

For students from foreign countries an accounting education has added difficulties

THE "OTHER" MINORITIES

by Johanna Ambrosio

They come from all over the world to be educated in the United States. To do so, these students brave a laborious admissions process, as well as linguistic problems and a multitude of social barriers.

But come they do, though the pace has slowed considerably. In the late 1970's, the number of foreign students increased about 10 percent annually; now that has dropped to annual growth of one percent.

Reasons for the slowdown vary, according to William McCann, a member of the research division of the New York-based Institute of International Education. The worldwide oil glut has pinched the oil-producing nations so that they no longer send as many students abroad. And because the U.S. dollar is strong, it is more expensive than in past years for foreign students of any country to come here.

There are currently some 342,000 foreign students in U.S. schools, McCann says. This figure accounts for students here on foreign visas, but does not include illegal aliens.

For the 1984-85 academic year, the most recent for which statistics are available, Taiwan and Malaysia with 23,000 and 22,000 students respectively, accounted for the most foreign students in the United States. In 1979, McCann says, there were approximately 30,000 Iranian students in U.S. schools; in the 1984-85 academic year, about 17,000.

Foreign students are a determined bunch. They have to

be, to overcome the myriad obstacles put in their path. But they are also well educated and among the brightest stars of their native countries.

Once past the preparation and red tape, there remain enormous social, ethnic and other problems foreign students meet. Depending on the country from which they hail, where they are going to school and the school itself, the students are often helped through their problems in a matter of months.

Language is one of the toughest barriers. Though most students must read and write English to be accepted into a college, their speaking abilities are often rudimentary.

Some students have an easier time of it than others. Foreign students from English-speaking countries, such as India, have an easier time adapting than others from third-world countries. Even if they speak English, their accents make them difficult to understand. This can hamper their learning process, as well as presenting social and potential employment blocks.

Gordon Schillinglaw, head of Columbia University's accounting program, notes that one of his students, a "very bright" woman from China, wants to teach accounting to U.S. students. But he fears she will not be successful because of her accent, which hinders students from understanding her.

Teaching accounting, a technical and demanding subject, requires good communications skills; how-

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ever, because of the shortage of American accounting teachers, foreign-born professors are an increasing phenomenon at American colleges. Often, they teach where they earned their degrees.

No giving up

Attrition – the rate at which foreign students return home before receiving their degrees – is not a serious problem, observers say. Before giving up, the student will try another school that may be closer to his educational needs and social requirements.

But for some foreign students, the U.S. isn't all that it was cracked up to be. Muslim students must pray several times daily and often find it difficult to practice their religion in this country. Students miss their families and the cultural and social customs they have grown up with.

And then there are the political problems, not only between American and foreign students, but also among the foreign students themselves, Iranian and Iraqi students for example.

"The political problems their countries are experiencing, whether or not the students agree with their country's actions, are a reality the students have to deal with," says Carl Herrin, a spokesman for the National Association of Foreign Student Affairs, in Washington.

Even something that seems simple can present problems. Europeans are baffled by the typical American greeting of, "Hi. How are you?" Just as they

are gearing up to answer the question, the greeter has disappeared. In general, the American pace of life is much faster than that in their native countries.

Or imagine a South American student raised in a wealthy family. To her, going to school in the United States is a type of finishing school. She doesn't understand why she has to live with someone else, why she has to do her own laundry, or how to do routine housekeeping chores. After going to the foreign-student office to have her questions answered, she waits until someone calls her a taxi. A student adviser gently explains reality.

Another difference is the way educational systems are organized in different countries. In Europe especially, students specialize for several years in a subject and so are advanced over their American counterparts in one or two areas. Americans, however, are educated in a much broader way.

The students' advocate

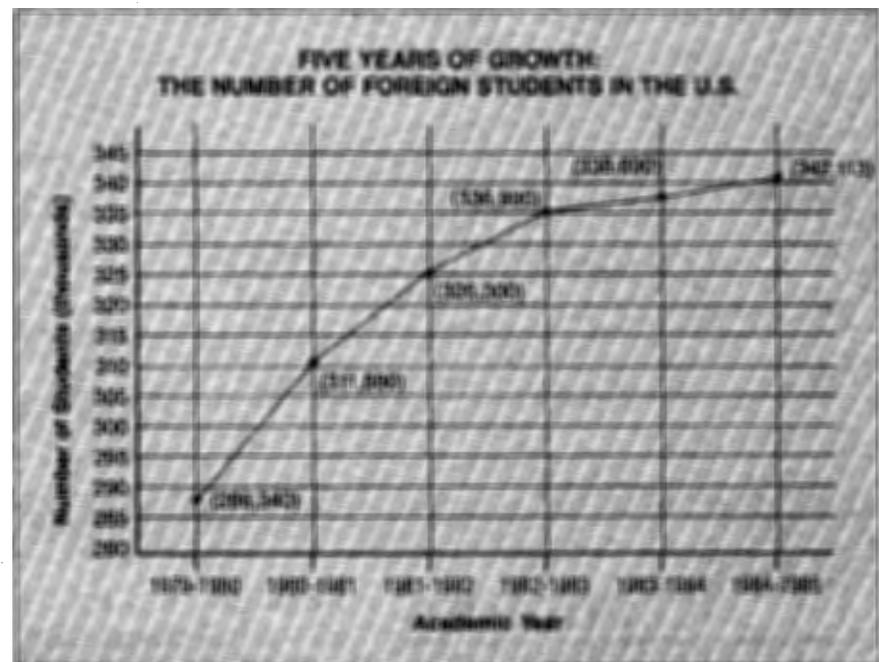
Much of the foreign students' adjustment depends upon the school and its location. An active, adequately staffed foreign-student office, which

serves as an advocate for the foreigners on campus and in the community as a whole, can go a long way toward making the students feel welcome.

