The 2011 Coming To America Essay Contest

While most members of The University of Iowa and Iowa City communities are aware of the presence of international students, it is likely relatively few have thought about the challenges and surprises faced by those who have come here from abroad. As the University seeks to increase international understanding and create a welcoming and supportive climate for international students, we can all gain by hearing the stories of the experience of transition to a new culture and way of life.

This essay contest provided a chance for international students to share what they have discovered in Coming to America. International students were invited to tell of their experiences of coming to the U.S.—the high points, low points, pleasant and non-so pleasant surprises, disappointments, unexpected successes, frustrating and positive encounters. By reading these essays, we can gain a better knowledge of what it is like to suddenly be a foreigner in a Midwestern university town.

The contest was open to any international student attending The University of Iowa on a nonimmigrant visa. Nineteen students submitted essays. These students comprised a good cross-section of the UI international student community, with both undergraduate and graduate students participating, representing twelve countries and a wide range of majors from throughout the UI curriculum.

The difficult job of judging these essays was graciously done a committee consisting of Michael Bortscheller (Office of International Students and Scholars), Molly Kelley (English as a Second Language Programs), and Melissa Meisterheim (English as a Second Language Programs). They took on a challenging task with dedication, professionalism, and a strong interest in helping international student voices be heard. All essays, whether they received an award or not, have something important to say, and all deserve to be read and valued.

Questions about the essay contest may be addressed to Scott E. King, Director of the Office of International Students and Scholars at 319-335-0335 or via e-mail at scott-king@uiowa.edu.

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SECOND TIME AROUND

“It’s going to be a breeze this time around,” I thought to myself as I read my acceptance letter. “I’ll know exactly how to act, exactly what to say, exactly where to go. I know Americans like the back of my hand. I mean, I have ten months plus three summers of experience. I can handle anything.” Yeah, sure I could.

This is not my first time studying in the United States. My first time in the US was as a high school exchange student in Indianapolis, during the 2004/2005 academic year. Upon my return to my home country Ghana, I had friends from Indianapolis come visit me two different summers and spent one summer on a rural mission trip in Ghana with a team of Intervarsity Christian Fellowship (USA) students. I honestly believed that I had pretty much figured out American society and culture. I said to myself, “Come on—it’s Iowa! It’s still the Midwest and it’s much smaller than Indianapolis.” (At that point I was convinced I had a comprehensive understanding of the varying cultures of America based on geographical regions).

I was however not mindful of two key things—one, that graduate school is a world away from high school (though I sometimes do feel like I am in high school with all these assignments) and two, that seven years is a long enough time to lose touch with a culture you were immersed in for only ten months.

My first day in Iowa City was wonderful. I had found a church family prior to arriving—one Ancient Hope Presbyterian Church—and was picked up from the airport by a member of the church I had only spoken to on the phone. Later on that evening, I met some men from the church at Donnelly’s Pub and I was completely blown away. Everyone wanted to talk to me; everyone wanted to know where I was from. I felt like the center of everyone’s attention and deeply cared for. I went to bed that night with a smile on my face.

The next day, my pastors helped me move in—as in literally carried my luggage and all the other items members of the congregation had been so gracious to donate to me. This action by the pastors was almost irreverent to me. In Ghana, position is highly respected and a pastor could actually lose respect in some circles by doing something as “menial” as carrying luggage.

I was invited to lunches and dinners numerous times after that. I hardly had to cook. During international graduate student orientation we had been made aware of the “honeymoon” stage of adjusting to a new culture—where everything felt alright with the world because you were so excited to be in a new place. I convinced myself I knew exactly what to expect so I could ride this wave for as long as I wanted.

I was happy about the increased access to technology and infrastructure I was experiencing. I had twenty-four-hour, (comparatively) high-speed internet access. Cable television to watch all the shows I had seen advertised online; free transportation via CAMBUS and pretty much computer stations everywhere on campus. Now what could be better? I’ll tell you what. Within the first week that I arrived, my laptop crashed. It just went dead. I was terrified. What was I going to do? I couldn’t afford another one so quickly. Then I was directed to the Information Technology Services (ITS) department. I was wondering how I was going to survive without a laptop for at least a week (my estimation of how long it would take ITS to get my computer running again). I was called back the same day to come for my computer (about four hours later). Now that was the zenith for me. And it was all absolutely free. I couldn’t have asked for a better school.
And then classes began. The first day of class we were assigned a reading. Reading—now that is something I like to do. To my utter horror, I discovered pages and pages of text, on topics I barely understood. Still I was not fazed. I just decided to get a good grasp on things by attempting to read ahead. I mean the syllabus for every course was on ICON.

Then the assignments started trickling in. My thought process went something like this, “Oh, two set of questions due next week is not bad at all. In fact it is easier than I expected. And they keep on saying graduate school is hard. These Americans must not know what hard is. They should attempt coming to school in Ghana.” Then another assignment. “But I haven’t even finished the first why are you giving me a second? What, more reading? I can’t believe this, there is no way I can get all this done by Monday. I just have to study harder and longer and suppose.”

By the middle of September I felt like I was drowning. I didn’t know how I was expected to do every single reading, finish assignments on time and still be able to read over course material to be discussed in class, the day before. The knowledge that it was a universal experience did not do much to help me. I thought to myself “Well no one else feels exactly the same pressure I do. I need to succeed. I need to be the best. I need to excel—not just pass. No one back home will be satisfied with just a pass. I must be a failure.”

At this point I was still not admitting to myself that I was experiencing any form of culture shock. I mean how could I? I am supposed to be a pro at this right? One defining moment came for me when one night, I was on the bus headed to my department because I needed to get caught up on school work, and I just felt fed up. For a moment, I seemed to transcend all the voices around me and they suddenly became just that—voices—weird accents; too many accents. When would I next hear people speaking English in a tone I was used to, without undertones of sarcasm? When would I hear Twi (my native tongue) all around me instead of all this babble? That was when I finally admitted defeat.

I must say I have learnt a lot this second time round. That punctuality in America is overrated back home Ghana. We almost feel the concept of lateness is non-existent in the US. So I was actually indignant the first time the bus came late and mildly surprised a class or program did not start exactly on the minute.

I have been challenged a lot to reach out to people more and become more open. At home walking up to someone and introducing yourself can be perceived as impolite in certain settings, though here it is not so much the case. Being around forward, opinionated, expressive people has helped me express my thoughts and opinions more, especially in a public setting.

I also have taken advantage of the opportunity of being in a new environment to shed some old “skins” and learn new healthy habits like managing my time efficiently and not comparing myself to others (two things I often fail woefully at).

I seriously have come to appreciate the concept of the individual—that everyone is unique in his/her talents and abilities and should harness their strengths whilst improving their weaknesses for the benefit of all. However I still feel that American society can sometimes be too individualistic that it borders on being cold. I cringe whenever someone clearly older than me is standing on the bus whilst I am sitting. I tend to have a status quo mentality and thus I am often afraid to offer my seat especially when that individual is female because I am afraid my gesture will be perceived as sexist. Oh what complexity!

And another thing, what is up with Americans and texting. Why does everyone prefer to text when you could just as easily call? Does it have something to do with invading someone’s privacy? I think anyone who owns a cell phone has given up a certain degree of privacy to begin with and isn’t there voicemail? I feel it takes a much shorter time to call than text and wait for a response.
So that is my verbose experience of coming to America. I am still learning a lot and look forward to learning even more. I love Iowa City—the culture, the campus, the creativity and most of all the Hawkeyes! (Not really, but I knew I had to put that in there)
Second Place Winner  
Written by Ya-Chen Chen, Taiwan  
Graduate Student in Journalism

Dear Me:

I know we have never met before, but I have been concerned about you for quite a long time. Who am I? I’m you a year ago. Do you remember those dreams we had talked about last summer before you went to America? I am like your parents who are always checking in on your progress, but more than that, I want to give you my blessing and remind and encourage you to utilize well every minute and opportunity in America. Therefore, you will not feel regret when you come back to Taiwan.

Has your English improved greatly? I hope the answer will be yes. I understand that you have always envied and have looked forward to becoming those people whose English is as excellent as their Chinese. You might assume this is impossible for a foreign student to achieve in one year. However, I do believe you have the potential to be fluent in English. As long as you keep studying English diligently, one day you will finally speak like a native speaker. I have heard someone say that if you can beat a native speaker in a quarrel, that means your English is good enough. No matter if you can do that or not yet— just remember to stay positive and confident about yourself!

One year ago, you worried that you would be unable to catch up to other classmate in journalism. Is this still troubling you now? Life is full of challenges, especially for a newcomer from an extremely different culture and knowledge background. However, even though you don’t have good performance at your study, please don’t look down on yourself. Remember, you have unique and treasurable personality that no one has. Moreover, I believe your hard working and active attitude will help you to make up for the unfamiliarity with culture and professional knowledge.

Making friends was not an issue for you in Taiwan, but I am not sure it would be the same as in America. Did you make any good American friends? Our cousin who studied in France told me that it is definitely difficult for foreigners to make native “true” friends because of the difference of cultural backgrounds. Foreigners lack shared memories, so in some specific situations, they won’t have the same feelings as native people, which can form a gap between foreigners and native people. She is probably right, but I do not think you have to limit yourself because of that. Everyone is different and you two are not in the same situation. Thus, stay open-minded and treat your friends with a true heart, and you will figure out a way to interact with your American friends. Remember, everything is possible.

I am really looking forwards to hearing from you. Please tell me all about your school experiences, your friends and your life there. I will listen any time.

Truly Yours,

Me  
Jun 2010

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Hey dear me,

It’s so nice to receive your letter! Your words are so warm and encouraging that they comfort me greatly. That’s not just because of the language and content but also the fact is no one understands me better than you do.

Since the first day I came here, I couldn’t stop worrying about everything. Culture adjustment, homesick, snowy winter and high calorie foods— almost everything causes my concern. Although my American friends and
classmates told me all the time “No worry, you will be fine,” I still cannot set my mind at ease. Nevertheless, somehow I overcame all the difficulties in some way I didn’t expect.

It is no doubt that surviving in American is not easy, but in fact, the sweet part is much more than the bitter part.

Studying at the University of Iowa is such a blessing. I have learned a lot from many knowledgeable, hard-working and caring teachers. They are so earnest in their teaching that I want to give back to them my best work and my eagerness to learn.

I remember the first sentence on the syllabus of my first class is “We are here to serve you.” The words ease my anxiety of studying in a new subject in a new language. The words told me that the teachers were not picky inspectors that judged my work and English. Instead, they were helpers to answer my questions and hone my skills. In addition, another sentence also reduced my fear of asking questions in class. It said, “No questions are stupid questions.” I was really afraid of asking questions because I assumed I might be the only person who didn’t understand the teacher’s lecture. However, I found that even American students would ask questions that I wanted to ask. Therefore, not everyone knows everything. Just like my teacher told us—you questions will actually benefit the whole class, not just you.

My English has improved but I don’t know how much I improved. I can understand what teachers are saying in class, I can read the newspaper, and my classmate won’t look at me as if I am speaking in alien language when I do a presentation. Unfortunately, I am still unable to meet the standard of writing perfect English. Every time when I got my assignment from teachers, there is always a line at the bottom that says, “You need to work on your English writing” or “you should ask an American to proofread you assignment before you hand it in,” which really frustrates me. It is just like no matter how hard I tried, I would never get there. However, when I told my writing tutor how frustrated I was, her response was quite surprised me. She said I should be proud of myself because most American students can only speak one language and I can speak at least two languages. While I wish I could be like them, actually they wish they could be like me.

As to making friends, it is true that there is a social gap between American and international students. However, surprisingly I have one American “true” friend. We care about and encourage each other. We met in church and have gradually become closer and closer after we had lots of great time to study and have fun together. She helps me in many different ways. When I was serious homesick and stressed about my studies, she was the one who gave me good advice and accompanied me through the bad times. She is willing to spend time on revising my writing. I feel comfort and happy to hang out with her. Someone told me that love is to spend time and doesn’t care about being annoyed. I think she is the perfect example that fits the definition, who installs love in our friendship.

