Introduction

A few years ago, I had the fortunate to travel to Hong Kong. While there, I had significant time to people watch, and I noticed a trend. Even the dog walkers and the trash collectors operated with a certain sense of pride and dignity. I asked one of the natives why this was, and he responded, “Why shouldn’t they be proud? They are doing something for the community. Of course they will be proud to contribute.” I thought about this and realized that this would never be the case in the United States. We don’t have that same fundamental mentality. If someone perceives that he has a job that is low on the socio-economic totem pole, he will almost always be ashamed of his occupation. That difference sparked my interest. How could something so ingrained in our culture be so vastly different on the other side of the world? This project was my opportunity to delve further into this question and to understand and explore what cultural differences and mentalities existed around the world and within my own home country.

This project was intended to be similar to Studs Terkel work from the mid 20th century. When I studied Terkel’s work a few years ago, I was fascinated by the way that he could capture the essence of a person and provide such depth, such insight into so many different people with such vastly different views and backgrounds. And all because of his ability to elicit and then tell stories. I have grown up on stories. I spent my childhood hearing them, creating them, and later practicing the craft of telling them. And now, even as an adult, I still genuinely believe that one of the strongest forms of communication is story telling. And
what better way to convey the lives of international students than by telling their stories?

Thus, the intent of the project was to introduce people to others that they would never otherwise meet. I wanted to capture the essence of a handful of international students and convey that essence to others. I wanted to write something that could be informative and enjoyable, for anyone who has ever been curious about the lives and thoughts of other people. I didn’t want to write something so technical that only a few could grasp the concepts, nor so elementary that it was only interesting to a few. I hope to have achieved some form of middle ground between the two, and thus reached a certain cross section between academia and those who are simply curious.

I started by contacting friends who were international students. My first interview was with a friend from Nigeria who gave me a plethora of ideas to go off of. Over the course of three sessions, he spoke for six hours about his life, his struggles, the lessons he has learned and the mentalities he has adopted as a product of his experiences. I was convinced that I could find no one else to convey such a rich and honest story. But I was proven wrong. From there, I interviewed a friend from Singapore and a friend from Venezuela, both who gave very diverse viewpoints and further strengthened my belief in the existence of some strong, underlying cultural differences between people within the U.S.

From there, the project took off. I interviewed twelve more people, undergraduates and graduates from all across campus, all international students who had come here from other countries with the intent to study. I asked
questions about their identities, their perceptions on America, and what it had
taken to come here. I asked roughly the same 15 to 20 questions, but I let the
conversation flow as much as possible. I wanted to capture, not check lists of
information, but stories, genuine, honest accounts of people.

While these narratives cannot provide a summary of the general
sentiments of every foreigner living within or outside the United States, they can,
however, provide insight into what some international students do experience,
how they think and how they perceive the U.S. This project is not meant to
convey any kind of underlying truth about how the rest of the world sees
America; rather, it is intended to provide a realm of possibility, a tool to open our
minds to other ways of thinking, and an opportunity to provide insight into the
mentality and thoughts of others that we might not otherwise encounter.
Many who come to the States believe that America is the one place in the world in which newcomers have the opportunity to transform themselves into fully accepted fellow citizens. One person said to me, you can live in France for 20 years but never really become a French person. But that’s not the case for all international students. In fact, a number of them have expressed how difficult it is to fit in in a country that predominantly speaks English and still has significant racial segregation. At the end of class, a Chinese woman notices with dismay how all of the American students go off with the Americans and the Chinese students all go off with the Chinese. A Canadian student notes that while interning in DC, everyone working on the hill is white, and all of the servers on the weekends are black.

A Nigerian student recounts the difficulty of having his high aspirations shot down by older immigrants upon arrival to the States. A French student observes the number of false stereotypes her American colleagues seem to have about her. An Ethiopian student explains how Ethiopians welcome outsiders into their community while Americans keep foreigners at a wary distance. This makes for a difficult time when students are already endeavoring to learn English and blend in with their American counterparts. Two graduate students in particular have experienced the struggle to fit in with the American students, a woman from China and a man from Ethiopia.
Ethiopia

Timid with his non-native English, he has a quiet intelligence about him. This is the story of a native Ethiopian man who comes from a family of teachers.

In the earlier days, there were few people who went to school in Ethiopia. That’s where I’m from, Bahir Dar, Ethiopia. It is the second biggest city in the country. Brunei, one of the longest rivers in the world, originates close to my city. Bahir Dar is about 450 kilometers south of the capital, Addis Ababa. The people live in houses, but now, you know, when the city grows, now the apartments are being built and people live in those. Our national language is Amharic, but there are 80 languages total in Ethiopia. It is a country where you have so many nations and nationalities. But when it comes to so many things, we are one, and we live as one. So it is good.

