

*My
Freshman Year*

What a Professor Learned
by Becoming a Student

Rebekah Nathan



PENGUIN BOOKS

2005

the descriptions of student life attest, diversity is one part of college culture that is intimately tied to community, another part. And both parts are ultimately conditioned by structures in the larger American society—including values of individualism and choice, materialism, and the realities of U.S. demographics—that may seem, at first, to have little bearing on whether college diversity increases because freshmen Joe and Juan truly become friends, or whether Jane strengthens community by deciding to attend Movie Night. But they do. Not understanding this leads to a reality about diversity and community in university culture that does not match its rhetoric, and a persistent confusion about why this is so.

CHAPTER 4

As Others See Us

As a partial outsider in college owing to my age, I found myself drawn to other partial outsiders, and vice versa. Those of us who in some way deviated from the norm perceived something in common and ended up, I noted, seeking one another out. Thus, the transfer student on my hall became a friend; I was close, too, to the more withdrawn and rural students at Previews; the lone African American student in my freshman seminar, and the international students in my dorms and classes.

My conversations with students from other countries were often illuminating. As anthropologists have come to know, culture can be invisible to its natives—so taken for granted that it seems unworthy of comment. Although I could view student life with an outsider-professor's eye, there was much about the U.S. college scene that, in its familiarity, was invisible to me as well. The more I spoke with international students, the more I noticed familiar refrains that both educated me and reminded me about my own U.S. and academic culture. After having many such informal conversations with both international students and teachers, I decided to add formal interviews of international students to my investigation of U.S. college life. In all, I conducted thirteen formal interviews, as well as several informal conversations, which included perspectives from Somalia,

England, Japan, Germany, China, Mexico, Spain, the United Arab Emirates, India, Malaysia, France, and Korea. In this chapter I share the comments made and stories told by international students as they grappled to understand and to fit in at AnyU.¹ Their struggles, surprises, and dilemmas pointed to both mundane and profound revelations about U.S. students, professors, and the college education system.

Getting to Know "American" Students

One of my earliest international contacts was with a young Japanese woman, Toshi, who lived on my floor. During Welcome Week, after we played volleyball together, I introduced myself and began a casual conversation. When I saw her again at a workshop, we eyed each other like long-lost friends, and she introduced me to two Japanese friends accompanying her who lived in other dorms. The four of us talked enjoyably for a while, and it was clear that the three exchange students were pleased to be engaged by an American student in this first week of activities.² I told them that I'd like to make dinner for them, and departed intending to stop by Toshi's room and ask her to invite her two friends to a Friday night dinner at our dorm. As I left, though, one of the women (whom I'll call Chiho) asked me a brave question in slightly halting English: "Excuse me but I don't understand. How can we have dinner together if you don't have my phone number and I don't have yours?"

I saw her confusion. After exchanging telephone numbers with all three women for assurance, I asked Chiho whether people had invited her before without following up. "I think so," she responded "but I'm not sure. I have been here for two months and I am still very confused by the customs. American students are so friendly and so nice. They are so open about wanting to get together, but they never take my phone number and they never contact me again. When I see a woman I met

two days ago, she does not seem to know me or remember my name."

I winced at the truth of the friendly American veneer. "Nice to meet you," "Drop by," "See you soon," all sounded like authentic invitations for further contact. And yet the words were without social substance. It was not just Japanese, or even non-Western, students for whom deciphering friendliness was a problem. One German student commented: "There are some surface things about American friendliness. Like 'How are you?' A girl asked me that one day when I was feeling sick, and I answered that I wasn't too good but she just went on like I had never said that. Maybe it's a sign of caring to say that. But in Germany, 'How are you?' is the actual start of a conversation rather than just a hi/good-bye."

Meeting and befriending Americans in more than a superficial way presented challenges to many international students. Even in class, students found it difficult. One Asian student told me how, in her linguistics class, the teacher had told the class that the native speakers should try to include international students in their groups for the study project. "But when we formed the groups," she recounted, "nobody even responded or asked us to be in their groups, so the international students had to make their own group."