So, dear, don’t worry about me. I have gotten lots of support from my friends in the U.S. and also from family members and friends in Taiwan. Every day I appreciate that God sent me here, to Iowa, to have such a great experience to study in America. Even if I graduate and go back to Taiwan, I will miss all the people and wonderful things here.

Forever friend,
Me
September 2011
**Third Place Winner**  
Written by Chaitra Anil Kumar, India  
Graduate Student in Health Informatics

**Coming to America**

“A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step.” Truer words were never spoken. The decision to leave your country and go to another does start with taking that one single step – acknowledgment. Acknowledgment that you want this, you have to do this and you are ready for this.

America was my greatest adventure and my biggest fear. Having never traveled to a foreign country before, I was intrigued about the culture, the people, the country itself. What will it be like? Will I be able to adjust to that pace of life? Will I make friends? Questions that plagued me; but ones which had no definitive answers.

Even before I arrived in America, the trepidation I felt was of not having the familiarity of home. Moving to another country meant that I had to start my life all over again; this time without the unwavering support of my family. Whether I succeeded or failed, it would be entirely up to me. It was my challenge, one that I accepted and vowed that I would thrive in. Failure was not an option.

The hardest thing I encountered was being away from my family. There is a certain comfort in knowing that no matter how hard your day was, you can always come home to a smiling face and an encouraging word. The first few months were the toughest. Being in a new place and surrounded by people you barely know, talking about your predicament does not come easy.

Being a naturally shy person, I found it difficult to make friends. My initial forays into meeting people were not very successful. The feeling of being alone intensified. The joy of actually being in this new country was slowly being overshadowed by the dread of loneliness. There was no guarantee that I would establish friendships. A definite change in demeanor was needed. This was the fulcrum which pivoted me to change, and for the better.

Self-confidence is what motivates us to the levels of success we ultimately achieve. This is the best lesson I have learned in the years that I have lived here. This came about through sheer necessity rather than a desire for self-congratulation. With the knowledge that I needed a radical change in my outlook, I started to become more self-aware, started to subtly get out of my comfort zone, started to become more social. This was rewarded when I met my current group of friends who are with me till this day.

Being on your own is an entirely new concept for a lot of people. This is especially true when you come from a country where families are close knit and sometimes live together. Coming from a background like that to living and fending for yourself can be extremely hard. This transition period is what makes or breaks the person. Never having lived alone, this was a test of my independence, of how much I could rely on myself. This would show me what I could achieve. Along with the confidence I had gained, this helped me realize what I am truly capable of.

Adolescence has passed me by a long time ago. The passage of time went unnoticed. In the eyes of my family, I was still that little girl taking her first tentative steps. If you fall, there is someone there with open arms keeping you safe, chasing the monsters away. Being in that haven, you never truly grow up. When that security is no longer there, the passage into adulthood happens. Coming to America brought that to me. I went from being the child of a family to a fully grown adult in the space of a week. The day I rented my apartment was, I can say, the proudest moment of my life. I had arrived. I was an adult.

All that I am today is what I have learned after moving here. Every experience I have had has been valuable. Every person I have met has helped me grow. Every failure I have had has been but a pit stop on the way to bigger successes. The decision to uproot myself and move to a country where everything was new - the culture, the people, the language – took enormous courage; something I thought I never had. This is true for every single
person who decides to get a degree from a country not their own. By doing this, they acknowledge to those others that they are someone; they are a force to be reckoned with.

Moving to America, studying here, living here has made me independent, resilient not to mention stronger and imbued within me the self-confidence I never had before. I would not say it has made become a better person; but it has made me more of who I really am, which is better. How often can one say an experience did that to them?
“You brought the snowstorm with your arrival,”

“I sure did not, Malaysia’s warm and humid all year long,”

Adapt. When I arrived at Iowa, things were a little different that I imagined. For instance, the inexplicable fury of wind as it slapped my face just a little too many times. I always love the cold weather, perhaps it is because my home is hot almost every single day. But, the slapping hurt. And my heart was ordinary, it beat with longing for the people I care back home, and the beating hurt. That was how I felt when I arrived during early January 2011. Cold and forlorn.

Adapt.

I thought I had to, but the longing did not last, which was extremely pleasurable in my humble opinion. Just the day after my arrival I was feeling excited and happy because of the people I met. Mostly Malaysians like me, they took great care of me, especially my elder sister. She is a tough one, smart and honorable, just like a brother. One snowy night, we went out for some snow fight. It was the sort of mental happiness you earn, the ones where outsiders will feel a pang of jealousy looking at you, when you spend time with great people.

In my mind, I had it all planned out. I had friends, my sister here right beside me, and no money. So the year was going to be filled with fun and a little suffering. When I said I have no money, it is true to all extent, because my parents are the ones funding my education and everything else. They pamper me, fluffy as a cotton candy. Here is something to explain why I am starving almost every day here in America.

In my apartment, there is a phone I named Turtle. The green thing sits there on the floor all day, hence its name. So father called and say, “Even if we haven’t got enough to fend ourselves, sending you out there has always been a must,” He probably did not realize the reverse psychology effect his words had on me, because I decided to be super fiscally virtuous ever since.

The snowy days went by, sometimes it got too cold, and I forgot to apply my hand lotion, which I would regret deeply afterwards, when my hands crack blood. My girl friends shrieked at the sight of it, and they warned me that my hands will get chopped off.

The snowy days went by, sometimes I wore just a layer out, and I basked in delight walking to class with the cold hugging me graciously. But a few minutes after sitting in the warmth of the classroom, my body started reacting and shivered all the rest of the class time.

The snowy days went by, I went to ski with my friends, I had midterms and assignments, I had leftover foods from those who care for me, I attended lots of campus activities to waste my boredom away at times and every night before sleep, I pray for my family and friends.

Spring ended. I got some A’s and a couple of Asian F’s, father was proud, but they never told me anything about getting A’s in my life, I just got them since they were somewhat reassuring.

Summer was a disaster. There was no air conditioner in my century old apartment. I showered more than half a dozen times every summer day. My apartment mate kept his clothes in the refrigerator, another counter strategy against the heat. But no matter how hard we threaten to burn the sun, we sweat all day long, we literally flooded the apartment, I swear.

Ironically, to take our minds off the heat, we played American Football everyday out under the sun. It was amazing. American Football should be played everywhere else around the world. Of course, my version of American Football was much more timid and gentle.
By the end of summer, I got A’s only, no Asian F’s. But I lost so much weight, and my yellow Asian color turned charcoal from excessive melanin production. Mother screamed when we finally Skyped. She was very concerned about my bones growing bigger, but it was just my flesh hollowing out. My sister and friends were worried about me too. I felt a little guilty.

I guess I was most afraid of being hated by Americans themselves. Even in my rhetoric class, a classmate mentioned how Americans do not like Chinese. Well, I am Chinese, my ancestors were from China, my grandparents’ parents died when they were still innocent, and somehow they were brought as escapees to Malaysia. So, I guess I am really just Malaysian.

One day, I noticed my mailbox name was torn off. Again, paranoia overwhelmed me. I thought the people here hated the idea of welcoming foreigners. I was depressed. I told my sister about it, nonchalantly.

“Oh, that must be our fanatical fan, reply him.”

So I grabbed some pen, and made another name card. I changed my name to “Alex” and I drew an American flag as the background. It was pretty. The next day, I woke up early at 6am just to run down the stairs and check the mailbox out. Sure enough, the name got torn off. Days later, I found out from Mr. Postman that someone vandalized everybody else’s name cards. I prayed for the kind elderly man.

Fall semester began. Most excitingly, it is the football season! I foolishly registered for 18 semester hours, just so I could maximize using the 12 hours tuition fee, only to regret it every now and then. The first game against the Tech’s was closing in, and I was pumped up to be standing as an Iowan in the crowd.

October debut came crushing on us that day. It rained throughout the first and third quarter. I stood there, on the bench, shivering with my fellow Asians, giving off some high-fives with them Americans for lasting out in the cold, laughing at myself. My legs went numb, but my heart was yearning for more craziness. I love being young.

Adapt.

That was not the right word. I was not adapting, and I still am not. It is more like I had to do things out of boredom. In between, my adventure may not be as supernatural as Odysseus’, but I will not complain having missed my chance to blind a Cyclop. America is different, it may be an excuse for me to say, “change,” but in this land of the brave, I shall observe, imitate, spin, experience, and learn. I was and will always be a part of this four-season blessing, all thanks to my parents, and America.

I am eighteen, I have never gotten baked, never gotten drunk, yet I love being young in America.

See ya!
As an international student, I have been in Iowa City for almost two months. Living in such a completely different environment is the biggest challenge of my life. Honestly, I really enjoy the beautiful and quiet environment here. Nothing seems wrong to me, but my social relationship. Although I am good at making friends with Chinese, I am too diffident to speak with Americans. Except for worrying about my nonstandard English accent, I also have difficulty in finding a topic to talk with natives. Since we grow up in different cultures, we hardly have something interested in common. Talk about sports? There is no football match in China. Talk about political events? But our president does not need to speech a lecture to everyone to win the election. And any protest campaign about the government will be suppressed immediately in China. Talk about music? I bet that the Americans never heard any of my favorite Chinese songs. Beside, I am also not a big fun of R&B. Undoubtedly; nobody can deny that the cultural differences play an important role in communicating with each other. Without understanding about American culture, international students cannot involve in American society completely. In my opinion, the most apparent three factors which reflect the cultural differences in my life are the people’s different attitudes of living, diverse educational styles and dissimilar popular trend. Those three factors represent the different ideas and believe between Chinese and Americans.

Americans and Chinese people have totally different ways of living. Americans value more about their quality of living than Chinese do. For instance, I find an interesting fact in dormitory that it is very easily to find out whether the room is belong to natives or international students by determining how crowed this room is. I truly shocked when I first saw the American girls’ room for they decorate their room like a home. Unlike my room, which I share with another Chinese girl, only has tables and beds, the American girls’ room have everything, including TV, microwave oven, mirror, sofa, and dresser etc. I never see a room like that in Chinese school. I regard dormitory as a place to live temporarily, so it is no necessary to decorate it like you will live here forever. However, Americans seem disagree with my opinion. They care more about their comfort of living things than I do. On the other hand, compare to most of Chinese students who only focus on studying, most of American students value more about their college lives. Therefore, they like to take part in clubs, enjoy parties and participate as volunteers of some events. Another interesting fact is it’s very common in America to say “hi” or “good morning” to strangers, but it is awkward when you do so in China. It seems like that Chinese people are not as much as hospitable as American. But the truth is Chinese people do not want to disturb others. In this case, say “hello” to a stranger is also defined as disturbing. It seems wrong in America, but not in China. Those two examples indicate that something seems natural in American may be awkward in China. Thus, it is difficult for international students understanding American students thinking. Due to the different growing environment of American and Chinese students, it requires time to understand each other.

It is true that the different countries have their different ways of education. The most obviously point is the different standards of scoring between Chinese and American schools. If you want to get a great grade on your subject in Chinese university, you just need to do well in your midterms and final exams. On the contrast, you need to work hard of the whole semester in American university to get an excellent GPA. Indeed, you need to not only study hard for you exams, but also for your homework and weekly quizzes. Because your total score is combined with all the grades. For instance, my total score of macroeconomics is combined with eight scores of weekly quizzes and one final exam score. I think this standard of evaluation is good for students, because it let them study hard during a whole semester instead of struggling a week before the final exam. On the other hand, American classes are care more about the students’ participation, especially for small classes. Professors will ask some questions to students to make sure that they are really involve in the class. It can not only make students pay attention to their class, but also let them thinking independent. By the way, the participation scores even worth ten percentages of total score in my writing class. Unlike the Chinese school care more about students’ academic behaviors, the American schools encourage students to develop their abilities of studying. So when American students graduate, they can integrate in society very well.
Due to the different cultural elements, fashion trend in America is not as the same as in China. It is true that Chinese teen generation is more openly mind than it used to be, but many traditional Chinese are still not acceptable for the modern popularities, such as music. By mentioning music, it reminds me an unforgettable memory about a music Party I had in Iowa City. That night was a crazy night. It was a DJ party which held in the front square of IMU. By following the beating rhythm, we were shouting and jumping, and rocking the sky. Everyone immersed in the music and forgot everything. I never experienced a party like that in China. And it was very jolly. Unlike the quiet and lyric Chinese music, American music is more energetic. Music is also another way to represent characters of Americans. Just like American music, most of Americans are passionate and hospitable. But Chinese people are more quiet and gentle.

