

America has Skies for Everyone

Fresh off my flight to Philadelphia, one of the first things I said in America was, “It is so bright here!”

The sky was the most radiant and natural blue I had ever seen. It was like I was dancing amidst an array of blue shades that converged to offer a pure, luminous sensation. The sky seemed to be extending a warm welcome, and at that moment, I realized that my journey as a graduate student in America would greatly impact aspects of my world view.

For someone who rarely ventured outside the confines of my home in Nigeria, the decision to leave for America is the most courageous I have been. While I have not encountered much social culture shock – having absorbed a multitude of Hollywood portrayals and devoured countless books while growing up, I was not prepared for academic shock (it caught me completely off guard). The learning atmosphere here is very different than I was accustomed to. Despite holding two degrees from two very different universities and regions within Nigeria, I found myself unprepared for this transition. It was like everything had shifted into high gear and I simply wished for a pause button. Finding solace in the supportive friends I made in my classes and the research lab I joined has been instrumental in easing my transition. Prior to this, I had never been part of a lab, and I am genuinely grateful for the opportunity to work with supportive scientists and grow through my research. I have heard and experienced firsthand the challenges that come with the first year of grad school, but navigating it with a supportive community has been immensely beneficial. Now, in my second year, and since my initial academic jolt, I have secured a travel grant, presented a poster at a conference, co-authored two papers, obtained an

assistantship, and mentored two undergraduates. Although it has been quite an adjustment, I appreciate the support systems in place to guide us through this process. One such lifeline for me is the African Graduate Student Organization (AGSO).

Community plays a pivotal role in the lives of international students. It can be isolating to be far from home and the familiar. Discovering your community here at UD and navigating shared experiences and intersections is invaluable. Currently serving as a leader in AGSO, being part of decision-making processes that facilitate integration for international students with similar backgrounds as me has not only aided my personal growth but has also strengthened my commitment to giving back to the community and being a source of support for my fellow students. I attend panels and discussions related to other international students, and just listening to their experiences provides a reassuring sense of unity. There are new aspects of myself that I uncover everyday. Like how I sometimes use the American phrase "You're good" instead of the Nigerian response "No problem" to someone's apology; or my new love for wraps which I would never have touched in Nigeria. It makes me laugh at how much I am adapting. But I have also had experiences that affirm enduring connections to my African roots – especially when the AGSO made its debut by co-hosting the international students coffee hour with CGPS and sharing about African countries with other students. I am so grateful for these intersections and the opportunity that America has given me to experience this. There are not many international students back home in Nigeria, and so I cherish the opportunity to meet people from all corners of the globe. My two close friends are from Spain and India, and we whimsically call ourselves the "Musketeers." It is always enjoyable to sit down and chat over ice cream at UD creamery, sharing the experiences we continue to have here. I encourage fellow international students to

seek out a community, whether it is among those with similar backgrounds or individuals who differ from you. America provides you with the wings; use them to soar.

As I continue to meet new people, explore new places, learn more about myself, and grow, all these experiences teach me that, just like when I first landed in Philadelphia, the way I see the sky differs from the way some other international student sees the sky. However, at the end of the day, we all gaze at the sky and aspire to reach for it. To new international students – remember, you're not alone, and, much like me, you'll likely discover a supportive community at UD. So, "welcome home!"