University of Waterloo in Canada

There is an old Chinese saying, "It is better to travel a thousand miles than to read a thousand books." A balanced education includes study and exposure. Canada has a long tradition of immense cultural diversity: 60% of the people have English as their mother tongue and 24% of the people speak French. It is indeed a very beautiful place of mountains and lakes. I enjoyed myself very much when I was in Canada for my four months study.

The University of Waterloo is one of the top universities in Canada. It has close links with many leading engineering firms in the country. According to the 2002 reputation survey by MacLean's magazine, it was rated the "best overall" university in Canada for 11 years in a row. I was amazed by the cutting-edge technology that the school offers.

It is because this university is one of the top universities in North America that I had many opportunities to meet up with smart people from all over the world. I made a lot of new friends in the school; local Canadians, Americans, Japanese, Korean, Germans, French, and English and I realized that different people from different countries have different cultures. I really enjoyed communicating and mixing with them. This cross-cultural international exposure greatly shaped my mind and sharpened my oral skills. At the same time, it also extended my horizon. I began to understand why we need foreign talent, because some of the foreigners are just so smart!

The University has a dedicated organization to take care of the overseas students like us. The "International Student Association" offered us various activities throughout the term. They organized a welcome BBQ on the second day that I reached the school, a Niagara Fall trip at the beginning of the term, a Montreal/Quebec tour, parties, movies etc. Also, all these activities are at student prices! Joining some of these activities provided me with another good chance to meet up with other exchange students from other parts of the world. I finally had a chance to understand what they mean by "globalization". Based on today's technology, different talents from different parts of the world can be drawn together easily. But to tell the truth, sadly some students from Europe had not even heard of Singapore!!

The biggest difference between studying in Canada and NTU is that there is no more spoon-feeding education. You, and you alone, determine how much you are going to learn. For instance, I was very amazed that all their students prepared fully before each and every lab session. When they reached the lab, they will just carry on and start on their own. However, at the first period of my lab session, I was the only one standing in front of my desk and waiting for the instructions. Unfortunately, there was no briefing and no instructions, the teaching assistant was walking around and even he realized that I was doing nothing, but he did not come near me until I asked! Another big difference is the style of the lectures. In Canada, all the lectures are very interactive. The lecturer will keep on asking us questions and when one question was asked; many students raise their hands and start getting involved in the discussions. A one-hour lecture will eventually become a one-hour tutor-to-students discussion.

Having the "just-need-to-pass" attitude will only hinder you. To be honest, that was what I thought when I first went into the school. However, after the first week of studying in Canada and constantly not understanding the lectures and tutorials, I began to change my attitude. Some nice Canadians spent a lot of time and effort to help me to adapt into the new environment as well as to cope with my academic problems. Some of them also taught me how to cook, how to use the washing machine, where to get cheap groceries, when to get a discounted-moving ticket in downtown, and so on...

There are also many rooms for us to enjoy in Canada. My friends and I joined the local tours to Ottawa, Montreal and Quebec; we spent our Christmas in New York, Washington; we went to the Casino and had some "fun"; we also went skiing! Oh, did I mention that there is a lot of snow in Canada? After November, at the beginning of winter, the sky will slowly turn white and almost every day from mid November, you will witness snow coming down from the sky! It is really very beautiful to see all the area being covered by a white layer. Anyway, Christmas should have some snow right? I am not sure if it were only my imagination, but I felt that when it was snowing, even the air smelt fresher!

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