Those three factors cause a gap between Chinese and Americans. Either ways of living or studying indicate that if international students would like to involve in American society, they must understand American culture first. Indeed, studying in University of Iowa is the most memorable experience I have in my life. I believe I will completely adapt in American society someday, and it only requires time.
Written by Lisa Cukuranovic, Germany
Undergraduate Open Major

**Coming to America**

When first coming to the University of Iowa, I was a little apprehensive about what would happen, the decision I made, and what coming here would bring for me.

I am originally from Hamburg, Germany, which is a fairly big city. It was hard to leave my family, friends, and my dog behind, however I had made a decision and felt confident about it. I arrived in Iowa City in mid–August and fell in love with it right away – it felt like home.

Nevertheless, I was a little concerned at first, as campus was deserted compared to what it is like during the school year.

The first time I met all the other international students was at the welcoming at the IMU. At first, I felt like I would never get done with all the paperwork and I was overwhelmed. Moreover, already being a foreigner, I felt like I was the only one who did not know any one as everyone was talking to each other. As time passed, I started talking to people and found out that I shared most of my fears with other students, such as not finding friends (which is probably one of the most common fears in college, not only of international students). The first couple of days were definitely challenging and difficult to cope with. Looking back, I am surprised how well I managed. Seeing as most students get help from their parents, financially and emotionally, I can say that I am proud of myself for getting through. The more I talked to people, the more it became clear to me how most freshmen struggle within the first couple of weeks due to all the adjustments that need to be made.

After having met all the international students, I was ready to meet American students. The week of “On Iowa!” was the perfect opportunity for me to do so. During the beginning, everyone was hesitant and it seemed apparent that nobody wanted to talk but as soon as we went to the stadium, everyone started to open up. Being a foreigner was definitely an advantage for me in a lot of situations – mostly because I would have a long story of how and why I came here and people were usually very interested in my origins. We could discuss differences between America and Europe and it was a great way to start new conversations and meet others. One of the most common questions I was asked was whether we had certain products over there, or even if we had refrigerators in Germany. Besides that being amusing, I found it interesting how few things people know about Europe, however I did not expect them to know. On the contrary, I would usually encourage others to go to Europe or at least leave the country at some point in their life.

Being in the stadium with all the freshmen was definitely one of my highlights. I am not used to school spirit, as high schools in Germany do not have sport teams or encourage school spirit. I was immediately engaged and excited to cheer for my school and I felt some kind of pride. Although this was not my first time in the states, I was overwhelmed by the atmosphere when the marching band played and especially by the fireworks in the end.

One of the rather unpleasant parts of my experience so far was all of the paperwork. I kept having to go from A to B to fill things out, get signatures and return forms to different departments. Initially, I felt like I could not really settle down because I had to worry about things like my social security card, finances, health insurance and so on and so forth. I felt like everyone already enjoyed themselves in school because they already had everything taken care of and quite frankly, at times I did not feel like I belonged.

However, I kept pushing myself to do things that would distract me and give me the opportunity to engage in other activities. For example, I went to free concerts, activities at my residence hall (Mayflower) or just got food with friends. In addition, I was happy when I heard that I had two job offers, which would give me the opportunity to put some change into my pocket and engage in various extracurricular activities outside of school. I accepted both of these jobs and still am very glad to have them.
Balancing school and social interactions has always been important to me. I was first worried that I would not be able to manage that since I was new to the environment and had to worry about adjusting. Nevertheless, I met great people and friends that have helped me immensely through hardships and problems that I encounter here at Iowa.

I also happened to spend one of my first nights at the emergency room. When I first got here, I was mildly sick and thought that it would just get better after a couple of days. However, it turned out to be unbearable and I had no other choice but to go to the emergency room. Luckily, my roommates and a friend volunteered to come with me, as it was already late at night. Looking back, I was so lucky to have these people around me, although they had only known me for a couple of days. I appreciate their support and willingness to help me in such a situation. As much as I appreciated their help, I hope it was the first and last time I had to be at the emergency room.

When I first heard about the Iowa Challenge I was not quite sure what to do with it. I thought focusing on school would already preoccupy me and I could not imagine engaging in anything else at that point. A couple of weeks ago, I passed Hubbard park where they happened to have the sign up for the Dance Marathon. At first I was hesitant to join, however they convinced me to join and I felt confident about raising enough money. My plan is to meet 400 people and get each one of them to donate one dollar so that by the deadline I raised $400. I am not sure if I can do it, but it is a challenge that I accepted. Everyone needs to excel in their classes, but I realized it is essential to join other organizations to not only help others, but also oneself.

One of my other concerns was to keep in touch with the people back home. There is a seven-hour time difference and although I am glad to have things like Skype and Facebook, it is quite challenging to stay in touch with the family on a daily basis. My schedule does not allow me to talk to my family and friends during the week, but there is definitely enough time on the weekend. I realized that even when being apart from each other, it is possible to stay in touch and be part of each other’s lives. Even though there is no physical connection, just talking to someone that you are familiar with when you have doubts can brighten up your day. For me, it is essential to have people I can talk to about my fears or hopes back home as well as over here. One cannot simply abandon oneself, even when homesick. The best thing for me to do is when I am homesick is to talk to someone here and when possible, talk to someone back home.

Reflecting upon myself after approximately two months into college here at the University of Iowa, I can say that I made the right decision. Of course I have doubts here and there, and there are bad days every now and then. The most important thing is to be happy and find one’s own way to achieve that. This weekend, I am going to my first football game and I am more than excited to go. I have found great friends, two jobs, I cope with school and there is still time to do other activities. I am proud to say that I am part of this college experience and of this school. Go Hawks!
Written by Xidong Feng, China
Undergraduate in Prebusiness

My adventure in U.S.

I came to America last winter while the entire Iowa City was covered by pure white snow. The quiet neighborhood and bare trees made it such a beautiful and perfect place for a person who made his mind to spend the next four years learning something that would eventually contribute to his career. I fell in love with this city as soon as I started venture through the city. I love the patio on the second floor of some houses, I love the bench on the porch and the big tree with swings in the front yard and white fence around. The more I explored the city, the more colorful I found. Those red bricks and green roofs stood out from the white snow. I walked by the delicate chapels, went across the river, rested by the railway, enjoying the tranquility and beauty of the nature. “Here we go, my adventure abroad is about to begin.” I said to myself.

A few days before school began, I got an email from my future roommate saying that he would be willing to help me move in since he is a local resident. I was surprised and excited, “He would soon become the first friend I made in this new place!” I immediately accepted this generous offer and kept picturing this day. Then on a Sunday morning, he drove to my apartment and handed to me a pack of cookies that his mother made. I was so impressed by his family’s friendliness and hospitality. Before we met I was worrying if we would get along living in the same room, but now I could tell I am looking forward to this year. Then he took my stuff into the car and drove me to the dorm. After that, his mother came from work and they took me to the mall to buy a cell phone and some daily supplies. As return for their huge favor, I took them to a fancy Chinese restaurant. That was my beginning on this new land, full of excitement and surprises.

Once I settled into school, I began to actively participate in several extracurricular activities. I joined the dance club, accounting club and Vietnamese Student Association. But it is the honor fraternity Pi Sigma Phi that broadened my horizons the most. Since we don’t have any Greek system in China, everything we did in the fraternity was totally fresh to me, starting from our first ceremony where we vowed to formally join the fraternity. Before we were about to make the vow, my big brother told us to close our eyes and line up. We put our hands on the person’s shoulder who standing in front of us and walked into a dark room. Every new initiate was really excited and nervous considering we had no idea what was going on but we also knew that something was about to happen. And then one brother said: “Now, you can open your eyes!” We opened our eyes and were shocked by what we saw. In this dark and quiet room, there was a row of candles burning in front of us and, above the candles, a big emblem of our fraternity hanging on the center of the wall. I could also see through the side mirror that all the brothers were standing at the back of the room looking at us. All of sudden, the solemn music broke the quietness and we vowed under the lead of the president. Once we said our name at the end of the vow, all the brothers ran to us, the next thing I could remember was that all of us were drowned by cheers and hugs. I felt this ceremony instantly bond myself with the organization and made me feel more inclusive. Right now, some of my best friends were my big brothers in the fraternity. Thanks to the fraternity that I could find some life-long friendship.

Other than that, there is one thing that I believe will change my view about the world is the Chinese Christian Church. I by a rare chance ran into the wife of a Pastor, Emily, who later invited me to their church. At first it made me uncomfortable listening to the “words” from God. What I had learned about how universe starts or revolution theory appeared to be untrue in front of the Bible. There was a period when I started rejecting church. However, the people in the church never stopped trying to help me. Not only did they give me books and monthly issues about Christianity, they also helped me in my life for my study and daily needs. Little by little, I started to accept some facts about Bible. I started to rethink what I had learned and what I used to believe. After my reflection on those things I began to view these issues from a neutral perspective without any bias. Meanwhile, I started to see everything in my life from a new point of view. It turned out I am gradually changing, little by little. I am beginning to accept more things, fall in love with more things and try more things. I devoted more time into learning different cultures for which I wasn’t caring before. I gained more confidence and believed I would become
an excellent leader in some day. I started to play ping pong and considering it as my favorite sport now. It’s true that everything will change.

Not until I saw the falling leaves did I realize I have been away from home for almost one year. When looking back, I can see myself is changing every day and I’m thrilled about it. I love this me who is constantly learning new things and trying to accept them. I realized that I am growing on this different continent, both physically and mentally, right on the opposite side of the earth from my country. Like a tiny sprout after spring rain, within a couple of days, it will become a seedling and the only thing it needs is a few more days, while it keeps growing and finally turn into a giant and exuberated tree providing numerous shade and oxygen for this fertile land. Looking to the front, another winter is approaching, I am going to meet that tranquil and snow white Iowa City again.

Hello, Iowa!
Coming To America

“America is a whole new world.” I still remember this is what everyone that has been to USA told me before I came here last year. Yes, I did say last year because I want to be an honest writer and clear up my mind a little bit before I start my story.

As what I mentioned above, I am strictly not a brand new visitor to this country, since I spend my senior year in Michigan as an exchange student. However, I still feel like there are still a whole lot I want to say pop out there that impulse me to write; after all, Florida or Alaska, Michigan or Iowa, Unite State is the same.

My mom has told me America is far different than what I thought and what I watched on TV after she returned from her business trip in 2008. Indeed, I found this is absolutely a truth and I was kind of mad at Hollywood of deceiving us by creating such a dazzling illusion. When I took the car with my host family, crossing the fields without seeing any building that higher that 5 floors and witnessing lots of deer rambling on the grass, I questioned myself: “Seriously, where are those fancy skyscrapers? Is this really America?” I was lost at the moment, but I woke myself up shortly and forced myself to accept what I was experiencing. For a long time, I tried to explore the mystery that what makes this nation so fascinating that so many Chinese want to come and settle down besides the point of advanced education plus the wealth society, and, as the time went by, I think I basically figured out the answer.

