Weber State University: Welcoming the World

Ashraf Al-Ruwaithi discovered a new sense of community when he came to Weber State University in 1999.

A senior mechanical engineering major from Saudi Arabia, Al-Ruwaithi attended three schools before WSU. “I had never gotten involved in student activities; I always focused on my studies,” he said.

“That changed when I got here. I got involved. I was president of the International Club for two years. I found it was more exciting to know more people, more cultures. I talk to students from all over the world. It’s been a very good experience.”

Al-Ruwaithi is one of more than 190 international students who attend WSU, this year ranging from Australians to Vietnamese.

These students bring a lot to WSU, according to Jeff Hurst, acting dean of students. “International students enhance the diversity of the university,” Hurst said.

“There’s a lot of learning in experiencing a new culture, both for the international students and the domestic students.”

International students also present a different set of challenges for the university. They face all the pressures an average college student faces: tuition payments, homework, exams, papers—and on top of those, they deal with complicated government regulations, living far from home and learning a new language and culture.

The Services for International Students (SIS) office and the English as a Second Language (ESL) program lead WSU’s efforts to provide a positive learning and life experience for these students.

First stop: ESL

For many international students, the ESL program provides a first taste of life at WSU.

Hsiu-Min Huang, a student from Taiwan, visits Addy Rivera in the ESL office.

Incoming students take an English placement test. Those with advanced English knowledge may “test out” of the program and start their academic classes. Others enter the program for full-time English instruction and can begin taking other classes once they have reached a level of proficiency.

The program had approximately 50 international students enrolled in fall 2003.

“We approach everything with the mindset: This student is going to succeed,” said ESL Director Mary Quiroz-Whisler. “We teach them about the university, walk them through registration. We help them over barriers. We are their life-support system while they’re in our program.”

The instruction the program provides can be far-ranging. “Students from some countries must learn you don’t call your teacher ‘Teacher,’” said Quiroz-Whisler. “For these students, the ESL program is their only English exposure.”

continued on back page
**Diversity Calendar**
**SPRING 2004**

The Diversity Center presents several monthly events. Call or e-mail Keith Wilder (626-6379, kwilder@weber.edu) for dates and more information on the following:

**COMMON GROUND:**
Enjoy an atmosphere of inclusion during this forum focusing on resources for education and information about diversity. Snacks are served, and feedback is encouraged.

**TASTE FOR DIVERSITY:**
Expose yourself to a diverse world of food, dance and art.

**SESSIONS@UB240:**
Share your music, art, poetry and history during your lunch hour in a coffeehouse-like setting. Snacks, beverages and interesting discussions provided.

**RELIGION AND ETHICS:**
Explore religious diversity on WSU’s campus, in the nation and around the world.

**STOP THE HATE:**
Participate in this national program to spread information about eliminating hate and hate crimes, and furthering zero-tolerance initiatives.

**INTERFAITH READING GROUPS:**
Learn about diverse religious books during bi-weekly meetings open to students, staff and community members.

**JUMP START:**
Mentor inner-city students in this after-school program.

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**January**

**National Black History Month**
- Feb. 2-6: Education Emphasis Week
- Feb. 16-20: Black Scholars United and Black Area Council (Black Emphasis Week)

**National Women’s History Month**
- March 4: Honors & Issues Forum along with Teaching & Learning Forum will combine to sponsor a panel that will explore historical and current issues around the Brown v. Board of Ed. decision. Contact Rob Monal at 626-6186.
- March 9: State’s Deans of Education Speaker Dr. Frank Murray, noon, Shepherd Union
- March 22-26: International Students Emphasis Week
- March 29-April 3: Asian/Pacific American Emphasis Week

**April**

- April 1, 15, 30: WSU Annual Holocaust Observances
- April 5-10: Native American Emphasis Week
- April 12, 13: WSU Student Activities, Office of Diversity, Moyes College of Education, and Goddard School of Business and Economics will host “A Conversation with Juan Williams”—a nationally noted journalist and biographer of Thurgood Marshall. Contact Forrest Crawford at 626-7420.