Anyway, I think it is more common for people in Ethiopia to go to school now. Things have changed a lot the past few years. Now maybe five to ten percent of all of Ethiopia is going to college. Usually students who do research will continue their education.

My father went to college. He is now a teacher in the high school where I took my schooling. My two sisters are also teachers. I am the oldest of five, two girls and three boys. One of my younger brothers is a civil engineer, doing his M.S., and one is a high school student.

My brother who is a civil engineer, I think he will continue his education. He wants to go to Europe, but after I have been here, in America, I am advising
him to maybe come to the U.S. I think when you do post graduate work in the
U.S, you are expected to do more work. I have friends in Europe and we discuss
this, and I think there is more work required here, and so I think I will advise him
to come here.

This is my first time to go outside Ethiopia. I did both my undergrad and
my masters in Ethiopia, in the capital city, at the university. After I finished my
undergrad, I was given a placement to work as a graduate assistant there, and then
I continued my M.S., both in civil engineering. When I was browsing schools to
see which would be good for me for a PhD, I came across Syracuse and I got in,
and that was it. It was my first try. And that’s what I’m doing here, working
towards a PhD in civil engineering.

I have to say, America is not what I thought it would be. It is totally
different. For example, I expected to see special things, you know, like what you
see in the movies. You have it in your mind that you are going to see so many
things that are special. I was expecting so many very nice things before I came
here. But I did not find the special things here. And coming from a developing
country, I would expect more differences. But it’s not that much different, so it’s
not up to my expectations maybe. But I still want to see New York City. And
then, I don’t know. Maybe California.

Growing up, most of the people I knew were fond of the idea of coming to
America. But for me, it was not like that. After I finished my MS, I just wanted
to continue my education, because I want to teach and do research in my country,
so for that purpose, I came here. America is a big deal for other people, but not
for me. My parents were not happy when I decided to come to the States because I would be far, far away. But after I have seen the education system here, I could tell them, at least I am doing good.

There is another, social difference between Ethiopia and America. In my country, you are free, if you go out, you can go out and find someone to talk to. It is easy to get familiar with people. Whereas here, you cannot go out and just talk to someone. At first I felt alone here. I think people have their own life here, and it is somewhat difficult. In my country, if they know that you are an outsider, like a tourist, they will make you to feel at home. You don’t have that as much here.

I am Ethiopian. I don’t have any intention of citizenship. I am an Ethiopian and I don’t want to change that of course. For me, being Ethiopian means being from Ethiopia, just like Americans are from America. Of course, most Americans are from well to do families around here. But I don’t have that close contact with Americans. You do not have the time to know each other well. And the other thing is, if you’re an international student, the way you speak is not like the natives, and so they try to avoid you somehow.

I started to learn English in school. It was the medium of instruction. So I can speak English when it comes to the technical, but when it comes to the day to day, I get difficulties. Usually the elementary schools, up to grade 8, we are learning English as one subject, and after that, you will start learning some basic subjects in English, and then when you are in college, the medium of instruction is completely in English. But I didn’t speak in English with my friends at all, so this is very different for me.
How long will I stay here? I’m doing back to Ethiopia this summer to see my family and have a vacation. When I come back to Syracuse in the fall, my PhD program will depend on my progress. It can be from three to five years, but most likely it will take four. I would be happy to work for two years in the States, but I want to go back to Ethiopia. I would be happy to get some practical experience, and see what things are being done here, so maybe I will stay for a year or two. I was a lecturer before coming here, so I when I go back, I will go and join the university to teach. In my country, I was one of the best teachers. But here, I pronounce some of the words differently, so maybe it will not be similar in this country.

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China

*This is the story of an affluent Chinese woman who came to America because she wanted something more out of life.*

I came to the United States because I wanted my life to be more interesting. I wanted to go to another country and experience another culture. America was my first choice because it’s the biggest country in the world. I also wanted to improve my English. In China, knowing English is important when you’re looking for a job. There are many international corporations who come to China and who pay high salaries. If you speak English, you can get those jobs. So there were many reasons why I wanted to come here.

Since my parents have high salaries back in Shanghai, China, they can support my life here in America. My father is a professor of engineering,
focusing on clothing material, and my mom is an accountant for a big company. They both supported my decision to come here, my mom not as much as my dad, but she did agree that the experience would be good for me. Neither of my parents came with me when I flew here. And they can’t speak English, so I think if they came to visit me now, they would feel lonely.

