Culture shock, money woes, trouble foreign students

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By DAVID KLINE

Over 400 foreign students from 80 different countries are enrolled in undergraduate and graduate programs at Tufts. According to Leslie Long, director of the International Students Office, most of these students come from Hong Kong, The Republic of China, India, Iran, Venezuela and Canada.

Generally, foreign students encounter problems when they choose to study in the United States because they must deal with the problem of fitting into American culture, they stumble over the language barrier, and often they are faced with financial difficulties.

Long says that students who come from restrictive, traditional cultures often experience "culture shock" when suddenly surrounded by the freedoms and informalities of U.S. society. She estimates that it takes two or three years for someone to become integrated into a new culture.

Long described a common scenario of the changes in attitude foreign students frequently experience when they come to study at Tufts. She says that at first they are excited by the new environment. Soon, however, the novelty wears off and the uncomfortable differences with their own culture begin to make themselves felt.

Many then go through a period of rejecting U.S. customs and institutions, perhaps, Long says, because they feel guilty for not adhering strictly to the norms of their own cultures. At this time they tend to form cliques with other students who share their background.

Eventually, most learn to put the cultural differences in perspective, and realize that there is good and bad in both. This third phase is marked by relaxation and enjoyment of study in the U.S.

Some students who adopt American customs that are not approved of at home experience additional problems with their families when they return for visits. This leads to feelings of ambivalence and worry. One student summarized the effects of this experience by saying, "When I go home it is as a tourist."

Long says that naturally not everyone goes through these various stages. For instance, there are some who go right into
Foreign students at Tufts eventually adjust

the third stage, and others who never leave the second.

Many foreign students say that adapting to cultural norms is not as great a problem as overcoming the language barrier. Before a foreign student is admitted to Tufts he must prove his proficiency in English by scoring 550 or better on the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL).

However, once here even high scoring students sometimes have trouble understanding what is being said around them and to them. Students agree that the greatest problem is in the classroom, for it is difficult to mentally translate the words of a fast talking professor.

Not only TOEFL but also SAT scores are evaluated by the Tufts admissions office. But, Long says that just as for American applicants, other factors besides academic background are taken into consideration.

One such consideration that is crucially important is the student’s financial status, for the United States government rarely funds education for foreign students. Some receive scholarship money from their home countries, but this is not always the case. Money is less of a problem at the graduate level because of the availability of income-earning teaching assistantships. For most undergraduates, however, it is hard to get by, mainly because they are not allowed to work off-campus because they are not United States citizens. Work permission is granted if a student can demonstrate extreme need, but, according to Long, this is rarely done.

Long says it is felt that the foreign applicant should know the cost of his education and be prepared to pay for it when he applies. Each year, the student must prove his ability to support himself through school for the following year, or else he is not allowed to stay. One student claims that among foreign peoples there is still "the misconception that America is the land of milk and honey and that if you can just get here the opportunity to support yourself will make itself available. It is just not true."

In light of all these hardships, the question is, why do students continue to attend schools in the U.S.? One of the most common answers by foreign students at Tufts is that they get a much broader liberal arts education here than at home. In their own countries, they say, they would study intensively in one field—usually one related to the needs of national development—and they would not be able to take courses in unrelated areas.

Most foreign students at Tufts are in engineering or science. These fields of study enable them to learn a skill that is marketable at home and to pick up knowledge on other subjects.

When asked why he came to the U.S. at such great expense, one student responded, "You are exposed to an individuality and independence that you know you can not achieve at home, and, while this presents a social and cultural conflict, I think it is an important part of the learning experience. Also, schools here have more facilities, more research materials and a certain freedom of thought in education that if just not there in my country."

In order to get this education, the students are willing to overcome the social and financial problems that confront them. They also feel that their presence contributes to the education of American students. According to one student, "Our attendance helps American students to see beyond the seas. It broadens their minds."

In reference to the culture gap, Pradhip Kapadia said, "You are either a part of the American society or your are not. There is no in-between. I started off by trying to be an American so as to be accepted in American society. There are, however, certain responsibilities and duties that keep you closely tied with your home, heritage and culture."

One main source of support for foreign students is the International Students Office, which has three main functions. It provides counseling for both foreign students and American students who are studying abroad. It acts as a support service for foreign students and faculty, and handles most of the paperwork and administrative problems involved in getting and maintaining visas. Finally, it is generally believed that the International Students Office helps involve the foreign students in campus social life.

Kapadia summed up feelings expressed by several students by saying, "The various activities organized by the different cultural groups that make up the international student body at Tufts and, more importantly, the individual interaction and cross cultural exchange between students have been an asset to both the American students and International students. More American students are looking into international opportunities, which is indicated by the International Relations major starting next year, as well as the increase in American students interested in studying abroad."

"As for me, personally, Kapadia continued, being a foreign student has given me the advantage of looking at the American system from a different perspective, which I consider an essential part of my education."