

Sooners



on the Road

BY BILL MOAKLEY

Students are traveling far from campus to connect with alumni, exchanging experiences and creating a closer bond with those who share their devotion to OU.

Mention “road trip” to any group of college students, and it’s a good bet the first idea that comes to mind is not dinner in a business attire listening to the “older crowd” discuss their college days and careers. But a program developed by the University of Oklahoma Alumni Association has OU students opting for such visits over trips to away football games or sunny beaches.

Since 2010, Sooners on the Road has introduced members of the University’s recent student bodies to its alumni and friends across the country who have used their Sooner experience as a path to successful careers in business, arts, energy, journalism, investment, community service and more.

Open to all undergraduates, Sooners on the Road allows participants to apply for a fall or spring trip to such cities as Chicago, Los Angeles, Washington, Dallas, San Antonio, New York, Phoenix, Denver and Miami. Applications are scored on a number of factors, including academic achievement, campus and community involvement, and a written essay. An interview process of top applicants then produces the year’s Sooner travelers. Trips are fully funded by the Alumni Association.

“The purpose of the program is to develop, strengthen and enhance the relationships between former students and current students,” JP Audas, associate vice president for alumni and development, explains. “It provides a unique opportunity for a meaningful exchange between Sooners from varying generations and eras and generates dialogue that centers around a shared love for the University of Oklahoma.”

This common ground forms the basis for cross-generational relationships that, for the students, lead to career advice, industry contacts and an understanding of the broad value of their OU experience. For alumni, it’s an opportunity to reconnect with campus, gain an increased appreciation for today’s student body and pay forward some of the guidance they received as freshly minted graduates.

“Connecting students with alumni is such a necessity and of such a high level of benefit for both populations,” says Courtlyn



Shoate, director of student programs for the Alumni Association. “Students are inspired. Alumni are reaffirmed and called to engagement with their alma mater. The end product is positive and builds up the University of Oklahoma, which is the common bond shared by anyone who is a part of the Sooner family.”

Matt Epting, Class of 2015 and current president of the OU Student Government Association, remembers his trip this past

spring to Phoenix, Tucson, San Diego and Las Vegas for the opportunities it provided to connect with Sooner alumni and learn firsthand about their broad impact.

“There was one alum at the San Diego reception who really stuck out to me. You could tell that he was so thrilled to reconnect with OU and current students,” Epting recalls. “He told us about his time on campus and how OU gave him purpose and a future. One thing he said that I’ll never forget was, ‘OU has given me every day of my life since I graduated.’”

“It was incredible just to see the kind of impact OU has across the nation. I’ve spent the last three years of my life in Norman, so I’m surrounded by crimson and cream, but traveling hundreds of miles away and seeing Sooners succeeding and making an impact on their communities was a really special experience.”

Audas says conversations like the one Epting recalls are the heart of the program.

“Students gain real-life advice and wise counsel from these alumni leaders,” he explains. “They are given an opportunity to ask questions of successful people who have walked the OU path before them. It has also given the students a unique appreciation for what life was like at OU before them and how the University has grown and improved on the foundation of those who came before.”

Alumni who take part in the visits come away with an appreciation for today’s students and their dedication to succeed in their college careers and beyond.

Linda Johnson (’67), a longtime business and civic leader in Arizona who funds scholarships for OU students and supports numerous campus initiatives, has hosted students like Epting in conjunction with the OU Club of Southern Arizona.

“The caliber of students participating in Sooners on the Road is outstanding,” Johnson says. “We met an Interfraternity Council president, student body president, Visitor Center student guide and many students in strong academic majors. Interacting with sophomores, juniors and seniors provides us with varied insights on campus.”

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Alumna Kate Beard, ’11 journ, and her visiting OU classmate Sarah Moore, of Oklahoma City, were on hand to show the traveling Sooners around Chicago. Back row from left, Angel Ochoa, Alumni Association staffer Courtlyn Shoate, Beard, Ray Wolber and Taylor Staab; front, Moore, Brittany Burge and Caitlin Rother.



Sooners in Chicago visit the “Cloud Gate” sculpture in Millennium Park, known locally as “The Bean.” From left are: Alumni Association staffer Courtlyn Shoate, Ray Wolber, Caitlin Rother, Angel Ochoa, Brittany Burge and Taylor Staab.



an Arizona high school graduate headed to OU, offering advice on everything from move-in to the first-year experience.

“You could see the comfort this provided for his dad knowing the caliber of students on

the OU campus,” Johnson recalls.

Shoate notes the value of bringing generations of Sooners together in non-campus environments.

“Alumni across the country get to see a lot of numbers, pictures and articles about what is happening here, but Sooners on the Road allows them to come face-to-face with the source of the outstanding things taking place here,” Shoate believes. “The program also very importantly gives them a face, a name and a story behind why they are or might become engaged with the University through club involvement, student recruitment and supporting the University financially.”

For 2014 graduate Brittany Burge, who is heading to Denver to pursue a career in human relations and took part in the fall 2012 trip to Chicago, the value of Sooners on the Road is in those faces, names and stories as well.

“I went on this trip with a year and a half left in my undergraduate experience,” Burge remembers. “I don’t believe I fully appreciated the strong effect of the Sooner network until the trip. I feel as if I could reach out to any member of the Sooner population in any city for coffee and to ask questions, inquire about

their field, or get to know them as a friendly face in a city full of strangers.

“I really came away hoping that one day I’ll be visited by students as part of the program.”

Bill Moakley, ’87 journ, is director of alumni communications for the University of Oklahoma Alumni Association.



Carrie Secrist, second from right, and her husband, Bill Beach, ’87 bba, (not pictured), met with the Sooner delegation in Chicago to share experiences, insight and advice: from left, Caitlin Rother, Taylor Staab and Brittany Burge.

“For alumni clubs in states geographically distanced from Oklahoma and campus, the opportunity to interact with current students is special. Many alumni seldom get to campus. This [program] provides a glimpse of campus today. For the clubs, which raise funds for scholarships, it’s a reminder of the caliber of today’s students and their needs.”

During the visit with Johnson and the Arizona club, Sooners on the Road students also exchanged contact information with