Reaching out for the university

TAMARA MOHANAN KUPPUSAMY finds out about the responsibilities of an SMU ambassador

Of students Amy Wan and Gerson Liew of Singapore Management University (SMU), the best part of being in the university's Ambassador Corps is meeting VIPs, such as Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew and other senior politicians.

"President Nathan was really nice," notes Mr Liew, smiling.

"And Prime Minister Lee — he was really interested in what the school was like; he was very inquisitive," adds Ms Wan.

Both students are currently third-year undergraduates studying business management, although Mr Liew is combining that degree with a second degree in economics.

And both say they enjoy being senior members of the SMU Ambassador Corps, a student organisation that gives students' perspectives to visitors. Ambassadors attend four to five events a semester where they must greet and rub shoulders with the rich and famous as well as the ordinary visitors to the university.

They also give tours of the SMU campus and interact with guests to help them understand the experiences of the students better.

In Ms Wan's words, "We present the school to external stakeholders".

The ambassadors also represent the university at conferences, and may host and organise events of their own. Most of the work is unpaid.

Right now, Ms Wan and Mr Liew are focusing on two Ambassador Corps projects — designing an SMU "hoodie" and working on a trip to help Asian elephants and plant trees in Chiang Mai, Thailand. The idea behind the hoodie is to help SMU students develop a sense of identity, to distinguish their small group of 4,700 students from the hordes of other schools.

According to Ms Wan, there's also a more practical reason — "It is very cold in the library!"

Last year, the two ambassadors were also kept busy organising the university's International Day of Peace ceremony, where they hosted an inter-religious forum. Some ambassadors have also visited schools and National Service centres to talk about undergraduate life.

Entering the Corps is an arduous journey in itself, requiring a "textbook" thick application, a prolonged interview process, an essay, a quiz and "surprise elements" thrown into the mix. Students who make the cut must then don a uniform, attend meetings and undertake assignments — taking precious time out of their study and lecture routines.

Ambassadors are also subject to disciplinary measures if their performance is not up to scratch. "Because we're fronting the school, we really cannot have bad characters within the Corps," explains Mr Liew. "We try and solve as much of the problems internally when things don't go quite to plan."

"We expect our members to be grown-ups right, you did something naughty, we're going to spank you," adds Ms Wan, laughing.

She also notes that no one has been kicked out, and that staff and senior ambassadors solve problems through discussions.

"Because of the prestige attached, there is much responsibility demanded," explains Chua Lee Lin, SMU senior manager of corporate communications.

There is also tough competition in becoming an ambassador. Senior ambassadors like Ms Wan and Mr Liew help select new ambassadors from the ranks of first- and second-year undergraduates, and Ms Wan is preoccupied with the interviews she will be holding this week. She's already sifted through over 100 applications, looking for students with the right balance of extra-curricular activities, strong grades, good character references and "love for the school".

"There's more going on in the interview round than they're bargaining for," she says mysteriously. Mr Liew adds that the applicants will be put under "some kind of duress, to see how they react", although he's frustratingly abstruse. Both went through similarly rigorous tests before they were appointed ambassadors.

So why become an ambassador? For Ms Wan and Mr Liew, volunteering as ambassadors is their way of "giving back to the school". Both said that they have also gained valuable public speaking and networking skills through their work in the Corps — and their experiences clearly can't hurt their resumes either. For Ms Wan, promoting the school has come easy. As she says: "My SMU experience has been much better than I expected — I really appreciated it".