I’m the only child in my family, because of the one child policy. There are 1.3 billion people in China now, so the government had to make a very strict policy to restrict the population growth. So for the whole generation of children born from 1980 to 1998, there is only one child in the family. Now, they are not as strict. If I get married, I can have two kids. Today the government prefers for us to have two children. If you have more than two children, you must pay some money. For my parents, when I was a child, the rule was much more strict. If they had had two kids, they would have lost their jobs. In the countryside, people can have two or three kids, because they don’t care about losing their jobs. In the city, it’s very strict, but in the country, people just grow crops so they don’t care about losing their jobs. I would like to have a brother or a sister, or even a dog, but it’s nothing. Just me.

Growing up, the idea of America was always exciting. I thought that the culture was very different from Asian countries, and it was such a wealthy country, the wealthiest in the world. So I just imagined working in America, studying here, living here. I had a great impression from American movies. We watched Friends when we were in high school, in English, but with Chinese subtitles. The show Friends was the first thing I got American culture from.
I started to learn English in elementary school, maybe third grade. We started from words like apple, duck, banana, and then we started to learn basic sentences. Sometimes the sentences were very old, like “How are you? I am well, and you?” and we learned the word “trousers” instead of “pants.” Now I come here and I realize people don’t say phrases like that anymore.

There aren’t many private schools in China. All the universities belong to the government and the government supports them. The private universities are growing, but they are not very good. It is quite different from America. In America, private university means good. That is not the case in China. For me, after I graduated from high school, I went to Tongji University, in Shanghai, which is very famous in China. There are several levels of universities in China. Qinhua University and Beijing University are the highest, and Tongji University is on the second highest level. In Chinese, Tongji means working together and collecting all the energy to achieve an aim. It is a very big engineering school, with maybe 2,000 people just in mechanical engineering. I studied air conditioning engineering there, which belongs to the department of mechanical engineering. Here in America, I am studying mechanical engineering, focusing on air conditioning. I am studying to get my masters of Mechanical Engineering and my program is two years long.

I had to do a lot of things to come here. I took the TOEFL exam to come to the United States and the GRE to come to Syracuse. The GRE was really hard because my English is not quite as good as some other Chinese students. The English part of the test was so hard for me. I think it is a terrible test. You have
to remember so many English words that you will never use for the rest of your life. After the GRE and the TOEFL, I had to apply for visas to come here, and there was always the possibility that the U.S. could refuse me. But now, the U.S. is not so strict; I think almost 100 percent of the students who apply for visas can come here. But for other people, for non-students, the percentage is not so high.

I think there are a lot of differences between China and the U.S., especially when it comes to university. In Shanghai, the tuition is very low because the government supports you. You just need to pay 5,000 Yuan a year, and 100 Yuan for the dorms, per month. There are only about 500 universities in China, or less. But in America, there are maybe 3,000 universities. The class sizes are different too. Normally in China we have 60 students in one class, but sometimes as many as 100 students. There is only one professor and no T.A. In fact I didn’t even know the word Teaching Assistant before coming here.

The relationship between students and professors is different too. There are no office hours for the professors, so if you want to meet with a professor, you have to make a special appointment. In America, students ask questions in class, but in China, students keep silent and the professors just keep talking. It’s like this rule between students and professors. And in most of the classes, you just need to take the final exam, no midterms, and there isn’t much homework. But I don’t think it’s good for students. Many students learn nothing; they just play and then study for the exam in one week. And that’s how four years pass. It has become a very big problem in the universities and in education. Many professors realize this but they can’t do anything about it because it is the policy of the
university. They should change things; otherwise it will become an even bigger problem. For a lot of families with money, when the kids graduate from high school, their parents send them to the U.S. or Japan for university, because they don’t believe in the education system in China.

In America, people are more open, like in their clothes and in their talking. For example, in China, we would never wear bikinis, or everyone would look at you and think you were showing off. But here, old ladies and young ladies wear bikinis. My friend told me that he went camping with a group from the university and they all went and showered together. That’s crazy for me, I cannot imagine that. Maybe that’s normal but it could never happen in China.

Even though people are more open here, it is still difficult to fit in with American students. During class, I talk with Americans, but after class, the Chinese go with the Chinese and the Americans go with their American friends. And in general, when people talk here, they say things more directly. But in China, people talk more indirectly.

Food is also very different here. I eat the American food in the dining hall normally, but if I had time, I would prefer to cook for myself. American food is a little salty and too sweet. We seldom eat sweet, or salty or spicy food in China. In Shanghai, we prefer bland food. For young people, though, their tastes are changing, and they prefer salty or spicy food.

