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Collapse of Their Currency Creates Problems for South Korean Students in U.S.

BY PAUL DESRUISSEAUX

COLLEGES in the United States are growing concerned that South Korea's economic problems are about to catch up with students from that country.

South Korea's unit of currency, the won, has lost half of its value since the country declared an "economic emergency" two months ago, and Seoul has agreed to austerity measures set by the International Monetary Fund as part of a \$57-billion bailout.

The number of South Korean students enrolled in U.S. colleges this year is estimated to be close to 40,000. Last year, according to the Institute of International Education, only two countries, Japan and China, sent more students to the United States than South Korea's 37,130.

With the start of a new semester—and tuition bills—just weeks away, many campus officials are trying to anticipate the needs of their Korean students and are looking for ways to help them.

The University of Wisconsin at Madison enrolled 463 Korean students last year—one of the largest such contingents in this

country—among its foreign-student population of 3,886. It also had a total of 585 students from three other Asian countries that have been experiencing financial difficulties: Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand. Madison officials are planning a meeting this week to consider ways they might assist students from those countries who are having unanticipated financial problems.

REQUESTS FOR HELP

"We have hundreds of students from those countries, and in recent days we have received requests from several dozen for information about whether the university could help them in any way," says Sheila Spear, director of International Student and Scholar Services at the university. "Many also have come in to say that they may not be able to come back next semester. We are very anxious not to lose these students, or to see their education disrupted."

Among the steps the institution will consider are an installment plan for payment of tuition, which is due when the semester be-

gins on January 26. Officials also will look for ways to let the students know about opportunities for part-time work on the campus. While U.S. immigration regulations prohibit foreigners on student visas from holding jobs, students can work at their institutions.

Gary Althen, director of the Office of International Students and Scholars at the University of Iowa, which enrolled about 200 students from South Korea last semester, says he has yet to see many Korean students in distress. He notes, however, that many of those at Iowa are in graduate programs, work as teaching or research assistants, and thus have a source of income.

"We've not seen a surge of students in need of help—not yet, at least," says Mr. Althen, who is president of NAFSA: the Association of International Educators.

He notes that "there are a lot of variables" to consider, including how much money students might have saved for their education, and what kind of support network of relatives and friends they might

have. "In my experience," he says, "this is not a group that will readily turn to the school for assistance—they will look first to their compatriots."

He does say, however, that he has seen "clear indications" that enrollment by Koreans in intensive English programs in the United States is declining.

'WE WILL DO EVERYTHING WE CAN'

The Peabody Institute of the Johns Hopkins University, a music conservatory, enrolls what could be the highest proportion of Korean students of any U.S. institution. Of its 630 students, slightly more than 100 come from South Korea. That sizable proportion was enough to prompt the institute's director, Bob Sirota, and his staff to discuss emergency assistance when South Korea's economic crisis became acute.

James Dobson, Peabody's registrar, says the institute already has put in place a deferred-payment plan for students who need it. "We will do everything we can to have them come back," he says. ■