In some ways, their dilemma was like my own. Where is community in the American university, and how does one become a part of it? International students learned quickly that being a student, being a dorm mate, being a classmate—none of it automatically qualifies you as a "member of the community," that is, someone whom others will seek out for activities.

"In Korea," one woman told me, "if we all take class together and our class ends at lunchtime, we would go out together as a group." No such group outing was available as a way for new students to meet others in their classes. Because in Japan, creating a network of friends and contacts is a major purpose of going to college, Midori found it surprising that U.S. students "leave the classroom right after class is over. They come to class

to get a grade, not to meet people or talk to people. They leave right away and don't talk to other people. I don't get why students run out of class, packing up and running out immediately."

Many students expressed surprise at the dull reception they received and the lack of interest they perceived from American students about their experiences and backgrounds. "Students don't ask me anything about my life," a Somali student lamented. "Even my friends . . . they don't ask me questions about how I got here, or my life in other places." A student from the United Arab Emirates observed: "Here everyone minds their own business. They're not that hospitable. Like if someone from the U.S. came to the UAE, people would take them out to eat and ask questions. It would be a long time before they paid for their own meal." A Mexican student concurred: "I'm lonely here. I don't think an American coming to Mexico would have the same experience as I've had here. We're more social, more curious. We'd be talking to him and asking questions."

"When I talk to them," one Japanese woman noted with dismay about her American classmates, "they don't try to understand what I say or keep up the conversation. They don't keep talking, and I realize that they don't want to take the trouble to talk with me." She thought that maybe the problem had to do with her thick accent. When I asked another Japanese student what questions students had asked him about his country, he answered: "Well, mostly nobody asks me anything about Japan. Some Americans don't care about other worlds. They don't ask questions, but those that do sometimes know more about Japan than I do."

Almost all international students discovered some individuals who were interested in their lives, but it was much more the exception than the rule, and these tended to be U.S. students who were well traveled or who had been exchange students themselves. "What I miss most," admitted one student, "is to have someone to talk to, to feel that someone else is interested in you." A Mexican student agreed: "I've met people who are

interested in me, but for a lot of other people it's . . . 'whatever'! My [car] mechanic is more interested in my life and my background than other students."

It was difficult, even for someone born in the United States, to see that the outward openness of both college and American life was often coupled with a closed attachment to a small set of relationships, many of them (as we saw in chapter 2) developed early in college and focused on people of very similar background. International students were often forced into the same structure, finding that despite their interest in forming friendships with Americans, they seemed to end up in relationships with other "foreigners." In many ways the active international programs, which ran socials and trips for its students, reinforced a pattern in which international students came in contact mostly with other non-U.S.-born students.

It was interesting to me that, echoing the camaraderie I felt with "others," a number of international students indicated that they found it easier to get to know U.S. minority students than white students. One student told me, "They [minorities] seem to be less gregarious than other Americans, in the sense that they seem not to have as many friends and they are looking [shyly] for people themselves." In practice, despite the fact that many students had come to the United States expressly for the "international experience," the majority fraternized with other foreign students.

"I think I know how to meet Americans," Beniko, a Japanese student, told me, "because my boyfriend meets people and has some American friends. It's his interests." Beniko explained to me that Americans find relationships when they identify hobbies or elective interests in common. She went on: "My boyfriend likes playing the drums, and he plays them in the dorms and people come into his room. They're like a friend magnet. It's the same with martial arts. He likes that, and other boys do too, and they watch videos together, like Jackie Chan. If you don't have a hobby in this country, it's harder to meet people. I need to develop a hobby."

Relationships and Friendships

Both Midori and Reiko had been excited, if a little nervous, to be assigned an American roommate. It was surprising to Reiko that there was no formal introduction; roommates met, instead, when they both happened to be in the room at the same time. Midori had heard that many Americans were messy and loud, but she knew that wasn't true across the board and hoped her roommate would not fit the stereotype.