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**NEWS AND NOTES**

**Diversity Center Program Wins Award**

Sessions @ UB 240, a Diversity Center program that features an eclectic array of music, poetry and other entertainments in a coffeehouse format, was honored with an award from the National Association of Campus Activities. Attending a NACA conference to exchange ideas about campus entertainment, Weber State students presented information about Sessions @ UB 240, which was selected as “best program of the year” with a diversity/multicultural theme.

“We’re really showcasing on-campus talent,” said Diversity Center coordinator Keith Wilder. “If people can write poetry, paint, play an instrument, sing, whatever…they can do it at Sessions.”

Sessions @ UB 240 is held monthly at the Diversity Center. Call the center at 626-6186 for dates and times.

**Office Launches New Site**

The Office of Assistant to the President for Diversity encourages visitors to explore its new Web site at [www.weber.edu/diversityoffice.xml](http://www.weber.edu/diversityoffice.xml). Comments and questions are welcome; contact Nadine Witcher at ngalze@weber.edu.

**WEB ADDRESSES**

The Diversity Center: [www.weber.edu/Diversity](http://www.weber.edu/Diversity)

Services for Students with Disabilities: [www.weber.edu/ssd](http://www.weber.edu/ssd)

Services for International Students: [www.weber.edu/sis](http://www.weber.edu/sis)

Services for Multicultural Students: [www.weber.edu/sms](http://www.weber.edu/sms)

Nontraditional Student Center: [www.weber.edu/nontrad](http://www.weber.edu/nontrad)

Services for Women Students: [www.weber.edu/sws](http://www.weber.edu/sws)

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Send submissions and comments to mailcode 4025; e-mail jphilion@weber.edu, or call ext. 6347.

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Designer: Hillary Wallace
Happy to be ‘Home’

Tajikistani Student Enjoys Challenges, Culture of WSU

Nazira Rakhmatova is 7,000 miles from home, yet she is also at home. The 21-year-old Tajikistan native is in her fourth semester at Weber State University, majoring in business administration with an emphasis in finance. She considered attending universities in Russia, Kazakhstan, Europe and elsewhere in the U.S. before deciding to enroll at WSU! Through the caring and generosity of her “second family.”

Rakhmatova first came to Utah as a high school student in the Freedom Support Act/Future Leaders Exchange, a U.S. government-sponsored program for students from former Soviet republics. She was placed with a family in Bountiful and attended Bountiful High School, but had no idea her year in Utah would lead to a repeat visit.

“I stayed in touch with my host family after I returned to Tajikistan. When I applied to a university in Moscow, I wrote to the family and told them the news,” Rakhmatova said. “My host mom e-mailed me back and said, ‘Why don’t you come back? You can live with us and go to university here.’

Rakhmatova originally chose WSU because it was less expensive for international students than other universities in Utah. Non-resident full-time tuition is $3,979 per semester for up to 18 credits.

After choosing the school for the bargain, Rakhmatova found a lot more to like. “I just love Weber State,” she said. “It’s such a diverse place. There are so many people who understand your background and where you come from.”

Although obtaining a student visa from the U.S. has gotten more difficult since the establishment of the Department of Homeland Security after the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, Rakhmatova’s experience was simple.

After her year of high school in Utah, she returned to Tajikistan and got a job as a receptionist at the U.S. Embassy. “I was considered a State Department worker,” Rakhmatova said. “So getting the visa was really fast. If I didn’t work at the embassy, or if I hadn’t gone to school in the U.S., it would’ve probably taken 4-5 months or longer to get everything done. Instead, it was a matter of hours.”

Even though getting permission to come here was easy, life away from Tajikistan can be difficult. “It is really hard to be away from my family. Especially on holidays, I think, ‘Oh, I want to be with you guys,'” Rakhmatova said.

