

CROSSING OCEANS

Leaving home for the first time is a significant milestone, especially when you come from a middle-class family and that home is halfway across the world.

As I stood there packing my bags in my room, I felt a whirlwind of emotions – excitement, anticipation, apprehension, hope, and the promise of personal growth. I had never lived away from home before, let alone in a different country, and the thought of being thousands of miles away from my family was both thrilling and terrifying. This journey wasn't only about pursuing an education but also discovering who I could become in a new and unfamiliar place.

I remember having tears while hugging my parents and friends at the airport. When I was hugged by my father, he murmured in my ears, saying, “No matter how far you go, just remember you will always have a home to come back to, and we are always here for you.” That’s something that struck me and gave me the strength that I needed to take this chance.

From the moment I stepped off the plane, I was struck by how different life here was compared to India. I was super excited but also incredibly overwhelmed and nervous. My first few days were spent trying to adjust to these differences while dealing with jet lag and homesickness and roaming around the campus, taking in its beauty and infrastructure. For the first time in my life, I was entirely on my own, thousands of miles away from home. Every small task—whether it was finding my way around campus, setting up my room, or figuring out where to eat—felt like an overwhelming challenge. It felt new and different but, at the same time very exhilarating.

Before coming to the U.S., I had high expectations of what university life would be like—an intellectually stimulating environment filled with dynamic class discussions, networking

opportunities, and a smooth academic transition. What hit me the hardest, though, was the difference in academic expectations. Back in India, my education had been heavily focused on lectures and memorization, but here, the learning environment was completely different. It was interactive and discussion based. We were free to speak our minds, and it wasn't about having the right answer; it was about engaging with the material and contributing to the conversation and, with that, having fun learning what was being taught.

Living in a different country also meant adjusting to cultural differences. Small things, like the way people greeted each other or how they approached time, were different. I remember being surprised by how friendly people were in the U.S.; strangers would smile or say "hello" on the street, something I wasn't used to. Sometimes, there's an assumption that international students must fully adapt to the local customs and behaviors, but what I've found is that the best experiences come from a mutual exchange of cultures. I began sharing more about my culture with my classmates—whether it was through conversations, food, or even small traditions I brought from home. I could see that people were genuinely curious and that curiosity opened doors to deeper connections.

Food was a big adjustment, though. I missed the flavors of Indian cuisine—the spices, the comfort of my mom's homemade meals. American food tastes delicious in its way, but it never felt as satisfying. I tried cooking a few of my favorite Indian dishes in the shared kitchen, but they never quite tasted like they did back home. In those moments, homesickness hit me the hardest and made me tear up because of that overwhelming feeling.

Despite these challenges, one of the most rewarding aspects of my time as a graduate international student was finding a community of people who understood what I was going through. We bonded over our shared experiences, missing home, adjusting to a new culture, and

navigating the complexities of living abroad for the first time. It was comforting to know that I wasn't alone in feeling lost or overwhelmed. They felt like a home away from home. Just by celebrating a few of our festivals together, it felt like home and gave me a sense of comfort and hominess.

The experience of leaving home, navigating a foreign culture, and adapting to a new academic system wasn't easy, but it was incredibly rewarding. I learned resilience, independence, and the importance of being open to new experiences. One of the biggest lessons I've learned is that growth often comes from discomfort. I had never thought of myself as particularly brave, but every day I spent in this new country, figuring things out on my own, I became a little braver. I realized that it was okay to miss home and that it didn't mean I wasn't strong enough to handle being away. It just meant that I loved where I came from. I learned to navigate a new academic system, made friends from all over the world, and even started to enjoy the freedom and independence that had once scared me. Even though I'm still overwhelmed with fear and excitement, I would never give this up for anything. This is something I have always wanted to do, and I will always be very proud of myself for taking this step.

For every future international student who is scared to take that step, I would say: be patient with yourself and take that leap of faith. It will be challenging but those challenges would make you stronger. And in the end, you will not only achieve your academic goals but also gain a deeper understanding of the world and your place within it, just trust the process and believe in yourself and remember you always have the choice of booking that ticket and going back. This adventure is more than just a degree—it's a journey of personal transformation, and it's one that will stay with you for the rest of your life.