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CMD-209

11/06/2018

Challenges for International Students

**The Challenges That International Students Encounter While Studying in United States Universities**

The idea of students studying abroad is always an exciting one. Most people would never pass up an opportunity to study in a foreign country when given a chance. Studying in the United States is usually a dream come true for most of the students especially for students who are from developing and third world countries. The US is an ideal place to study as it has ten of the top universities in the world. To some, the thought of living the famous “American Dream” tends to overpower them. When a student has such an opportunity, they forget the challenges that they may have to face in a foreign country as the experiences, laws, beliefs, and cultures are usually different from those of their mother country.

In trying to find out some of the challenges that these international students faced, four international students studying in different universities in the United States shared their thoughts. Students have different background origins making their experiences better for comparison. The students interviewed were, Ahmed who is a senior student in final year at the California state university, Los Angeles in the state of California studying Medicine. Ahmed is a scholarship student from Egypt, Africa. Abdulaziz is from Saudi Arabia studying at the University of District of Columbia, a freshman, taking law whereas Omar from Kuwait is also a student at the University of Washington in his final year, however, taking a course in business. Last, the final student is Rayan who is from France, in his second academic year and is taking a course in Engineering at the University of California, San Diego.

Students were asked about the experiences that they had as a result of studying in the US and the effects that these experiences had on their individual lives. Ahmed said, “Experience is great, and the country is even greater, I have however been unable to explore as much as I would want to since I need to keep up my grades and I also have a part-time job.” “The challenges can be overwhelming at first, but eventually I learned how to adapt.” The focus was based on the challenges that they were facing as a result of the fact that they were international students. Most of their challenges were similar.

Some of the challenges raised were being far away from their family members (homesick). All the four students confessed that they missed home, their family members and even their friends. One would think that the students that are almost done with their year are less homesick as compared to those that are beginning their academic year. However, this is not the case. Rayan said, “I am in my second year, and I still miss home, I thought that I would be used to this place already.” Omar explained, “I am in my final year and though there is the excitement I never thought I’d miss home this much. I am even counting the days before I leave.”

The second issue that was stated by all the students was the culture shock since students come from different countries. To some it was a harsh environment whereas to others they thought it to be friendly. Rayan, for example, said, “The culture here is quite harsh, I am used to friendlier environments being French.” For Omar and Abdulaziz, they found it to be quite awkward that women in the US even had more say than men. Abdulaziz said, “Here women hold political positions, work and address men as if they were of the same sex. In my country, Saudi Arabia, women do not work or hold political positions.” “This is also why I feel that my country needs a change.”

The other challenge is climate changes. The changes in the climate in the US have always depended on one’s location. For those that are inland, they experience harsh weather conditions as compared to those in the coastal regions. Students like Ahmed and Rayan found the weather to be quite favorable for them. They are both studying in universities located in the state of California by the Coastline. Ahmed from Egypt which is a desert and France that experiences winter, California could not be any better. Abdulaziz and Omar are also from countries that experience harsh desert conditions; however, they are used to the heat. When they started at the University of District of Columbia, they had trouble in adjusting for winter. They had never experienced such degrees of cold before. They also found it to be weird on how the women wore clothes that showed off their legs in the summer season. They had been used to women in their country wearing hijabs despite the heat levels.

The students are also faced with issues as a result of the financial crunch. Countries with lower economies are not used to working culture. The standards of living are also not as high as those in the US. Some of them are unable to cope, and it can sometimes be difficult for them to find job opportunities that are well paying. Rayan, in this case, stated, “I have no issue with working as it’s no different to France.” Omar, on the other hand, said, “I work just to keep myself preoccupied, my dad is an oil tycoon back home and caters for all my expenses.” For Ahmed it was different he said, “If I don’t get a job I will have to beg, for my parents cannot afford to cater for me while abroad.”