This is when having her American family really helps. “Because I’m living with a good family here, it’s less hard for me,” Rakhmatova said. “And the longer I live away from home, the more I get used to being independent. She uses e-mail to keep in touch with her family, and writes letters and calls about once a month. It costs about $20 for a 20-minute phone call. “But it’s worth it,” she said.

When she is stressed, Rakhmatova deals with it by remembering why she’s here. “The first thing I do is say, ‘Okay, Nazira, you wanted this, and now you’re here. Be happy,’” she said.

Academically, Rakhmatova has had to develop new skills. “I had to really work on time management,” she said. “I had never kept a planner before, and now my planner is my best friend. I can’t live without it.”

Faculty members have made the adjustments easier, though. “Every single professor I’ve had has been incredible, very understanding and helpful,” Rakhmatova said. She said that in particular, Brian Davis, Matthew Mauritzen, Giana Curtis and Angie Banchero-Kelleher have been great to work with.

Between her studies and her job as an office assistant with the visual arts department, Rakhmatova hasn’t had a lot of opportunity to get involved on campus, but she’s planning to start a French club. “I want to minor in French, and I thought I might as well get together with students and practice,” she said.

A French minor is part of Rakhmatova’s plan for after graduation. “I want to work at the World Bank, or the U.N.,” she said. “That’s why I’m studying finance. I would like to go back to Tajikistan. My country is one of the poorest former Soviet republics; the economy is very unstable and weak. So I want an education that will help me make some contributions.”

For now, though, Rakhmatova is enjoying her experience as an international student. “It’s very challenging and exciting, being exposed to so many new things,” she said. “There are so many people at WSU who are interested in different cultures, and I have so many friends from different backgrounds. I just find myself at home at Weber State.”

—Jennifer Phillon, University Communications

University, Students Face New Regulations

August 1, 2003 brought the beginning of a new age for universities that admit international students: the implementation of the Student and Exchange Visitor Information System (SEVIS). SEVIS is an interactive database created by federal government. It enables the transmission of information between all academic institutions that admit international students and the Department of Homeland Security and Department of State.

“In the post 9-11 world, the complexities of immigration regulations are impressive,” said Gita Raksha, interim director of the Services for International Students office at Weber State University. She outlined the changes in immigration policy:

“Those used to be the INS (Immigration and Naturalization Services). But after 9-11, it became a priority that a new system be implemented. Once the Department of Homeland Security was established, immigration became part of its responsibility. Now, there is the USCIS (U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services).”

With the change in bureaucracy, there have also been many changes in the laws regarding international students. Senior Ashraf Al-Ruwatthi of Saudi Arabia, has been studying at WSU since 1999 and has experienced the changes firsthand.

“Before Sept. 11, you would fill out a visa application at 10 a.m. and have the visa by 4 p.m.;” he said. “Now, it takes 30-50 days to get an answer. There’s always an interview, and for some reasons, your application can be denied.”

Al-Ruwatthi understands the need for security measures. “It’s good to have people feel safe,” he said. But he hopes the system can be streamlined. “It can be very hard to keep track of school and all the new rules at the same time.”

In the SIS office, Raksha kept a three-ring binder handy: the Association of International Educators’ Adviser’s Manual of regulations affecting foreign students and scholars.

“This is actually a simplified version of the regulations,” she said. The binder is 4 inches thick.

In addition to keeping track of the federal laws and regulations that apply to international students, there are SEVIS tasks the SIS office must perform so the government can keep track of students’ status. The staff ensures that every student has a record in the database and updates that record as needed, verifying that students have arrived, registered and are attending classes. If a student leaves WSU or drops below full-time, their record is updated.

“SEVIS has really created an incredible amount of work,” Raksha said. “However, we must do anyone with questions about SEVIS or the laws regulating international study can find information at the USCIS Web site, www.uscis.gov. The Hot Topics menu includes a link to the Student and Exchange Visitor Program.

—Jennifer Phillon, University Communications
students, addressing a professor this way shows respect, but in America that’s only done by small children.

