

A New Land For A New Way Of Learning

International students face challenges with an alternative education

Eight students, all from different countries, sit around a table in the basement of Neihardt Hall and compare their education here in Nebraska with the one they received in their homelands.

Like members of a world council, they talk of flaws in their native countries' educational systems and the problems they see at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln.

Many agree on several points: education at the universities they attended back home is cheaper than UNL; fewer students in their countries have the opportunity for a higher education; professors at UNL have a better relationship with their students.

But when it comes to attitudes on education from a more theoretical standpoint, their ideas are often as different as the countries they represent.

Soon Kim Boo, 26, came to UNL from Malaysia in 1983. He graduated with bachelor's degree in architecture in 1986 and is currently working on his master's in community and regional planning.

Boo says he takes the idea of a higher education very seriously.

His views on what should be gained are often more critical than the other students there. He says people in his country view higher education as very important. Malaysian families and the government there spend large amounts of money on educating the country's youth. Boo says the importance of knowledge is stressed at a very young age.

Therefore, anytime spent at a university is precious, Boo says. Opportunities for learning should be taken advantage of, both inside and outside of class.

Boo says he is "always looking for the opportunity to learn something."

During his years at UNL, he has become involved in numerous organizations. Boo was elected president of the International Student Organization in 1987 and is a senator of the Association of Students of the University of Nebraska and the Advisory Committee for International Student Affairs.

"I see my future as someone who is going to serve society," he says, "so I need this time to learn."

Boo says he is frustrated at UNL because many students don't take advantage of their

educational opportunities.

Instead of spending time productively, he says, many of them waste time drinking every weekend, behaving childishly and being inconsiderate.

"To me, going out and getting drunk is not productive," he says.

Boo says he doesn't blame the students, rather the problem is social, stemming from their surroundings.

"Human beings are the same, only the environment changes," he says.

Most of the other students in the round-table discussion agree: an approach to education depends not only on the country, but its needs, history and culture.

Stepanka Korytova, 31, is studying for her doctorate in history at UNL. Korytova first studied geography in her homeland of Czechoslovakia, and has also studied in Great Britain.

Korytova says she came to the United States because Czechoslovakia has a centrally-planned government and the system only allows as many students to study in one area as it needs.

The Czech government has five year plans, she says, in which it estimates the number of people it will need in certain careers. There is little need for people in liberal arts, so the government only hires 15 to 20 historians a year, she says.

As in many other countries, Korytova says national test scores taken before the end of high school determine the eligibility of each student to go to college.

Likewise, students at Czech universities only study subjects related to their field and after five years receive a national diploma similar to a master's degree. There are no bachelor's degrees at Czech universities, she said, but doctorates are very similar to ones in the United States.

Korytova says there are fewer exams given in Czech universities. Most are oral exams given at the end of the semester.

"That sort of encourages students to have a good time," she says. But at the end of the semester students study very hard for almost a month.

Christos Mantzios spent a year-and-a-half studying at the University of Athens in his homeland of Greece. Mantzios says one of the many reasons he does not like

Greece's higher education system is because of the entrance process.

Mantzios says the process is similar to the one Korytova described. Juniors and seniors in high school take a national exam and acquire points. Those scores along with the students' GPAs are sent to the university.

Students can fill out a career preference sheet and specify what they would like to study, but if their scores are not high enough for a chosen profession, they are not allowed to study it, he explains.

Because of the strict entrance standards, many of the students end up in professions they don't want to pursue, Mantzios says.

Many students are so burned out by the process that they don't study once they get to Greek universities. Absenteeism is also a problem, he says. Many times huge auditoriums are left almost empty. Mantzios says he is insulted by the American "greek system" of fraternities and sororities.

"They do nothing to carry this name," he says. "They just use it as an excuse to drink beer and be obnoxious."

Another difference between UNL and Greek universities, Mantzios says he has noticed, is that students in Greece are more politically active.

"There is always something to demonstrate against," he says.

Unlike students at UNL, Mantzios says, if the students did not like something at a Greek university, they would fight to change it. If the cafeteria food happened to be terrible, students at Greek universities would tear it down, he adds.

