting up the local supermarket was so satisfying after two weeks of constant travel.

Our apartments are awesome. Well, I guess any living accommodation compared to nomad tents would seem luxurious but our apartments are actually great. We have an endless supply of purified water, a nicely stocked kitchen, for the most part cooperative wifi, and—and this is a huge deal considering the jishou heat and humidity—air conditioning. As for the city of Jishou, I am pleasantly surprised. I had no idea Jishou would be this big and bustling. The streets are hoppin’ and flowing with delicious treats and goodies.

We even located the Jishou gym—a true gem! There are plenty of weights and lifting machines to advance any athlete or slightly interested gym member to the next level of intense fitness! Okay, so the gym is missing a few nuts and bolts here and there but it certainly gets the job done. To make your gym going experience even better, you will be happy to know that red-faced Americans making their way back to the apartments would be this big and bustling. The streets are hoppin’ and flowing with delicious treats and goodies.

Finally, two cultures unite!

Emily Gass ’12

We've been in Jishou for five days now and I'd like to say that I've temporarily added a supplement to my daily teaching routine. All of the SOS teachers have been doing some kind of afternoon get-to-explore-the-town activity; I've done a good amount of walking around Jishou’s financial district just across the bridge from our apartments. Jishou’s financial center seems to me very much like a huge shopping zone (the foundation of which is an abyss of an underground supermarket) packed with banks, taxi cabs, fruit stands, and of course, people. Yesterday I noticed that I've gotten into the habit of wandering around town during what I'll call Baby Hour for lack of a better direct description. It's a period in Jishou afternoons when it seems that all the parents and babies are done napping at home and take the time to enjoy a nice hour stroll on the streets and in the underground markets, mingling with the watermelons, food stands, and clothing shops.

Wendy Lang ’13

What are couples outfits, you ask? That's a great question! Couples outfits are extremely popular in China and essentially what they entail is that a young couple wears matching clothes on a given day when they are out and about in order to demonstrate their “closeness”.

Couples shirts, shorts, Crocs, hats, etc. The possibilities are endless!

So naturally when the Hawks (Emily, Nikolai, and myself) heard that the Princeton in Jishou Halloween celebration would be this past Friday, we knew almost immediately what our costume of choice would be. We decided to be a three person “couple” of sorts and we purchased matching pink polos, white and blue striped shorts, tangerine orange plastic sandals, and pale pink visors with subtle rhinestone accents; all for 65 rmb or a little over 10 U.S. dollars per person. But then again, you can't really put a price on the bond between the Hawk teachers...

Ann Niehaus ’12
Teaching at Jishou Normal College

As we dive into our third week of teaching in Jishou, I’m struck by how much (and how quickly) time has passed since we, at that time a group of veritable strangers, began planning our English curriculum back in Princeton this spring.

Then, in the midst of writing my junior paper in East Asian Studies, I thought of the smiling students of the Jishou classroom as a distant vision. Now, at the official halfway point of our Summer of Service program, with a ten-day adventure through the mountains of Gansu province and two weeks of teaching under our belts, that vision is tangible.

Thought-provoking lessons help students learn about American culture, make connections to their own experiences, think critically about important issues, and, of course, use English to engage in meaningful discussions. At the beginner level, fellow teacher Wendy and I follow a curriculum of basic practical English (lessons on shopping, visiting the doctor, and filling out job applications, for example) supplemented by simplified versions of selected lessons from the main textbook. Every night, each teaching group gathers to plan activities that encourage students to produce and learn English vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation in fun, inspiring ways.

Unlike the teachers in the other levels, whose students’ comments in class and individual sessions often exhibit a very developed understanding of American culture, I find my motivation for teaching in those moments when I can see that my students have understood a particular grammatical structure or when they succeed in sustaining a conversation in individual session. After all, many of my students have only been studying English a relatively short time! This afternoon in precept, however, during our first real discussion about a topic of societal and cultural importance – changing gender roles in the United States and China – I felt a hint of that deep satisfaction that comes when a student feels empowered to express an idea that challenges the status quo. When I asked one of the male students, Sam, whether he thought he was a “typical” Chinese man, he answered, “No, because I do not like typical Chinese women. I like girls who are strong and independent.”

Pleasantly surprised by his response, I asked the rest of the class if they had any more questions before the end of precept. One of the girls, Trees, raised her hand and asked Sam this bold question: “But what if your wife was stronger and more independent than you? What if she made more money than you? Would you like that?”

Not wanting to appear weak in front of his classmates, Sam said, “No, she shouldn’t make more money than I do. I should be stronger than her.” Although many of the other students, mostly girls, giggled at his response, I could see the frustration in Trees’ eyes.

Moments like that – when I catch a glimpse of the new and changing ideas of the largest generation of students in China’s history – are what made me want to return to Jishou this summer as student leader.

Astrid Stuth ’11
Student Leader

“Thought-provoking lessons help students learn about American culture, make connections to their own experiences, [and] think critically about important issues...”
First of all, I’d like to say that I’m feeling knackered.

For the past few days, my schedule has been crammed with work and activities. I am teaching the highest level English speakers with Pete, and our days are filled with lectures from 8-10am, precepts from 10-noon and then individual sessions from 1.30pm to 3.30pm. After class, I’d either hit the gym or play basketball with my students. The weather here is incredibly hot; my sweat soaks through my entire wardrobe; my originally red shirt now looks pink.

After a long day of work and sports, we would enjoy a delicious and cheaply prepared meal at the local mall for around 2USD (max).

No matter how exhausting teaching is, no matter how devastating the weather is, the time I have spent in Jishou so far has been one of the most rewarding in my life. Teaching students and watching them improve and grow give me intense feelings that I simply can’t describe in words. The discussion in precept sometimes brings tears to my eyes as my students talk about their ambitions and dreams and the difficulties they face. Their maturity and deepness in thought surprise me every single day.

I know that I can definitely improve as a teacher and I will endeavor to not only teach my students but also to learn from them. They are now my greatest inspiration!

Victor Li ‘13
My name is Stella.

I’m a young woman with compassion and dedication and commit to my work completely. I serve as a Program Assistant this summer for the SoS Program. In my role as Program Assistant, I am responsible for assisting with oral translations between our American teachers and administrators and the Chinese College officials. I also completed our written translations (English to Chinese) of the English textbook that was written by our eleven teachers. From 2006 to 2010, I witnessed the process of growing our program. Now I have to say that SoS is a part of my life. It has made me who I am.

NIMEN HAO PRINCETON UNIVERSITY STUDENTS, Do you want to participate in the Summer of Service Program?

The next information session for Princeton University students who are interested in participating in the Summer of Service program will be held on Wednesday, January 12, 2011 on Princeton’s campus.

Interested in receiving future newsletters via email?

As part of our PiA 2.0 initiative, we are compiling a new newsletter subscriber list for alumni and friends of the program who would prefer to receive digital copies of future PiA newsletters.

If you are interested in signing up, please send us an email at pia@princeton.edu indicating so, or stay tuned for a returnable postcard in an upcoming mailing with additional instructions.

“Together with the the Class of 1948, these 55 Princeton students epitomize Princeton University’s commitment to service and exemplify the aspirational motto: ‘Princeton in the nation’s service and in the service of all nations.’”

--Anastasia Vrachnos, Executive Director of Princeton in Asia

The city of Jishou. The campus of Jishou Normal College can be seen on the right.