As it turned out, Midori's roommate—neat and fairly quiet—*was* different from her expectations, but she presented challenges on another level. She spent most days and nights at her boyfriend's apartment, returning only one or two days a week to their room. And when she did, as Midori explained, her personal and spatial boundaries were sharp:

It bothers her if I change anything in the room, even though she only came to the room one or two times a week. She would say, "This is my window—don't open it"—even if she is not there and I am very hot! "Don't change the heater setting." I ask her, "Can I turn on the light now?" "Can I put some food in your refrigerator?" It had almost nothing in it. After a while, she just comes back to the room and ignores me. She let me know that I am her roommate and nothing more.

The separateness and individualism of the roommate relationship was something that Reiko encountered as well, albeit without the hostility. Her roommate had also communicated that they would be "roommates and nothing more," but Reiko came to appreciate the advantages of this arrangement:

I like the American system. My roommate is just my roommate. In [my country] I would be worrying and thinking all the time about my roommate. If I want to go to dinner, I feel I have to ask my roommate, "Have you eaten yet?"

Would you like to go to dinner?" I must ask her about her classes and help her if she has a problem. Here I have a roommate and I work separately. I don't have to care about her. It's easier.

International students saw "individualism" and "independence" as characteristic not only of roommate interactions but of relations with family and friends as well. When Arturo was asked about how AnyU students differed from those in his own country, he responded: "There's much more independence here. At home, students live with their parents. Here families aren't that tied together. My roommates call their dads and moms maybe once a week, and that's it. It would be different if they were Mexican." Alicia, another Mexican student, thought similarly that "Americans have a lot of independence. At eighteen in Mexico, I can't think of living by myself. Maybe it's the money, but we think united is better, for both family ties and for expenses."

For Peter from Germany, Nadif from Somalia, and Nigel from England, the disconnection from family had repercussions for social life with friends. Americans, they felt, sharply distinguished their family from their friends and schoolmates; more than one international student remarked about the dearth of family photos on student doors, as if family didn't exist at school. International students generally saw family as more naturally integrated into their social lives. "When you're not near your family," Peter told me, "it's hard to know where do I invite people. No one here says, 'Come on and meet my family.' Here I have to invite people to come to a home with two other people I don't know. It's strange."

Nadif continued in a similar vein:

I have American friends, but I haven't been to their houses. I don't know their parents or their brothers and sisters or families. Back home, if I have a friend, everyone in their family knows me and I know them. If I go over to visit [friends] and they're not there, I still stay and talk with

their family. Here friendship doesn't involve families. I don't know where my friends live and who their families are.

Nigel found the American system peculiar, much less similar to his own culture than he had expected. "My friends come to my house, and they just walk in. It's like they're friends not just with me but with my family. You know, a lot of my friends' parents buy me Christmas presents." He went on:

If I have a party—like at Christmas I had a big party—my mum and dad, they'd just join in and drink with everyone else and have a good time. My American friends would think that's daft. I have friends [at AnyU] who have all grown up in the same city near one another. They wouldn't know how to have a conversation with anyone else's parents. They get their friends to come over when their parents are out, like, "Hey, my parents are away, come on over." At home, it doesn't make a difference whether your parents are there or not.

For Alicia from Mexico, this was all evidence of American "independence." But "independence," she argued, was one side of a coin. The other side "is that I'm not sure that they have real friendships."

The issue of real friendship was often more problematic in interviews than I had anticipated. I typically asked what I considered to be a straightforward question: "Do you have friends who are American?"

"I'm not sure," answered one Japanese girl. "My American roommate might be a friend."

"What makes you unsure?" I queried further.

"Well, I like my roommate," she explained, "and sometimes even I cook and we eat together at home, but since August [six months earlier] we have gone out together three times. That's really not much, not what friends would do in my country, so I don't know."

Another student responded to my question about friends with one of his own. "What do you mean by 'friend,'" he asked, "my version or the American version?" A French student responded quickly to my query about friends: "Sure I have friends. It's so easy to meet people here, to make friends." Then she added: "Well, not really friends. That's the thing. Friendship is very surface-defined here. It is easy to get to know people, but the friendship is superficial. We wouldn't even call it a friendship. In France, when you're someone's friend, you're their friend for life." Their trouble answering my question taught me something: There were recurring questions about what constitutes friendship for Americans.

