

## **DISCOVERING DIVERSITY**

Moving away from my home in Colombia to the United States, to pursue a Ph.D. in Physical Chemistry, has been a deeply transformative experience, filled with a complex range of emotions. I always had this objective in mind, as it's a typical path in the field of science. However, looking back from the perspective of years ago, it seemed remarkably distant. But here I am, thanks to the support and motivation of many people in Colombia, both financially and emotionally.

This journey has not only been about academic growth but also personal. Leaving my comfort zone, my parents and my three beloved furry siblings behind, was one of the most challenging aspects of this move.

Living here, in contrast to Colombia, I encountered a diverse range of people from various cultural backgrounds. Initially, I expected significant differences that might set us apart. However, to my surprise, I found that we all face similar problems, fears, and hopes. These few months have helped me realize that, at our core, we are more alike than different; we all strive for a better future, regardless of the language we speak or the country we come from. This understanding has fostered a sense of unity and empathy, reminding me that we are all citizens of the same world. None of this would have been possible without a university that embodies inclusion from its very foundation—an institution that continually fosters connections within diverse communities, where, like me, individuals strive to forge new bonds and explore unfamiliar cultures.

One of the things I feared the most, which made me more hesitant about the decision to study outside Colombia was English, which I believe this is a common experience for many international students. I often found myself struggling to express my thoughts and ideas, most importantly I

cannot even express my anger in English yet. For instance, a few days ago, I was attending an R.A.D course in the police department, I was instructed on how to react in the case of harassment. I had to kind of shout 'get back' in a guttural voice to alert about a possible danger, but I could not do it, is not natural and I guess won't be my natural reaction to danger, even after several years.

Part of that English problem is teaching general chemistry to undergrads. This is a significant part of my academic responsibilities, and the thought of standing in front of a class in a language that was not my native, was daunting, sometimes it still is. However, it turned out to be a remarkable funny learning opportunity. I realized that our expressions differ, even though the basic science remains the same. Initially, I struggled to find the right words; for example, in Spanish, we say “despejar la variable X”, while in English, it's “solve for X”, a concept I had never encountered before. This issue arose on the very first day of class and my first thought was to say, “clear X”.

I also observed intriguing cultural differences, such as the significance of the U.S. healthcare system and the emphasis on self-care. Additionally, the active involvement of older people in the workforce caught my attention. Witnessing older people working in various roles showcases the diversity of life paths, inspiring me to embrace a lifelong learning journey. Moreover, that reflects the value and respect for elders in American society, which I have come to appreciate.

I made some amusing observations, firstly regarding the absence of trash cans in public restrooms. In Colombia, we're accustomed to having one trash can per toilet, and although I don't particularly like it, it's considered normal. Secondly, I found it curious how most US students walk without overtaking others. I had not noticed this until another Colombian mentioned it to me. I am still unsure why these things caught my attention. I could continue describing peculiarities, like the horizontal and vertical door handles, the absence of Spanish products in supermarkets, the consistent placement of eggs in the fridge, and the fact that I haven't encountered any street cats

since I arrived, but at the end, all these small quirks served as a reminder of how cultural differences can manifest in unexpected ways. If it's like this for me, coming from a culture not too dissimilar from the American culture, I can only imagine how it might be for someone from a vastly different culture, such as China.

In conclusion, my journey, though just beginning, has already taught me that pursuing our dreams often requires confronting personal fears and embracing the unknown. It has also shown me that there is always someone willing to offer a helping hand, to teach you and accompany you on your path, and these people not only guide you through the intricacies of local customs and traditions but also become an integral part of our journey. From this point forward, I will carry with me the profound knowledge that the bonds of diversity have the power to unite us all, transcending the boundaries of language.