In daily life in America, I still feel about 80 percent Chinese. If I don’t speak to a professor or an American classmate, then I speak Chinese. I don’t
think this is so good. But it would be weird to talk to Chinese friends in English. I don’t have many American friends here so after class, I just speak Chinese.

If I didn’t have family back in Shanghai, I would want to stay in the U.S. for the rest of my life. There is so much freedom here. In China, there are so many restrictions. If you want to buy a house or apartment in Shanghai, maybe it will take 30 or 40 years if you save up with your husband. I don’t like that. Here, a couple that is only 30 years old can buy a house of their own. Now if you want to buy clothes in China, the price is the same as it is here. So I think if I lived here, the quality of life would be better than in China. If I lived here, I could have spare money to travel or do other things. I prefer to be here. If I can find a job here after I graduate, I would just want to work here for two years and then go back to China. If I can get work experience here, it will be easier for me to find a job when I go back. As an only child in my family, I don’t want to just stay here for the rest of my life, without my family.

Even if I did stay here, I don’t think I could ever become American. After living here for ten years, maybe my English would get better and I could communicate better with Americans. But I don’t think I could fit in with other American people. Maybe it’s a difference of culture. My best friends would still be Chinese, and I would never feel totally American.

Before I leave the United States, I want to travel. In China, I traveled to many places. I’ve been to Hainan and Sichuan and Hong Kong. Shanghai is very modern; now I want to see more natural places. I went to Miami this spring break and I’ve been to New York City, Washington DC and Philadelphia. I am
planning to go to Hawaii this winter break. I have a picture that my friend sent me from there and it is so amazing, and I want to go see it for myself.

What does it mean to be American? It means you have freedom, and you’re wealthy, open minded and easy going. Chinese people are very rooted in tradition. They’re very conservative. They don’t want to show themselves and no one asks questions because they don’t want people to see that they are different from everyone else. The government is very strong and they would like to control us. Like if you were searching online, a lot of the information would be covered. I don’t feel very much freedom in China. But on the other hand, Chinese people do have a very good spirit; they like to share things with others. But in America, I would not share with you. It’s just not very common. I want other people to know how international students feel. It’s nice to share what we’re thinking with other people. If no one asks us questions, we would never share our experiences.

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For some, coming to the U.S. doesn’t make or break their tracks of excellence. Students have conveyed that there are other countries, such as Canada or those in Europe that would serve as perfect alternatives to an American education. This is the case with four affluent students of the upper and upper-middle classes, an undergraduate woman from Singapore, a female doctoral candidate from India, a male undergraduate from Venezuela and a female graduate student from Canada.
She speaks intelligently, articulately, but without over thinking. She smiles often, and when she laughs at something, her faint British accent comes out even stronger. Born and educated in upper middle class society, this is the story of a young Singaporean woman.

I’m considered a full-fledged international student. I was born in Singapore and I’ve lived there all my life. My parents were born there, and my grandparents were born in China, so I guess that makes me second generation Singaporean.

I think I was lucky growing up because all of the schools I went to focused on extracurricular rather than just academics. I tried a ton of different things. I did dance and art and drama. I even tried robotics in middle school, where we had to write a paper on the probability of getting a connect four. We even wrote in to some international space-shuttle design competition. Then again, now, I can’t seem to be able to do a simple math problem.

The school system is a little different in Singapore than in the U.S. It follows more of the British model. There are independent schools, which can structure their curriculum more on their own and you can decide your own syllabus. The school doesn’t depend on government funding. Autonomous schools depend on government funding and they’re more responsible to the government. I went to an autonomous school for the first ten years and then to an independent school for my last two. At the end of your schooling, you can choose whether to go to a pre-college school for the last two years, or a professional
degree for the last three. Professional school isn’t really like vocational training but it’s a less academic path to take, kind of the first steps toward doing what you want to do if you already know what that is.

We do have some kind of caste system, like German schools. But it’s more to accommodate students at different levels rather than to separate students out. It caters to teaching the student. We’re taught English in school; it’s the primary language. But then you also study the mother tongue, like I studied Chinese and then French as an extracurricular.

When it was time to apply to schools, I looked at six in London, largely because that’s how the application process works in the UK, a school in Canada and then four in the states. The American schools I looked at were all strong in communications, which is what I was interested in. There are schools in Singapore, three universities and six at the tertiary level, following the British system. At the time I applied though, I think there was only one school that offered a communications degree. And really, we’re a small country. With only four million people, we have very limited media providers. In the end it came down to a tossup between Syracuse and Goldsmith in London. I think my decision to come here started out as strictly just for education. I didn’t think I would study in another country, like when I studied abroad in France. I don’t think it even crossed my mind. But I always knew I would travel.