A prime difficulty in sorting out the concept centered on judgments surrounding what one did for a friend. When Maria made her first American "friends," she expected that they would be more active in helping her settle in her new home.

I was living in a new country and I needed help. Like with setting up a bank account and doing the lease. It was new for me. And looking for a mechanic to fix my car. Or going shopping—I didn't know what to buy [for my room]. And when I tell my friends that I had a hard day trying to figure out all the things they say, "Oh, I'm so sorry for you."

Maria found it unfathomable. "In Mexico, when someone is a friend, then regardless of the situation, even if I would get in trouble, I would help them. American people are always busy. 'Oh, I like you so much,' they say. But then if I'm in trouble, it's, 'Oh, I'm so sorry for you.' 'So sorry for you' doesn't help!"

Geeta's roommates seemed just the opposite. When she told them that she was planning on buying a used car, they told her, "Oh, you don't need a car. We have two cars and one of us will take you where you want to go." But then after a while, she explained,

I see how life is here. It's like I'm a little eight-year-old girl, and I have to say, "Could someone please take me here?"

"Could someone take me there?" So I don't ask much. One day I said that I need a ride to school, and my roommate says, "Fine, but you have to leave right now," and now isn't when I want to go. After a while, I saw that I needed my own car.

Nigel told me: "I don't understand the superficiality in friendships here. Americans are much friendlier than the English, but then it doesn't really go anywhere. As far as deep friendships are concerned—I know there are people who have deep friendships, but it's a lot harder to figure out who those people will be." I asked him, "What's so different about friendship at home?"

I think friends at home are closer. We're in touch every day, for one thing. For another, when one person is doing something, the others are supporting them. Here one of my American friends graduated, and I went to the graduation to support him. A lot of our other friends were here for graduation, but they didn't even go to watch him graduate, and they weren't even doing anything. That upset me. There's a lot of incidents like that. It's confusing.

"Confusing," "funny," "peculiar" were all words used to describe American social behavior. "Why do so many students eat alone in their rooms rather than go out or cook together?" "Why don't any of the guys on my hall know how to cook anything?" "Why does everyone here use computers [Instant Messaging] to communicate with people who are down the hall or in the same dorm?" "Why do young Americans talk so much about *relationships*?"

The *way* that Americans socialized was also a prime subject of comment. Two points stood out. First, Americans don't socialize as much, tending to spend more time alone, as this British student explained:

People back home of my age socialize a lot more. On a free night, you'd go out and meet friends and be doing some-

thing together. You'd probably go out as a big group. In a week of seven days, I'd probably go out two or three nights. It's all student-based and promoted. Here, in the evenings, you walk down the hall and people are sitting in their rooms playing video games and watching television.

The second thing consistently noticed by international students is how Americans seem to separate socializing and partying from the rest of their lives. "Social life in Japan," explained one student, "is different. It's not like, 'This is party time.' It's more integrated with the rest of your day and your life." A French student noted this same pattern, but with regard to clothing. "We'll be hanging out, and then we decide to go out. The American girl in the group says, 'I need to go home and change.' I think, why? It's the same people. We're just going to a different place now. We're not going to anyplace fancy. What is so different now that you have to go change your clothes?"

For one British student as well, the American "party time" mentality was perplexing:

I don't understand this party thing in the U.S. When you go out here, it's get drunk or nothing. If people go out with people and drink, they have to get drunk. If they don't get falling-down drunk, they think, "What's the point of doing it?" I find it difficult to understand. It's really a European thing. You socialize, have a few drinks together, and go home.

For many international students, then, there was more flow between family and friends, school and home, and between academics and social life.

Classroom Life

In the classroom, most foreign students notice what U.S. adults, if they have been away long from academia, would probably notice too: there is an informality to the U.S. college classroom

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that some, including professors, would interpret as bordering on disrespect. A Japanese student giggled as she told me: "It makes me laugh when I see how students come to class: shorts, flip-flops . . . torn T-shirts. Some students come to class in pajamas!" A Middle Eastern student exclaimed: "You have so much freedom here. You can step out of class in the middle of the class! We could never do that." For one Asian student, one of the surprises was how often students interrupt the professor in the middle of a lecture to ask their own questions. This would not be tolerated in his country. An African student shared his thoughts: "There are certain things that surprise me about American students. I look at how they drink and eat during class. They put their feet up on the chairs. They pack up their books at the end of class before the teacher has finished talking." One European student noted, "We used to eat and drink in class sometimes, but at least we hid it!"

