

International Student Essay Contest

Graduate Student

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### **Beyond Borders: Finding Pride and Belonging in Korean Culture at UD**

Studying in the United States has always been a blend of excitement and uncertainty for me as an international student. Arriving from South Korea for the first time over a decade ago, I was eager to learn and grow but unsure how much of my own culture would find resonance here. In my initial experience, it seemed that American universities - at least where I studied and lived during my undergraduate years - were still evolving in their recognition of international diversity in ways that would make students feel deeply connected to their cultural roots. Korean culture, in particular, was not yet widely recognized; aspects like Korean music, food, and traditions were just beginning to emerge on campus. Fast forward to my current experience at the University of Delaware, and the difference in how international cultures are celebrated is remarkable. Events like Korean Night, K-pop performances, and international food fairs now foster a meaningful sense of belonging, pride, and optimism for the future.

When I first came to the United States 15 years ago, the cultural landscape was notably different. Back then, I seldom saw events celebrating international cultures or opportunities for non-Americans to share their unique backgrounds. While I recognized that Korean culture had started gaining traction globally, it was still mostly uncharted territory on college campuses. There were few occasions where I felt that my cultural identity was represented or understood. Korean music, for example, was virtually unknown outside of niche interest groups, and while some

students showed interest in Korean food, it was far from the mainstream sensation it is today. In short, there was limited recognition of what international students brought to the table. It was as though we were expected to adapt without the mutual exchange of learning about each other's cultures.

Today, my experience as an international student at UD is worlds apart. The university's commitment to inclusivity and cultural representation is reflected in countless ways, perhaps none more moving to me than Korean Night. This event brought together students, faculty, and community members to celebrate Korean culture in an immersive and interactive way. As I walked into the event hall filled with the lively sounds of K-pop, the sight of students dancing joyfully to Korean music was both surreal and heartwarming. For the first time, I felt that my cultural heritage was not only recognized but also celebrated by a diverse community. Watching students from various backgrounds participate in K-pop dance routines, eager to learn and enjoy, filled me with an overwhelming sense of pride in my identity. It was a moment that reinforced my belief that I belonged here, not just as a student but as part of a global community.

Beyond the music, Korean Night showcased the rich flavors of Korean snacks and dishes, allowing others to experience Korean cuisine firsthand. Seeing people enjoy Korean snacks, which represented so much more than food to me, symbolized a bridge of understanding and respect. It was as though, through these shared tastes and experiences, a piece of Korean culture found its place within the UD community. The food was not just food for me; it was an invitation to others to partake in my culture, a shared moment that blurred the lines between "local" and "international." Events like these show me that UD does not just support diversity in theory; they foster it in practice. Such events make international students like me feel seen, valued, and proud to share who we are.

This transition over time - from limited cultural recognition to full-fledged celebration - has been inspiring to witness. UD's commitment to diversity reflects a broader shift within higher education, emphasizing inclusivity, mutual respect, and shared experiences. It is heartening to see that the university values diverse cultural expressions, which foster understanding and respect among students of all backgrounds. The university's mission to develop culturally aware, creative leaders is reflected in every event, every class discussion, and every student initiative that promotes cultural understanding.

To future international students, I would offer this advice: Embrace your culture proudly and share it with others, because this campus is a place where diversity is not only accepted but celebrated. Attend cultural events, try foods from other countries, and be open to sharing your background, knowing that UD is a welcoming space where your identity adds richness to the community. Don't be afraid to introduce your peers to your traditions, because you might be surprised by how interested they are in learning about them. The campus environment today is open and curious, ready to learn from each unique culture and create a more inclusive atmosphere.

Reflecting on these experiences fills me with optimism and pride, not only for my identity but also for the progress that has been made over the years. The University of Delaware has grown to be a place that genuinely values international cultures and the students who bring them here. As a Korean student, I feel fortunate to witness this shift, to be part of a university that honors its mission of fostering a global and diverse society. This experience has shown me the power of cultural exchange and reminded me that in sharing who we are, we become a stronger and more vibrant community, prepared to contribute creatively and thoughtfully to an increasingly interconnected world.