Americans enjoy the high level of civilization and well-being. We just can’t ignore the factors such as space, population, environment that directly impact the index number of happiness. I can feel how my living community changes my life on daily bases: smile is the most powerful way to deliver happiness and I feel my world was brighten up day by day as I receive tons of smile from the strangers to the people around me; nothing is more delight for enjoy the beauty and peace of nature as I can hear birds chirp every morning and see fish swimming in the clear lake; space can make people feel harmony and less stressful as everybody posses probably 5 times as much as what Chinese has; the service fee here is way higher than goods’ fee which shows the respect of human in an economical way, as I don’t remember how many time do I leave the tips on the table. Maybe I was already lost when I cramped in the big city, smoked by the dust that emitted from industries and merge my face in the ocean of poker face, but fortunately, I think I am on the way back to the rejuvenation at this point. Sincerely, this is truly incomparable. On top of that, I think I genuinely understand what real prosperity is: skyscrapers tell nothing, only what express on people’s face shows us something.

So how does Iowa treat me after Michigan? Nothing that different but since I have to live on my own there have to be something changed. One thing I have to mention is the taxi service because I was annoyed by it. In China, the only thing you have to do to take a taxi is to lift your hands up to a 30 degree angle when you see there is one coming. Here, things are far more complicated. In most cases, I have to phone the taxi line first and waiting for them to load for me. This is a big pain especially when I have some emergency and I have to get to my destination as quickly as possible. Additionally, the rate is calculated by the amount of people on the taxi, which is always confused me. As I am getting experienced, however, I usually make the plan ahead for upcoming days so that I basically know what is going to happen.

As to advises, I would conclude those into a sentence:”Get involved, be bold.” Looking back to the day when I first got here, I just feel like I was thrown into a new land and I have to face everything by my own. What I am trying to say here is don’t ever let environment push you to keep moving. Instead, stand up and go talk to people first, as you can’t expect a friendship just fall on your head. Once you start looking passionate, people will understand that you open your heart to the them and they will comes to you naturally. Trust me, that’s what I did last year and I have been proved it to be effective. Everybody needs to go through this period, a period of pain, fearfulness, and roughness, but how can you succeed without a starting point? And, once you make it through, you will see how a brilliant world comes to you and every effort you did paid back. Also, get involved. This is the key part of adjusting a
new culture. I know American food is just not for many international students, I know the football game seems too
crazy for many people, but how can you become part of America without involve in it? Wipe of what you thought
about this country and clean your mind up to get ready for a genuine America. Do you think you can improve your
English just by stuck with your own nationality whole day? No, don’t ever count on it. Feeling fresh when you see
real homemade American food; cheering with the football fans when you watch the game, laugh a loud with your
local buddies when watch the comedy show. At the time you start doing all these, you will see you are on the track
of a bright future.
I am truly grateful for all the people I have met and all the experiences I have had in America because they molded into who I am today. Staying in America for the past 10 years, I have had many opportunities to experience new things. Those experiences were enjoyable and challenging. I appreciate them because I learned and grew through them. It is truly God’s abundant grace that I am here today.

I was born and raised in Daegu, the fourth largest city in South Korea. I lived there with my parents until I was nineteen years old. Then I made a decision to move to America to study abroad. I didn’t quite have a “grand” plan, nor did I have so called an “American dream.” I was just a teenager boy with much curiosity. It was mostly out of this curiosity and my desire to experience something new that made me want to study abroad. Even so, my parents were supportive of my decision and sent me off to America in the summer of 2001. I spent my first fall in America in Fayetteville, Arkansas attending a language school. There, I met many foreign students, who were just like me, coming to America for the first time in their lives and having primary focus on experiencing new things and being successful in their career. Everyone seemed to have a dream to be successful. Then, I realized the harsh reality that not everyone would make it all the way. The first challenge for every foreign student to face was to master the English language. To learn a new language was fun sometimes, but was very difficult most of the time. I have made many mistakes in speaking/listening English. I still vividly remember that I went to a cafeteria one afternoon and ordered a hamburger. I couldn’t understand what the cashier who was taking my order was saying because he spoke too fast. Perhaps he was speaking normally, and yet I felt that he was speaking too fast. So I kept nodding my head and answering “yes” to every question although I did not understand any of them. Then when I got my order, as I looked inside, there was a burger with only one layer of cheese in it and nothing else. That was literally a “cheese” burger.

The following year, I was able to transfer to the University of Pittsburgh as a freshman and moved to Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. To learn the English language, which was not my native tongue, was difficult. But it was even harder to be a student in an American college studying many subjects in English. At the beginning, I could understand less than 50% of the lectures. I had to do something about this, because I knew that I would fail otherwise. My parents advised me to take science classes first and push back the elective classes to a later time. They speculated that science classes would require less “reading and writing” and I would be able to understand better by studying the textbooks since the terms used in science are international. This plan worked out very well. During the beginning of the first 2 years in college, most of my classes were science related classes. During this time, my English got improved gradually. Afterwards, I began to add more and more elective classes to my schedule, and those classes were easier to handle than before. For this reason, I experienced something fun and memorable. Since I was taking too many science classes and had to take advanced science classes as I got into a sophomore year, my classmates were mostly juniors/seniors. Then when I became a junior/a senior taking all the elective classes, my classmates were mostly freshmen and sophomores.

One would think that a college student would be able to make many new friends and enjoy social life. Well, in my case, I struggled a lot to make friends especially during the first few years. That’s because the study itself was hard for me due to the language barrier, so I spent most of my time studying either at home or at the library by myself. Secondly, it took me a while to get used to the American culture and its way of thinking which I thought were quite different from those of my home country. I felt that there was a big gap or a wall between me and the American students. But I still wanted to overcome the barrier, and tried to find a way to do so. One of the things that I did was to watch TV not to kill time but to improve my English and to gain understanding of the American culture. Sitcoms and comedy shows were my favorite. As I watch them, I could understand the culture better. I also learned many slang from them. Afterwards, I began to make friends. I felt more comfortable talking to the American students than before. As I stated making American friends and talking to them, my view on the Americans and the American culture started changing. For quite some time, I only saw the differences between the American students and myself whether it was cultural, linguistic, skin color and so on. However, as time went by, I
could see more and more the similarity that I have with them or that they have with me, and began to realize that, deep down, we are not that different. Realizing that, I could embrace the differences more easily.

As I got closer to a point of graduation, I began to wonder about what I should do after I graduate. Frankly speaking, I didn’t have a clear direction. Then, I went to a church conference where I reacquainted myself with a close family friend who was a physician. This person emigrated from South Korea to Uganda many years ago to live there as a missionary and a physician. He is still there practicing. When I asked him why he had gone to Africa giving up all the materialistic advantages he could have had as a prominent professor, he explained to me that he went there simply because he was needed there. Telling him that I was searching for a career that suits me, he encouraged me to have a professional career, find a place that needs me the most, go there and work. He told me that that would be the way I could get the most satisfaction with whatever career I would have. What he told me inspired me a lot. I began to have this hope that all the experiences I had and all the education I obtained could be used preciously for those who need them. That was also when I decided to pursue a professional carrier hoping that perhaps in the future I could also go to a third-world country like Africa and work there as a clinician and a missionary.

I spent 5 years in Pittsburgh. In the summer of 2006, I graduated from college with a B.S. degree in chemistry. My parents, and not to mention myself, were very happy and proud to see me graduate from a college in America as a foreign student. I went back to my home country after I graduated to fulfill the military duty assigned for me for 2 years. After finishing the military service, I applied to a dental school in America. I was fortunate enough to get accepted to the dental school at University of Iowa. So I came back to America in 2010 and resumed to be a student again.

I have been very fortunate to have all the experiences I had and to meet all the people I have met in life. Because I came here, I was able to learn many things, make many good friends and establish a life direction to follow, which I am greatly thankful for.
Written by Sujin Kim, South Korea
Undergraduate in Journalism

Five-and-Half-Year-Long Journey to Find My Dream

As with most of outsiders in Iowa City, the question that I was, as an international student, asked most frequently, even after five and half years in the United States, was “why Iowa? What makes you to come to Iowa City?”

I didn’t want to hurt the feelings of people who had showed interest in me, so I often couldn’t helped but lie, “well, I have heard that UI has a renowned journalism school.” Since my major is journalism, it is always a good excuse when people ask me such a question.

However, to be honest, the reason I chose to come to UI is neither because of the famous J-school nor because of UI’s beautiful nature-friendly campus. I hadn’t even heard about the state, Iowa. I came to UI because UI was the only college that sent me a letter beginning with congratulations.

Thinking back on it now, I wasn’t prepared in everything. As the reason I came to UI was because I had no choice, I couldn’t picture myself living in Iowa, so I was afraid. For me, it was like opening a book written in unknown language.

I started my first year majoring in clinical science because I was good at science in high school. However, I became more and more skeptical that “do I really like to do this?” I was confused about my future paths that I used to be so confident. After getting two Fs at the mid-term exams in Principle of Biology and Human Physiology, I finally decided to change my major to pre-journalism.

After entering the journalism school, I once again faced a challenge. I was asked to leave the class by the professor. The professor told me that I was not qualified for the class. He said that I would not succeed in the journalism major, and suggested that it would be better for me to change to another major. I dropped the class.

I chose to take a creative writing studio workshop instead in order to maintain a full-time enrollment status. That came out to be the best class I have ever taken during five years in college. For the first time after coming to the U.S., I enjoyed writing without pressure from the feeling of inferiority.

The depressions I got from the journalism class were being dissolved. I was happy when I was conceptualizing, writing and completing my story. It was pure happiness coming from doing what I love to do.

While realizing that writing is my way, another big change arose in my mind. I got a new desire to learn English not only as a means of communication, but also as a means of delivering something meaningful through writing. The English language – its uniqueness of expression – attracted me. From then on, I started to dream myself of being an English writer, delivering deeper messages through people’s daily-life stories.

After being through five and half years at UI, finally, I am looking forward to graduating in the coming December. And now, as a non-native English speaker, to become an English writer is my dream.

My college life at the UI is just like the process of conceptualizing my story. My experiences in Iowa would be a root of stories I will write in the future, and would be a fertilizer of my career that I will build for the rest of my life.

Although my arrival at the UI was unexpected and unprepared, I, somewhat, believe that it is something meant to happen, because I discovered the greater value of my life throughout years in living in Iowa City.

As I turn the pages of the book written in unknown language, which I picked up inevitably five and half years ago, I have gradually learned the new language and understood the meaning of the book.
The chapter of my life in Iowa is going to end soon as I graduate from the University of Iowa, but the book is now telling me which way I should go next.

My journey in the U.S. will go on.
Written by Jeongeun Lee, South Korea  
Graduate student in Anthropology  

The smiling city in my ‘hawk eyes’  
-My first semester in Iowa City –  

I still remember the first morning in Iowa City. It was a Sunday in early August, and the weather was so nice that I could see a fresh breeze on the green grasses under the sunshine. Yet, I was still puzzled with whole new scenery in front of me. I was here in Iowa City, but somehow it still hadn’t hit me yet. I felt like I was still in my dream. It might be because of the jet lag that derived from the 14 hours flight all the way from South-Korea or the apartment without a bed that I had to sleep on the floor. However, I think it was more caused by the scenery itself that I was seeing. The green grasses were everywhere, and squirrels were climbing up the trees. I decided to take a walk along the street. I searched for the location of the university from the internet, and it said it was 45 minutes walk to the main campus. However, the weather was nice, and it seemed that the bus didn’t run on Sundays. So I just said to myself “why not?”, and started to walk to the campus. It was a bit hot, but was not that humid as the summers of Korea. I walked along the shade of trees, and tried to remember the directions of the road. Several people were passing by. They were jogging or walking with dogs. I ran into an old gentle man and a lady, and they were smiling at me when our eyes met. In addition, the lady even said “hi” to me. I was so surprised. I am from Seoul. It is a dynamic, noisy and a huge city full of the people, cars and skyscrapers everywhere. Moreover, if you smile at people or say “hi” to someone that you don’t know but just bump into, Korean would think that you personally know the person unless you are simply crazy. However, it was a kind of joyful surprise. I hesitated for a second, but said “hi” to her trying to smiling her back, and kept walking with a smile. It was my first morning in Iowa City. I walked a lot that day, and I saw calm and peaceful streets with full of smiles everywhere.