Indeed, as any American college student knows, stepping out of class or interrupting a lecture with questions is now quite acceptable. Eating and drinking during class, sleeping openly, packing up books before the teacher has finished talking have come to be standard behavior that most professors will ignore.

For the most part, international students liked the American classroom and American professors. U.S. professors were described by different international students as "laid-back," "helpful," "open," "tolerant" (of scant clothing and sleeping in class), "casual," and "friendly." Some, like the UAE and Somali students, appreciated that "teachers are not as involved in your lives—they don't see where you live or try to force you to study." For others, including the Japanese and Korean students, it was the interest in listening to students' problems and opinions and in helping students that was refreshing:

Teachers think helping students is their job. In Japan they don't think that way. I e-mailed my prof in Japan because I am doing an independent study and I asked her to send me an article. She got mad at me and thought this was very rude for me to ask her to do this.

American professors are more open; they give you their phone numbers and some let you call them at home. You can really talk to them outside of class and they are willing to give you extra help.

Although American professors and the American classroom received high marks for openness and helpfulness, they received mixed reviews on course content, including its rigor, organization, and modes of evaluation. Although one Indian student appreciated that "profs tell me which points to concentrate on when I read; they sometimes give chapter summaries so I know what to focus my attention on," more than one other mentioned the controlled way in which the American college classroom is run. The student is given a small chunk of reading and lecture to absorb, and then there is a test, usually short-answer format. Then there is another chunk of reading and a test. It is a system that one student described as "forced study," but one in which it's generally fairly easy to master the material and do well.

Most international students were used to a less pre-digested academic diet. Their course content was delivered by lecture, and it was students' responsibility to fully understand the content without the benefit of outlines, projected overhead notes, and other aids, as in the American classroom. Their grades for the semester would be based only on two long comprehensive essay exams and sometimes a lengthy theme paper. The American approach—frequent small short-answer tests sometimes coupled with study guides and lecture outlines—was criticized by different international students:

[It works but] in some ways . . . it's like elementary school or grade school. The teacher tells you exactly which chapters to study, and then you review just those chapters. The advisers tell you the courses to take and approve your schedule. Sometimes it's annoying.

Students here have lots of exams, really small quizzes. The quizzes make you study. You learn a little bit for the quiz,

then you learn a little bit different for the next quiz. But people forget from week to week. Once the quiz is over, they forget. . . . Really, I wonder at the end of the semester what people remember when they leave.

I find it difficult to take the exams here seriously. You can go into a multiple-choice exam without studying really and still come out all right from things you remember from class, and a process of elimination. You could never go into an exam back home knowing nothing. They're essay, and you start from a blank page; you wouldn't know what to write. Knowing almost nothing there, you'd get a 20 percent. Here you could pass the test!

Still some students appreciated the American grading system, with smaller, non-comprehensive exams and a syllabus, serving almost as a contract that laid out exactly how tests, papers, and presentations would bear on the final grade. As one Asian student explained:

We don't know what we're getting for a grade in [my country]. We don't have small quizzes, just one final exam or sometimes two, and there's no class participation. I had a class that I thought I was doing well in but I got a C. Expectations are much clearer in the U.S. They are much clearer about grading. It's easier to see results of a test or paper and how it related to a grade in a course.

"Teaching in America is like a one-man show," argued Èlène, a French student, in the middle of our interview. "Teachers tell jokes; they do PowerPoint. There is audience participation."

"I thought you just said that in France it was a one-man show," I followed up, "because the teacher basically just stood up with a microphone and lectured."

"Yeah, that's true" Èlène went on, "but it's not entertainment. It's a lecture. They're not trying to interest and entertain the students, and where I went to school we never rated the professors, like entertainers, with evaluations at the end of every course."

