

# Studying Beyond Books

By VISHAL GUPTA

**A**dmissions to U.S. universities generally follow a long but systematic process that starts about a year before the first day of classes. The application process involves preparing for and taking some standardized tests like the GRE or GMAT and TOEFL, short-listing universities, preparing applications, getting official academic transcripts and letters of recommendation, and securing funding for tuition and other expenses.

A common mistake that students make during this process is focusing excessively on university rankings and ignoring the idea of a good fit between the university and one's goals and objectives. For example, Harvard University in Massachusetts is ranked in the top tier for many programs, but it may not be a good fit for all students. There are more than 4,000 universities and colleges in the United States, so it is important for Indian students to select the institution that best fits their situation.

Most of my student life in the United States was at the University of Missouri (2002-06), though I have also spent some time at Penn State university as an engineering student (2001-02), at the University of Nebraska (2006-08) and at Binghamton University in New York (since 2008) as a faculty member in the business school.

The University of Missouri (MU or Mizzou as it is popularly referred to) exposed me to the Midwestern United States and allowed me to study and under-

**Indians form the largest group of students going to the United States for higher education, with about 94,500 in 2007-08.**

stand American culture and life from close quarters. When I started my student life there, I did not know that there was a long historical connection between the university and India. Sanskrit had been taught at Mizzou for many years. The university yearbook was named *The Savitar*, Sanskrit for Sun God.

"...Research shows that the aesthetic reasons for selection of the name by University students of 1894 were perhaps tempered by more prosaic ones. Among other things, the editors liked the size and sound of the word. The student editors probably got their idea for the title from Professor James Shannon Blackwell, professor of Semitic and modern languages at the University from 1886 to 1897, who was known as a student of Sanskrit," says the university's Digital Library Web site. The first edition of *Savitar* came out in 1894 and its final edition was printed in 2006.

The University of Missouri was also a partner in starting an agriculture university in Orissa in the early years after India's independence.

Perhaps the most visible difference between the U.S. and Indian education system is in the extent of decentralization of academic responsibility, that is, the autonomy professors in the United States have in designing and teaching their courses. Faculty members have a lot of freedom to teach as they consider fit, which results in more creativity and innovation in pedagogical techniques and curriculum.



Courtesy Vishal Gupta

Another important difference between the two systems is that students in the United States generally have some sort of work experience, mostly on a part-time basis in a fast food restaurant or department store. Indian students, on the other hand, are like those from many other countries who go through school and college without working in the real world. Consequently, U.S. students tend to be stronger at relating theoretical concepts to practical situations, whereas Indians have better quantitative and mathematical skills that take time and practice to develop.

In my early days in the United States, I realized that most Americans usually associate two things with India: the Taj Mahal and Mahatma Gandhi. In more recent years, Bangalore and outsourcing have been added to this list. I have also been shocked by how little Indians who go to the United States know about India to intelligently answer questions about their country. The reason for this perhaps lies in an important difference between the U.S. and Indian education systems. In India, advanced education primarily involves in-depth study of one's chosen academic field, with students taking a list

## For more information:

Binghamton University—State University of New York

<http://www2.binghamton.edu/>

The University of Missouri

<http://www.missouri.edu/>

Mizzou's missing memories

<http://www.voxmagazine.com/stories/2009/07/15/mizzous-missing-memories/>



*Above: Prospective students follow their tour guide on the campus of the University of Missouri.*

*Left: Binghamton University in New York.*



of courses considered relevant to their area of interest. In the United States, on the other hand, undergraduate education involves a broad spectrum of courses on various, sometimes unrelated, topics, followed by a short sequence of courses taken in a chosen field of study. It is thus important for Indian students to read in fields outside their own area of specialization and gain the breadth of knowledge that will help them intelligently respond to questions about their country of origin.

At the same time that Indian students studying abroad are expected to help local people learn about India, they should also

make a conscious effort to learn about local culture and lifestyle. In 1907, Rabindranath Tagore wrote to his son-in-law, Nagendranath Gangulee, who had

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gone to the United States to study agriculture:

“To get on familiar terms with the local people is a part of your education. To know only agriculture is not enough; you must know America too. Of course if, in the process of knowing America, one begins to lose one’s identity and falls into the trap of becoming an Americanized person contemptuous of everything Indian, it is preferable to stay in a locked room.”

Most people who have lived in a foreign country can attest to the wisdom in Tagore’s advice. Unfortunately, many Indian students in the United States tend to follow either of the extremes: Some isolate themselves and do not interact much with the locals, while some become one of the locals in every way possible and forget their own identity and origins. The best course for students, Tagore advises, is to carefully and mindfully analyze and understand the local culture in the United States, while retaining their own core identity.



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