2 weeks later, I found more smiling of myself at the campus. My orientations started. I was a bit overwhelmed by the diversity of the international students. My table at the orientation reception was full of students from China, India, Iran and Moldova. I hadn’t seen so many international people at a same time at a same place before. They had different face and voice, but same smiles.

It was amusing to learn about University of Iowa through the several quizzes. I learned that the symbol color of the University, and I also noticed that the state was called Hawkeye state. It was an amusing coincidence that my father used to call me a hawk eye when I was in Korea. The shape of my eyes is a bit sharp, and I always observe something as a hawk does (maybe it’s because of my major, anthropology), and here I am at the university of Iowa, the university with Hawkeyes. The orientation by OISS was indeed interesting and helpful at a same time. I also learned how to take care of my visa status in the US, and I even learned how to open the bank account and how to apply for my health insurance. The information was really practical and helpful, and I was impressed by the massive information and the effort of the staffs at the orientation sessions.

My department orientation was amazing as well. Actually I missed an important orientation because of my blocked old e-mail account, but the chair of department of anthropology re-organized the orientation session just for a few students again. Secretaries of the department were devoting to help me to figure the new system out. I was so touched by their considerate work. My home country has many kind people too, but when you face the administrative system, it is more about the bureaucracy and the authority rather than considerate and caring approaches to each person.

Other great surprise that I faced was the consideration from my academic advisor. We do have a good relationship between students and academic advisors in Korea as well. However, the strong moral law of Confucian sometimes blocks you to talk with your professors more often. On the contrary, my academic advisor was so caring and encouraging me to talk with her more. Actually, her great researches in my academic field were one of the most crucial reasons that I chose to study at the University of Iowa, and now I’m also impressed by her considerate caring.
My classes are even more surprising. Almost every class has a lively discussion, and the atmosphere creates a freedom to talk about anything comes up to the mind. It flourishes the contents of the discussion, and deepened the analysis. I cannot say that I am so fluent in English, because this is my first time being in English speaking country. So I have to confess that sometimes I have a hard time to understand whole context, if some of classes speak so fast. In addition, the cultural difference that highlights modesty rather than active attitude in Korea sometimes drives me to be shy. However, I am aware of the bigger sequence of the seminar, and that helps me to fit in the active discussion. I am really pleased the fact that I am not only learning from my professors but also from my classmates.

My TA session is another joyful experience. I teach Korean language and culture for 2nd year level students. At first, the students seemed a bit shy, but as time goes by they got used to study with me, and they present their enthusiasm for learning new vocabularies and expression. Furthermore, they are really hard working students so that they can use new grammar patterns freely just in 2 sessions. They are my students, but I also learn from them a lot. They encourage me to care about the classes more, and they also show how to be hard working in the class. When they say “an-nyong-ha-se-yo(Hello in Korean)” to me, I also say hello to them with a huge smile.

Today, I woke up early in the morning. The air was a bit cold. I took a warm sweater out of my closet. I wasn’t sure when I was going to wear this one when I have just arrived here in the hot weather of August. However, it is autumn already. The winter will come, soon. I still can see the green grass, but it’s covered with fallen leaves from the gray-brown trees. I passed by the trees and took an Iowa City bust to come to the campus. The driver was smiled at me, and said “good morning!” I didn’t hesitate this time. I smiled at her back and said “good morning!” with cheerful voice. The bus started to move towards Kinnick stadium. The symbol of Hawkeye was on the wall of the Kinnick stadium. I was smiling at the scenery that I was watching without notice. Here I am in Iowa City. Here I am enjoying my first semester at the University of Iowa. I smiled again with my hawk eyes, and I believe that this smile will last for a long time with me in Iowa.
Come to America

By bringing my memory back to 2 months ago before I came to the University of Iowa, I still know the feeling when I saw my parents waved to me in the airport. I wasn’t that sad but ambitious because I told to myself that I have to keep moving for the choice I’ve made. This is my first trip to America, not for fun, but for my entire future. I am happy to see “everything is different”, and all I experienced during the 2-month transition made me think a lot, enjoy a lot, and learn a lot.

I love the sign of Iowa very much which is a hawk in black and yellow. For me, black makes me to think and to be sedate; yellow gives me the feeling of happiness, peace, and hope; hawk means brave and insight who can reach the target as soon as possible. I was so excited when I first got an instant tattoo of a black & yellow hawk on my cheek; I felt I am in the right place because what I understand about the sign is the spirit I want to pursue for the rest of my life.

I was astonished when I walked around the campus, and whenever American students ask me: “what do you like the most about Iowa”, my answer will be “the environment” without thinking. Iowa makes me get rid of steel and waste from big city, and I can’t believe that I am able to live that closely to nature! I really enjoy smelling the river, lying on the grass, watching the beautiful defoliation, taking a trip wherever on the map by bike; these experiences are completely different than what I had in my hometown. I just love this place so much.

There is one thing I don’t understand. Why there are so many cigarette butts on the street near the bus station instead of waste bin? I haven’t get the final answer yes, but I guess that it is because the regulation by Iowa government for smoking is banned indoor. Also, I didn’t saw anyone smoke on the grass or near the river, so the bus station may becomes a good place to smoke with benches to sit on.

What makes me happy is that the people here. I was taking a cab and the old driver gave me a great greeting, kept telling me about the culture in Iowa, and also shared his feeling about Chinese food. The most confused experience for me is when I was in a group activity with local students, they can’t understand my gestures of showing 6, 7, 8, 9, and 10 but I can understand the way they performed. It is interesting for me and I believe that there are a lot of cultural differences for me to learn, and I will be glad to get used to it.

A frustrated experience happened recently really taught me a lesson: “to be 100% responsible for my study and life in the university”. I registered for a 1-credit Team Building class which will just took two weekend days outside to finish. Before the course began, I received the email showed the schedule changed to a one-day course with an additional meeting at night. I didn’t read the email carefully and completely forgot to attend the meeting after I finished the course. Although my classmates told me the meeting was just about 10 minutes talking about the feeling and eating pizza, I still have to spend another weekend to retake the course with no bus pick me up in the morning, and go through the same stuff again.

So although I have been in boarding school for 12 years, I still need to get used to the new life style because there are still some issues make me lost. I must keep making trade off about which one is more important for me to do in certain period of time. As an international student, the most challenging mission for me is not only about studying, but also be able to handle my life in America.

This 2-month transaction for me is not easy but meaningful, and I am more than happy to become a true Hawkeye start by watching a football game in Kinnick Stadium. Besides, since the University of Iowa is the new beginning on my way to success, I am willing to make my whole effort on it and do credit to my university eventually.
How to tip like an American if you are Chinese?

Coming to America from China, I have had wonderful time encountering, learning, and enjoying culture differences. Surprisingly and ironically enough, my biggest “culture shock” came from my experience at Chinese restaurants in America.

One Saturday night, I was dining at the Jade Sisters, a Chinese restaurant in Coralville, Iowa with two Chinese friends. After we finished our dinner, we were given a check that we didn’t need to fill in the tip/gratuity section: the tip was already calculated and included within the check. The service was very good, and the 18% tip/gratuity charged by the restaurant seemed to be fine with us, even though we wanted to tip about 20% or more. However, I was a little bit unhappy that the restaurant deprived my right and freedom to decide how much I tip based on the service I got. And I was even more befuddled by the fact that I was given a normal check with a blank tip section where I can write some numbers with a pen when I went to the same restaurant few days prior to that night with my Romanian friend, who is also an international student, but white.

So I asked the waitress and she told me that they only do it for Chinese customers because many Chinese students don’t know how to tip or tip little. This is understandable: the restaurant does it to protect its waiters and waitresses from fresh off boaters (aka international students) who are not familiar with the American manner. Then, I asked the waitress how could she tell if someone is Chinese, Korean, Japanese or Chinese-American, she told me that she cannot and that the restaurant’s strategy is to automatically charge tip for anybody who looks like Chinese. In addition, she shared with me her personal story: as a Vietnamese (and maybe -American), she was also mistaken as a Chinese student at the Three Samurai, a Japanese restaurant in Coralville, Iowa, and was given a check charged with pre-included tips.

"If it's American customers, then we don't charge it," she continued, suggesting the traditional perception of America as a homogenous white society, which explained my pervious experience with my Romanian friend, who was always lucky enough to be treated as American customer because she looks "American."

"It's their country, they do whatever they want," My Chinese friend seemed to be annoyed by my making a fuss about something that didn't really matter, "you have to tip anyway."

I was shocked and speechless.

Across the street from Jade Sisters is another Chinese restaurant, the Szechuan Village. The owner here established a much more creative double standards to distinguish its Chinese and American customers. The restaurant adopts two different menus: an original for-here menu and a derivative to-go menu with prices of all the dishes 50 cents or 1 dollar lower than the former one.

According to a former waiter working at the restaurant, if you're American and order the food to go in English, you will enjoy the lower price on the to-go menu, but if you're Chinese, you will unconditionally be charged 50 cents or 1 dollar more for every dish you order, to match the for-here menu even though you are ordering food to go. More interestingly is the fact that even if a Chinese customer orders the food in fluent English with local American accents, it won’t work. The smart restaurant owner saved all customers’ phone numbers and can identify your nationality right away!

If you don’t believe me, find a friend and do an experiment before the restaurant owner reads this story. I can't tell you the name of former waiter because he is a college student and he was working black off campus. Everybody knows that many Chinese restaurants in the United States prefer "black" labors that are cheap and uncomplaining.
I had been ordering food to go in the Szechuan Village for almost a year until one day I accidently found out that the price on the check I received didn’t match the price on the to-go menu that came with my check. I went back to the restaurant and showed my receipt to the restaurant owner. He refunded me 50 cents for my “Green Pepper Potatoes,” but refused to refund me the other 1 dollar for my “Szechuan BBQ beef,” nagging and complaining that the meat prices were rising. The owner also claimed that it was a mistake of the out-of-date to-go menu, but when I came back to the restaurant months later, the to-go menu was still not updated. Everybody can tell that the owner was not sincere.

I didn’t go to talk to the restaurant owner because I want my 50 cents back. Actually if I didn’t go, I could probably save more money for gas. I also do not care about paying one more dollar for every dish if everybody is paying the same. I just don't like the fact that even I am trying very hard to do as the Americans do; I am still treated as a FOB, a stranger from a different shore.

"Why would overseas Chinese treat their own people like this?" When I told the story to a friend, he was more than surprised.

"Well, they used to be Chinese," I said, "but not anymore."

However, these are not the only places that I enjoyed different “benefits.” Twice out of the four times I went to Airliner, a pizza restaurant in Iowa City, I had to wait for at least an hour or an hour and half before my pizza reached the table. When I asked a waitress "why my pizza hasn't come when the people coming in after me have almost finished their dinner?" she simply told me "the pizza you ordered takes longer time to cook." But when she eventually brought over the pizza 10 minutes later, the pizza didn't smell like it was in the oven for an hour. The other two times when I got my meal served quickly, I went with a bunch of real American friends.

The other time I went to the seafood buffet at Riverside, Iowa, my table was not served at all. The waitress only showed up once in the end to bring us the check when our table is packed with crab shells. Angry about the service we got, my Chinese friends and I all left a one-dollar bill on the table to demonstrate our dissatisfaction. Of course, our demonstration only reinforced the true stereotypes that Chinese people don’t know how to tip, and the frustration that I can never tip like an American.
Written by Yilan Lu, China  
Undergraduate in Prebusiness

Obviously, it was a really exciting experience for an 18-year-old student to study aboard, and, be alone. This is a beautiful place, and a good place to study. People there are so nice. But new life not only makes me happy, but also gives me many challenges.

