

When home is an ocean away

Foreigners feel 'culture shock'

By Debbie Howlett
Of the Emerald

Most people have been the new kid on the block — and once usually is enough.

One group of "new kids" on this University's block is 1,500-plus students from 72 foreign countries. Many times, says Peter Briggs, director of the international study program, those students experience "new-kid-on-the-block-type feelings."

When foreign students leave their native country to attend school in the United States, they leave behind familiarity for a new-and-different world.

Briggs says the transition is similar to what freshmen experience upon entering the University.

"There is a definite analogy between going from high school to college. Freshmen experience some levels of culture shock," he says.

While "new and different" can cause problems, "new and different" also can present an individual with challenges and rewards.

A chance to study with an outstanding faculty member or in a first-class institution and the chance to see new parts of the world are just two of the reasons students leave their native country.

And those reasons are usually big enough factors to keep a student who's feeling culture shock from returning home before their studies are through.

But culture shock isn't always an obvious thing. "I've never had anybody sit down and say I'm experiencing culture shock," Briggs says. "But research shows that you cannot be in another society for more than one month and not experience some degree of culture shock," he says.

Briggs talks about a "cultural adjustment curve," which measures levels of satisfaction that progress from high to low to high. The U-shape curve outlines the typical reaction for students who are adjusting to a new culture.

But Briggs still can see the signs when something is amiss. One of the surest signs is criticism of a new culture, he says.

"It's common for foreign students to be critical if they're going through missing their country," Briggs says. "Americans have to be careful not to be judgmental of criticism of their culture."

Briggs says talking about those differences can ease that shock.

"To talk about the differences in culture fascinates me," Briggs says. "To get that dialogue going is great."

Briggs says discussion gives the foreign student an

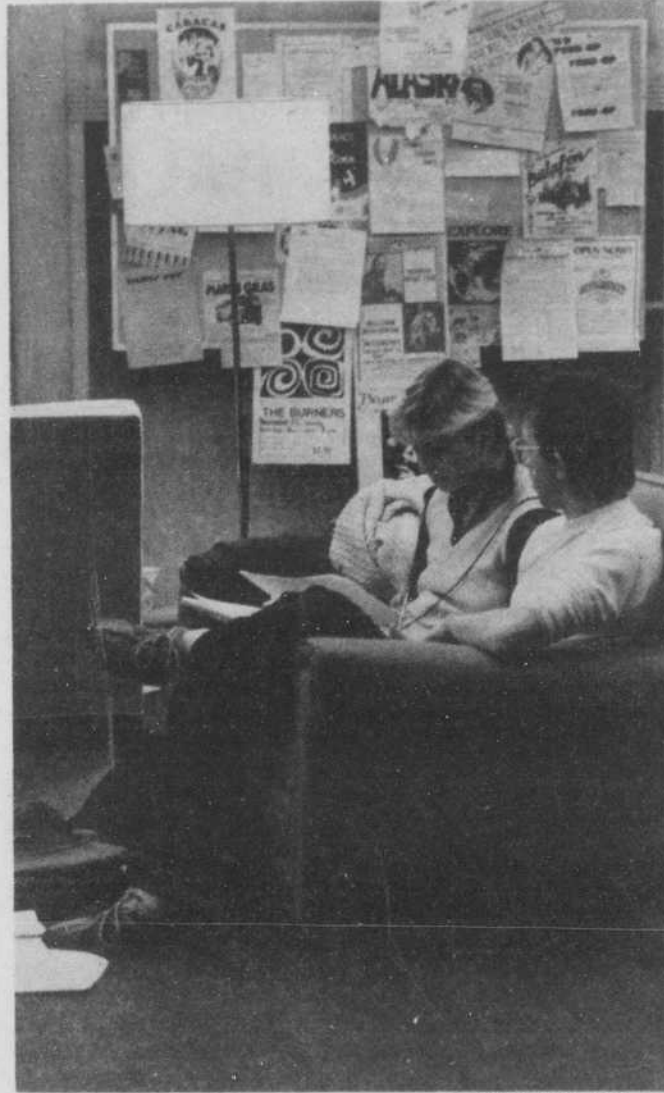


Photo by Mark Pynes

The International Student Lounge affords foreign and American students a quiet place to study or chat.

outlet for frustration and through comparison of the two cultures, students have a better understanding of the differences that cause frustration.