Further, like Americans, foreign students often have to weigh locations based on their needs and ultimate goals. A large city may provide a wealth of services and opportunities, but a smaller town can provide a sense of belonging and a more solid existence.

Human nature being what it is, once they are settled, foreign students experience the same problems as American citizens. They worry about their grades, the opposite sex and their options once they graduate. But if all goes well, within a few months, foreign students are partying with their new American friends.

The most popular areas of study have not changed over the years, McCann says. Business and management, which includes accounting, is the second highest choice for foreign students, with approximately 63,000 majors in the 1984-85 academic year. Engineering is the number one, with 75,370 majors. Computer science is,



however, gaining popularity and may soon become the second most frequently chosen major.

Paying their way

Some 80 percent of all foreign students are single; 70 percent are male.

Over two-thirds of the students either pay their own way or are supported by their families, McCann says. About 15 percent receive scholarships from American colleges or corporations. Also included in this group are students sponsored by the U.S. government through various exchange programs.

Another 15 percent of foreign students are sponsored by their governments or by universities or corporations in their home countries.

Indeed, the students' financial backgrounds are investigated thoroughly before they are allowed entrance into the United States. The federal government requires the school to ascertain that the student has enough funds to meet his or her expenses while in the U.S.

In fact, a foreign student's entire history is opened up during the entrance process and during his or her stay in this country. The students must sign a form allowing their academic and other records to be inspected at will by the U.S. Immigration and Nat-

uralization Service. In contrast, the academic records of an American citizen are closed, protected by law.

Foreign students often pay higher admission fees, higher tuition, or are required to put up hefty deposits to signal their serious intention to attend a U.S. school. These fees help offset the higher costs of processing foreign students' applications.

Once a student applies to the school of his choice, the school reviews his academic and financial credentials. If the student is accepted, the school sends him information about the school, the city and the state in which it is located plus information about the United States in general. The school also sends an application for a visa.

In the meantime, at home, the students prepare themselves as best they can, usually with the help of their current educational institution. They study English and try to learn as much as possible about the United States.

For most students, this process is not difficult. They have read American literature, seen U.S.-made movies and read extensively about U.S. current events.

Additionally, students must be approved by the U.S. consulate in their country. The process again investigates the students' finances and at-

tempts to certify that they will return to the country of origin.

At the final step of the admissions process, upon appearing at the U.S. border, the student is interviewed by an Immigration official. The student presents his passport, visa and other relevant papers. This is generally a routine process, since the weeding out has already been done.

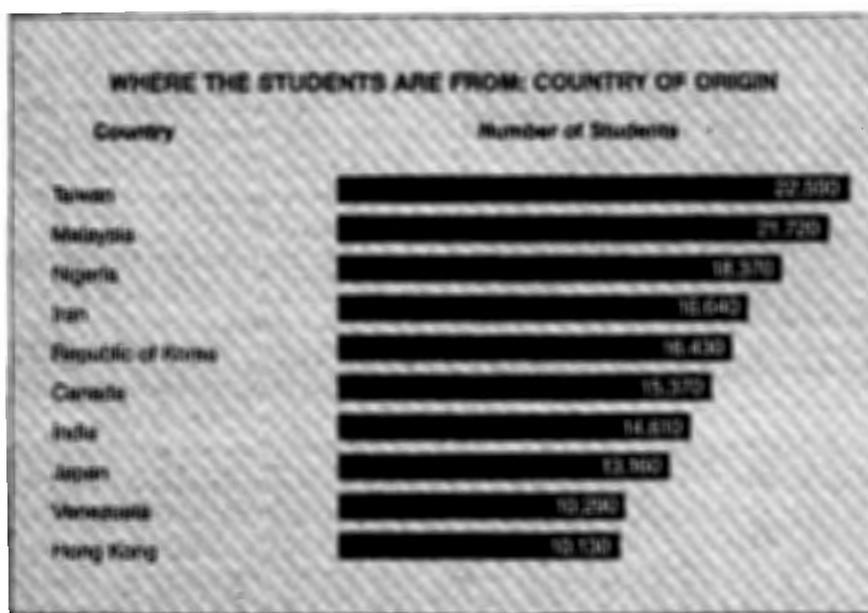
Just visiting

The stickiest point is determining whether the student will return to his country. "Proving a negative - that the student has no intentions of becoming an immigrant - is impossible to do," says Herrin. If students reveal the slightest hint that they may want to remain in the U.S. after receiving their degrees, their visa applications are denied. So students must often stretch the truth in order to be allowed to come to school here. And some genuinely have no idea of what they will want to do in four or eight years, when they receive their degree.

Even after arriving in the United States, they have to be careful to mask their intentions so that they are not accused of lying on their visa applications. But, should they decide to stay, after several years they can "come out of the closet" and apply for permanent-resident status.

"The system has no bias against people who change their minds," Herrin says. He estimates that approximately 10 to 15 percent of all foreign students ultimately remain in the United States. Some take industry jobs, others teach. Some stay a few years, then return to their native country; others, a lifetime, retaining original citizenship so as not to completely sever ties. NA

Jobanna Ambrosio is a New York-based freelance writer specializing in business, science and finance. Her stories have appeared in the Westchester Business Journal, Our Town, and Information WEEK.



Source: Institute of International Education, New York. Data for the 1984-1985 academic year.