I found a job in dining hall because I try to ease my parent’s pressures, at least, I want to buy food using my “own money”. There is one thing which made me grow a lot. One day, I worked in dishroom, when I arrived there, an old man—the man who manages the workers in dishroom—told me to pick napkins, folks, spoons and knives off the plates. But five minutes later, another girl came in, the old man told her to substitute me and I need to go out of the dishroom to pick napkins out. I thought I have to face everyone who finished eating and that was kind of a weird thing to me (although later many people told me they can do that, they thought I was weird). I showed kind of unwillingness to do that. He noticed that and asked me: “Do you have a problem?” I answered: “Can I do it inside? Cause I prefer to work inside.” Then he said: “Ok, let’s talk with A—the manager of dining hall. I thought he just asked me if I had any questions, and I gave him a answer, but why didn’t he give me an answer instead of taking me straightly to the superior manager? Is the answer “No, I don’t have any problems” the only answer he wanted?

Then we went to the manager’s office. The old man told A he wanted me to do that work but I said I couldn’t do that. I didn’t say that! I just asked if I could do that inside instead of working outside. Why he said in such a way! The manager said I should do for that work, it was just a temporary work decision. But considering that someone told me, “In America, if you don’t fight for it, you will get nothing” I said, “But I think there are enough space for me inside, I think I can do it inside.” The manager told me: “Ok, let me tell you. Do it or go home, OK?” This sentence made me so upset. I almost cried. I said “Thank you” in a low voice, turned around and went out.

I know the old man and the manager are in their position, so they had to make such decisions. It’s just culture difference and the way we think are also different. I realize that I have to take a long time to adapt for these. I also consider this kind of affair as a barrier of my life abroad. I will regard that as a challenge to make me better, so that I will be able to carry more tough difficulties.

I will be stronger, I believe.
Written by Mary Nyaema, Kenya
Graduate student in Science Education

**My experience of coming to the US.**

I could hardly believe it when I got my admission letter to come to the University of Iowa. However the problem was that I had only one month to get to the US in time for my classes. The events that eventually shaped my coming to the University of Iowa are worth documenting.

Applying for the visa was not an easy task as the rules had just changed and all material had to be submitted online. I found myself pounding on the computer onto the wee hours of the morning trying to meet deadlines and making sure that I had filled out all the forms correctly. And once that was done, I remember developing butterflies of how the interview process would go at the embassy. What if I got rejected? Amidst the encouragement I got from my advisor, family and friends, I still had that apprehension that I might have forgotten to do something right. When the day finally arrived, I was very determined to get there at least one hour before. Getting the right outfit, right poise, the perfect handbag all went to contribute to my showing up to the embassy five minutes before time. However I found a long waiting queue of people all who had been give the same appointment time. When my turn came, I walked over to the counter armed with all kinds of compelling evidence of why I should come to the US. After being interrogated not so easily at times, I was finally given a receipt that signaled that I was to be issued with my visa. I even heard myself breathing a sigh of relief.

That moment called for celebration. I even developed a brisk walk in my step from time to time from all the excitement. Most were happy for me but some did not really understand why I was leaving the place I had called home for so many years. Saying bye to my family friends was also not easy. I boarded the plane trying to mask all the tears but knowing deep down this was the better option for my future. Flying for almost a full day across different borders was a bit numbing. I enjoyed the scenic change of landscape and would have stayed a bit longer in some places if I had been allowed to.

On landing I was well received and hosted by my sister for a day before embarking on a road trip to Iowa City. Were it not for her, I do not think I would have adjusted as well as I did. She did not leave until she was sure I had settled. And when she did, it was just a realization that a new era of independence had started in me. Getting my way around was not easy. I often found myself listening intently to passersby as I was still getting used to the delightful accents of the diverse community at Iowa.

I also come to the realization that I had carried the wrong kind of wardrobe altogether. I was told that the weather in August in the US would be similar to what we had in Kenya. However my clothes always seemed to be a bit too long or too warm for the summer. Also a stare or two could send me in the direction that I was not dressed for the weather. Therefore shopping for new summer clothes was an inevitable but welcome part of my agenda.

The food tasted different at first but I could not resist trying different tasty dishes at the food court in the Old Capitol Mall. The candy selection is also amazing and very tempting for my sweet tooth. To date, I am making a very good attempt avoid it. I tend to wonder how long this will last. Looking left and right in various corners in my department there is always a bowl of free candy for you to pick. And living in health conscious America is not helping me much either. I am glad I have alternatives that taste just as good with fewer calories at the grocery store.

The most important highlight in my coming to Iowa was the orientation week. The process helped answer a lot of questions about living and working in the US. It also helped me understand a lot about various immigration documents and which type I should always carry with me. It also gave me an opportunity to meet with various organizations in the school community and found several that I could associate with. All of us were provided with a package that contained campus maps and bus routes that helped us get from one point of campus to the next. We also attended a lot of socials that helped us understand more about the American culture.
One low moment in my arrival was when I was informed that my apartment at Hawkeye would not become available until one month later. A feeling of homelessness overwhelmed me and found myself yearning for the comfort of my room. I am thankful for the friends I met during my first week at Iowa who directed me to a roommate with whom I am comfortable to live with.

Having settled in and registered for classes, I must say I have no regrets coming to Iowa. Any person planning to come to Iowa as an international student should not hold back or settle for anywhere else. The warmth and friendliness of the people I meet from day to day has got to rub on to you. My coming to America finally put everything into perspective. I got the opportunity to meet the people whom I had only communicated through emails. When I shook their hand, I felt like a young girl meeting her favorite movie star in person for the first time. To them it was not a big deal going out of their way to ensure my transition went okay. I have them to thank for finally giving me an opportunity to pursue my higher education.
My First Semester at the University of Iowa

I open my eyes at his footsteps. A pair of orange-brown boots with brown shoe laces under two long legs in deep-blue jeans. I see the boots are covered with dabs of slush on the sides of their rugged, black soles. Mr. Fuller must have walked through some snow to come to this army classroom in South Quadrangle that the army ROTC of the university occupies. Sitting in the first row, right in front of the light-gray, teacher’s desk, I don’t feel like I can look at my nonfiction teacher’s face. While I keep looking at his feet, the teacher’s young, cheerful voice greets us and asks us how our weekend was. He walks towards the students who sit at his right, away from my seat. A student says her weekend was awful because of her drunk roommate. When another student, four rows behind me, begins to talk about his family trip during the weekend, Mr. Fuller approaches to his left side where my dark-blue backpack sits right beside his left foot. The slush on his boots starts to melt, and the shiny, white tile floor is stamped with his thickly-grooved, dark-gray footprints. While I was looking at the melting slush, a smile spreads on my face. I feel silly, but I can’t help smiling whenever I am reminded of winter—that I am in real winter, my first winter at the University of Iowa.

* * *

It took me three days to move to Iowa from Southern California where I had lived for four years. Before my departure in early January, 2010, Mary, my mother-like friend in California, warned me of snow in northern states through which I had to drive. As a Korean, I knew very well what winter was like and what snow felt like, but I had never driven in snow and had never crossed America by driving though it wasn’t really west coast to east coast.

“I know I have to be careful, but I’m excited to have cold winter again. There’s no snow here in winter,” I told her. “Don’t worry, Mary. I know what I am doing, and I promise you that I will be careful.”

“Winter is beautiful with snow, but you need to be aware of black ice on freeway and learn how to drive in snow. It’s really dangerous to drive when it snows,” Mary said. Her brown eyes look into my black eyes, and her warm, white hand gives my right hand a light squeeze. “I will pray for you, Jooweon,” Mary said.

My plan was that I would go east first on freeway 40 till Oklahoma then go north to Iowa so that I could avoid snow-covered roads as much as possible. But actually, I wasn’t worried about my road trip too much. Perhaps, I wasn’t worried about it at all. After four years of studying in the U.S., my search was finally done—I found what I wanted to do with my life. I was going to Iowa to attend the University of Iowa where the best U.S. writing program was, where I wanted to pursue my dream to become a writer. I felt like everything would be fine—even I almost believed that I would become happy forever in Iowa—because I was going for what I wanted. When my trip began, I first saw snow around Flagstaff in Arizona, but even when I was passing Kansas and Missouri, which had a record-breaking snow fall that year, the American freeways remained safe and iceless. In the first night at a small hotel in Coralville, Iowa, I admired the three-foot-long icicles hanging under the hotel eaves. The noisy heater of my hotel room sounded like a welcoming cheer, and the neon-green light outside, falling from the hotel signboard on curvy snow piles, made me feel as if I had been having another Christmas in January. I emailed Mary a photo of my car parked right by a three-foot-high snow pile.

My one bedroom apartment at Parklawn was larger than I had imagined before my coming to Iowa. During the first few weeks there, I was busy, getting some furniture and learning about Iowa City. The golden dome of Old Capital shone under the winter sun, and the ice-covered Iowa River felt romantic, but when January was gone, I started to feel something strange, something I had never felt before. I started to notice how dark my new home was and how isolated I was when it snowed. One weekend, I ran out of food and was going to go grocery shopping. When I stepped out to the parking lot of Parklawn, I found my silver hatchback was coated with one-quarter-inch-thick ice. I couldn’t even open its door, and some pasta, seasoned with salt and pepper, kept me
from hunger during the whole weekend. When I called my mother in Korea and Mary in California about my food shortage, both my mother and Mary told me I needed a local friend who could help me in this new environment.

People didn’t smile at me in Iowa when our eyes happened to meet in a Hy-Vee, on Clinton, or elsewhere. They weren’t like Californians who seemed to be always smiling. I thought Iowans were rather like Koreans—people looked like that they didn’t like strangers too much or were too careful about them. Until March, my cell phone had no new friend’s number saved, and my brown-carpeted apartment had no visitors. I made no trips anywhere except school and grocery markets—there was always too much snow everywhere. Then, one slow Saturday morning, I met a stranger, Stef, in the laundry room of Parklawn. The tall, blue-eyed girl in blue shorts, who was one of the community assistants of Parklawn, had five loads of laundry and told me that she was out of clean clothes, and I said to her that my too-classy, white blouse and pink bunny socks that I was wearing were the signs that I had no clean clothes too, except what not to wear in public. Stef was a native Iowan. A few days after the laundry day, she fed me with her toast and fried egg for a brunch in her apartment, and she took me to the gatherings of her friends. At the end of my first semester at the University of Iowa, I attended Stef’s commencement from the school, and in January, the next year, I sang two songs at a church for Stef and her boyfriend, Trey, when they got married.

* * *

For the last day of our nonfiction class, Mr. Fuller asks several of us, including me, to read our essays at “Writers Gone Public.” On the night of the event, which was the last day of my first semester at UI, the Gerber Lounge at the English Philosophy Building is filled with rows of people sitting in dark, fabric-covered chairs. When it was my class’s turn, Mr. Fuller, in a gray, suit jacket, introduces the readers of my class one by one. Before I get to read my essay, he says that I remind him of something, but I can’t comprehend what the thing is because of my nervousness. My hands are cold, and my feet feel numb in my bronze heels under my apricot skirt. I forget to say hello before my reading, but I tell my audience that my English is my second language so that I might mispronounce some words. While I read my piece, I think I no longer care about whether people understand my childhood, which my essay is about, and when my reading is done, I come back to my seat without thanking the audience who applauds for everyone.

The event ends around 10:30 PM, and Mr. Fuller comes to me and my classmates to thank us one by one. I step out of the room, but I turn back to get the last look of the semester. Mr. Fuller is talking to his female colleague who’s wearing a multicolored skirt. Some people are eating cookies and drinking soda set up in the back of the room. When I push the east door of EPB, the air of May is soft and cool on my cheeks. Trees are full of leaves, and on the concrete pavement, some white petals have fallen from flowers whose name I don’t know. There is no trace of winter left on campus, and the summer vacation has just started. I walk toward a bus stop by the red-brick building of the main library and think about how my first Midwestern summer will be, and how my next semester will be in fall.
Written by Xuequan Peng, China
Undergraduate in Economics

—A Mirror of Race

The idea of race wasn’t really one I’d considered in my previous 19 years, even though I saw people of different skin color almost every day in the media. I always believed that something else, such as gender, age, or languages, instead of race was more likely to divided people into different groups. However, I will never forget the moment that I realized my skin color shapes me, makes me to be who I am, and differentiates me from other groups of people. The chance of living and studying in United States creates this mirror which gives me a new angel to look at the term “race” and the space to think about my own identity at this big country.

