International Office Aids Students in Cultural Adjustments

No one disputes the fact that one of the enriching influences in the atmosphere of Tufts’ campuses is the presence of many people from countries around the world. From the French-accented remarks of Tufts President Jean Mayer to the numerous Fletcher School students speaking in foreign tongues and wearing the costumes of other cultures, members of the Tufts community are often reminded of international influences on the campuses.

That international influence comes in part from the more than 500 foreign students who are a part of the Tufts community. Those 500 plus students come from more than 60 countries — from Algeria to Zimbabwe — and populate the undergraduate colleges of Jackson, liberal arts, engineering and the Boston School of Occupational Therapy, and numerous graduate programs in the veterinary, dental and medical schools, and, in particular, the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy. They come as undergraduates for the full four-year degree program or as one-year exchange students from universities with which Tufts has exchange programs. Foreign graduate students come to Tufts for anywhere from one to five years.

It is a fortunate circumstance that the university is a popular choice for foreign applicants, and one that makes for a diverse campus. Because of the special services provided for foreign students, the university provides a number of special services to them in order to facilitate the inevitable transition to a new way of life in an American university. Most of these special services are coordinated through the international students’ office, under the direction of Leslie Rowe.

Before they even arrive on campus, foreign students have become familiar with the international office, which not only expedites their visa applications, but also supplies them with abundant orientation materials, including a handbook providing information about everything from Boston social life to campus athletic activities, from guided tours of Medford and Somerville to listings of medical services and the addresses of consulates in the Boston area. Further, new foreign students, who through the efforts of the International Students Club have already received personal letters from international students already in residence at Tufts, are invited to participate in a special three-day orientation program. There students are introduced to the campus, to local banks, to Boston and to each other at a variety of social gatherings.

Through a monthly newsletter, the office alerts foreign residents to special services — free English instruction, an international student emergency loan fund, tours, informal host family arrangements and opportunities for cultural exchange.

The international office becomes a clearing house for a wide variety of problems, many of them personal. Rowe, who herself came to the U.S. as a “foreign” student, having grown up with her American parents in Europe, and who is particularly sensitive to “culture shock syndrome,” confesses that much of her time is spent simply listening to the problems of Tufts’ international residents.

Culture shock, Rowe explains, is the result of “being caught between two cultures and trying to integrate the best of both.” This is not an easy process, she adds, cautioning that it may take a student anywhere from a couple of months to a couple of years to adjust to a new country.

A foreign student may feel euphoric initially after arriving in this country. About the time midterms are scheduled and all students begin to feel the stress of their work, foreign students discover that they don’t have the same kind of support system they had at home, and frequently they become lonely and distressed. It is then that culture shock really sets in.

Rowe explains, “Students know a lot about the U.S. before they come here, and they are not always prepared for the big things. It is the subtle cultural differences that bother our international students after a while.”

Mimi Chiu, ‘83, who emigrated with her family from Hong Kong in 1973, and who now spends much of her time working in the international students’ office, is particularly sensitive to these subtle cultural differences. Chiu reports that she has had to learn to deal with conflicts resulting from the different sets of standards she finds at home and at school.

“International CLEARING HOUSE—Tufts’ international students’ office provides a variety of special services to foreign students, including advice on visas and money transfers from home countries. Here, Leslie Rowe (right), director of the office, consults with Iranian student Sima Bakhitaerina, who is pursuing graduate work in physics at Tufts.”

“One of the things I have learned from American culture,” she explains, “is to decide for myself what I want to do with my life, to make decisions as an individual. In my culture, we are taught obedience to the wishes of our parents, which should supercede our wishes.”

Chiu’s parents, who came to this country to find better opportunities for their children, hoped that she would direct her studies toward a practical vocational choice, business or engineering or computer science. At Tufts, she has developed an interest in the arts. A sociology major, Chiu hopes to specialize in immigration studies, and eventually to work as an immigration counselor.

Working with Rowe and the international students’ office has been beneficial in preparing Chiu for her career choice, but the process has been painful, nonetheless. Chiu, as the oldest child in her family, was particularly expected to follow her parents’ expectations. They are disappointed in the path she has taken, and she has experienced no small amount of guilt.

Rowe and her associates are there to help when this kind of problem comes up — or when other problems occur, like the fact that American “openness” does not always represent real friendship, or that earning money is a part of student life here, though uncommon elsewhere.

Members of the Tufts community can also help foreign students through some of these adjustments by participating in the international hospitality program, administered through the international office. Through the program, families provide occasional hospitality to students matched to them based on common interests. Rowe says that twice as many students have applied for host families this year as in other years, and many still need to be placed. She invites members of the Tufts community to find out more about it by calling the international office at ext. 545.

—Selby Holmberg