

Cultural Connections

By SHAHEENA PARVEEN

Experiencing different languages, religions and lifestyles on a U.S. campus enriches our lives.



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Students paint a mural recognizing diversity in faith among Muslim and non-Muslim youths, in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

Living and studying in the United States is a different experience. The method of teaching and professors' expectations are different. The curriculum is diverse. If you are a mathematics major, you can also take classes in art, music, literature and sports. You can earn a degree as well as nourish your interests and hobbies.

The professors are comparatively informal. Each student is assigned an academic adviser. The expectations of the professors are more or less the same as in India—timely completion of assignments, participation in class and at least 98 percent attendance.

Some students worry about their accent and back off from interaction. However, teachers or fellow students do not care about accents as long as they understand you.

You should try to live on campus, at least for the first year, as it gives you a chance to blend in and participate. Some organizations that might interest Indian students are the International Students' Association, the Indian Students' Association, the Muslim Students' Association and the South Asian Association.

When I joined Chatham University in Pennsylvania, there was no association for Muslim students. A few of my friends and I decided to get something started. We got permission from the college authorities and started organizing events in order to spread the message of Islam. Our first event was an *Iftar* party to which we invited the college staff and students. The *Iftar* dinner was followed by a discussion about the significance of Ramadan in Islam.

I also organized Diwali and Holi with the International Students' Association. By joining these groups, you can develop strong leadership and teamwork skills, and make friends.

Sharing a room with another student is an opportunity to explore a different culture. I remember our orientation leaders telling us that we cannot expect our roommates to be our friends. But we can expect them to be good roommates. Cultural differences might create some problems that need to be addressed. It is advisable to resolve them between yourselves. If things get out of hand, the residence assistants are there to help.

In my senior year, my roommate was a freshman. We did not have many things in common and, as my orientation leaders said, we could not become friends. But we were good roommates and both of us compromised a little so that we did not disturb each other.

Food turns out to be a concern for some international students, especially if you are vegetarian. Some of the recipes served in my cafeteria contained alcohol. We had to request the chef to label those items. It is a common practice in the United States to offer alcoholic beverages at parties and social events. If you do not drink alcohol, refuse politely and if you like, you can explain your reason as well.

Americans are curious to know about other cultures. Use this opportunity to grow. Studying abroad is not all about earning a degree but enriching your life as well.



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