

My Four Years

OSU's first foreign student body president reflects on what Beaverville is really like and how it has changed in four years

By George Abed, '62
Oregon Stater, summer 1962

In writing this article on my impressions of Oregon State University and my reflections on the various experiences I have had over the past four years, I see myself inescapably faced with having to choose between the role of a polite guest who is ready to leave his host and that of a scrutinizing inspector ready to submit his report. I will avoid making the choice by taking the role of a faithful alumnus and thus attempt to record my true impressions as they occur to me at this point of departure.

During my four years at OSU I never did claim to be a good student although I may safely claim to have been a versatile one. I came to this campus as a foreign student without a single personal acquaintance and by the time I became a senior, or even earlier, very few people could tell that I had come from Jordan only as recently as the fall of 1958.

Except for my nostalgic feelings towards camel-riding and my "objectivity" on the Palestine problem, I have had little difficulty in "adjusting." It is amazing what one can do in his four years of college. In my case, the four years were full of rich experiences most of which probably aimed at avoiding being poor — a phenomenon common to the 41 percent of our student body who support themselves entirely through college.

During the past four years I have come to know personally hundreds of people throughout the state in all walks of life. I have learned to like hot-dogs and hamburgers (with ketchup, mind you), memorized the batting averages of major-league baseball players and learned to believe in the four basic freedoms. Needless to say, I have enjoyed my stay at Oregon State immensely and I am grateful for the opportunity of pursuing my higher education.



Editor's note: "My Four Years" is reprinted from the Summer 1962 Oregon Stater, and is being posted here as an online-only sidebar to the above article in the Spring 2007 issue of the Oregon Stater. The 2007 article, available at www.osualum.com/stater, tells of how George Abed went on to a long career as economist with the International Monetary Fund, and then took on the task of setting up an international bank for the Palestinian people.

I am a firm believer in the student exchange program and I sincerely hope it will be expanded to include the largest number of students possible. It is through such programs that a genuine understanding among people of various countries may be established on the personal, and hence most effective level.

To most students from other countries, the opportunity of attending a university is considered a privilege not readily available to the large numbers of high school graduates. Education is highly prized and well respected. This is evident in the fact that teachers occupy a high status in other societies and are looked to for guidance and leadership. Consequently, a foreign student enters a university highly motivated and with high expectations of a unique intellectual experience.

With this state of mind I entered OSU and I must say my first encounter with the campus was that of disappointment. I found the average student dull in his conversation but pleasantly friendly and considerate. The type of conversation among my fellow freshmen students was shockingly trivial and childish. If you did not have any "hot-rod" or a cute blond girl to talk about or if you had not been chased by police or caught with illegal possessions sometime during your high school days, the earlier the better, then you did not have much to contribute to the highly worthwhile conversations that went on.

The difference between the freshmen and the upper classmen was that of degree and not kind. I was amazed to see that the world problems which seemed to occupy a priority position in the conversation of students in other countries were almost completely absent from the minds of many of the American students.

Also to my surprise I found that the average student in Europe or the Middle East was even more familiar with some of the American problems of racial segregation and foreign policy matters than the average American student himself, and that the intensity of concern over some of these problems was much higher in the case of the former than in the case of the latter.

That was, however, four years ago. The situation has improved immeasurably since then due to the impact which the world situation is exerting on the American public in general and students in particular.

The general description of the student body at Oregon State as being isolated, indifferent and somewhat lacking in purposefulness still holds true to a great extent. It may also apply to a great number of campuses across the country.

I was also surprised at the type of activities that occupy the university student's time. Most of them are of a purely social nature lacking in educational value and many of them represent residual attitudes carried over from high school days and the teen years. Thus to most students, college is merely a larger and somewhat more advanced high school which neither requires much adjustment nor does it pose a greater challenge.

To many students the four year period in college offers a refuge where they can postpone their social maturation process for four more years without having to make any fundamental changes in their normal course of life. The majority of them enter college with their minds made up on their courses of study and even their future careers and some would even resist getting exposed to any different course. In my opinion this is unfortunate.

One of my friends describes a college education as a period of four years during which ten or fifteen students "wake-up." This definition, although exaggerated, touches on a vital point. I view the college years as a period where the student would do much

soul-searching, questioning, believing and disbelieving; a period where he might encounter his moments of glory as well as those of frustration; a period where he would make drastic changes in his own pattern of values and attitudes; a period of active participation in the interchange of ideas and exploration of one's own potentialities and limitations.

