Passport to College

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Recommended Citation
Available at: http://lib.dr.iastate.edu/ethos/vol2015/iss1/13

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PASSPORT TO COLLEGE

The success and strife of international students when they come to study at Iowa State.

BY ANDREAS HAFFAR
DESIGN RENAE MEINES
PHOTO TOMAHS HUHNKE
AND ANDREAS HAFFAR
Iowa State University is home to nearly 35,000 students, and 3,980 of those students are studying abroad, whether it’s for a few months or a couple years. This makes up 11 percent of the total enrollment, according to the Iowa State Registrar. On a diverse campus like Iowa State, there is an abundance of cultures and languages.

This fall, 100 different countries and major cities are being represented in the Cyclone Nation, from Beijing to Bogotá. People from all over the world come here all pursuing different degrees and sharing cultural experiences.

All you need to do is have your passport ready and hop on a plane to Des Moines International Airport.

Not so fast.

Traveling abroad is tantalizing; however, the process of getting into the United States and gaining admission to Iowa State is a tedious one. In addition to the requirements that the students from the United States have to meet, international students are required to do even more.

International Students must first find a Student and Exchange Visitor Program (SEVP)-certified school, such as Iowa State, which will be able to accept students outside of the United States.

Then, you’re done. Welcome to Iowa State...

Not quite. Most universities, including Iowa State, require students to pass the ‘Test of English as a Foreign Language’ (TOEFL) before they’re accepted. The test includes sections on reading, writing, listening and speaking.

Then, the student is given a form that indicates they’ve been accepted. They can proceed to apply for a nonimmigrant visa at the nearest U.S. Embassy or consulate, where they will most likely require the student to schedule a meeting.

If all goes well, four months later, the visa will go through, and the student will be packing up for his or her new adventure.

But the documentation, oh, the documentation. One must be sure to have their passport, a receipt showing that they’ve paid for the fees (oh yes, there are fees), a photo of themselves, a transcript of one’s grades, scores from certain tests such as the TOEFL or SAT and a payment plan throughout the time spent in the states.

International Students must meet, international students are required to do even more.

“The Cyclone Nation in the Heart of America”

Some people seem to wonder why a student from a different place would ever want to come to Iowa. Perhaps Iowa is mundane, or is Iowa all we know? Iowa State isn’t as boring as some may believe. The university, and life itself, is what they make of it, and Iowa State is well-respected nationally.

The College of Engineering has the highest enrollment of undergraduates and last year, had just over 7,100 students. In the case of Azzam Alnasser, the reputation of Iowa State’s engineering school was what lured him to Ames.

Alnasser is a senior in mechanical engineering from Jubail, Saudi Arabia and a “sponsored student.” A company called SABIC (Saudi Arabia Basic Industries Corporation) based out of Riyadh sponsored him, enabling him to travel across the Atlantic for his education.

However, Ames was not his first stop in the States. He went to Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Tennessee, where he took classes and worked on his English. Upon passing the TOEFL, he came to Iowa State in the fall of 2011. To say Alnasser was surprised at how things were in America would be an understatement.

“Saudi Arabia is a completely different culture and has completely different perspectives. We do have segregation—women and men can’t go anywhere together like in school or restaurants. It’s not like here,” Alnasser says.

Saudi Arabia is one of six countries in the world to still be considered an absolute monarchy. Alnasser goes on to say that socializing with people, especially women, could be seen as harassment and land a man in jail. The women in Saudi are not allowed to drive, have hefty restrictions when going out in public, and anything ‘coed’ is viewed as taboo.

Alnasser loves having friends of the opposite gender and socializing with people here at Iowa State. At first, as you would imagine, it was a hard adjustment.

“Coming to an extremely different culture in the states from a closed culture and [from] closed-minded people was totally different—everyone is a lot more open-minded. At first it was a big culture shock,” he says.
“How the people treat you is very different. People say hi, they’re nice to you, they are patient and you can ask anyone for help. In Saudi, you can’t do that. Nobody wants to talk—it’s too hot, no one has time to talk! You go on a picnic in Saudi, and after, you’ll hate yourself—it’s that hot.”

Alnasser admits the welcoming atmosphere has helped him settle in.

“When I came to America, I couldn’t even speak a single English sentence. People took time to figure out what I was trying to say. At ISU, people are accepting,” he says.

Alnasser has since been back to Saudi, most recently in the summer of 2014, for an internship with SABIC in its inspection department.

This past summer was an eye-opener for him. Alnasser admits that the first three years at Iowa State were tough and tedious in regard to his studies. He had yet to fully comprehend how much he had learned until his fellow employees were astounded by the amount he knew.

“Everyone was amazed. They kept asking, ‘How the hell do you know that?’ The senior manager was coming to my desk at least two or three times a week to chat about the States and engineering techniques, and was amazed by what (ISU) had taught me,” he says.

The crew at SABIC was so impressed, the senior manager wants him to work for them when he’s out of college, which if all goes as well, will be this spring. He just hopes he can remember some English when he goes back home.