My parents were really good about me wanting to study in the states. I know my dad secretly really wanted me to study abroad. He went to school in the U.K. and worked his entire way through school, and then went straight into work
after graduation. I think my mom kind of wishes I was closer to home, but she’s really good about me being here. She did a three-year program in Singapore, the equivalent in advertising. And now they’re both still in Singapore.

My freshman year was the first time I had ever been to the U.S. My dad and I went to New York City for a week and then came here. My mom has never seen SU. I was kind of going in blind, just kind of hoping that all the pretty brochures were really telling the truth. And it was weird adjusting to the states at first. I didn’t think it would be as different as it was. It’s kind of like a high ropes course when you’re climbing up and you’re super far away. I mean, it’s half way across the world. And really, as a city, Syracuse isn’t that practical. In Singapore, I can walk ten minutes and get to the grocery store. And I’ve got five different choices of grocery stores at that. But in Syracuse, you can’t walk to the grocery store. So I felt kind of helpless for a while. It wasn’t so much culture shock as I just didn’t know anybody and the crummy weather didn’t help.

I think you become more independent when you study in another country, maybe because you worry about different things. Like I can’t just have one of my parents here if something happens to me. I’ve heard of parents writing in to the school if their kid doesn’t get accepted to a program or something. So that’s kind of different.

Spending four years studying in another country is somewhat difficult to explain. It’s much like my actual study abroad program, when I went to France for a semester. If you ask how it was, I could say that it was “awesome” or give you an anecdote, but you’ll never actually know what it was like. I mean in
France, we spoke a different language and had a new lifestyle and bureaucracy to adapt to, and host families, of course. And sometimes it was nice just to be in the cocoon of speaking English. But even then, the SU Strasbourg program was kind of just an extension of SU.

I think being an international student as an undergrad is very different than being an international graduate student. You start as a freshman, and then you’re going to be here for four years. That’s, what. One fifth of your life up to that point? That’s a lot. But more than just studying, traveling in general is different. I think everyone in our generation is traveling a lot more. Maybe it’s just that everyone wants to see the world before they settle down. Even though the economy is getting shittier, it’s not as expensive to go abroad. Twenty years ago, it was a lot more rare to travel.

And the American Dream? I had a class once where they talked about that. It was kind of interesting how many people still think of it as the American Dream. I would say that fewer people believe in the American Dream than in the principles that America stands by. I think those principles are more ingrained than the conventional concept of “if you work hard, you can get anywhere.” For example, if you don’t have health care in America, you can still kind of sponge off the government for a while, that kind of idea. I guess the actual “Dream” is to make enough money that you can have enough to tie you over and live the kind of lifestyle you want to. Now it’s more about getting a job that you want rather than just getting a job that lets you golf on Sundays.
I’ve found that, particularly being an international student, it’s always fascinating when people from different backgrounds get together because people always react differently to things. I guess being around people with other experiences really opens up your eyes. And sometimes, people just try to act politically correct to the point of getting annoying. Often in those environments, we don’t even tell other people how things are anymore because we don’t want to upset anyone. Everyone just has this innate sense of wanting to be nice and being aware of different cultures. I think it’s the fear of hurting someone else’s feelings. But it also depends on whom you’re talking to. The concept of being politically correct is, I believe, less prevalent among the younger generation. Maybe it’s just that I hear the term “politically correct” far less when I’m back in Singapore and with people like my grandmother.

Do I want to stay here after I graduate? I don’t know. Apparently I have to find a job within 60 days if I do stay. Then again, I like Singapore and my family is there and everyone I’ve known since I was six, so I think it would be nice to go back. But sometimes it feels kind of small. And it’s a lot more sterile than the U.S. We’re more draconian. Like if you have sex and take drugs, the general mentality is that you’ll die. We had this whole thing for a while back in Singapore where something, I’m not quite sure what, was misconstrued, and the Prime Minister had to come out and say something about homosexuality in the government. There was this whole hullaballoo. Very confusing. But I don’t see that happening in the states. We used to be called Disneyland with the death penalty. You know how there are all these underlying things in Disney, where it
looks perfect outside but there are still things going on inside. Yeah, that’s Singapore.

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India

Born to a family of the educated upper class, this is the story of a native Indian woman on the verge of graduating with a PhD in Economics.

Before I came to the United States, I spent two years in the U.K, getting my masters. I did my bachelors in Bombay, India, right by where I grew up, and I got a scholarship while I was there to study at Oxford. After that I went to D.C. to intern with the World Bank for the summer. Interning turned into consulting for a year. And I was told that if I was serious about economics, I should get my PhD. And that’s how I came to Syracuse.