Opinions of the U.S. system varied somewhat with a student's country of origin. While Mexican students found U.S. professors and advisers a little formal, most international students noted their easy informality. A Chinese student was alone in mentioning that "the profs don't seem to prepare as much. There is little in the way of class notes or handouts for the students." And while the UAE and Somali students believed that "U.S. students are more serious about school because it makes more of a difference to your future," for most international students, either the lack of rigor of American classes or the work attitudes of American students presented a different sort of surprise.

"When I was in Japan, I heard how hard it was to go to university in the U.S.," said one student, "but now I'm here and I see that many students don't do the work."

"How do you know that?" I asked.

She responded, "When I talk about an assignment, they say they didn't do it!" It's confusing, though, she admitted: "Students in my class complain a lot about the time commitment while, at the same time, they talk about the parties they go to and the drinking. Some students make the effort, but I see that many others don't do the work."

Most European students agreed that U.S. classes were less demanding. "My first two years of classes in this country," said Èlène, "were at the high school level. What a joke! Only at the 300 and 400 level am I seeing much better and harder material." A British student commented: "My involvement within my actual classes is a lot higher here, but as far as the content of work, it's actually a lot easier. I didn't work nearly as hard as I could, and I got Bs and better in all of my classes." According to Li, Chinese students work harder and do more homework: "I don't think the American students work that hard. I did a group project with an American student and I see he follows. I organize. I suggest the books we should read because I want a good grade. He just comes to meetings but doesn't really prepare. At the end, he thanks me for carrying the project."

"Group work" was one of three points that were often repeated when I asked what if anything is different about the

"academic approach" in the American classroom. I had never really thought about it until I saw how many international students noted the frequency of group projects and presentations in their classes. One European recounted: "Here they keep telling you to get into groups; do a presentation. I've done so many presentations while I've been here I can't believe it. . . . Many of them aren't even marked—we just do them as an exercise. I think it's a good thing, because people here get a lot more confident about talking in front of others."

"It's funny," I mused with Beniko, a Japanese student, "that in such an individual culture students do so much work in groups."

"I think I understand why you can," she answered. "It is because of your individualism. In Japan, we don't and couldn't do much group work because we would consider each other TOO MUCH, and the project would get very complicated because of that." Only American students, she suggested, would have the necessary boundaries and sense of their own preferences to be able to negotiate the demands of a group project.

Individualism and individual choice also figured into both of the other mentioned themes. For Asian students in particular, one formidable challenge of the American classroom was in the number of times people were asked to "say what they think." "Professors are always asking what you think of this and think of that," maintained one Japanese student. "It's great, but it's scary when you're not used to this. I don't always know what I think."

One Korean woman remarked to me:

Everything here is: "What do you want?" "What do you think?" "What do you like?" Even little children have preferences and interests in this country. I hear parents in restaurants. They ask a three-year-old child, "Do you want French fries or potato chips?" Every little kid in this country can tell you, "I like green beans but not spinach, I like vanilla but not chocolate, and my favorite color is blue." They're used to thinking that way.

"Choice" abounds in the U.S. educational system in ways that most American-born students are unaware of. "You can take [courses] that interest you here," affirmed one student. "If I like archaeology—good, I take it. But then I also like astronomy, so I take that." A Japanese student explained that at home she "can't take a ceramics course just because I like it." The courses she takes are determined by her major and not subject to choice. In Europe, another student told me, "when we get electives, we are able to choose from a very short list which course from the list you will take. You get very few 'open credits'—what *you* call electives—where you can actually pick the course, and it is usual for someone to take a course that is related to their major so it helps them with other courses."

In their home countries, most international students could not change their major, nor could they liberally choose classes outside their major, nor could they double-major or double-minor. Most could not drop courses after they were enrolled. For some international students, even being able to pick one's major was a luxury. In countries that rely heavily on test scores for entry into specific fields, one's major often depends on rankings on exams. A Japanese student reported: "Many people in Japan pick majors they don't want. My friend is studying to be an English teacher, but she wants to be a dog groomer. She picked her major based on her test results and what she did well in."