When I first came to United States, I worked to get acceptance by the majority group of people—the white students. It’s like a new born bird trying to adapt the cruel environment by taking the risk of death to fly with other birds. I was blind and hasty in joining this white group and differentiate myself from other Asians. I pulled myself into every white group conversation that I could find, pretending to enjoy when I actually could not understand anything they said. At the same time, I refused to go out with other Chinese students and even refused to talk to them. Later on, my desire to pass among the white people group became uncontrollable. I even started changing my style of clothing, the way I acted in public, and my tone of speaking to match white American ways. I was wearing the invisible clothing called “I am not Asian” because I was afraid that if I took off it, there would be more conflicts between me and my white friends. I was afraid that they wouldn’t talk to me if I had too many Asian friends; I was afraid that they look at me differently because my Asian style of dressing; I was afraid to make them feel I was the one who made races matter and always used it to fight back at every unequal situation. I am denying the part of my identity that can reflect I am actually not white, because I don’t want my position as a minority to be exposed.

However, the truth is that the closer I am to my white friends, the more different from them I felt. They can cheer and be proud for the heroes from popular movies of their race; they can easily find all kinds of make-up products that are designed for their skin; they do not worry about getting the jobs if their grades are good enough. When a person witnesses examples of white privilege which he does not have as a non-white, he might find another way to accept this unchangeable truth by persuading himself that he is simply not good enough to get them. He may not relate it to race because it is a label that one can never change. That was how I persuaded myself everyday when I was so close to my white friends and so close to their privileges. I was deeply aware of that even though I tried my best to be part of this white group, my skin color could immediately exclude me from all those benefits. When applying on-campus job, I was automatically filtered out from those work positions such as office assistant, front desk clerk and tutoring which required me to work with other white people. And the only answer I received was that I may not be able to handle these kinds of jobs. However, my other white friends from the same class as me started working as lab assistant or resident hall clerk when I failed to. I tried to convince myself that I did not get this job or I did not have these privileges because I was not trying hard enough and not eligible to deserve them. I mentally refused to relate it to race, which is the issue that I could never change. When I desired to be a part of white group, everything my white friends got but I did not become a mirror that reflects back to me. I saw myself in this mirror as a person of color. This is my identity at this country.

By observing the inequality faced by incoming international students, I enriched the knowledge of my own identity, which made this race mirror clearer in my life. I saw these students trying to make friends with other white students but few of them get full respect. I saw them working hard at those low skilled positions such as food services and cleaning when other white students were in parties or football games. I also saw that most of them come to this country voluntarily, become minorities, and then endure the unfairness between them and white group. Everything became crystal clear for me, when I started to admit my identity of being part of this minority group. Since then, I learned to respect them as I respect myself of being non-white. I started to make friends with them, and also started to be proud of being an Asian at this country. Denying or ignoring our identities of being minorities is not the way to diminish the discrimination. Instead, being who we are and accepting our identities should be more appropriate ways to do, because they give us more space to think about the meaning of race, maybe even to change the stereotype that others have on us, and finally to improve the equality between different races. I still remember the day that my American roommate asked me why all Chinese people like talking loudly in public. I explained to her with respect on both sides of people. I said “Talking loudly is a way to show you are friendly in China, which is totally different from American culture. We are here trying to understand and respect your
people’s culture and behaviors, but we might miss some details, so please understand us too.” From that moment, I realized she started to look at me as a person of different color but with equal respect and understanding as to other whites.

Coming to United States brought this race mirror to me. I saw myself in this mirror as a person of different color. The whole process of realizing my own identity may not be pleasant and cheerful, but it’s still a part of my life and may be part of many other students’ lives too. I made my progress a bit by bit everyday, starting from realizing my identity from each time of talking with my white friends, seeing new international students coming to this school, and observing other group of people at classes and restaurants. Now, I accept myself as a minority, and accept the existence of races. More importantly, I learned how to respect people from different races and embrace their distinct cultures as I embrace my own. I know this is my first step, and I hope it’s also the step that many others will take.
Written by Lin Sun, China
Undergraduate in Communication Studies

Coming to America

I have to admit in advance, this is already my third year here in the University of Iowa. Buried in busy schoolwork and part-time job, I felt I was not that sensitive of the fact of me being in another country any more. Fortunately, I volunteered as a group leader in the International Students Orientation this summer. Facing all the excited new students refreshed my memory of my experience of first coming here and reopened my eyes to observe where I am.

Oh My God, this is THE U.S.?

What was my impression of America? Thanks to the great Hollywood, U.S. used to mean New York, Washington D.C. Chicago... all the metropolis, skyscrapers and busy street. When I arrived in Iowa City, I felt unreal, is this the United States we had heard so much about? I still remembered the morning after my arrival when a kind girl drove me around to show me the city, there was literally nobody on the pavement. I was astonished and amused. Coming from China which has a larger territory and even larger population, my definition of city refers to some regions with far more people and larger area than what Iowa City has. Among all the Chinese students, we have a prevalent synonym for Iowa City. When we talk about the city, we call it jokingly as “our countryside”. Don’t take us wrong, we mean it in the kindest we as we can. It may be cliché but also very true to say that everything has its advantage and its disadvantage. As a small town (this is my compromise to say Iowa City), Iowa City has a nicer atmosphere. Most people seems friendly and patient. Also I feel more secured when living here. Meanwhile due to its size, it can provide us limited resource for entertaining, and as a girl, I mean specifically shopping.

The Sense of Politeness

During my life here, one of the differences between Americans and Chinese I sensed is our politeness. On one hand, through the first week I lived here, I felt like I heard apologies more frequently than any time in my previous life. In China, we rarely say ‘excuse me’ when we pass between someone and the shelves of groceries in supermarket. Nor do we say so when trying to walk through a door simultaneously with someone else. On the other hand, I did not feel comfortable to address my TAs and sometimes professors by their first name, which seems perfectly natural to my American classmates. And I had been used to a more respective way to talk to them. I don’t think the difference means either American or Chinese are more polite than the other. It may attribute to the different ideologies behind. American culture is more about individualism, thus makes people more conscious when intruding others personal space. Meanwhile our Confucianism gave us more explicit social hierarchy thus required more respect to teachers. Here comes a “not-so-good” point. As “the different one” in the American society, I am always conscious of what people think of me. I often worry that the different sense of politeness may misrepresent me as rude.

Expression of Intimacy

Americans and Chinese have different ways to express closeness. Chinese have smaller personal space than Americans do. It is very common for two girls who are only friends to hold hands when walking on the street, or sitting closely when talking, both of which seem very less comfortable to Americans. I did not realize this until last summer when I went back to China and suddenly become more self-conscious when my friends tried to walk
with me hand in hand. But in terms of expressing their affection verbally, Americans do it more explicitly than Chinese people do. Once I accidentally heard one young American man said “love you” before hanging up his parent’s phone call, which amused me; because in China, it is regarded too feminine for a man to say “love you” unless it is to his significant other. I like this part of American culture. Since then I have learned to say “love you” every time before I hang up my parents’ phone call; and I am glad that I am doing so.

Guess We are not that Different

Yes, we have different definition of “city”. And yes, we have some different details in our social etiquettes. But the last thing we should do is to dramatize the difference between us. We are all young college students. We all complain about hard exams and homework. Most girls, regardless of nationality, like shopping, and most boys love sports. We are all trying to become good persons. And we have dreams of our future. We may have limited topics to chat about, but that may be simply because we grew up watching different cartoons and TV shows. Or even that might not be true, as every kid loves Disney and Hollywood sells movies all across the planet.

At last, I am not the everything-is-fine kind of person. I did face unexpected differences which is acceptable or frustrating. But this is exactly why I chose to study abroad. I had learned the habit of addressing people by their first name before I came to the U.S, but it is a different story when I actually experience it. Experience is so much more than merely knowledge that I have never regretted to study abroad. Living abroad gives me an open mind; and as people say, open mind means to realize that there are different ways to live than the way you do, and it is OK for people to be different.
“Ted, how do you find the guest speaker?”
“He was interesting yet his speech lacked lasting appeal.”
“Well, how would you compare it to one of Professor Durham’s lectures?”
“Ah… Hey, look at the piles of yellow leaves.”
“Yes? Here comes autumn.”
“Yeah, here comes autumn…”

Sixty-three days have passed since my arrival at Iowa City, the City of Literature. Before my departure from my hometown in China, I bore this dream about my university education: a dream of becoming a well-informed and versatile writer who would craft thoughtful pieces; a dream of being an arduous student who would pass with flying colors; a dream of acting as a helpful body who would address others’ concerns. I had been ambitious about my university experience when I first looked into it. Over the last two months, however, I have not only initiated my dream but also enriched it with various valuable elements adapted from my American friends. This essential integration of distinct cultural constituents has played a pivotal role in reshaping my new life.

Before the start of the school term, I had made a number of trips around Iowa City. The city impressed me with being quite amenable and peaceful, with neither tall buildings nor large factories. Differed from the stereotypical portrait of cities in American movies, Iowa is neither a jungle of concrete and steel bars nor a busy cosmopolitan business center. People here walk at a much slower pace than dwellers in cities like New York or Los Angeles along the coastal regions. Along the street, how little my American bodies wear during the cool days amazes me. The differences in climates play a vital role: the air here is much drier and the sky is much clearer comparing to that in my hometown. Throughout the day, I had watched energetic and passionate runners everywhere, a phenomenon rarely seen in my hometown due to the utter differences in lifestyles. People living in cities of economic importance tend to imprison themselves in these small flats after work and burden their life with endless work assignments. In Iowa, everyone seems to lead a relatively manageable life with sufficient exercise to better prepare them for the next day. I figure the life pattern plays a crucial role that contributes to the city’s reputation: people here are more freed from rat races to take a breath and reflect on themselves. One is more likely to be visited by one’s muse if one has got more time to free one’s mind. Besides Iowans’ lifestyle, local libraries and public facilities may also have served as sources of inspiration. Along Iowa Avenue, metal tablets inscribed with famous adaptations scattered along the pavements, recalling memorable moments to enkindle new enlightenments. On the other side of the avenue, sculptures and pianos along the paths within city plaza drew the pedestrians’ attention to the appreciation of both aesthetic and musical arts, refreshing one’s mind to stimulate innovations. A quiet reader on the bench by the piano dissolved into the environment with this peaceful ambience. After this series of observations, I have recognized Iowa as the perfect spot for residence at a slower life pace.

Life has changed drastically ever since the beginning of the school term. Dashing between buildings for classes and working before my laptop day and night, I have little time for other activities apart from studying. This way of life has overthrown the myth that a university is a place where everybody enjoys himself and has fun as introduced by my Chinese friends back home. My timetable may appear free, yet homework fills up the blanks. The concepts appear to be easy during class but devour chunk of time to digest before application.

The most challenging course I have encountered so far is Media History and Culture lectured by Dr. Durham. He is a humble man who speaks and acts firmly. His action speaks for his stand: “I cannot teach you the ability of analyzing and interpreting journalistic events. But I can give you the know-how to acquire it. And that, my student, is more worthy than a huge pile of exam study notes.” He has demonstrated the utter differences between spoon-feeding and self-enrichment. Every piece of his assignment is a tough challenge for which I conduct extensive research of the background information in order to complete. He is strict, yet he is friendly and easily accessible as
always.

Since the beginning of Dr. Durham’s first lecture, I have undergone several phases of change: initially, I interpreted this class as a history class, blatantly ignoring the concepts integrated within each historical event; then I learned to study the concepts by memorizing them, falling short to answer certain questions in discussions; now, I have started to build up links between each term and event, trying to plot the big picture Dr. Durham has been emphasizing. Until this point, I have realized Dr. Durham has actually offered me a box of puzzle, posing me the challenge to restore the original picture. There starts my journey towards higher level of thinking and enhanced skill in problems solving and this differentiates success at the university level and that of the high school level.

