

Advisor assimilates new students

■ Magid Shirzadegan guides students toward an understanding of American culture and education

By Yoshiomi Morishita
for the Emerald

International students arriving in the United States to attend the University are welcomed by someone who has been in their place before. Magid Shirzadegan organizes an international student orientation at the beginning of each term.

Shirzadegan, associate director of the Office of International Education and Exchange, has advised University international students for seven and a half years on visa matters, financial issues and academic difficulties.

"The unique differences [between international and U.S.-born students] are understanding the American-style communication in the classroom and in friendship," he said.

In recent years, the University has had the highest percentage of international students compared to all other public universities in the nation, according to a survey by the Institute of International Education. Numbers from the OIEE showed that 1,384 international students from 82 countries were enrolled at the school as of fall 1999.

Shirzadegan said international students choose to come to the U.S. because some want to learn English, an "international language," some want to take advantage of the flexible, integrated educational system and others want to explore American culture.

"I have a lot of similar experiences to international students," Shirzadegan said, explaining that he is the only non-U.S. born adviser among five international student advisers at the OIEE. "They can relate themselves to me."

Shirzadegan, 46, was born and raised in Iran and said as an international student, he was transformed by experiencing "American individualism. Coming here, some of us are running away from the pressure of collectivism."

After attending Georgetown University as an English as a Second Language student in 1977, Shirzadegan earned a master's degree in plant science from the University of Wyoming, and finished his education in 1984 in Germany with a doctorate in ge-



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Magid Shirzadegan has been helping University international students since 1993.

netics.

When he returned to the states to fulfill his post-doctoral work at the University of Michigan, he realized science was not his passion.

"I made a big mistake," Shirzadegan said. "Growing in the culture as I did, you have to study; that's all they told us."

He said he was basing his life decisions on what was good for his country and his family, instead of what was good for him.

"I asked myself for five years, 'What else can I do?'"

Through volunteering at a crisis center to help poor families and runaway youths, he found himself gaining energy from working with people and became determined to serve international students, whom he could "relate to."

He quit his second post-doctoral work at the University of Nevada, and after spending one year as an international center advisor at the University of Michigan, he was hired in January 1993 as an international student advisor at the University.

"He is sincerely interested in counseling international students," said OIEE director Tom Mills, who hired Shirzadegan.

Mills' high opinion of Shirzadegan is echoed by students.

"He treats us not in the relationship between a student and an adviser, but as a person," said Hanayo Ozaki, a sophomore in pre-journalism. Influenced by Shirzadegan, Ozaki said she has been involved in the International

Student Association since last year.

Shirzadegan pointed out that the support system for international students has improved since he was a student 23 years ago. Due to efforts of the NAFSA: Association of International Educators, which works closely with the U.S. government for the sake of students, he said it is easier for international students to consult their international student advisers for help.

Only in the past 40 years, Shirzadegan said, has the advising duty switched from professors to advisers more focused on issues specific to international students.

Despite these supportive attitudes of international student organizations, students say they still sometimes encounter problems.

"The U.S. is very ethnocentric; people are overly focused on our own culture," said Deidre Schuetz, an American student who just graduated with degrees in international studies and Spanish.

Getting past that ethnocentrism should be a fundamental value for all people, Shirzadegan said. He stressed the importance of soul-searching and said, "If you don't know yourself, you cannot get to know others."

"This is a unique opportunity to be with people from all over the world," he said. "Anything you want to know, any stereotypes you have, any questions you have, ask them now. You won't get the chance again."

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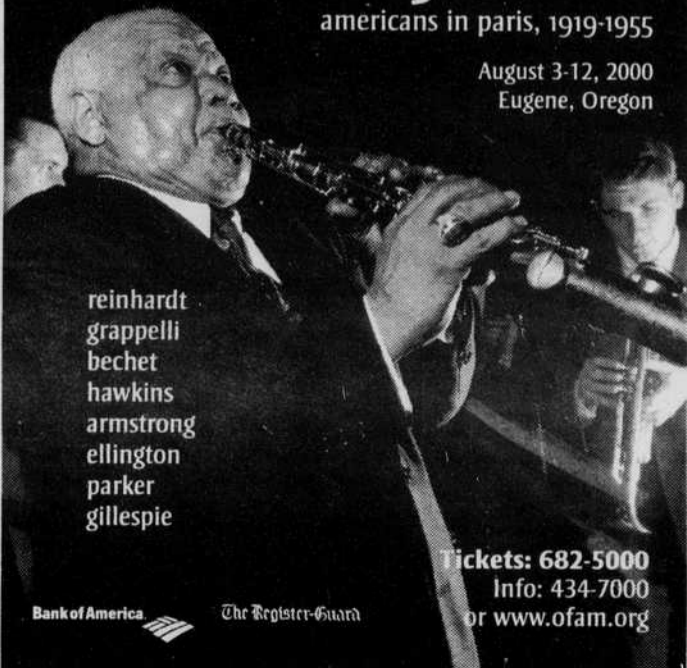
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