Sanaty Estehan from Teheran, Iran says unlike the United States, much of the political protest in his country started at its universities. Iran's revolution in 1979 was partially due to unrest among the nation's students under Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi's regime, he says.

During the Shah's reign, almost 90 percent of the students were against him, Estehan says. The Shah knew university students would most likely be against the government, he says.

Students at UNL, he said, are much more passive and apathetic.

"They complain a lot, but they don't really do anything," he says, adding that the Iranian students' serious attitude toward politics carries over into their studies.

While more than 250,000 Iranian students graduate from high school every year, only about 40,000 to 50,000 can get into the universities, he says. The strict acceptance process is similar to that in Greece.

There are a limited number of universities in Iran, creating higher standards for accepting students in cer-

tain professions. Many male students who are not accepted end up in the military, he said. Subsequently, many other students leave the country to study.

One thing Geoff McDonald, 24, says he has noticed at UNL since coming from Deakin University in Australia is segregation.

Dividing UNL students into groups such as the "greek and non-greek" systems, men and women, legal drinkers and minors, for example, not only separates friends, but limits growth, he says.

McDonald, who is currently working on his master's in architecture at UNL, says since coming to UNL, he has also noticed that UNL classes are often an "extension of high school."

In Australia, McDonald says, there is a better overall education before college so students can spend more time on individual research and critical thinking. McDonald says high school in Australia is tougher, so the system "weeds out the less bright people."

Australian university students enjoy a cheaper tuition so many do not put as much of an emphasis on "getting their money's worth" as Americans do, he says. Because there is no grade point average in Australia, McDonald said students who study there are "not as interested

in good marks."

The People's Republic of China has no GPA either, according to Hao Chang, a former student of Tong Ji University who is currently working on his master's in community and regional planning at UNL. But Chang says students in his country pay more attention to grades than students at UNL.

According to Chinese tradition, Chang says, a better education means a better chance, therefore many students take their education very seriously and study harder.

Chang says he is sometimes frustrated at UNL by the number of tests given in graduate school. Time spent studying for too many exams, he says, takes away from time that could be spent on independent study and research.

However, Chang says, professors at UNL have a better relationship with students because they are easier to consult.

Two students from Afghanistan and Poland agree that friendships during a student's years at a university in their own countries are often different than at UNL.

Rohullah Attai, 28, studied three-and-a-half years at Kabul Polytechnic University in Afghanistan.

Attai, who is now a business student at UNL, says he remembers students becoming very close friends during their years at the Afghani university. Groups that enter

the university at the same time in the same major always stay together until graduation, he says.

Attai says 30 to 35 students at an Afghani university who start at the same time have all of their classes together, because they have permanent schedules they can't change.

Over the years, students become "family," he says. They study together, celebrate together and even skip classes together. Because of that closeness, students there are much friendlier.

Pawel Marczenia, 22, says students at the Teacher's College of Zielona Gora in Poland where he first attended college, were closer than they are here.

Friendships are intended to last a lifetime, so "students help each other any way they can," he says. Marczenia says it is not uncommon for students even to help others cheat.

"In Poland there is lots of cheating," he said.

Another problem in Polish universities, Marczenia said, is alcoholism. Most students in Poland drink a lot on the weekends, he says.

"And when we drink, we get drunk," he says.

Student unions at Polish universities sell beer, but many have stopped because of the alcohol problem, he says.

One difference Marczenia says he has noticed between universities in the United States and Poland is the choice of classes. Like other countries, he says, Polish students have a set schedule according to the profession that does not change.

"Here students can choose their own classes," he said.

Marczenia says he likes the atmosphere at UNL better than the Polish university he attended because of the congenial relationships between students and professors.

"You have to have great respect for the teachers in Poland," he says, "... but when you talk to teachers here, it is closer than it is in Poland."

Although the majority of Marczenia's comments on his education at UNL were positive, many of the international students admitted their assessments were mostly negative.

One reason for the lack of positive reaction, Stepanka Korytova explained, is that most of the international students come from countries in close proximity to other cultures, where students are more worldly-oriented.

