

My Experience as an Exchange Student with the State University of New York at Buffalo

When I first applied to participate in this exchange programme, nothing quite prepared me for what lay ahead of me. But now, looking back, I just wished I could spend more time there. I have done and seen a lot but there is so much more that I want to do and even more for me to discover. I hope this summarised essay effectively capture the fun and excitement that I'd had throughout the four and a half months that I'd spent in the US of A.

From the essay that one have to produce to the interview that one have to go through, there is much more hassle that could simply put one off from applying for the exchange programme. And then there is the visa application, the vaccinations, the courses that needed to be approved and not forgetting the costs involved even before you set foot on your journey! At the same time, you have to set your mind on your lectures and tutorials. But now, come to think of it, every effort that I have put in and the hassle that I have gone through in preparation for this trip has been worth it.

I have set two main objectives for going for this programme, firstly to be able to experience a whole new education system and secondly to be given the opportunity to meet and interact with students from all over the world.

It started from the first day of orientation for international students where I was given a chance to meet our exchange co-ordinator in the University at Buffalo (UB), a wonderful lady that every exchange student there speaks highly of. She is someone who will readily assist you in your difficulties during your stay, despite her tremendous workload. Do not expect the orientation programme to be as rigorous as the ones we had in NTU but it will give you the time to get all your administration done and at the same time, adapting to the new environment. But one thing for sure, you will feel welcomed during this week-long orientation.

For any students who have gone through our system of education, I would believe that he or she would face little difficulty, if any, in getting used to the American education system. The emphasis is not on the finals but the assignments you produced that are meant to give you the opportunity to apply whatever that you have learned in class. There are also frequent quizzes and exams that await you in class, plus formal class presentations that you'd have to give. The small class capacity promotes interaction between the lecturer and the students. Never have I been in a situation where your professor would come to class dressed up as one of us (in T-shirts and jeans), thus creating a relaxed and informal atmosphere during class. The school does not exercise excessive control on its students but instead treat you as adults, assuming that you are responsible enough to know what is good for you. This is the way I feel every tertiary institution should treat their students. There is a great emphasis on academic honesty and integrity and the university takes a very serious view on this.

The Fall semester would be the best time of the year to visit the country. For one thing, you'll be fortunate enough to witness the glorious transformation from summer to autumn and finally to winter. During the early autumn months, you'll be blessed with such great weather that gives you every opportunity to wander and explore the country for there are thousands of things there to discover. From apple picking to hiking, or just to take a trip up to another city such as Toronto, Chicago, Boston, New York City, etc., one thing for sure, nothing would be enough for you. A weekend could be spend just admiring the magnificence of the famous Niagara Falls which is only about half an hour's drive away from campus. And finally when the trees shed their leaves and the snow starts to fall, the city transforms itself, setting a landscape of such ethereal beauty, carpeting every space there is with fluffy white flakes.

And when it is too cold to travel, I would be contented just spending my time in the lounge by the television. You'll be spoilt for choice with NBC, ABC, CBC, CBS, FOX, WB, USA, CNN and many more, not forgetting the campus' very own movie channel. I quote from one of my travel guides, "watching television is like a whole new experience that should not be missed". I am conscious of the harmful effects of excessive television but give yourself a break. Afterall, you're only there for a few months. You'll be the very first to watch your favourite American action-packed dramas or sitcoms. And then there is the cinemas, with the latest movies which would for some, either take months to get to your local cinemas or never at all. Furthermore, there would be no interference from the ever-so-strict local censorship board. It is definitely heaven for the avid television fans and all the movie maniacs.

And as for the students, I would describe UB as a melting pot attracting students from all over the world. Unlike in NTU, one can differentiate an exchange student just from his appearance. But there, you'd be disappointed should you be hoping for the spotlight to shine on you. There are students from every continent there is and from such diverse backgrounds.

Life in America may not be as forthcoming to some of us who prefer to uphold our traditional Asian values and culture. Certain behaviour, ideas and views may be frowned upon and somehow be viewed as unacceptable by the conservative Asians. This could be a culture shock to some of us but it is all part of the challenges of living in a foreign land. As for some who'd imagine that life in an American institution would be what you had seen in the once popular American drama, 90210, you will realise that this is not always the case.

Take the time to get to know the Americans as they are as interested to know more about you as much as you are interested to know them. Though some may still be ignorant and think that Singapore is part of China, there are many others who do remember our country for that one eventful incident - the caning of Michael Fay.

Unlike in Singapore, it would not be excessively competitive where you feel that everybody is competing against someone else. I set my mind at my own comfortable pace and for once, I could honestly admit that I took pleasure in learning what I am pursuing. An MBA student there who also graduated from our local university commented that, she too realised that she is effectively learning something and not just studying for the sake of exams.

Another thing that I find rather interesting is the fraternities and sororities that apparently is a "big thing" is American universities. The stories and tales I heard of their "Rush Week" never fail to intrigue me and it makes me wonder if they are actually true. I've got to mention "The Buffalo Chips", UB's Men's Acapella Group. I was privileged enough to watch them in concert and was overwhelmed by the spirit and vibrancy they put in, in their performance. As for the rest of the student organisations and clubs, I believe they would not have a problem of students participating in them in return for points that they hope would ultimately qualify them for a place in the hall.

For some of us, this is the only time we get to experience an overseas education. An overseas stay of such duration could make you look at things from a different perspective, start making you appreciate the things back home, to grow to be more independent or maybe a chance to refine your culinary skills. As for myself, it is all these and many more. I have been blessed with this opportunity to meet people from different backgrounds and different cultures many of whom have flourished into friendships, those I will always remember and that will remain close to my heart. To some of you who will be making your way there, I hope you'll have such a memorable time just as much as I did.

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