



James Mehling/DN

New international students cope with scary transition

By Brian Sharp
Staff Reporter

Home was 10,000 miles away. In the movies, he had seen Los Angeles, New York. Images of the big city, with busy streets, bright lights and people everywhere were his America.

Boon Lee Lim had never seen Lincoln, Nebraska. He was an industrial engineering major from College of Damansara Ugama in Selangor, 15 miles away from Malaysia's capitol, home to more than 1 million people — four times that of Lincoln. Lim had seen the big city, and this definitely wasn't it.

There were 100 UNL students from Malaysia when he arrived that summer. Out of 25,000, that wasn't many — and none of them were family.

Still, Lim was dealing with it. Homesickness wasn't plaguing him the way it does some international students. The only distance he was feeling was time.

When he should have been thinking about going to class or getting lunch, he was ready for bed.

Lincoln's 11 a.m. is Malaysia's midnight.

In terms of culture shock, Lim experienced little. After a few months, he was comfortable speaking English. It helped that he had a support group, though small, already in place to help ease the transition.

Not all foreign students have that.

In some ways that can be a good thing. Lim said people tended to be less independent when there was more support. By forcing students to be on their own, they may actually learn more about their new world, he said.

But many of the international students are shy, he said. Having some support at first can help ease the transition and clear some of the confusion.

That's where International Affairs and other international student groups come in. And that's where Lim is now. Lim, a graduate student specializing in industrial management, acts

as one of 15 peer advisors for new international students.

He describes his job as both mentor and family. Each advisor works with about 10 foreign students, answering questions and helping with problems.

Mary Swoboda, a counselor at the University Health Center (UHC), said the fact that foreign students couldn't just get in their car and go see parents, family or friends only added to the stresses of their first year at UNL.

The Health Center rarely sees the results of that added stress, however. UHC records show that last year, only 59 international students used the counseling and psychological services. Most foreign students are used to relying on family and friends she said, and they try and find that at UNL. But when the stress gets to be too much, the students health can suffer.

UHC Medical Director Russell LaBeau said anxiety had a lot to do with all illnesses. Many symptoms related to culture shock were headaches, stomachaches and other gastrointestinal problems, he said. Unless dealt with, however, the anxiety persists and the student can become sicker.

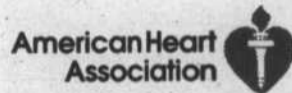
Generally, it wears off over time, he said. Once students realize they're fitting in and everything is going to be okay, they're less fearful, he said, and less anxious.

Most international students will only spend a year and a half to two years in the United States before returning home. Judy Wendorff, international student advisor, said 80 percent of all foreign students went back to their country. Usually, because the job market back home was much better.

If they choose, students can stay on for a year or more and get practical experience, working anywhere in the United States. Most, however, do not, she said.

Lim will not stay. In a year, he hopes to graduate with his masters and return to Malaysia. The job market there is good he said, and he should have his pick of jobs.

It keeps more than memories alive.



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