"There's a lot of choice in your curriculum," one Spanish student maintained, "and even in the time you take classes. In Spain, certain courses *MUST* be taken, and a class is given at one time and that's it."

The same choice inherent in the curriculum was seen in the extra-curriculum. "There are so many clubs to choose from here—you can pick any interest and there will be a club for it!" remarked an African student. "If you want to join a sport in my country," said another, "we have one or two sports you can join (soccer and cricket), but here you can choose from so many different ones like climbing, snowboarding, basketball, soccer, football—and so many more."

There were few detractors from the benefits of choice in the American system, but a couple of students pointed out the downside of having so *much* choice. One suggested: "Your system is much more complicated, and it's much less specialized. Because you take so many different kinds of courses, you are spread thinner and have less focused knowledge in particular areas." Another looked at the implications of students' freedom to drop a course at will: "People here can drop a class whenever they want. If I don't like it, I drop it. If I don't like the teacher, I drop it. If I'm not doing well, I drop it. In Spain, once you sign, you pay, and you can't drop. I think it affects attitude."

Indeed, as one foreign-born teacher confided, "I take time to talk to my students who didn't do well on an exam or who are having trouble. I suggest that they set up an appointment with me, and I tell them what skills they need to work on extra. The minute I do that, it has the opposite effect in your system. Instead of coming to my office, they drop the class. It's really quite surprising!"

Worldliness and Worldview

The single biggest complaint international students lodged about U.S. students was, to put it bluntly, our ignorance. As informants described it, by "ignorance" they meant the misinformation and lack of information that Americans have both about other countries and about themselves. Although most international students noted how little other students asked them about their countries, almost all students had received questions that they found startling: "Is Japan in China?" "Do you have a hole for a bathroom?" "Is it North Korea or South Korea that has a dictator?" "Where exactly is India?" "Do you still ride elephants?" "Do they dub American TV programs into British?"

These are just a few of the questions American students actually asked of international students. While they no doubt came from the less sophisticated among their classmates, it was clear

that international students across the board felt that most Americans—even their own friends—are woefully ignorant of the world scene. It is instructive to hear how students from diverse countries discuss their perceptions of American students' views of themselves and the world.

JAPAN: Really, they don't know very much about other countries, but maybe it's just because a country like Japan is so far away. Japanese probably don't know about the Middle East. Sometimes, students keep asking about ninjas.

UAE: American students are nice, but they need to stop being so ignorant about other countries and other cultures. Americans need to look at the world around them, and even the cultures around them in their own country.

MEXICO: The U.S. is not the center of the world. [Americans] don't know anything about other countries. Many of them don't have an interest in learning about other cultures. The only things students ever ask me about in my culture is food.

CHINA: Americans know very little about China or its culture. Most people think China is still very poor and very communist-controlled, with no freedom. There is a very anticommunist feeling, and people know little about today's China, which is quite changing and different. New Zealanders know much more about China—perhaps it's their proximity. I think that older people here have more of a sense of history, and that history, about the wars, about the cold war, makes them understand more about the world. Younger people seem to have no sense of history.

ENGLAND: People here know surprisingly little about England, and they assume a lot of things, some true, some not. People's impressions of me when I say I'm from England is that I might drink tea off a silver tray, and maybe live in a castle, and use a red telephone box. That's the

honest truth. The questions that I've been asked are unbelievable.

MALAYSIA: I tell people that I am Muslim, and they take for granted that I'm an Arab. How can they not realize that not all Muslims are Arabs when they have many Muslims here who are American?

GERMANY: American students are much more ignorant of other countries and cultures. I suppose it's because it's so big, and knowing about California for you is like us knowing about France. It's a neighbor. The U.S. is less dependent on other cultures, and maybe that's why they need to know less. Still, Americans come across as not interested in other cultures, like they don't really care about other countries. So they think things like Swedish people are only blonds.

INDIA: Somebody asked me if we still ride on elephants. That really bothered me. If I say I'm Indian, they ask which reservation? I say I'm from Bombay. "Where is Bombay?" Some people don't even know where India is. A friend of mine and I tried to make these Americans see what it was like and we asked them where they're from. They said California. And we said, Where was that?