I would say, for most people in India, that’s the ultimate goal, to study abroad. At least, for the top 10 percent of the population. For the other 90 percent, they don’t have the resources to go elsewhere. Me, I was lucky. My parents always encouraged me to study abroad, and they were happy when I decided to go to the U.K. for education.

I have one brother, who’s in Bombay, working in pharmacy for a company in Cairo. I would say we are upper middle class Indian. For the lower class, it’s much harder to get anywhere. I think literacy has a lot to do with it. If your parents are illiterate, you end up dropping out of school so you can contribute to the family. It’s a vicious cycle. I’ve definitely been very fortunate to have been able to go to school. Neither of my grandmothers went to school past second or
third grade, but my maternal grandfather had a bachelor’s degree in engineering, and my paternal grandfather had a degree in textile engineering. All four of my grandparents died when I was very young. My immediate family is very educated; my mother has two masters’ degrees and my father used to be a professor of Economics in Bombay. I would say it is not good to be too educated. And it is a huge deal that I will have my PhD. I don’t regret it, although it may be difficult for me to find a husband. Ideally, a female would have a master’s degree because then you’re not too threatening to your husband but you can still work and contribute to the household.

Before I left for the U.K, I’d never even been on a plane, let alone left the country. I was born in Bombay and lived with my parents through college, so living in a whole new place by myself was quite a culture shock. Everything in England was new, nothing was similar. In India, we didn’t even have supermarkets. I had never seen such big stores. In Bombay, I knew where everything was, but when I first moved to England, I was almost in such tears. I didn’t know which milk to buy at the store, or how to turn on the heat or the shower, and stoves were so different. So it was very hard for me, especially at the beginning. It took me about a year to adjust. And academically, the pressure was really high too. But it was nice to have my own freedom. It’s nice not to have someone always asking where you are going. And it was fascinating to learn about other cultures.

England was a little different from the states, in a sense, because we have so much colonial history with them, so we knew a lot about them. All I knew
about the U.S. was from Hollywood movies. And when I got here, the people were completely different than I thought they would be. But I would say that coming to the states was much easier. It wasn’t that different, and overall, the culture is the same as England.

Technically I’m a legal alien on a student visa. I graduate in May, after five years here working on my PhD in Economics. If I get a job here, I’d have to apply for a work visa. I’ve been looking for jobs mostly in the U.S., Europe, Australia, India and Canada. I’m planning to work on international trade. The PhD market is very global and it’s very easy to get work visas. That’s not the case for low skilled workers, of course. Ideally, I would like to go back home after working for a couple of years, so I don’t think I want to become an American citizen. I don’t have any family here, so it just makes sense to go back home.

After so much time in the states, I still identify as strongly Indian, but I definitely have a soft corner for the U.S. I’ve had a very positive experience here, and I would like for the U.S. and India to have better relations. I don’t have much of a strong attachment to Europe. I was only in England for two years, but the racism and the xenophobia is pretty strong there. At least in the U.S., the racism is out in the open. It’s the land of the immigrants, and a lot more diverse.

I think being here in America, it is harder for an international student to get a job. We have a lot of visa difficulties, and everything has to work like clockwork. And in a recession, people don’t want to sponsor international students when they could find Americans to work for them. I’m not saying it’s
impossible. But I have had friends who are intelligent and hard working but things didn’t work out in time and they had to go back to India.

I think that idea, that if you really want something in America, you can get it, that’s the American Dream. In a lot of countries, there are lots of things opposing you, like a lack of opportunity, and corruption, even in India. Like when I see homeless people in America, I think, you’re in the U.S., if you really work hard, you can get anything. Back in India, people are starving and they don’t have opportunities, even though they work very hard. If I had to live outside of India, I would live in the U.S. You’re able to create opportunities here for yourself; there’s nothing stopping you. That’s what the American Dream is to me.

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**Venezuela**

_He’s hunched over, the perfect picture of a contemplative student unwinding from his day. He’s comfortable, yet composed. This is the story of a young man from Venezuela’s high society._

I should start by saying that my experience here may be different than many other students who come to study in the States. Actually, my experience as a Latin American is, I know, very different than other Latin Americans who have come to the U.S. I think there are two kinds of people coming from Latin America- there’s the massive group, those coming from Mexico, Colombia and Venezuela. For them, coming here is more of a necessity. They do what they have to be able to sustain their communities and families, their nuclei back home,
through remittances. And those are the kind that most politicians are worried about.

I come from a much smaller group. I’m from the very upper strata of society in Venezuela, the group where our parents can afford to send us here. For us, we come here because we know the U.S. education system is much better, and fortunately, our parents know this as well, especially because we don’t have scholarships. So in that sense, it’s very different, at least from the Latin American perspective.