“We teach them how to write on paper: You start at the top left and write across on the lines; you stay within the margins. We explain how different methods of testing work. In some cultures, you’re expected to help others pass tests. Here, it’s cheating. “We try to be sensitive to their background but help them to get over the shock of experiencing things differently.”

While the ESL program deals with almost every aspect of its students’ experiences at WSU, it does not provide advice on the legal aspects of visas and immigration issues. That is the responsibility of the SIS office. (See story on page 3.)

**SIS: Always hopping**

In Room 143 of the Student Service Center, every day is a busy day. Aside from providing advice and support to international students, the SIS office also serves as a hangout spot.

“The office is always open,” said Al-Ruwaithi. “When students have free time, they go there. It makes them feel at home, helps them make new friends, and helps if they’re lonely or homesick.”

SIS tries to foster a sense of community among the international students while helping them feel more comfortable in unfamiliar surroundings. The office provides an orientation each fall for new students.

“We try to get them to connect with each other and start making friends immediately,” said SIS Interim Director Gita Rakhsha, who ended her term in December. She continues to work with international students while a search is held for a permanent director and will return to her position as a Counseling Center psychologist in August.

In the orientation, Rakhsha said, “We get them to talk. It’s difficult for someone new to know how to speak here. They’re self-conscious about an accent, and they don’t know what’s appropriate: How loudly do you speak? Do you make eye contact? We discuss the communication norms.”

They also discuss how academic experiences can be different than what students are used to. “There’s an academic casualness here in the U.S.,” Rakhsha said. “You can sit down with your professor. You have the freedom to question, express, challenge. But in most cultures, only formal ways of relating to professors are accepted.

“We explore different situations, having the students do things that feel awkward, such as calling their professor by the first name. This can be as strange to them as it would be for an American to suddenly call his grandmother by her first name,” Rakhsha said.

**Getting involved**

The SIS office is also home to the International Club and the International Student Advisory Committee (ISAC). The club offers social activities, such as a “welcome back” barbecue in the fall.

ISAC, a group created in the fall by Rakhsha, consists of seven students—two American—and the SIS director. “We needed a means by which international students could give input and ideas about what services need to be provided,” Rakhsha said. “We also wanted to bring together our international students with our American students so they could collaborate.”

The committee also serves as an advisory council for the international student senator, senior Michael Danso.

“ISAC has been really good,” said the business administration major from Ghana. “I am an advocate for international students: I present their issues to the student government. I need to communicate with the international students, but I cannot do that alone.”

“The committee gives me ideas about issues to address. And I can tell ISAC which issues I have to vote on, and we discuss them. It’s been very fruitful.”

Danso believes WSU provides a good environment for international students, and he encourages them to become active on campus. “I keep saying, it’s not just what the school can do for you, it’s what you can do for the school,” he said. “If you maintain a positive attitude and feel like you belong on campus, you’ll get a lot more out of being here.”

“Don’t hide in your room—not bullying is going to come look for you. You have to make an effort and be involved.”

**Teamwork makes a difference**

Another key to international students’ success is the relationship they develop with WSU faculty.

“The faculty plays a huge role in the success of these students,” Rakhsha said. She encourages faculty or staff members to contact her or the SIS office if they have questions about dealing with international students. “When a professor shows interest in getting to know or helping a student, it makes an invaluable difference.”

Al-Ruwaithi echoes this sentiment.

“Robert Milner (Assoc. Professor, Manufacturing Engineering Technology) was more than a professor to me. I learned something very important from him: If you don’t know something, go ask. Sometimes international students aren’t comfortable asking questions.”

He praises WSU’s dedication to its international population. “Some other schools might have more international students, but here the services provided are better,” he said. “At other schools, I’ve seen an attitude like, ‘Okay, you’re the international student, you stay over there and do your thing.’ At WSU, it’s more like a team.”

Danso agrees. “Weber State has definitely helped me be the person I am now,” he said. “I think the school does have our interests at heart.”

—Jennifer Philion, University Communications