

FSO assists foreign students in adjustment

By Julie Shippen
Of the Emerald

Acquainting foreign students with American life, the University and each other are a few of the many purposes of the Foreign Student Organization.

But because many students new to both the country and campus have language problems or are just unprepared for the culture shock, this task is often easier said than done, says Vijay Balan, who has been involved in the administration of FSO for the past year.

"Many (foreign students) come here knowing very little English," Balan says. "It's very hard for them to converse with Americans. Who wants to sit down and try to understand English not being spoken very well?"

As a result of language barriers, many of these students may avoid mixing with American students and cluster with members of their own nationality instead. "It makes them shy — they revert to being with other (foreign students)," he says.

One example of this problem is the Singaporean sector of students living here, which Balan says lives together in a "whole block of apartments" near cam-

pus. Although doing so may help these students to feel more at-home here, he believes this practice is a less-than-correct approach to studying abroad.

"That's not right," Balan says. "You come to this country to get to know Americans and you want Americans to know that you exist. The whole motive is to get foreigners to know each other, know America."

Another problem that hinders some foreign students in America is a slowness in adapting to the new country's lifestyle, Balan says. Many dilemmas are minor, but some situations this attitude fosters can be more volatile, he adds.

Balan relates one case of the latter where a group of students from the Middle East voiced an objection to the flag of Israel at the opening of International Night in early April of this year. As people of the Middle East do not recognize Israel, these students were simply carrying out their beliefs, he says.

"Many don't want to change when they come here, either," Balan says. A prime example of this are the Indian students who are accustomed to bartering before buying. To not barter in India is either a sign of weakness or an insult, he explains, whereas in America it is just the opposite.

But no matter the background reasons, Balan believes a willingness to learn the different ways is best. "If I come to America, I want to learn American ways and not just completely ostracize myself," he says.

Even those who are willing can have difficulty in adapting, he says. Foreign students from Africa, Asia or South America not only must deal with a new way of thinking, but also with a different environment, Balan says. Whether it's the continuous rainfall they never experienced in their country or the independent, separate nature of America's family structure, students from these three areas in particular find adapting to

American life most difficult, he adds.

Still another side of the international coin are the groups of foreigners who do not wish to be considered as such because "it's like a stigma to be considered foreign," he says. Europeans are most well-known for this, he adds.

"Most Europeans feel they can identify with Americans...since we (Americans) originally came from there (Europe)," he says. "While Americans consider themselves foreigners in Europe, they (Europeans) don't consider themselves foreigners (here)," Balan adds.

As blatant proof of this, Balan points out the absence of special organizations for the German, French, Swedish, etc. students on campus. Thus far, only the Norwegian students have formed a student group, which has been a very recent effort, Balan says. For the most part, European students are hard to get together, he adds.

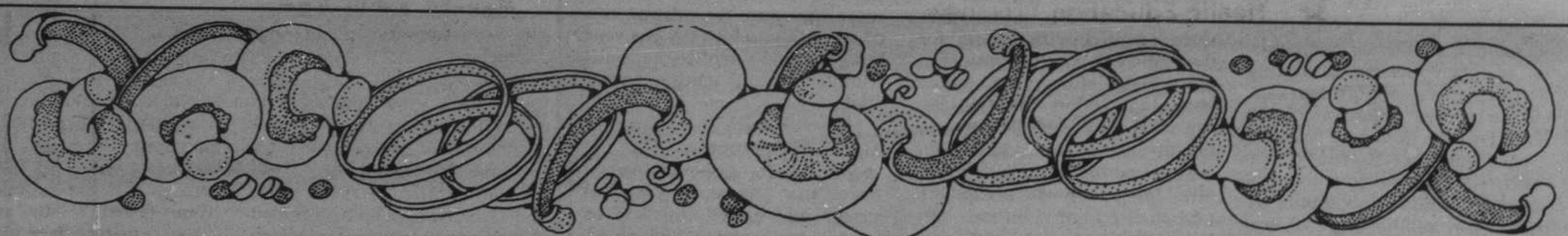
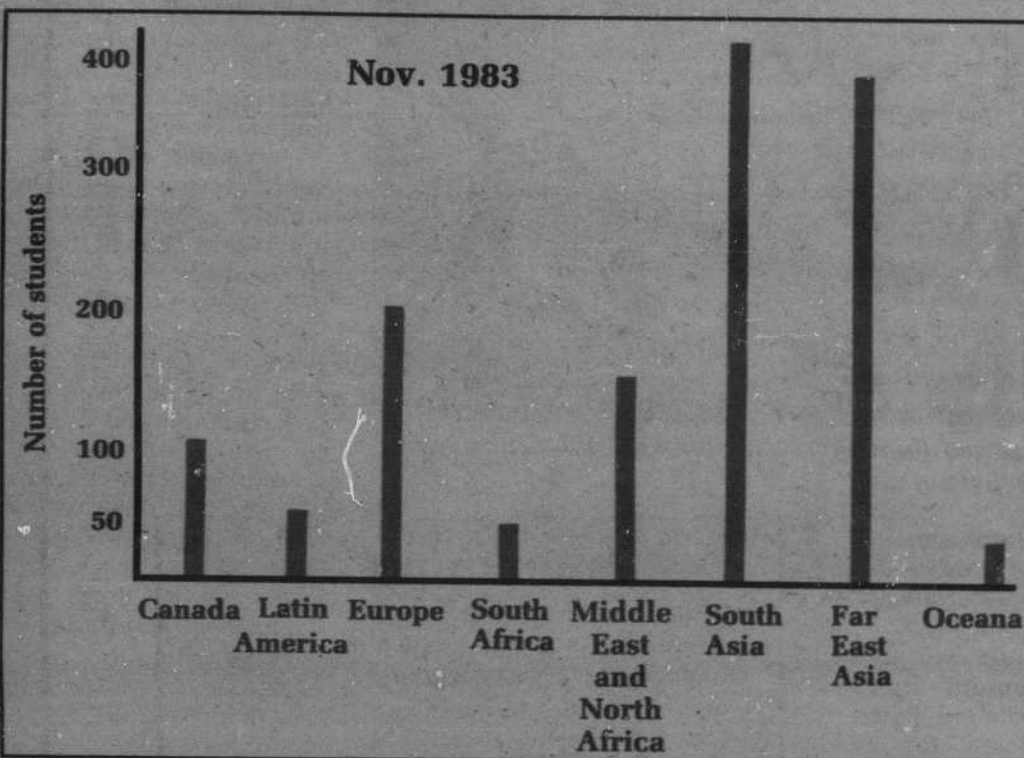
One way that FSO helps foreign students meet each other is at regularly scheduled coffee hours, where Balan originally became interested in the organization. The group also formed the Intercontinental Soccer Cup, which was made up of six countries and created by Balan and his co-director, Alberto Foyo, upon their official addition to FSO.

