

The Sandwich Conundrum

I still have vivid memories of clambering up the front steps of my dorm, my arms laden with two heavy suitcases, trying not to appear as though I had taken three flights and a Greyhound bus to get there. Nonetheless, I was thrilled to be in the U.S. and fulfilling my dream of pursuing my higher education here. My first dose of culture shock hit me that same day when I was ordering a sandwich from Subway and the employee asked me what kind of bread I wanted. In Sri Lanka where I come from they usually don't give you the option of choosing your bread. Reading my puzzled look the Subway employee motioned to their bread menu. I was unaccustomed to this level of customizability in my sandwiches and I was also increasingly aware of how I was holding up the line. The result was an ill-advised combination of ingredients in my sandwich and me running to my dorm to frantically google how to order a sandwich at Subway!

This was five years ago when I first began my journey as an international undergraduate student in the U.S. The culture shock which overwhelmed me at first has diminished, but I still encounter moments of it. I am now beginning my graduate studies at the University of Delaware and I find that I am now in a community that allows me to embrace my identity as an international student and still integrate with the larger school community.

At the University of Delaware I had the opportunity to take a summer program for international teaching assistants where I met graduate students from a host of different countries. I learned some of the cultural mores and biases of students like me from all across the globe. This made me realize how international students bring unique perspectives and opinions, promote cultural awareness, and make the educational experience more interesting and I was grateful to be a part of it. More importantly I savored the chance to indulge in the culinary traditions of my fellow international

students. A group of Chinese friends of mine invited me to a hot pot dinner, which is a Chinese fondue-type meal consisting of a simmering pot of broth, with raw meats and vegetables placed around it so people can add and cook whatever they like. It was a completely different dining experience and a fun social activity that I would definitely recommend. My fellow international students and I visited places like New York, and Washington D.C. that we had never visited before, often times with American friends. Through programs like this UD has helped me connect with both international and American students.

One thing I may never escape is the routine onslaught of questions I get about what Sri Lanka is like. Is it a lot like India? Do you eat the same food and celebrate the same holidays? I try to explain how Sri Lanka is a tropical island paradise rich in culture and history. I also try not to be irked when people think India and Sri Lanka are similar because we are neighbors. Instead I patiently explain how different Sri Lanka is from India in terms of its culture, customs, religions and food. After all promoting awareness of my culture is part of my responsibility as an international student, so I see this as an opportunity to do that.

There are also many differences between Sri Lanka which is a developing country and the U.S. which require adjustments all the time. Public transit varies strikingly, and while it is easy to get around Sri Lanka without a car it is not so in America. On the flipside driving in America is much easier with the improved road conditions and the absence of cows wandering on the road! For the first few years in the U.S. I didn't own a car but I had friends who were always willing to drive me. This is why forming a strong support system is vital to an international student's success, and this forced me to learn to connect with people of all backgrounds and personalities which is something I never had to do in Sri Lanka.

I still face some of the same difficulties I had when I first arrived although with time and experience things have become easier. Navigating subjects like taxes and healthcare in the U.S. is always challenging but I am encouraged to learn that Americans find these equally painful to deal with. Adapting to the varying climate in the U.S was also totally new to me since Sri Lanka sits on top of the equator and has no seasons. Even though Americans often complain about how hot it gets during the summer or how cold it gets during the winter, the weather in Sri Lanka can impact daily living. I am used to conditions including severe drought resulting in electricity and water cuts and monsoon seasons where it rains for weeks on end bringing floods and mosquitoes in its aftermath. I have not experienced a Delaware winter yet so I am really hoping I don't eat my own words!

The struggles of an international student in America are real but some are wildly exaggerated. From converting everything from American dollars to your home currency, and feeling abysmally poor or dangerously rich, depending on where you're from, to the fact that all employers are allergic to the words "visa" and "sponsorship", to the constant fear that you are being watched and every tiny infraction will result in you getting deported. In my experience these problems are often exaggerated, and international students are not under constant pressure. I have also found that the UD community embraces international students and the university strives to support us. It is up to us to make the right connections, follow our passions, and take advantage of the resources the university offers. It's all about customizing your experience just like with a sandwich!