Venezuela is a very stratified place. I was born and raised there, in Caracas, in Venezuelan high society. There are so many people from low economic means there. The higher strata of society is maybe 8-10 percent, and we’re kind of excluded from the rest of the people. You can see the huge economic gaps in the differences between the rich residential areas and the downtown areas. Massive, massive homes versus places where you don’t even get clean water.

Growing up, I went to a private Catholic school. 95 percent of Venezuela is Catholic, so it’s pretty dominant. My mom stayed home and my dad was in banking. My dad actually went to the same private school I did, and then went to the Catholic university for Economics. My mom never finished a degree because her parents moved around a lot with my grandfather’s work. She tried three or four things, then she married my dad and had kids and she’s stayed home since.

Myself, I didn’t come straight to the states after I graduated from high school. I took nine months off after high school and went to France to learn
French and to take my own kind of sabbatical. I applied to a number of schools in Venezuela, and some in the states while I was there. I figured more doors would open up with an American education.

I was 19 when I came to the U.S. I’d already lived by myself for nine months in France and I’d lived in the states before. But it was still kind of a shock to be here, on my own, for the first time. People were really different. My first semester here it was actually pretty depressing. It was hard to be on my own from the start, and I wasn’t in the same mindset as the rest of the students. But after kind of adjusting and meeting people, I got more comfortable here and I started doing a lot better. So yes, I did have culture shocks. But maybe they weren’t as strong as for people who are just coming here for the first time.

Originally I came to Syracuse for Newhouse, for Newspaper Journalism. In my social group in Venezuela, people always expect you to be a lawyer, or a doctor, or a businessman. And if you’re not, your profession’s not really respected. People don’t really see the importance of liberal arts or humanities or areas like that. Even professors are really underappreciated at home. Professors here are generally more appreciated. Back in Venezuela, the pay isn’t very good and public universities actually have quotas for their salary. And there are never enough materials for them to work with, nor for the students to work with. I talk to friends who go to school back home and the resource difference is unbelievable. Maybe there’s one computer lab there, and that’s it. And we’re talking about the best private universities in Venezuela.
My original plan was to go back to Venezuela after I got an education. But now that’s changed. Being in the states is much better than I thought it would be. There are vast differences in your ability to develop yourself and your resources here. I was always attracted by that and by the possibility of staying here, being more independent from my family and my society.

My whole idea of the U.S. has definitely changed since I was young. When I was little, my parents would ship me off to summer camps to learn English here. So I kind of associated the states with summer and vacation. Eventually that changed when we moved to Miami, Florida for a year. My grandparents from Cuba lived in Florida. I was in sixth grade at the time, so I think that was probably 1998-1999. My dad had taken a sabbatical, to take a year off of work. My parents figured it would be good for me and my siblings to be in the states. After a year in Florida, we moved back to Venezuela. We came back a few years later, around 2002-2003, but for different reasons. This time, there was a lot of social unrest in Venezuela. There had been a failed coup d’état and lots of strikes, so almost for safety reasons but more just for peace of mind, my dad sent us to Miami in January of my sophomore year while he stayed behind. We stayed for a year then as well. When I went back to Venezuela, I eventually graduated from the same high school that I’d started at. Spending time away for a while, just for peace of mind, it wasn’t that uncommon in my social circles.

I remember, when I was young, talking with friends back home who were from the same socio-economic background, and we all kind of thought of American kids as ignorant. This was just from interacting with American kids,
but kids who didn’t have the same kinds of opportunities that we had. And that wasn’t really fair because we were from the upper strata and we shouldn’t have been comparing ourselves to their strata. So when I came here to live on my own as an adult, I had formed a lot of stereotypes about Americans. And I really had to think about which ones to believe and which ones to reject.

Now, after I graduate, I’d like to try and work for at least a year or two in the states, and then maybe go to grad school here. Or maybe in Europe. There are a few schools I’d be interested in in Europe, but I’d probably stay in the states. When I get into professional life, I think I’d like to stay in the U.S., or maybe go back to Venezuela. And the job market is definitely difficult no matter where you go, but I think whatever job I’ll have would be underappreciated in Venezuela and there certainly wouldn’t be as many opportunities for me there.

