We were thrilled to get the grant and believe the ELC Mentor Program perfectly reflects the grant’s name and purpose,” Cohen said. “It’s a one-year grant, so we’re concentrating on ways to best represent the benefits and demonstrate the program’s value.”

The International Student Mentorship Program helps international students at MSU’s English Language Center adapt to American university life and succeed in their academic programs. The program matches provisionally admitted international students in advanced language study in the English Language Center with two mentors – one domestic student and one international student who has completed the university language requirement. Together, the three students complete a series of assigned tasks designed to help facilitate social, cultural, and academic adjustment and integration.

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The program attempts to match students who share interests and have the same or similar academic majors. Student mentors must have a record of academic success and involvement in university life as well as strong communication and leadership skills.

“ELC students report understanding university expectations and requirements better and enjoy making connections with people outside the English Language Center. Mentors develop cross-cultural competencies and leadership skills and get to know people they never would have met.”

The ones that do are often the most successful groupings in tackling motivation and isolation issues.”

English Language Center Instructor Alissa Cohen (standing at right) and student mentors meet regularly to discuss what’s working and explore possible solutions to any issues.

Now in its third year, the International Student Mentorship Program, created and run by English Language Center (ELC) Instructor Alissa Cohen, was awarded a Continuing Inclusive Excellence Grant (CIEG) by MSU. The 2015-16 grant marks the first time the Mentorship Program has received CIEG support.
Taerim Kim (center) and her mentors Yufeng Zhang, (left) and Sierra Owen (right) have forged a strong friendship.

The Mentor-Mentee Relationship

MSU senior Economics major Yufeng Zhang has been an ESL International student mentor for three semesters. From Xiamen, a port city on China’s southeast coast, Zhang first heard about the program via e-mail. “The email requested students with experience taking the ESL class to consider being a mentor to assist new freshmen better adapt to life here,” Zhang said. “Having taken the ESL class, I know there is confusion and difficulty taking it, as well as with life here. I also knew I would have appreciated it if someone could have helped me my freshman year. I decided to do it, and thought it would also be a good way to make new friends.”

Domestic mentor Sierra Owen, who is dual enrolled as an undergraduate Marketing senior and a first-year grad student pursuing her master’s in Market Research, said, “I’d gone on two short study abroad programs last summer, one to Scotland and one to Ireland. I spoke the language and found it difficult. Everything was really different, and there was so much I didn’t know. I couldn’t imagine doing that on top of having a language barrier and being a full-time student. I was only on study abroad for a couple of weeks taking classes. They’ll be here for years. So, I’m glad MSU has a program like this.”

When fall term 2015 began, Zhang and Owen were assigned to mentor Supply Chain major Taerim Kim, an international student from Cheongju, Korea, the capital and largest city of North Chungcheong Province. “I had been a high school foreign exchange student in California and went back to Korea and graduated there,” Kim said. “Then I came to MSU. My first semester, I had to take the ESL course and thought it would be a great experience before getting into ‘real’ college life. I signed up and met my two mentors.”

The three do weekly projects, such as finding a club that’s of interest to Kim or going to an MSU student resource center to learn what’s available. The mentor program also helps Kim practice and learn English, as the women must text and speak solely in English. “Yufeng and Sierra have both been here awhile, so they are sort of the MSU experts,” Kim said. “They really help me, and not just as mentor and mentee, we meet and hang out with each other as friends. Sometimes, we’ll talk about what it’s like being an international student and how others regard us. So there’s cultural communications, too.”

Zhang and Owen agree that required weekly group mentor meetings are very helpful. They learn what other mentors are experiencing and the difficulties they have. They become aware of issues they may not have noticed as well as ways to solve various problems. Kim said the same is true for weekly essays that mentees must write and share in class. Essay subjects cover activities mentees do with their mentors, where they went, what they learned, and more. She said it’s also a good check and balance to make sure mentors and mentees engage in the program.