



Courtesy Bhavani Tirumurti

Going for the Right Mix

By BHAVANI TIRUMURTI

It's wise to begin researching early to find an American university with the right balance of course offerings, qualified professors, diverse student population and scholarship opportunities.

By the time one selects the universities of one's choice, completes all the necessary paperwork and formalities, buys the cheapest ticket to the United States and finally boards the flight, the feeling is not one of joy, but relief—that all the trouble, the anxiety and the nail-biting wait have finally paid off.

Starbucks, Ben & Jerry's and Taco Bell. Yes, they are all there. But these are not the reasons why an Indian student should study in the United States. These are the add-ons! The real reasons include an atmosphere of academic learning; an unparalleled range of disciplines on offer; the charm of a rich campus life; opportunities to innovate and think differently; and, in my case, the possibility of combining the pursuit of serious

college tennis with academics.

Most Indians tend to narrow their search to some well-known institutions, based on word of mouth. They, therefore, consider only a handful of institutions and neglect others. It is better for students to research the advantages of different universities based on their individual needs.

Considerations include: Location—west or east coast; size—smaller colleges allow more individual attention; private or public—thereby determining the funding available; liberal or conservative—a conservative U.S. college is equivalent to what we in India may consider liberal; discipline and faculty—some have strengths in specific areas of study and a higher percentage of professors with PhDs; and diversity in the student mix.

Researching, analyzing and consulting college counselors are good moves. For a head start, begin looking while in Class 11.

Being an International Tennis Federation junior player, I looked for a healthy mix of tennis and academics, and some financial support in the form of a scholarship. I first wrote directly to the coaches and got responses from several. The fact that I had attended school for three years in the United States, had played in the U.S. national junior circuit and did reasonably well in my SAT exams helped.

But then, sports scholarship slots are not easy to come by since the coaches are inclined to favor U.S. players with whom they are familiar, or they go by International Tennis Federation rankings for those from abroad. This is only natural.

The University of Denver in Colorado met most of my criteria and, most importantly, had a young dynamic coach with whom I established a rapport much before I accepted their offer to join. They also gave me a very generous sports scholarship.

Once into the U.S. college system, Indian students have a lot of adjusting to do. It's probably best for them to get into a college that has a diverse student population, as finding other Indians in a similar predicament helps bonding.

But I strongly encourage Indians to mix with students of other ethnicities as well, since the average American student is keen to get to know Indian students, who have a reputation of being intelligent and hardworking.

College life can be a sobering experience in many ways as one no longer has cooks, maids or drivers to depend on. With independence comes the need to become self sufficient. All hostel students anywhere in the world go through this, but when you combine this with your new "alien" environment, with no *dosa* or *idli* to fall back on, it becomes difficult. Time and patience will see you through.

In the first year, one can almost expect to fall seriously sick once (no, I don't want to scare you), lose weight after the first few months and become skilled at time management. In addition, it is most important to maintain proper



Courtesy Wikipedia

The University of Denver in Colorado.

accounts so that you know when to call your parents for help!

It's usual for Indians to feel awkward about their lifestyle, especially if one is religious. One doesn't have to wear religion on one's sleeve, but there is no need to compromise one's beliefs or values for the sake of gaining acceptance. The American system sometimes unwittingly tries to convert everyone into its mould, even while it appreciates diversity. Well, that's life but that doesn't mean you give up your culture. 

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