And if a student goes through college without getting exposed to such experiences, then in my opinion he has shortchanged himself of a meaningful education. The tragic fact remains that most of our students do so.

This attitude of "protectionism" also exists, although it is not so obviously evident, towards the sincere attempts to "liberalize" the campus both on the curricular and extracurricular level. Not enough emphasis is placed on the humanities and social sciences nor sufficient encouragement is given to the various liberal arts programs on campus. It may be argued that this is the way it is the way it ought to be in a professional institution such as Oregon State.

I think this is an extremely narrow viewpoint to take, and a look at the leading technical universities in the nations shows that the strong liberal arts programs in their curricula have contributed greatly in the development of more comprehensive and more profound educational programs in these institutions.

This imbalance between the technical and the liberal aspects of education should be remedied if Oregon State is to contribute significantly to the production of scientists and technicians who are not only competent in their own fields but who also have a clear understanding of their historic role in making the world a better place for the human race to live.

This requires an understanding of all the social and human forces operating within this over-all process of human progress. At this crucial stage of man's civilization, we do not only need scientists who can put the atomic energy to use but also those who realize their historic duty to call upon man to use it sensibly and not for his own destruction.

This is the mission of a technical institution such as Oregon State University. I believe, however, that we have a long way to go and unless we make the necessary changes in our attitudes and open the campus for the more liberal minds we will definitely fall behind.

These are some of the basic and more significant critical observations I have made about Oregon State University. In my criticisms I have attempted to be sincere and honest with nothing but the utmost of love and dedication to Oregon State and with the single hope that it may become a better and greater university.

I also have been more critical than complimentary in my remarks so far and if there is any reason to give in this regard, it is because Oregon State has much of which to be proud and very little to be criticized for. Oregon State is one of the finest institutions of higher learning in the nation and will always continue to render its services and make its contributions to the progress of this country and the world.

Oregon State is the type of university which inspires a high morale in its students, faculty, alumni and other groups connected with it. This is one of the main positive attributes usually given to entering freshmen, visitors and parents, and it is very strikingly evident in the intensity of the enthusiasm and the extent of the support various programs receive on the campus.

Whether it is in attending athletic events, hosting alumni, parents or high school seniors, the students have always displayed the utmost in friendliness and service. It is all a reflection of the deep-seated loyalty to the university and great desire to do something for it.

The way in which our crowds behave at crucial moments in athletics events has drawn nothing but praise and admiration from visitors and observers. I recall very vividly the commendations of the Utah press to our band and other fans at the Provo playoff last season. These are positive and highly commendable values and attitudes I am sure will continue to characterize this friendly campus in spite of its monumental growth in numbers and in size.

Another pleasant feature of the campus is the tendency to preserve school traditions. There is a distinct difference between preservation of school traditions and preservation of out-dated attitudes which is overt conservatism. And although I find in the former many constructive implications of spirit-building and sense of loyalty I find the latter rather regressive in its effects. Both attitudes are not the same nor do they have to be necessarily mutually reinforcing.

A case in point here would be some of the eastern schools in this country and many European institutions where traditions are enthusiastically preserved simultaneously with the nourishment and growth of very liberal philosophies and intellectual attitudes. In my estimation, however, these two issues have been somewhat confused on this campus and until we make the difference clear and until we have placed the emphasis on the right things we will still be uncertain as to what we should preserve and what we should change.

A promising trend in the over-all growth of Oregon State is definitely the growth of the Graduate School and research opportunities and facilities on this campus. I can easily conceive of Oregon State becoming one of the leading few centers of research in the not-too-far-away future. At this moment our university can probably claim more than its comparative share of "firsts" in the fields of agriculture, forestry, the physical and the natural sciences.

The contributions made in these and other related fields have been instrumentally significant in the advancement of various industries. When such progress in the technical fields is allowed to be matched with similar progress in the fields of the humanities and the liberal arts there would be no limit to which this institution may grow in status and contributions.

In conclusion, I wish to extend my thanks and deep appreciation for the opportunity of allowing me to be a part of this dynamic process of change and improvement which help make a good university a better one. My thanks are extended to the students, the faculty, the administrators the alumni and friends of this great institution. I know now many of these as dear personal friends of mine whose help and cooperation made my four years at Oregon State the most enjoyable and most rewarding years of my life.