

Lack of Transportation, Health Care Confusion among concerns of International Students

By Pete Strella
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Picture yourself in this situation. You've just arrived in Germany to attend a university as part of an exchange program. You look around and see many bars with cheap beer. "This is gonna be cool," you think to yourself.

But things don't go as smoothly as you had anticipated. First you spend hundreds of dollars on hotel rooms because the school you are attending doesn't offer housing over semester breaks.

Once you finally move into the housing, you find out you have to buy furniture because they don't provide it. But, you don't have enough money to buy it because you pay twice the tuition that everyone else pays (you're "out of state"). You try to buy groceries but have no ride because the small rural town

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that you are in has no public transportation. You feel uncomfortable asking for rides because your German is choppy.

These are some of the problems that international students are facing here at Penn State Harrisburg, according to a

study released by two professors from our campus's School of Behavioral Sciences and Education. The study found that a lack of transportation, minimal interaction with American students, and problems dealing with housing accommodations are among the biggest concerns of international students.

The study was entitled "Psychosocial and Academic Adjustment Issues Experienced by International Students Studying at the Penn State Harrisburg Campus" and was written by Dr. Senel Poyrazli and Dr. Kamini Grahame. It surveyed 45 international students and interviewed another 15 through focus groups.

Donna Howard, coordinator of Adult and International Student Support Services, has read the study and agrees with some of its findings. "I'd say the biggest problem is transportation," she said. Howard said that a lot of international students come from urban areas where mass transit is readily available, which is not the case in Middletown, PA.

Phillip Klenner, who came to Penn State Harrisburg through an exchange program from Germany, agrees with Howard that transportation is an important issue. "We have some roommates with cars, but it's a big problem," said Klenner. "For us, it's a shock to have no public transportation." Klenner attended the University of Nuremberg Erlangen in Germany and is used to living in a city with 500,000 people.

The study also suggested international students are concerned that they don't have many opportunities to interact with American students. "They really do want to participate," said Howard. She added that international students often appear shy because their English skills are not at the same level as that of American students. Howard suggested that American students "offer more of an open hand, not a hand-out, but friendship."

Glenn A. Rudy III and Japanese student Yumi Makita are an example of how good things can come from interaction between international and American students. Makita came to Penn State Harrisburg for the American studies graduate program in August of 2001.

"She would go almost everyday to the third floor of the library to study," explains Rudy, who works at the library. "I have a passion for Japanese video games," he continued, "so I started asking her translation questions about certain games." It worked out well, as Makita would ask him questions related to her American studies work. The two eventually started a relationship and have been together for 14 months.

Rudy and Makita both agreed that there isn't enough interaction between international and American students. "It almost seems that the Penn State Harrisburg campus is segregated at times," said Rudy. "It's human nature to want to be around people from a similar background and whose customs you know by heart. However, participating in clubs and organizations available to the student body, such as the newspaper and radio station, could be a way to break down these barriers."

"I've heard that American students are not that interested in foreign

countries outside of America," added Makita. She thought that more interaction between foreign and American students would help solve this problem.

The study focused on many problems related to housing. It stated that "the cost of living on-campus was a problem" that needed to be addressed. Also, students who bring their families have no way of living on campus with them. Buying furniture and domestic products is another expensive endeavor. And many are spending hundreds of dollars on hotel rooms because they have nowhere to go when they get here.

Health care was another issue. International students in the study said that they were confused by the United State's health care system. They find that the coverage they have covers them inadequately and often leaves them with large bills to pay. The students also found that the questions they had about the health insurance offered through the school could not be answered by the campus's health center.

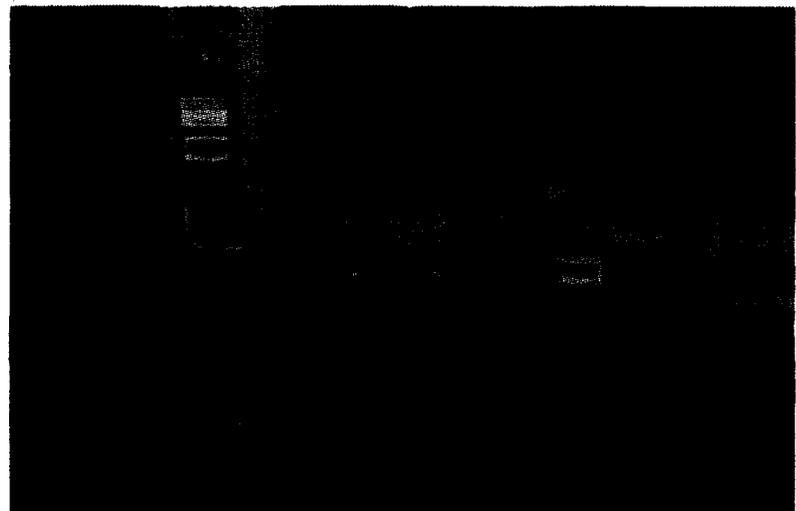
Many international students are also restricted from having jobs off-campus because of their visa status. The students interviewed in the study asked to be given preference for on-campus jobs. This is the only way they are able to pay the unexpected bills. They also said that they have trouble finding the necessary transportation to obtain social security cards, which they need to get a job.

The study ended with a number possible solutions that could be implemented. It suggested better communication about Penn State Harrisburg and the Harrisburg area to the international students before they arrive. This would help prepare the students for many of the problems that they are now facing.

Shuttle buses to the grocery store and a bicycle-lending program were suggested to improve transportation problems. A temporary housing program in which host families would take in international students for a couple of days was suggested so that students would not have to spend hundreds of dollars on hotel rooms. A program to accept furniture donations was suggested so that international students wouldn't have to spend money to furnish a whole apartment.

The school has already established a service to pick up international students from the airport, which was another one of the suggestions in the report.

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Glenn A. Rudy III and his girlfriend Yumi Makita lounge at WPSH, the campus radio station. Both agree that there is not enough interaction between American and international students.