

# "Foreign student" is a state of mind

by Shelly Kalkowski

Ravi's footsteps echo as he walks down the broad corridors of the Lincoln Municipal Airport. For Ravi, a foreign student from India, and many like him, it is the first introduction to a new way of life.

As a student at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, he will face a new and sometimes insensitive educational system complete with a difficult new system and language. As a new resident of Lincoln, he will face an unfamiliar economic and legal system. And socially he will face a different etiquette and sense of humor.

Ravi has left everything familiar to him, entered a totally new environment, and is about to become a victim of cultural shock. He is liable to feel depressed, irritable and annoyed with the seeming lack of attention people around him pay to his problems.

According to Dr. Robert K. Jones, a Lincoln psychiatrist, this is caused mainly by communication problems and, to a lesser degree, by feelings of inadequacy when the foreign student realizes he may not be able to live up to the high goals he usually sets for himself.

Cultural shock can be, and usually is, conquered. Although many foreign students refuse to talk about the problem, one of the biggest aids in a

student's recovery is knowing he's not alone.

According to Rowena Boykin, UNL foreign student advisor, all foreign students suffer varying degrees of culture shock. The seriousness of the condition depends on how well the student knows English and how sociable he is. The better he can speak English and the more at ease he is with new acquaintances, the easier it is for him to adapt to the changes.

"And there is a relationship between the seriousness of cultural shock and how westernized their own country is," Boykin added.

She said foreign students tend to be too ambitious when they first come to the states. They usually want to carry 16 or 17 hours, not realizing the system may be different.

In many foreign educational systems, the final exam is the only thing that's important.

Boykin tells how students with down slips will say, "They can't flunk me. I didn't take the final." The students assumed they would get an incomplete if they didn't come for the exam.

Often, foreigners are not used to snap quizzes, hour exams, and mandatory class attendance. Because they do not have a complete command of English, objective tests tend to confuse foreign students.

Often, they have problems understanding professors who speak rapidly or in American idioms.

Although faculty prejudice cannot be proven, Boykin also said she occasionally notices something in a teacher's attitude or tone of voice which might indicate an anger or lack of understanding toward a foreign student. She added that, in a few cases, she's talked with faculty members to prevent further misunderstandings.

The students themselves have little to say about their academics. Most list language difficulties and term papers as their biggest problems.

One Nigerian undergraduate noted that American educational programs cover a wider variety of areas. He said this liberal arts education makes it easier for him to discuss numerous subjects.

The foreign student is then faced with the problem of housing. Given UNL's chronic shortage of housing, especially for married students, well over 60 per cent of the foreign students have to seek off-campus housing. This compounds the problem.

The students usually are struggling financially and can't afford a car. Often they are afraid of Nebraska weather, and hesitate to buy a bike. So they are forced into the tight market for apartments close to campus.



Jorge Baca is a man with a mission.

"Since there are so many people without an education in my country (Peru), and I have the privilege of one, I have to pay my people back. I have an obligation to complete—to help and teach them."

So Jorge is on the plains of Nebraska taking graduate courses in food science, studying under the Latin American Scholarship Program at American Universities. When he returns to Peru he not only plans to teach, but also to advise local food industries, set up experimental programs in food science and even do market research.

If all this sounds a little too ambitious, you just don't know Jorge. His life has always centered around studying. At 15, he finished high school. At 16, he left his father's ranch to live alone and study in Lima, the capital of Peru. He became involved in politics as a delegate for the university in the government. At 21, he graduated near the top of his class.

Now, at 23, he has had one semester of practice teaching, is working in the UNL food science lab and owns his own ranch and 50 head of cattle in Peru.

But Jorge has his problems, chief among them the English language. While he has no problems with technical or classroom English, he does with every day English. This creates problems of its own.

"When you don't know a language well, you like to answer questions rather than ask them," Jorge says. "In other words, on most occasions you are afraid of starting a conversation."

Jorge watches TV to practice his English.

But even without the language barrier, Jorge finds it hard to communicate with Americans.

"You always have to put your hand out first, before they will shake it," he says. "Nothing comes from them. Our backgrounds are so different, we should try to understand and talk to each other, rather than just a 'hello, a smile, and a good-bye.' It seems that you have to act some weird way, even childish and foolish, in order to be accepted by the Americans."

And it's not that he doesn't want to communicate with Americans.

"It doesn't matter what country you come from, love and understanding are the most important things to come along with people."