



INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS' ADJUSTMENT

All new students' first days at the University of Miami are ones of adjustment. For international students, this is even more true. Experiencing sharp changes in values and communication patterns can cause stress. The food may be different ("What is corn on the cob?"). The people you pass may smile, say "Hello, how are you?" and then keep walking past you. Public transportation is different from back home. No one knows where your country is located. The media offer sparse international news, and most of what you see is about local crime and corruption.

What have you gotten yourself into?

Fortunately, what you will experience is not all negative and you will soon get your initial cross-cultural trauma in perspective. The people will be friendly and you will want to learn of life in your country; the changes in food, language, and physical surroundings will be an exciting challenges and sources of mutual enrichment. You and the University of Miami community will become fortunate for the contact with each other.

Of course, there will be some values that are hard to understand or accept. U.S. ways of raising children, our styles of family life, our social customs, our material-consumer lifestyles, our religions, our politics and our views of ourselves as a nation in the world may be quite different from your perceptions of "what should be." The breadth of customs and values in the U.S., however, will show that for however many agree, just as many will disagree: that is our way. More than any other country, we are diverse: city-rural; North-South; East-West; dominant-minority social groups; liberal-conservative, etc. The population in the U.S. is highly mobile, pragmatic, and a melting pot of more than one hundred primary cultures. Our values emphasize individualism, independence, change, growth, and opportunity. For some, the family, the aged, children, marriage, and stability suffer. As is true in many parts of the world, minority groups are in tension with regard to the dominant power structure. Blacks, Hispanics, the women's movement, fundamentalist religion, etc., all offer challenge to the dominant structure.

Part of the solution to your adjustment is to interact with us; but even language can be a cross-cultural problem. Often the implicit meaning in what we say cannot be absorbed from a book or class. Accents, rate of speech, and local idioms add spice to the process. "We'll have to get together sometime" may or may not be an invitation to dinner. The cashier saying, "come back soon" does not usually mean to immediately come back at that time. A smile and "hello" is not always an invitation to stop and talk. Figuring out what is intended can be confusing, but it is possible.

At the same time you are experiencing these sources of stress, you are also trying to find housing, register and attend classes, fill out countless forms, eat, and find others from your country. Like the juggler in a circus, you have many items to keep in the air.

For a few, the differences are too great. Loneliness and depression can set in. The effort to adjust or adapt is too great. The isolation is felt too severely. Withdrawing from stressful contact may serve to accentuate the loneliness. Academic performance can suffer and your pride and sense of accomplishment may falter.

Fortunately, there are many people in the university community who are available: to help with the forms, to listen, to untangle misunderstandings, to help with housing concerns, to offer counseling and support. If you take advantage of these resources, you will not have to struggle alone.

Some personal preparation would begin with making sure you are getting proper food and enough exercise and rest to function well. Look for ways to meet people. It may be difficult at first, but nothing can be achieved without trying. Student groups, parties, a host family, religious groups, departmental social events, C.O.I.S.O. (Counsel of International Students Organization) events (305-284-2928), and other activities are all good places to meet others.

Everyone is in the same status of being new, so take the risk of communicating. If the stress of adjusting is interfering with study or your ability to socialize, seek out one of the counselors at the Counseling Center in Building 21-R (305-284-5511). The service is free and confidential. Above all, relax and take time for yourself, even in the labor of your class work. Do things you consider enjoyable, things that support your good view of yourself and your abilities. Know that stress can be a sign of challenge and growth, and that the typical international student does survive, becomes enriched, and enriches us here at the University of Miami.

We wish to thank the Counseling Center at Vanderbilt University for permission to adapt this article from its original version.