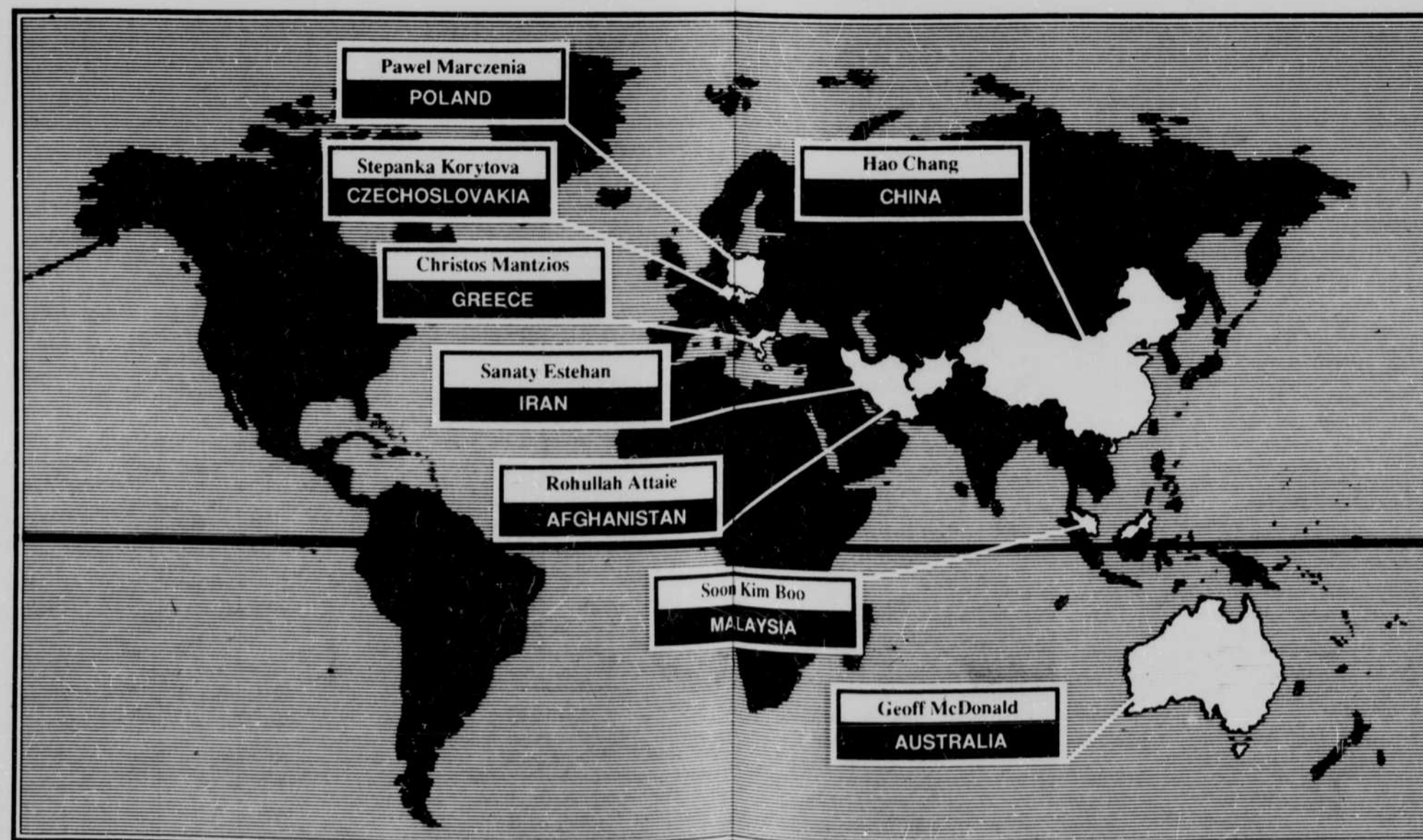
Many UNL students have not been outside the United States and have an isolated view of the rest of the world, she said.

World politics, history and geography are sometimes difficult for UNL students, which she said puzzles many international students.

However, opportunities are increasing in this country for students to study abroad, she said. Once Americans take advantage of them, Korytova says, many of those isolated attitudes will disappear.

But like the remote possibility that every American student will ever understand what it's like to study at a distant university, so are the odds that people around the world will ever share the same views on education.

—Lee Rood



Soon Kim Boo of Malaysia