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UA1B2/1 International Students History

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International Students History

In 1961 there were only two or three international students on WKU campus. They came from Saudi Arabia and Lebanon. On the other hand, the Bowling Green Business College attracted many more foreign students. Robert Wurster, an English teacher who had lived and thought abroad, formed the International Club. The Club united both groups of foreign students, together with friend American Students. The American members outnumbered the foreign ones until a few years later, when WKU started getting students from Iran, China and Nigeria.

International students had many problems during those first years. The students had no place to stay during the breaks, so Wurster organized host family programs. WKU had no funds for international students, and because they weren't citizens they didn't have access to loans. Faculty and students organized projects, such as talent nights, to raise some money. Wurster organized a system for 50-100\$ dollar loans that could get an international student through the end of the month until a check would come in the mail from back home.



FOREIGN STUDENTS AND ADVISER — Bob Wurster, foreign student adviser at Western Kentucky University, talks with Ed Ezedi, left, Nigeria, and Len Belfrage, Sweden, in his office on campus. Wurster

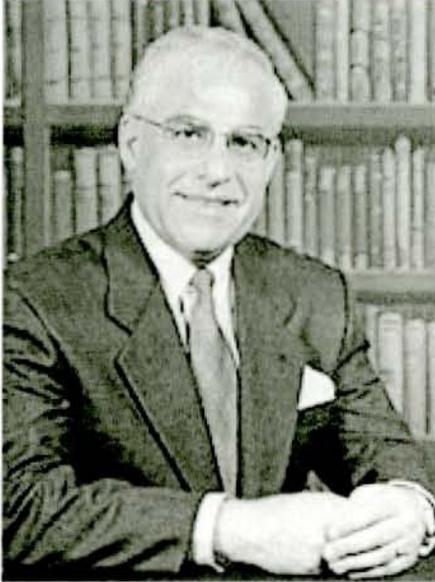
(Staff Photo By Paul Hightower) feels the foreign student program cannot flourish without community support and that the program is needed to protect America's best interests abroad.

Robert Wurster unofficially worked as an advisor to foreign students for about seven years. In 1968 the university officially named him foreign student advisor, but only reduced his teaching load by one class. He was never offered a full time job as foreign students advisor, though he was on call 24 hours a day. He emphasized the difference in advising American student who you can tell "let's make an appointment the day after

tomorrow", and foreign students who always had urgent problems: they didn't have money, their visa was run out, or their car had broken down. Professor Wurster never left

Bowling Green for Christmas until every foreign student had a place to stay, besides a motel.

In a 1984 interview, Rober Wurster told an interesting story about an international alumnus: Zuheir Sofia. Zuheir was out of money for the last week of the month and had to wait for his father to send him money from Lebanon. He approached Bob Wurster and told him his situation. Wurster knew that the administration was very sympathetic to students from poor families, so he went to the Financial Aid Office and asked for 50 or



60\$. He was told that they didn't have any for foreign students. He replied that they had a student who may not eat for a week. The person answered: "If it's a foreign student we don't have any. Foreign students are more trouble than they are worth". Zuheir Sofia later became president of the International Club. He graduated from WKU in 1969 with economics and business administration degrees. He is now chairman of his own private investment firm, Sofia & Company Inc.; serves as a trustee of The Ohio State University, chairman of the

board of the Arthur G. James Cancer Hospital and Research Institute, and member of the board of The Ohio State University Hospitals, The Ohio State University Foundation and the WKU Board of Advisors. He was inducted into the WKU Hall of Distinguished Alumni in 1998. Furthermore, the International Center in Normal Drive is co-named after him.

In 1966 there were 60 students from Iran in WKU, they were by far the most numerous group. That same year, during the Iran hostages' crisis, a pro-American rally at D.U.C. turn into an anti-Iran protest. Posters saying "Iranians Go Home" and "Iranian Load up the Boats" hung on the windows of Sigma Alpha Epsilon Social Fraternity house in College Street.

September 1996 both entities moved together into the International Center, forming the Office of International Programs. In the year 1999 the English as Second Language Institute program, a company that specializes in intensive English on-campus courses, was brought to Western Kentucky University. There were 20 students enrolled the first semester. By 2002 there were about 200 ESLI students.

In April 2001 the International Plaza was erected to celebrate the affluence and contribution of international students to our community. The flags of the 25 nations with the majority of students at Western (starting with the U.S. flag and following in decreasing order) are changed every year as the number of students from different countries varies.



During the September 11, 2001 international crisis, the American flag at the International Plaza was lowered and the other flags had to be removed because, in the confusion, there was no information or authorization from the countries to lower their flags. Since the first days, several plans were prepared to ensure the international student's safety from any kind of harassment or retaliation. The WKU Police carefully patrolled the areas of campus with a high density of international students, like PFT (the one dorm that now remains open during breaks for the good of international and out-of-state students). But as more and more gossip started rolling around campus, some students started worrying and feeling afraid. At that point several community residents "offered their homes to any international students who were afraid or upset. They wanted the students to know that most Americans do not blame all internationals, or all Arabs, or all Muslims for what has happened", said Larry Caillouet, President of International Programs in October of that same year.

The story of what happened during the 9/11 crisis is impressively different from the situation international students confronted in 1969 during the Iran hostage's crisis. The divergence clearly shows how international students, Western Kentucky University, and Bowling Green's community have blended into a positive relationship throughout the years.