FRANCE: People here don't know where anything is. For World War II, the teacher had to bring in a map to show where Germany and England are—it was incredible! I read somewhere a little research that said only 15 to 20 percent of Americans between the ages eighteen to twenty-five could point out Iraq on a map. The country will go to war, but it doesn't know where the country is!

Despite the critical consensus in these comments, it would be unfair of me to represent international student perspectives as roundly negative. In general, students from outside the United States warmly appreciated the American educational system as

well as the spirit of the American college student. The criticisms that they did have, though, were pointed and focused. Taken together, they amounted to nothing less than a theory of the relationship among ignorance, intolerance, and ethnocentrism in this country, one that international eyes saw bordering on profound self-delusion. When I asked the linked questions, "What would you want American students to see about themselves?" and "What advice would you give them?" one German student stated succinctly what many students communicated to me at greater length: "Americans seem to think they have the perfect place to live, the best country, the best city. I hear that all the time. I used to think you just got that from politicians, but now I see it's from regular people too. The patriotism thing here really bothers me."

It is sobering to hear these words from a German student, whose country's historical experience in the 1930s and 1940s taught him the dangers of hypernationalism. To his fellow U.S. students he offered this recommendation: "I'd give them advice to live elsewhere. They should recognize that the way of living in the U.S. is fine, but it isn't necessarily the best way for everyone. I don't like to evaluate, and I'd like that applied to me. Be more informed. Information leads to tolerance."

It bothered a Chinese student who read in an article that American students don't want to study a foreign language because they believe that the world language will be English. "I think they need to learn about the world, to learn a foreign language," he urged. It bothered a British student, who lamented how much of world music American students seem to miss. "Everything here [on his corridor] is either black gangster rap or punk rock, and that's basically it. They don't want to hear other music—contemporary music from around the world."

The connection between lack of information and intolerance translated occasionally into personal stories of frustration, hitting home in the lives of some students. "I wish they [his hall mates] were accepting of more different music," said an Indian student. "I play my own music. I play it loud just like they do—

Arabic and Punjabi and other stuff—and they complain to the RAs. But it's my right to play that too. Why don't they understand that?"

"They don't accept other cultures," speculated one Japanese student.

Once I was eating the food I had made—Japanese noodles—and we Japanese eat noodles with a noise. Somebody else in the kitchen area looked at me funny. She asked, "Why are you making so much noise?" I told her that's the way Japanese eat their noodles, and I can see by her face that she is disapproving. It hurt me to see that. Some Americans don't care about other worlds.

One key toward creating a more positive cycle of information, self-awareness, and tolerance was for many the university and university education itself. Learn a foreign language and study overseas, many recommended for individual students. Use your education to expand your purview beyond your own country. For the university, other students recommended a greater emphasis on self-awareness, including a more critical eye directed to our own institutions and history.

For one Chinese student, the need to be more reflective about the media representation of news and issues was critical: "Media coverage has a very great influence here. In China, it has less influence because everyone knows it's propaganda. Here it is not seen that way because there is a free press. But it's curious." In American newspaper articles and TV news, "the individual facts are true often, but the whole is not sometimes. I can see how Americans need to question the way stories are being represented to them."

A French student beseeched us to examine our own educational system:

Americans teach like the only important thing is America. There is no required history course in college. The history course I took on Western civ. at AnyU was middle-school

level, and it was very biased. I mean they taught how, in World War II, America saved France and saved the world, how they were so great. The courses don't consider what Americans have done wrong. All the current events here is news about America and what America is doing. If it's about another country, it's about what America is doing there. There's nothing about other countries and their histories and problems. [In France] we had lots of history and geography courses, starting very young. I learned about France, but then we had to take a course in U.S. industrialization, in China, Russia, Japan, too. We got the history and geography of the world, so we could see how France now fits into the bigger picture.

For the international students I interviewed, American college culture is a world of engagement, choice, individualism, and independence, but it is also one of cross-cultural ignorance and self-delusion that cries out for remediation. It was a Somali student who summed up all of their hopes for "America": "You have so much here, and so many opportunities. I wish America would ask more what this country can do to make the world a better place."