The English language and the TOEFL were only minor obstacles on Rewa Seblani’s path to success. Seblani is from Flewa, Lebanon, and is a grad student in plant pathology. She is attending Iowa State in hopes that she’ll be referred to as ‘Dr. Seblani’ sooner rather than later.

Arriving in the summer of 2013, this is Seblani’s second year in Ames. English may be a challenge to some, but for her, being raised in Lebanon helped.

“We [Lebanese] learn English from kindergarten on and it’s intense. We learn it so well, that we may know how to write better in English than most Americans—in communication though, the accent is what throws some people off it seems,” she says.

“’In Lebanon, I may be more cautious about how I act. Here, I don’t give a shit as much—I’m here to do my best. I can be myself.’”

For her too, Iowa State’s reputation was intriguing; however, what sparked her interest was Iowa in particular. Seblani believes it’s a great place for agriculture and this is what helped her make the decision to join the Cyclone Nation.

Things weren’t so easy though (are they ever?) Graduate students too, felt the blow of the ‘Economic Crisis’ in 2011 and still feel it throbbing today.

“It’s challenging now especially, because before the economic crisis in 2011 (particularly the U.S.), there were a lot of funds for grad school. After that, the amount of funds given—regardless of major—decreased. It’s more competitive and there are very little opportunities,” Seblani says.

Seblani didn’t shy away from the challenge and feels fortunate to be here in Ames. At first, like most students, she didn’t know what to expect. She’d been to places like New York before, but she’d never been to ‘America’s Heartland.’ For Seblani, ‘pleasant AND surprised’ may sum it up.

What she found pleasant was that—

“In Lebanon, I may be more cautious about how I act. Here, I don’t give a shit as much—I’m here to do my best. I can be myself. I would feel (more) judged by others in Lebanon. Here, I feel I can do anything. My friends here and my friends there are very different. People here are versatile and dynamic. I love it,” she says.

Seblani’s surprising first day set the bar a little higher than she expected, as she would soon see.

“The first day I was here, my brother was helping me move in, and we were walking to our apartment. We’re on the sidewalk, we see a girl with a huge chest and the shirt was see-through, without anything under. There she was, breasts very noticeable, and it was no big deal to her. I’m there like, ‘This definitely isn’t Lebanon anymore...’

A Home Away From Home?

For Alnasser, Seblani and many students, there are many services that Iowa State provides. For those traveling abroad, there are student ambassadors, the ‘Iowa State Visits You’ program and the International Student Council—just some of the multiple ways for students to enjoy their collegiate life and make people feel at home.

Kimberly Woo never actually visited Iowa State before deciding to enroll.

Woo is from Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, and majors in journalism and mass communications with a minor in performing arts. She had lived in a big city for her entire life before coming to ISU.

In December of 2013, Woo moved to the city of Ames, but not only that—it was the first time she’d ever been to the United States.

“I wanted something different, to see something new and different from what I was used to... the first time I came to America, I moved to America. It was my first time on my own, at the age of 19, and I couldn’t wrap my head around it—it was crazy,” she says.
Woo has since enjoyed her time at the university. From being in crowds at football games and participating as a student ambassador, to loving Iowa’s cold weather and experiencing her very first ‘tornado scare.’ However, Woo is faced with a dilemma in which she is torn between both of her worlds.

“I haven’t been home in two years and I’m so used to the life I have here. Ames is my second home. It’s scary to think about going home (to Malaysia.) I came here at 19 and I’m not the same teenager I was when I arrived. I really had to build my own life here and build from ground zero. Of course it was hard and tough, a lot of things were so different. But now that I’ve made friends and connections, I’ll graduate in spring 2016 and I have three months to get a job in America. After those three months, if I don’t get a job then I’m sent home for good,” Woo says.

Unlike those who are born in the United States, international students must, again, apply for visas, watch for deadlines and go through the proper channels in order to get a job. “This too, is not a quick course of action and even if they’re multilingual, three months isn’t a long time.

“What if I’m sent home for good? I’ll have to leave all my friends here. I’m torn between these two places, which to me, I probably shouldn’t be because in reality, Malaysia is my home. I’ve changed so much that I can’t separate these two. I’ll always be Malaysian—but because I’ve built my own life here, it’s hard for me to leave. I can’t just say goodbye,” says Woo.

“I’ve almost integrated so much, that all these little details come up as a reminder that I’m still an ‘alien.’ It’s a major reality check, and it’s hard sometimes.” Woo knows the situation that she’s in.

“They say college shapes who you are, and your friends in college are your real friends. It’s where you grow into your expertise and it’s your life and job. But for me to think that there’s a 50% chance that I have to say goodbye to all of that, and take only my expertise and degrees with me—I’d have to start from scratch again. I try not to think about that,” she says.

But, like other international students, Woo is happy with the time she has spent here.

“Every moment here, I try to appreciate and enjoy.”