The organization also sponsored a week-long International Week where many of the 1,200 local students representing 72 countries held slide shows, films, forum discussions and booths with information about their country, he says. Balan hopes the festivities can be expanded from a week- to a month-long event this coming year.

The primary purpose of FSO is to oversee the finances of the dozen foreign student groups on campus, he says. The ASUO office afforded FSO a \$7,400 budget last year to allocate to the different groups, he adds.

The group has its recreational uses, as well. For instance, last year FSO organized an inexpensive bus-trip to Crater Lake, which turned out to be almost too successful as three times the expected number of interested students turned out for the venture, Balan says.

Among the many informal parties the group arranged last year was a "goodbye" party for the graduating foreign students, which Balan says was the least FSO could have done for them. "They paid a lot to go to school here," he adds.

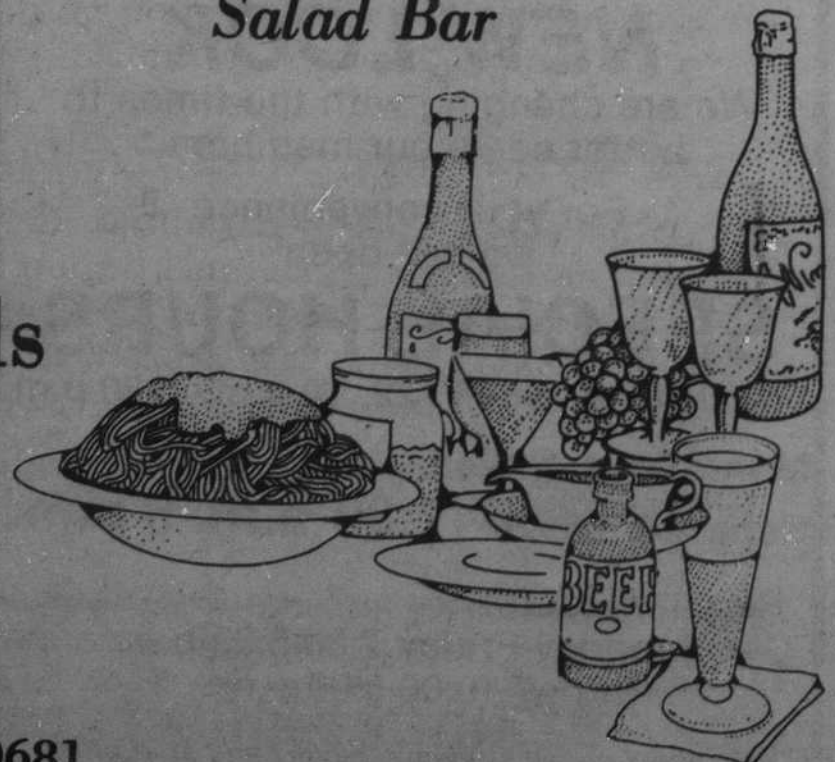


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