

## Being an International Student in the U.S.A.: In Her Own Words

*Center Note:* Many students participate at our Center as part of their experiences at UCLA.\* Some come to the university from other countries. Hiu Lam (Vivian) King came here from Hong Kong. Near the end of her time with the Center, she had just a little time left to do one last project. We discussed the Center's various products on the challenges confronting immigrant students and pointed to the need for people to hear the voices of students. She thought that was important and decided to write and have the Center distribute the following brief essay conveying her personal reflections and advice.

**T**his is my fourth-year as an international student in the US. Being an international student makes me encounter many challenges, but I certainly learn a lot at the same time. Here I would talk about what I have learned from my experience for the past three years, and I hope this can help other international students to face their challenges better.

### Food

Because food is memory and represents attachment to our own culture, sometimes you would feel missing something inside yourself when you haven't eaten food from home for a while. It is great if you know how to cook your home food. But if you don't and there is no restaurant that has the food from your culture nearby, try to find other food you like. I find this helpful to form attachment to a place, especially when you start liking the food made by local people. And as a food lover, I also feel that being able to eat good food is comforting and relaxing (not saying you should do binge eating though, this is unhealthy).

### Society

Before I came to the U.S., I never studied anything about American history. The things I knew about the US were from the local news stations, people around me, and the US pop culture; which means it was a very general view about what was going on in the country. I started to understand this place more when I took classes (mainly social sciences) that would use examples from the American society. There are indeed a few differences between the America I had imagined and the America that really presents. Every place has its good and bad sides, and acknowledging that makes it easier for you to fit in.

Personally I really enjoy watching talk shows and reading news articles from social media. There are a lot of options you can choose from. It really helps me to understand more about the culture and society of America without paying too much effort. Of course, it is up to you to find the best way to get more information. But knowing more always helps.

### Sports

Different from where I come from, where sports are not a big deal to the society; sports can mean a lot to the Americans. However, it also depends on which part of the US you are in. When I was living in the bay area, most people I know were supporters of San Francisco Giants. Everyone was talking about the Giants. My classmates and even my professors were talking about their games. When the Giants won the World Championship, people went celebrate on the street. This had been new to me at that time, because I had no idea that sports can be such a big part of a community. Understanding the role of sports in American culture helps me to participate in the community more, because it explains why people act in a certain way. It also helps me to connect with other people. For example, you can start a conversation with people you just met with a topic about sports. Most of the time, we all have something to say about it.

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## **Transportation**

I always find transportation in the U.S. as the most difficult thing to adapt to. The reason is simple – I don't drive. It can be hard to get to somewhere without a car. People would take buses instead, but it can be very time consuming. Uber is quite popular nowadays, when a point-to-point transportation is needed. Sometimes having friends who are willing to give you a drive is probably the easiest way.

## **People**

When it comes to interacting with other people, it is essential to understand that everyone is different, and how they see the world may not be the same with you – especially for the people who do not come from the same culture as you do. However, there is no need to argue about who is right or wrong. Try to listen to what the others say, and understand why they think that way. You don't need to agree with them, but you would definitely learn something. At the same time, the people you talk to would learn from you too, and they would appreciate it. Respecting the diversity among people is important for building friendships.

One of my former roommates, an American, once told me how she felt about getting along with me. She stated that I was the first person she knew who was from another country, and she was surprised that there were so many similarities between the two of us. Without a doubt, there are always difference between people from different cultures and places. However, finding the common ground is helpful for building friendships and creating understanding of both cultures. Putting yourself in other people's shoes can help doing this.

## **Language & Communication**

Language can be one of the hardest things to get used to as an international student. First of all, not able to use your first language to talk with other people can make you feel lonely. It is also harder to deal with problems you encounter, because you need to know where to find help and how to describe the situation to others. A few people I know (including myself) find it hard to talk through the phone, because sometimes it is difficult to hear what people of the other end are saying. That's why I usually prefer sending text messages to communicate with others; and I also think that email works best when you need to follow instructions. In general, face-to-face communication should be easiest to make things clear. No matter what method you use, ask questions and repeat the response to confirm the information you get until you are sure you really understand them clearly.

When you are finding help and assistance, you should understand that Americans prefers communication that is more verbal and explicit. You can especially sense the difference if you come from a collectivist country. Doing so is not being impolite. Try to tell them what you need directly. Sometimes they really want to help you, but they just don't know what you need without you telling them.

The best way to learn a new language is to speak more. Sometimes it feels embarrassing when there are mistakes in speeches, but that is okay. Most people understand it is difficult to speak in a second language, so they would not judge you for trying. True, some people may laugh at you for your usage errors, but these are rare cases, and you don't need to care about that too much. You would learn from your mistakes. To a certain point, you can try to think in English mentally.

When you are able to do so, the words can come out from your month more easily and naturally. Being confident is the key point here.

## **Homesick**

Homesick has always been a challenge that I need to face during my time in America. In my case, I spent my whole first year adjusting to my new life, and it was not easy. I had prepared myself for loneliness, but the feeling of insecurity is the hardest to deal with. The feeling of losing connection with the things you know can be terrifying, and having to adjust to a new phrase of life takes time and energy. Once an international student told me that, in her view, there is no international student who never cries because of missing home. I have never done a research on this, but it is quite believable. It is normal to feel emotional when this happens.

During my first year, I was very fortunate to have a caring counselor. Even though she was an academic counselor, she listened to my problems and concerns, and gave some suggestions on how to better adapt my new life here. Having her as my counselor helped me ease my anxiety, and I knew more about what resources I could get from my school. Therefore, if you want to get more support during your transition, don't hesitate to find a counselor (usually a psychological counselor in such case). I can't say it will definitely help you, but it is a good way to find more support. So that's no need to feel strange and uncomfortable to do this!

## **Personal Growth**

One thing I am most certain about my time in the US is that I have changed a lot.

My relationship with people back home has changed without me really noticing it in the first place. This actually makes sense, because what we are experiencing has become so different. The way we see things and how it should be treated become different. This is painful sometimes as it feels like you are not part of both worlds – the US or your own community. It is like in the middle of nowhere. Once when I talked to my friend, who is also an international student, she said she could feel that too. However, she didn't think it is a big deal. As long as her friends were still her friends, she was fine with it. So it also depends on how hard you try to maintain the connection with people back home.

On the other hand, this means that you can relate to other international students. It is also a good thing to befriend with other international students, because you all know what difficulties you are facing and can give suggestions to each other. Although I encourage international students to interact with local people more, having a group of friends who come from the same culture as you do can be comforting. It feels nice to have friends you can easily connect to.

In general, being flexible can help you deal with your challenges better. Give yourself more time to deal with problems, so that you still have time to make correction when you make any mistake. If you can, try to think of a back-up plan in advance. Being an international student means that you need to rely on yourself. You need to know what resources you are having, and what you can do with these resources to fix the problem.

Growing up is hard. Growing up in a foreign place makes it even harder. I think we should all give credit to ourselves for growing up as international students.