For a long period of time, I have frequently observed Chinese students staying with compatriots upon the campus. Yet, I have rarely been part of the prevalent scene due to the large amount of time I have dedicated to my study. In the case, learning has set me aside from others’ life as a bystander, who is mostly too steeped in his work to peep hastily into anybody else’s life. On the other hand, the bystander is also constantly looking into others’ life whenever possible in hope that he will become part of another’s life. Often this is awkward to me that my hustling steps squeeze my chat, even a greeting to schoolmates. I was willing to show others my friendliness yet I was “too busy” to make it. The dilemma lasted long enough before the midterm test of Media History and Culture, at which point I decided to form a study group as a means to socialize more. To my surprise, my proposal failed even after the intervention of Ted, teaching assistant of the course, which I could barely accept. Bewildered, I turned to my suitemate for clarification.

“Ryan, I feel bad.”
“Why’s that?”
“I have missed lots of experiences with native students and am now trying to establish my connections with them.”
“Why did you sigh then?”
“I have failed this attempt to call upon a study group and I thought that was a good approach.”
“Well, everybody does their own thing and they may not have time to join your group.”
“I doubt it and probably people do not like me.”
“You’re fine. People here are conservative, so they usually only talk to people like themselves.”
“Do you mean everybody tend to stay within one’s comfort zone?”
“Exactly, and now that you’ve given it your best shot, it’s up to them to take you up on the offer.”
“Well, I have long lived within my own comfortable zone, feeling comfortable with study. I shall be reaching out to more individuals.”

Ever since, I have actively engaged in the student body and teaching staff but major shifts just take time to propel. I have made a few friends including Casey, Ted, and Ryan. Ryan and I once stirred up a debate on the terms of “Midwest” and “Mideast”. From my perspective, if Iowa lied to the east of America, it should be called “Mideast”, drawing a line down the center of America puts Iowa in the eastern half. Chinese English played a role there and it indeed served a good laugh. Similar tiny memorable moments have accumulated over time and lightened up my life along the path.

“Benny, it is autumn and why do you ponder over that?”
“Oh, I have just realized without your invitation to attend this speech, I would still be hiding in my cave and doing my homework. Thank you, Ted.”
“Well, life is definitely more than being buried in books. Experiences like attending such speech make learning more insightful and diversified. Isn’t this why you’re here?”
“Yeah, probably this is all about to be a Hawkeye, right? A Hawkeye is a symbol of vision, and one’s ability to look deep into matters. Blessed and strengthened by their creative minds and precise depictions, generations of Hawkeyes have pushed forward social changes with their powerful pens, being the thinkers, the leaders, and the pioneers for which the word ‘Hawkeye’ has long carried its meaning.”
“You are an idealist, ain’t you, Benny?”
“What about your American Dream then?”
“Yeah, we are on the same track. Dare to soar high up in the sky with our visions and strengths.”
“I agree. My life in Iowa is an olive: a salty sting at first, then sweeter every taste.”
Sometimes I feel the air I breathe in and out can be so different in two places. Instead of being a noble and live in someplace luxury, I'd rather end my life in a peaceful wonderland. I prefer the soft texture of water when douse my hand in the creek than staring at the polluted city through window or seeking for reading place in a bustle market. So here I am, in Iowa, waving back to the past at the airport, with two packages of dreams in hand. I came, hugging everybody I met.

1. A child with bare foot

Just like a child with bare foot, I observe the outside world with curiosity and satisfaction.

Thanks to the OnIOWA Programme, I met Sean and Natatile, who are now really close friends with me. I remembered we three went swimming at the CRWC.

After the great swimming experience, we walked all the way to Burge with bare foot. I've never try this back to China. It may be so embarrassing to walk on the road with so many people staring at you in China.

But here I will.

I will because the road is much more clean.

I will because I have friends for company side by side, heart by heart.

I will because I don't need to worry the crowed will separate me and my friends.

I will because I came to the right country with freedom.

So what's can you see through the reflection in my eyes?

I could see behind the bus station, the fluorescent lamps from the Main Library together with the road lamps enlighten the darkness. Sometimes I would stop by to see my fellows inside the building, who are probably tired after hours of concentration.

I could walk through the lawn behind the Old Capital. The grass with buds is as tender as the skin of a baby. I saw the tree which I spent the lazy afternoon reading under the shadow of.

Just like a child with bare foot, I observe the outside world with curiosity and satisfaction.

To experience the adventure, to treasure the memory.

As the memory flows, the dreams come true.

Drivers will gesture in car to let you cross the road first. I release the stress when crossing streets in my hometown. Everyone greets me with smile. Most of them are strangers to me. But don't you worry about that. Smile will melt the boundary between us. I forget the indifferent faces when I took buses on my way home in China.

I walked through the path and left my footmarks in mind.

This place, never hesitate to devote my heart as long as life endures.

2. Another door of life

So lucky I did the survey the other day, or I won't open another door of life.
The first lesson I learned from the bible study is "forgiveness". The first word I learned from the bible is "sinful".

I can still recall I participated in the survey of religions on the way back to Duam. To be honest, I'm always interested in religions despite I had no probable opportunity to approach. So lucky I did that survey the other day, or I won't open another door of life. Since that I met Dan, who give us the bible study every Tuesday night at Duam. Since that I get to know and also attended the Cru.camp (Fall getaway 2011) to have a deep understanding about the bible.

No one is prefect expect the God, we are facing variety of stress from all kinds of aspects in the life. Pray for our guilt and wash away the dust of heart, then we'll be saved by god.

It was on Sunday night in the camp, we had a self-criticism meeting for only men where everyone could get a chance to make a confession and pray for forgiveness from the God. We all have issues in lives, whether homosexual love, smoking habits, family divorce, fraudulent sex or so on. Here there were men bravely commit them and pray. Life is not about trapping in the miserable memories, but committing the past, letting go, and moving on.

Most of the men had tears in eyes, including me. I believe there are always two personalities live in men's body. Most of the time we impersonate as a tough man that nothing can intimidate us, another live deep inside the heart when we release our feeling of frustrating and upset in the endless night. The hypothesis of man being invincible facing all difficulties is so radical that never consider the stress we carried. We needs to pray, and we need to be comforted. We may be defeated by problems sometimes, after confession we can struggle to our feet and then pursue to be a better man outside and inside.

I'm still not Christian yet, but maybe just on the way "home".

3. Far far away from home

Missing never stop chasing the desire of exploring the outside world.

"Miss you" never easy to come out from my mouth. As a man, more mature you are more incapable for you to express the love.

I took 3 hours to write this poem. It used to be a Journal assignment for my ESL writing, but moreover, I'd like to think it as a voyage of the heart.

Far Far Away From Home

I just want to run, far far away from home,
Ignoring the time elapses in the sound of wind,
Ignoring the sand in my sports shoes,
And the rigorous teachers in both class and dream.
I just want to run, far far away from home,
Until I prove the earth is a cube,
Until I vindicate all the fairy tales are true.
Then I will book the ticket for home.

I just want to run, from far far away to home,
Until the death intimidate me,
Until the dinosaurs come back to life,
Then I will stop my step, tear at the wharf.
I just want to run, from far far away to home,
Ignoring the roadside has no plants grow,
Ignoring the tumor in the throat,
And lay on the road where used to be my home.

Though
I seize every opportunity to stay in this country.
Missing never stop chasing the desire of exploring the outside world.

Maybe one day I can introduce my family to you, America.

5. Start

Have you seen me?

I don’t have a sense of direction. I lost my way finding the rooms for the lecture I should participate. Asking people around with poor speaking abilities, I need to be brave, they need to be patient.
I never have experience to sleep after 3 in the morning before. Here you may be. If it is not a crazy non-alcohol party on weekends, homework due tomorrow may force you.
I can not catch up with the speaking speed, next time I would keep remember don’t nod at the professors pretending you know all the stuffs, only if you want to embarrass yourself to answer the question in class, which you probably have no idea. Measuring the professors after class by appointment is the optimal way to solve the problem.
That what I’ve worked through, challenges that pretty much all the freshmen once or will experience.
I never hesitate to "embarrass" myself.
Start,
because that’s the start of a first-year student.
In the building, have you seen someone lost their way and running back and forth?
On the way to class, have you seen someone looked confused staring at a map in hand?
In the lecture class, have you seen someone nodding at the professor with an innocent face?

-Have you seen me?
-Yes, I see you, all of you.
Written by Lamia Zia, Pakistan
Graduate student in Journalism

Inspired by the fantasy story of 'Alice in Wonderland', I used to dream in my childhood days that one day I will fall down a rabbit hole too and will find an adventurous world. Dream comes true when holding a backpack filled with the books on the U.S. culture and history, an English dictionary, and too many stereotypes in my mind, I started my journey from the other part of the world, Pakistan to explore the 'Wonderland'-unique for its culture and diversity.

When I first read Lewis Carroll’s “Alice in Wonderland,” I was transported to a world of fable and fantasy, wondering when I too like Alice would fall down my very own rabbit hole, equipped with its own share of eccentricities. My “wonderland” was Iowa University. On the first day brimming with apprehension, a backpack full of books on U.S. culture, history, and an English dictionary as heavy as I was (or thought was); I began my journey.

I started my journey in Pakistan as a journalist with six years of cumulative experience.

With over six years of journalism experience, I had come across hundreds of people who were either desperate to know more about the U.S. or were totally disoriented about the perception of a country, USA, which never seize to impress the rest of the world because of its success in all walks of life. The journalist inside me was not only curious to experience the U.S. culture, but I was equally excited to share my culture, traditions, and values with the common man of the U.S.

With a fragile democracy and an enormous number of social problems, why Pakistan is becoming crucial for the U.S.? The nations from both sides are perplexed with such kind of questions. They need veracious answers. One cannot measure the water, until jump into, similarly, issues from security to poverty in Pakistan, cannot be gauged sitting thousands of miles away in a serene environment.

Boarding an airplane, my heart was filled with ecstatic joy and sadness of leaving my homeland and becoming an “Alien”. Despite the stereotypes, I was curious to know about the characteristics of American culture: values, styles of communication, thinking patterns of its people, customary behaviors, and how Americans are different from others. Filled with ecstatic joy and sadness of leaving homeland, I entered the plane and buckled up. Soon the airplane lost its touch from the ground and I was up in the clouds. I had to travel 32 hours to reach Iowa City. My plane landed in the wee hours at the Chicago International airport. I felt myself lost in the hustle and bustle of this new, stunningly bright, and entirely different world.

Wow! "At last, I fall down a rabbit hole and found a wonderland," I mumbled. May be 'Alice' was not that much amused as I was. While looking at my watch I realized that when I was traveling for a new dawn in my life, my country was already in the dusk—It’s a 12 hours time difference between the U.S.A. and Pakistan.

While holding my backpack, I went to the immigration officer to get an entry stamp into the new world. The officer looked at me and the first sentence he said was, “So you are an alien here.” Obviously it bewildered me. I thought that I was a human being, not an alien but perhaps to “Know Thyself” one has to be in new avatar. I took a deep sigh after attaining my new title which was just the beginning as I got another cultural shock when I arrived in Iowa City.

Actually, everyone perceives the United States from Hollywood movies and Iowa City was the other side of the action movies-meaning it was very calm, serene and peaceful. There was no such action here like I saw in ‘Iron man’. Iowa City had beautiful river around the University and had blue clear sky without any noise pollution, inspires everyone coming from South Asian countries. Contrary from the movies and stereotypes, the U.S is quite different from its education system to football game.
I spent one year in Iowa City, learning and finding that Americans are in a perpetual state of hurry whether they are walking, eating or talking, from fast food to fast reading, there are few moments of peace. Besides blending with an American culture, I actually still do not grasp the hip hop, football game, Halloween, pumpkin carving, making a turkey on Thanksgiving and etc. The best part is, I never feel like a fish out of water since I am in Iowa because of its wonderful people and culture. To the other side, coming to the wonderland was more or less proved to be an ‘Individual land where the freedom of individual counts.’