Making friends was also challenging. It was a social issue that could not be escaped. The interviewees all stated that this might have just been the biggest challenge yet. They noted that it was both easy and challenging. The students were friendly but also challenging due to the differences in culture. There was always the fear of approaching American students as there is uncertainty on the outcome of the response. It was harder for someone like Abdulaziz as he stated, “Being that my home country is Saudi Arabia, one is not allowed to address women as he feels. Men are forbidden to talk to the women, especially those that are not one’s sisters or relatives.” He continued to state that, “You even find that in restaurants like McDonald's there are separate sections for the women and the men. Due to my culture back home, I find it difficult to approach women and become friends with them.”

The students also stated that they faced the challenge of language barriers that exist. Students that do not speak English in their countries have it more difficult than the rest. In this situation, only Ahmed was fluent in English as English is one of the leading foreign languages in Egypt. The rest of the languages for the students were French and Arabic. A lot of miscommunication was ongoing. They had to take English classes and being unable to speak English made even making friends and a smooth transition harder.

When they feel homesick, there is the issue on time zone differences. The US is found on the West side of the globe, and the countries that these students come from are in the East. When they want to talk to their families, it proves difficult as it is daylight in the US and night in Asia. Rayan said, “I am a bit lucky the time zones are not that far apart from being that I am here in Washington DC and my family in France. My parents always wait up on my call. Facetime and Skype have made it even easier. When I cannot reach them, I email them, and as soon as they see the email, they respond.”

They went ahead to talk about the education systems that were very much different from those from their countries. Even the grading itself was different. It was clear that the students knew what they wanted to pursue in the university. Rayan wanted a degree in engineering as France is a country that takes technology and architecture seriously. For Ahmed, he is pursuing medicine as he wants to become a doctor and deal with the health issues that are facing Africa. The problem was the grading as it was challenging to identify whether one has aced their exams or not. They all stated that they had recorded quite a few fails before they got a hold of the system.

Students were from schools where they were not subjected to conduct research papers, assignments or class participation as a way of grading. In the US, however, the grading system is mostly based on class participation, assignments and research papers. Adjusting was difficult, but they had to work on their research skills to achieve good grades in research papers and improve in-class participation.

Concerning the above, the professors in the United States conduct their classes on a hands-on approach. They like engaging with the students on a one on one basis, enquiring on their weaknesses and even involving them in activities so that they can earn extra credits. Most of the international students are from countries whose professors and teachers operate on a hands-off basis.

The sports that are famous in the US are different from sports in other countries. In the US the major sports are baseball, American football, Basketball and Ice Hockey. Most of these games are entirely unfamiliar in other countries. In fact, among the four the only famous sport in other countries is maybe basketball. The students stated that they found it weird as all their countries value football which is the leading sport. Ahmed stated, “When people want to relax, they watch matches as a form of recreation. I don’t understand how football is uncommon.” In this case, football is what the Americans call Soccer. It was therefore quite hard for them to play any sport or enjoy any game especially when they are unaware of the rules.

Lastly, students had a challenge of food culture and the festivities. Most of the students were unable to enjoy the festivities. They were also not able to practice their festivals as they were in a foreign country that does not recognize their celebrations. For Ahmed and Abdulaziz, it was even more disappointing. Abdulaziz said, “I am unable to celebrate festivals like Eid ul-Fitr and Eid al-Adha, and they are religious.” With regards to food culture, in the US most of the foods are typically served in a buffet. The tastes, spices, and portions were overwhelming for the students, and most of them find themselves gaining weight in the first few weeks after arrival. The students had to resort to exercises and healthy eating to ensure that their eating habits do not make them obese.

From the students, it is clear that the problems are different. Friends of international students witnessed firsthand the challenges that the students endured before they got used to the culture and lifestyle in the US. For those being hosted by a family instead of living on campus, the hosts stated that the international students are ordinarily kind. Most of them are however usually shy and typically have a hard time adjusting to the culture. For some, the culture shock is too weird to the extent that they prefer staying indoors concentrating on their studies as compared to going out. One solution is to be friendlier to the international students as locals hence helping them to have a smooth transition and a home away from home.