

## **Navigating New Horizons: My journey at the University of Delaware**

Imagine stepping off a plane into a world where the familiar melodies of your native language are replaced by a sea of foreign words, and the warmth of home is suddenly exchanged for a whirlwind of unknown faces and unspoken customs. That was me two years ago, arriving in the United States—a place I had only dreamed of studying in, with expectations that would soon transform in ways I never anticipated.

In fact, studying at a U.S. university has been a journey of profound transformation for me. As an international student from Jacmel, Haiti, embarking on this adventure was both exhilarating and daunting. In Haiti, education is often a structured experience, with a strong emphasis on rote learning and memorization. At UD, I encountered a more interactive, discussion-based approach to learning. Instructors encouraged us to question everything, to debate, and to share our perspectives openly. During my first few classes, I hesitated to raise my hand or share my thoughts, fearing I might not express myself as eloquently as my peers. Over time, however, I realized that my unique perspective added value to the classroom discussions. I began to appreciate the diversity of thought and learned that expressing my ideas was far more valuable than remaining silent.

The anticipation of new experiences, academic challenges, and the opportunity to broaden my worldview filled me with excitement. However, it also brought uncertainties as I prepared to leave behind my familiar environment, language, and culture for a country I had barely known. Reflecting on my journey since I arrived at the University of Delaware (UD), I see a path marked by growth, resilience, and moments of joy, which have ultimately deepened my appreciation for both my heritage and the diverse perspectives I've encountered. When I first considered studying in the United States, my expectations were a mixture of high academic standards, opportunities for research, and cultural exchange. I expected a more rigorous educational system with vast resources and highly interactive classes. In many ways, UD has lived up to these expectations, providing me

with exceptional academic resources and the chance to engage in meaningful research as a Research Assistant on Project-DELITE (Delaware English Learners' Impact on Teacher Education). However, my perspective on American culture has evolved significantly since my arrival.

As a Haitian, I come from a culture deeply rooted in community, where personal interactions are filled with warmth and openness. Before coming to the U.S., I imagined a society of individualism and fast-paced living. To some extent, this has been true, but I have also discovered an underlying culture of kindness, curiosity, and collaboration. I've been welcomed into study groups, cultural organizations such as Caribbean Student Alliance, and even family gatherings with American friends, which has offered me a nuanced understanding of U.S. culture. The blend of independence and community support has been a refreshing discovery, one that I am grateful to have experienced.

One of the biggest challenges has been navigating the preconceptions people have about my Haitian heritage. Haiti is often portrayed in the media through a lens of poverty and struggle, but there is so much more to my country. Haitian culture is deeply rooted in resilience, creativity, and a vibrant sense of community. I wish more people understood that Haiti is not just a place of hardship but also a land of liberty, artists, poets, and a rich cultural tapestry.

At UD, I've had the opportunity to share my culture through conversations, presentations, and by joining the Caribbean Student Alliance. It's been rewarding to see that, over time, many of my peers and professors have become more curious and open-minded about my background. I remember a specific moment during a cultural fair when I spoke about Haitian art and folklore. A fellow student told me how surprised they were by the richness of my history, which encouraged me to continue advocating for cultural exchange and understanding. Adjusting to new customs and

traditions has been a journey of patience and adaptability. I've had to learn the nuances of American communication styles, which often prioritize directness and individual opinions. In Haiti, conversations are more indirect, and there is a strong emphasis on respecting authority and collective values. Initially, I found it challenging to adapt to the classroom dynamics, where students are encouraged to debate, question, and express differing viewpoints. Over time, I realized that embracing this style of communication allowed me to develop a stronger voice and the confidence to contribute to discussions.

For newly arrived international students, my advice is to approach this transition with an open mind and a willingness to learn. It's essential to recognize that feeling out of place at times is part of the process, and it's okay to seek support. UD offers various resources for students, such as counseling services and cultural clubs, which can help ease the transition. The challenges I faced, from overcoming language barriers to adapting to different academic expectations, have been balanced by the numerous opportunities UD has offered. Working on research, presenting at 22nd Annual Policy & Practice Institute: Delaware's Conference on Public Education 2024, and connecting with students from around the world have not only broadened my academic skills but also expanded my worldview. Every hurdle I encountered has taught me valuable lessons in resilience and has reminded me of the importance of embracing new perspectives.

Looking back on my journey, I am grateful for the challenges and triumphs that have shaped my experience as a graduate student in the United States. The opportunity to study at UD has not only allowed me to pursue my academic goals but also to grow as an individual, bridging the gap between my Haitian roots and new environment. To future students, I encourage you to embrace the journey with an open heart and mind. Your unique perspectives are not only valuable but essential to fostering the rich tapestry of diversity that makes the university experience so rewarding.