

FOR RELEASE:

IMMEDIATE

Contact: Bob McGill



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YOUNGSTOWN, Ohio - Often the road of the college student is rocky, paved with financial and academic pitfalls, like small rocks that must be skirted or overcome before reaching the goal of a college degree.

But the rocks that American students encounter can seem more like giant boulders to the foreign student who pursues his or her degree in the United States.

During the 1984 Fall Quarter, Youngstown State University had 307 foreign students enrolled in undergraduate and graduate programs. They represented 53 countries, including Nigeria, Gambia, Denmark, Egypt, Taiwan, Romania, Malaysia and Vietnam. They may be financially sponsored by their families, their government, or the United States government.

Susan Khawaja of Boardman, coordinator of Special Student Services, says that most of the students come to the U.S. because of the quality of the education.

"It's the best in the world," she stated. She adds that the students are drawn to YSU because of its solid reputation in the engineering and technical fields.

The waiting area of Khawaja's office often resembles a mini-gathering of the United Nations with faces of varying skin tones and the sounds of foreign tongues. They are there for a multitude of reasons, most of which revolve about the complications of forms and Visas. Some are there to find a sympathetic ear to bend with their frustrations, others, just seeking friendship.

Friendship is a precious commodity to the foreign students. Separated from home and family, they need American friends to close the gap between cultures.

MORE

ADD ONE

How does a foreign student know where to go to buy a used car? Where does one buy groceries? How does one find a place to live?

These students need "deep friendship," Khawaja says. "It requires cultural risks on both sides to reach across that chasm."

Some of the transition is smoothed by the Special Student Services office and community and campus organizations.

One of these organizations, the American Friend Family, involves community families who act as a support line for the foreign student, offering both the host family and the student glimpses of each others cultures.

Another organization, the Volunteer International Peers, helps the students with campus and community orientation.

One of the "helps" at YSU for international students are courses specifically for them to improve their reading and writing skills. Two of these "English as a Second Language" courses will be offered in the Spring Quarter. They are taught by Linda Misja of the English Department, who also works with international students at the university Writing Center.

The burdens of the foreign student are many. They must cross language and cultural barriers, deal with unfamiliar politics and bureaucracies, while contending with finances, schooling, achieving their goals, plus the mechanics of living.

Added to this burden is the pressure of keeping up the grades and graduating within the time allowance of their Visas. Also, these students feel strong obligations as a representative of their nation and their family.

Earning their college degree is a proud matter for these students and is reflected in the importance they attach to the symbols of graduation. Many of them make sure they carefully take their commencement caps and gowns back home as visual proof of their accomplishment.

MORE

One student, who did not trust the mail system to safely deliver his diploma to his home, considered staying in the U.S. an extra three months to personally receive his diploma during graduation exercises. He was finally appeased by a photograph showing him receiving his diploma.

"Many of these students are first in line in their families," Khawaja says. As such, they will return to their countries to help finance the educations of their younger brothers and sisters.

Foreign students are carefully screened before their admission, for their own benefit as well as the university's. When they are admitted, all Visa papers must be in order, they must pass an English proficiency test and be a full-time student.

In addition, they must be in good health, have the academic ability to complete their program, and the financial resources to generate \$8,500 per year. This figure represents the estimated cost of education and minimal living expenses. With few exceptions, students are denied employment by their Visa requirements. Khawaja says this often involves garret-type living and cooking meals on a hot plate in the room.

Nuraishah Othman of Malaysia, a recent transfer student to YSU from a university in Georgia, is a petite girl with a quick and friendly smile. Her first impression when she came to the United States three years ago was that all the people were tall and walked fast.

Othman is sponsored by her government, a privilege she won through many highly competitive tests.

She worries frequently about finances. She does receive some money from her parents, but says, "I'm a big girl. Why should I ask them for money?" She adds, "It is hard to study when you worry about the rent."

For her, language was not a major problem. She spoke English in her homeland, but it was the English of Britain, not of the U.S. The difference in accents does make for some difficulty in understanding.

ADD THREE

And language barriers have produced a few problems. She was rejected by a few engineering schools before she was accepted at YSU because she failed to fill out all the proper forms and papers or didn't meet the deadline requirements.

She likes YSU and the teachers, although she has had difficulty making friends. "Maybe it's because I don't have much courage," she says.

"It's hard for them to trust," she said of the people she has met. She was, however, pleased recently when a local utility company did a service for her without asking to check her credentials.

Othman, a Moslum, is impressed with the open door policy of the American colleges. Her father wanted to attend college in Malaysia but was turned down because he was then in his 30's and beyond the age limit. Frustrated himself, he became determined that each of his six children would be educated.

The advantages to having foreign students on the YSU campus are multiple and work on social, economic and political levels. Both the American and the foreign student are exposed to a culture other than their own.

In a constantly shrinking world, a global perspective is a valuable asset to a student increasingly exposed to dealings with other countries.

"Each student becomes a carrier of culture, not necessarily our own. They are making the world smaller. Each student is like another little knot in a constantly tightening string," Khawaja points out.

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CUTLINE

A youngster is the focus of this group at one of the weekly YSU International Students' coffee hours, which provide opportunity for students, friends and family to meet informally. The on-campus events are sponsored by the Youngstown Federated Women's Clubs, the United Nations Association of Youngstown, working with the YSU Special Student Services.

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(YSU PHOTO BY ELISE CLEARY)