University strives to increase diversity

Culturally uniform student makeup, changing business world prompt VCSU president to launch effort

Valley City State University President Steve Shirley wants to enhance the university’s diversity during his tenure.

“We’re in the business of preparing our students for the work world,” he said. “More career opportunities will open up for (students) if they’re more familiar about the world and cultures around them.”

When Shirley began his term on July 1, 2008, he thought VCSU’s diversity was typical of similar universities in North Dakota and Minnesota, but he wants to “push the envelope.” “There’s always room for growth,” he said.

Building bonds

Shirley traveled to east-central China last December to analyze opportunities with Chinese universities. He said it was critical for the United States and China, two of the most important nations in the world, to develop an educational relationship.

As a result, earlier this month, 11 Chinese faculty members spent two days at VCSU to see how the school uses technology in its courses.

Shirley’s travels also interested a Chinese student who will be studying at VCSU this fall.

The university has used its long-term relationship with two schools in Mexico to help students working towards Spanish education degrees. Shirley said he want to strengthen that bond.

“There’s a greater and greater need in our region and country as we become more diversified and a tremendous demand for teachers that can teach Spanish,” he said.

He also plans to enhance diversity through study abroad fairs and an international club. He said the first study abroad fair was a success because a student will be attending France this year and others are contemplating studying abroad in the future. The university will host another study abroad fair this fall.

Shirley said 44 international students from 11 different countries attended VCSU last year, which is the university’s largest number of international students in 13 years. He said it’s too early to tell whether that number will increase this year.

‘One big village’

Last fall, international students and professors started the university’s first international organization.
Treasurer Fakira Soumaila said they cooked traditional food on weekends and raised money to go to Bismarck, but flooding delayed the trip to this year.

Soumaila was born in Niger, West Africa, and her family moved to Italy when she was 7. She wanted to study abroad to have new experiences and study medicine in the United States.

She said she thought VCSU was a small school that would help her easily adjust and learn with an average understanding of English.

She said North Dakota isn’t a popular place for international students.

“VCSU has a lot of Canadian students,” she said in an e-mail from Rome, “but when it comes to students from other continents we can be counted on just two hands.”

She said her friends at VCSU appreciate international students because they share their cultures with one another.

“The world is becoming one more big village,” she said. “The more we know about one another, the better we will all live together.”

**Professors, too**

The school has four international faculty members. Science professor Hilde van Gijssel, from the Netherlands, said it’s positive for students to interact with people from other cultures.

“It’s cool to learn what other countries do different and that they function perfectly OK with doing it differently,” she said.

Van Gijssel first came to the U.S. for graduate studies in cell and human biology at the National Institutes of Health in Bethesda, Md. She wanted to teach instead of doing research because of the interaction, and she started at VCSU in 2002 after she was offered her first teaching interview.

“I’ve gained an enormous amount of self-confidence from studying abroad,” she said. “You can put me anywhere and I’m going to be OK.”

Her students don’t realize she’s foreign until she speaks because she doesn’t look any different from other North Dakotans. Once the shock that she’s not North Dakotan wears off, she tells them they can laugh at her during lessons, but at the end they have to tell her what she did that was funny.

“That’s how I learn what I did wrong,” she said.

She said it’s easy for her to teach science because science books around the world are only published in English.

“I’m teaching from the seventh edition now and I had the third edition when I was in school,” she said.

She finds it more difficult to teach math because she learned it in Dutch.

“Explaining it in Dutch would be hard on the students,” she said and laughed.

There are two other foreign professors, from Poland and Japan, in the science and math departments. Van Gijssel said the students enjoy learning from their different techniques.

“I think the students enjoy the diversity in the way we teach, our humor and how we handle ourselves,” she said.