

A leap into cold water? Not for the Welcome Service

The new Welcome Service at the University of Augsburg supports international visiting scholars from abroad with planning and organizing their research stays in the Fugger City.

By David D. Reitsam.

Susanne Graf and Ellen Tietz are doing pioneer work. Since summer 2013, they have become the Welcome Service team at the University of Augsburg, an office within the International Office. There has never before been a comparable position in Augsburg. Both women provide support to roughly 100 international guest researchers from all over the world who come to the university to research and teach.

“We are asked pretty much everything having to deal with a stay here in Augsburg,” says Graf. In order to make the work more manageable for the Welcome Service, visiting scholars are asked to fill out a contact form before they arrive in Germany. After this, scholars receive all of the necessary information, for example about schools and apartments in Augsburg, from Graf und Tietz. “Many international researchers are satisfied with just this information,” says Tietz, “but others need more help.” The German language tends to be the largest obstacle, according to Graf. “Some websites are still only available in German. Information in English, especially about more complicated subjects such as rental contracts or banking, would be very helpful.” The bureaucratic processes are also not clear to all. For example, in order to open a bank account, one needs a permanent residence and a permit to stay in Germany. “That is not clear to all of our guests,” Tietz said, “and for many it’s good to know that there is someone there who can help in the case of an emergency.” Both women profit from their previous personal experiences. “We have both lived abroad and worked in intercultural teams,” explained Tietz, “therefore, many questions and problems are not new to us.”

Graf and Tietz are able to use the academic departments’ experiences in their daily work. “Some secretaries already have a lot of expertise and experience in advising scholars. We would like to bundle this knowledge and make it available to everyone, in order to create and use a synergy effect.”

Graf and Tietz are especially excited to be working in close contact with the university’s award-winning Legal Service Center, which supports the Welcome Service with everything having to do with legal issues, such as residency permits. “The Legal Service Center, which is a collaborative between the International Office and the city’s Foreigner’s Office, is a godsend. All residency permit questions are able to be answered quickly and to the fullest extent,” said Tietz. A Japanese scholar reacted amazed after his experience at the Center: “I registered myself at the Center and applied for my permit to stay. I have often heard that it normally takes a long time to apply for this in Germany and that the people are often unfriendly. But this is not the case in Augsburg.”

Tietz and Graf view the Welcome Service as a connection point between the university, external partners, and guests from all over the world. So far, they have had the most success with this strategy. “The feedback has been very positive,” says Graf, especially in conversations with non-university partners we have noticed that it is useful to have a central contact person at the university. This creates trust.” Opportunities for the guests to get to know each other are also not neglected. The Welcome Service therefore organizes community activities – for example a welcome reception with the vice president for internationalization, a city tour, and excursions.

The Augsburg Welcome Service is, however, not the only one of its kind in Germany. Graf is promoting a special emphasis on internationalization as set by the Free State of Bavaria. The State created the program so that all Bavarian universities are able to guarantee a minimum standard for supporting international visiting scholars. Therefore, new similar offices are being developing at Bavarian universities that were not previously there. “A state-wide network between these offices is being facilitated and encouraged. The exchange of experiences with other offices was especially helpful for the establishment of our Welcome Service,” said Graf.

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