Along with the "ideal" one-on-one interaction, Briggs says he's trying another type of interaction.

"Groups are hard to approach," Briggs says. So rather than bringing students to a group, Briggs is bringing the group to students.

He started a program with a "core" group of about seven foreign students last year who met with other foreign students to try and get them involved.

He hopes to do the same thing this year and after a few "organizational" meetings, Briggs seems confident the group idea will continue.

"How to get that involvement is what I want."

Sometimes... the reverse hits

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Aside from the usual case of culture shock, Caleb Igbalajobi, director of the foreign students organization, says he sees another "problem" among foreign students.

Students finish their education in the United States and don't return to their native country.

Igbalajobi says it's a type of reverse-culture shock.

"You kind of look at your own standard as different. You look at your own society as another culture shock."

Women especially have a tough adjustment to make once they come to the United States. Sometimes returning to the other culture is too difficult.

"Very few females come to American schools, most decide, for one reason or another, to stay home," Igbalajobi says.

"Most of the developing countries have different concepts of women," he says. "But that idea has been changing fast."

An example Igbalajobi uses is education, which he says "is being extended more and more to women."

Igbalajobi knows about adjustment to new cultures and readjustment of going home.

Born in Nigeria, he's been to Britain, France and now, the United States to study. Igbalajobi says the transitions became easier with each move, but they'll always be there to some extent.

Eugene's climate and rainfall is similar to Nigeria's, Igbalajobi says, and that helped to make the transition easier. But Igbalajobi isn't planning to stay in the United States when he completes his doctorate in special education.

"My belief is you should return and use your education in your country."

Foreign students stay because work is easier to find and the "amenities" of the United States are tempting.

"The condition, the standard of living is not so expensive," he says. "And it's a very free society."

"It's my guess, of Africans, that 65 percent go back. Less than 50 percent really want to go back," Igbalajobi says.

Group helps foreign students to adjust

By Denise Waldron
Of the Emerald

Foreign students frustrated by the problems of adapting to a new culture can find help at the Foreign Student Organization, members say.

"Students may have a hard time at first in trying to feel comfortable on campus, especially when they are not familiar with a new culture or the demands that the new academics may make upon them," says Caleb Igbalajobi, director of the ASUO-funded Foreign Student Organization.

The FSO tries to change confused feelings about the University into positive ones, Igbalajobi says.

The organization brings together students from foreign countries and the United States to mold them into one student body, he says.

"Most students have three

foreign students, Igbalajobi says. The FSO also encourages students to start relationships outside of the group, he adds.

Getting involved in University activities is one way to make

"The relationships here compared to the ones at home are a lot more casual," said Peiter Rasmussen, a freshman architecture major from England. "At home I had about

people within the organization, says Eska Chin, a sophomore design major from Thailand. Students tend to date people from their own country or region because they are familiar with dating traditions, she says.

But not all adjustments to Americans and their customs are made as easily.

"The food is terribly different here," Igbalajobi says. "There is a very limited market for the kinds of foreign groceries available here in Eugene. Sometimes it usually takes people up to about six months to be able get used to the food."

"I can't wait till I go home again to be able to go to the bars," Rasmussen says.

'Sometimes it takes people up to about six months to be able to get used to the food.'

main areas that they are uncomfortable with," Igbalajobi says. "These are of adjustments to the new culture, making new friends and perhaps finances."

The FSO's primary function is to provide a meeting place for

new friends.

Americans are friendly, but foreign students must be willing to "meet them halfway and not be afraid to get involved," says Maria Gonzales, a sophomore bio-chemistry major from Italy.

two or three chums that I was terribly fond of and one girl that I dated all the time, but now I have so many friends in the dorm where I live, and they are a mixture of guys and girls."

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