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More Audacity of Hope: International Perspectives on What It Means to Be American

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“But when I made it in to the honors program, it just occurred to me that,
oh my gosh, this country really rewards hard work!” – international
student from Nigeria

Abstract

What, from an international perspective, does it mean to be an American? After having spent so much time in other countries and seeing how people elsewhere felt about the U.S., I had to wonder, what about the people who actually come to America? What is it that draws them here and makes them want to stay or return? Do they view America as a pinnacle of perfection and hope and opportunity, or are we really perceived as the dregs of a consumption-driven world as some fear?

In talking to international students from all over the world, I have found answers to some of these questions. Some of these students have come to the States, hoping for a Disney-esque land of wonderment, a country that delivers on all the promises of an industrialized nation. Some have found instead, that this country bears a strong resemblance to the humble third world roots that they've come from. Others have been left satisfied and some even enamored with the U.S. and have continued coming back, time and time again.

Some have come here following a path of tradition. For a few, pursuing a degree in the U.S., Europe or Canada was a natural course of action taken by friends and family before them. Others have had to plot their own paths and leave friends and family for years at a time in order to see what this country has to offer. Others still have had to fight tidal waves of criticism for their decisions to traverse land and water to come to the U.S.

Some of these students have dreamt of coming to America, the land of opportunity and fortune, since childhood. Others have merely turned to this country as an opportunity to further their instruction in their respective disciplines. Many have come to reap the benefits of a First World education system and to bring that information back with them when they return to their own countries, hoping to apply it so as to improve the quality of life for citizens there.

What follows are the stories of fifteen young international students who for one reason or another found themselves in the halls of Syracuse University, pursuing degrees from Chemistry to Public Diplomacy, French Literature to Mechanical Engineering. They are graduates and undergraduates, males and females, from upper class Venezuela to poor, struggling Nigeria.

And these are their stories.

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Summary of the Capstone

When I first started this project in spring 2009, I intended to look at the effect of immigration on an immigrant's identity. I was studying abroad in Strasbourg, France at the time, and I was curious about the idea of European identity and immigration. For example, if Miss X moves from Turkey to France, after 20 years, does she still identify as Turkish or French or does she feel European? Furthermore, is it possible to ever truly become French if one immigrates to France? Unfortunately that version of the project met with limited success, largely from language barriers and a lack of available networking.

Upon returning to the States, I decided to turn the project inside out. Instead of looking at what it means to be French from an immigrant perspective, I decided to look at what it means to be American from an international student perspective, domesticating the project and increasing my chances of finding solid candidates ten fold. I decided to limit my study to students at Syracuse University, both undergraduate and graduate. At the time of each interview, every single one of the people I spoke with was a student at Syracuse University. These students must have come to the States from another country intending to study. They must have come to the U.S. without parents moving with them. It is one thing to come to an American school if one's family is already located there. It is quite another to leave one's family in the pursuit of higher education.

I decided to follow in the footsteps of the famous American journalist and radio personality, Studs Terkel. Throughout the mid 20th century, Terkel traveled throughout the U.S. and interviewed a plethora of different people, from all different socio-economic levels and viewpoints. He turned his notes into narratives and told the stories of the average, common American, providing us with a survey, a brief look into the lives of hundreds of people we would not have otherwise encountered.

This project is a horizontal, rather than a vertical study. Rather than looking at different students from, say, Taiwan and comparing socio-economic levels and experiences, I kept the project broad and talked to students from all over the world. This gives the best holistic view of the international student population at Syracuse University, and hopefully, provides a glimpse into the lives and thoughts of the international persons living in this country.

I started last fall by contacting various friends, teaching assistants and professors and utilizing contacts from all three to obtain interview candidates. I told students that I was doing a project on what it means to be American, and that I wanted their perspectives as international students. Each interview lasted somewhere between 45 minutes to six hours, although the average would be far closer to the 45 minute mark. A few of the interviews were broken into two or more sessions, but the majority was conducted in one sitting. One must keep in mind that this was an undergraduate thesis and not a PhD dissertation, and that the students I

spoke with clearly had limited time to answer questions. I was constrained only by time; from an information perspective, each interview could have easily lasted far longer than it did.

I conducted all interviews in person, in one-on-one settings. I asked questions and essentially dictated the responses in to a word document. Given fast typing skills, I captured approximately 95 percent of what students told me. Throughout each interview, I asked open-ended questions and let each student tell his or her story as much as possible.

While I did not follow a predetermined word-for-word list of questions, I did ask the same 15 to 20 questions in some form or another in the course of each interview. I started by asking how and why each student had come to the United States and what it took to come here. I continued by inquiring how each student and his or her respective community had perceived the U.S., and whether or not the student's personal views had changed since coming to the States. I asked about the American Dream, both to define it and whether or not it was feasible for Americans and for international students. I asked what it meant to be American, how students identified themselves, and where they wanted to go from here, career and geography wise. I asked how their families and communities have responded to their being here, how they have been treated by Americans and whether or not this country has fulfilled any initial hopes or aspirations they may have had. I also asked what kinds of differences they have perceived between their home countries and

America and what they will take away from their American experiences. Apart from this basic outline of questioning, I asked each person the questions that naturally flowed from their responses, to clarify, guide, and to elicit the stories they wanted to tell.

After conducting the interviews, I took the notes from each and wrote narratives from them, depicting the various roads students took to get here, their family lives growing up, their dreams and pursuits, and a general synopsis of their views on the States, pre and post arrival. Throughout this entire process, I have remained true to what each student has said, only adding and rearranging words to improve clarity and flow.

Only one student of the fifteen was a native English speaker, and so the majority of students were speaking their second, third or fourth language. A number of these students have studied English for a few years. For some, this is their first year actually using oral English. Thus many students inherently used different phrasing or incorrect grammar in their responses to my questions. When writing their narratives, I was torn between whether or not to use the grammar that they had used. Doing so would help characterize the student and add a degree of honesty and color to their stories, but on the other hand, I would risk making a student who lacked perfect English sound unintelligent and possibly confusing to the audience. In the end, I used incorrect phrasing and grammar only sparsely, and only when it articulated the point that the student was trying to make more strongly than correct English could have articulated.

At the onset, I intended to meet with ten to fifteen subjects, build rapport, conduct a series of interviews with each person, and then take the strongest eight to ten students for the actual project. But I quickly found that each student had a unique and fascinating story to tell, and so I have kept the narratives for every student I have spoken with.

One must keep in mind that even though I have spoken with a number of different students from all over the world, their views cannot possibly represent the true mentalities of their respective home countries. Having four students from Asia, two from the post Soviet Union, four from Africa, two from Europe, one from North America, one from India, and one from Latin America, I have achieved the goal of getting representative voices from all over the world. But I do not dare suggest that fifteen students represent all 191 other countries in the world, because they certainly do not. As the students themselves have frequently reminded me, they have been self-selected. I have gotten their names and contact information from among my own friends, friends of friends, teaching assistants, and professors. Some have responded to mass emails written on my behalf to seek out international students. These interviews were done of each person's own volition and self-nomination, rather than a randomized sampling of the entire international student population at Syracuse University.

It was easy to build rapport. I made each interview into a comfortable conversation, and I had to keep in mind that, as a friendly,

young-looking person rather than an academic, professorial figure, I probably disarmed the students I spoke with. Because of the depth of personal experience that each student shared with me, I could not in good conscience associate students' names with the information they provided. This could potentially risk the credibility of the work, but the opinions given here are so honest that the subjects must remain anonymous to protect students' privacy.