My older brother is kind of the same way as me in that way. He went to school for graphic design in Venezuela. But he got bored and never graduated. Now he’s here in the states, at a photography school in New York City. He’s loving it and he can’t see himself going back, especially because of the nature of what he does, his job wouldn’t be as respected in Venezuela. If he went back, he wouldn’t have the same resources that he has here. Then again, my younger sister was kind of the opposite of both of us. She came for a year to study culinary arts in New York, but she didn’t like it. She didn’t like the lifestyle and she missed her friends. She was pretty young. Now she’s back in Venezuela working in a pastry department. I think she’s happier there.
So who do I identify with? I’ve been here for three years now, and I spent a year in France, but I still feel very Venezuelan. I don’t feel American. And I can’t say that I’ll become an American, but I do think that the U.S. is one of the only countries where you can become American. I was walking with a friend in New York once and someone asked if she was an American and she answered, “Not yet.” And really, this is the only place where the answer can be “not yet.” If you think of Paris or London, or any number of other places, you can live there for 10 or 20 years and still not feel like a citizen there. So that’s great to think that if I want it be an American, that’s not an unrealistic goal. For myself and whether I choose to become an American and where I go from here, it really depends. It depends on what I see as best in the future. It depends on the situation, both career-wise and social-politically speaking. We’ll see.

Even though I’m not an American, I’ve been here long enough to get a good idea of what that means. And this whole concept of the American Dream. To me, the American Dream means possibilities. This is definitely a very competitive country. And that’s difficult, but it also means there’s always possibility. One of the reasons why I came here and why I want to stay is for financial independence. I want to be able to make my own money. In Venezuela, you can go to the best school, live in the best strata, even get the best grades, but after graduation, you can’t get a good enough job to live on your own with even decent standards. People graduate and then they all live with their parents. You basically make enough money to pay for yourself and your parents essentially still pay for your room and board. My brother’s friends are 26 and they still do that.
And you can’t really go forward professionally in Venezuelan jobs; it kind of feels like the system is holding you back. A lot of people look to emigrate elsewhere. Basically, if you don’t have that uncle or dad who’s looking for a loan and you can use that to start your own business, you can’t do anything.

I think the American Dream is also about individualism. You can make your own decisions; you don’t have to depend on other people. In Venezuela, wealthy people own businesses everywhere. There’s really no middle class; it’s just this big “haves” and “have-nots” so the upper strata is a few people who own a lot of things and then there are the masses. And the president in Venezuela is just making most people poorer.

I guess, in a way, I consider myself a global citizen. You’re defined by where you’re born and where you grow up, but that shouldn’t stop you from becoming a global citizen. You can’t deny that fact. That’s the way I feel about being Venezuelan. It’s my nationality. But it’s more than a place that I grew up. It’s an emotional attachment. But I have the feeling that I’m something bigger than just my country. I’m a Venezuelan. An American? No. Not today. But maybe someday.

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**Canada**

*She’s the picture of a grad student, working comfortably, blending in easily with the room full of other students. This is the story of a native Canadian woman, who drives four hours north and is home.*
I’m from Toronto, Canada, so growing up, I visited a number of nearby American cities like Boston and New York City on school trips. But the U.S. wasn’t really a destination, so for vacation, my family and I would leave the continent and go to places like Europe. Sometimes when the dollar was strong, we’d hop over the border to go shopping in Buffalo. Even though I’m from only four hours away, Americans and American culture are still different. It was really only until I lived in the DC for five months that I felt like I’d experienced America.

My family back at home is from the upper middle class. My mother has a bachelors of science, she’s a registered nurse in an administrative capacity. And my dad went to school for a year, but then dropped out and now he’s in finance. Growing up, I went to rather diverse public schools. There were a number of recently arrived immigrants and refugees who lived around and went to the school. So I was fairly exposed to people outside of my socio economic circles growing up. Canada tries really hard to define itself as multicultural. While the U.S. calls itself a melting pot, Canada is a tossed salad. We don’t expect you to melt. We don’t think we have this sense of traditional ethnicity, but that’s just one of our myths. We don’t have the same idea of being different levels of “Canadian.” Everyone can come from different backgrounds and just be happy. Myself, I’m third generation Canadian, with the typical Scottish and British roots. That’s the traditional Canadian background.

I did my undergrad at Queens University, in Canada. For my masters, I wanted to study public diplomacy and administration. I was living in DC at the
time, and I was very interested in international affairs issues. Someone told me that American public policy was very developed, and I knew that having that international part carries a lot of weight. I was pretty sure I could get into reputable Canadian schools. In the end I was torn between the University of Toronto and here. I figured that I would probably work in a U.S. based body, like the World Bank or something. I could always go back to Canada, but if I wanted to work in the States, I would probably need an American degree.

Canada always views itself as being better than the U.S. My parents weren’t really anti-American, but we always knew that we had healthcare and Americans didn’t. We were raised as the cleaner, nicer, more informed version of Americans. It’s just kind of a cultural thing. You kind of always want to beat the U.S. Among my upper-middle class friends in high school, it was cool to be anti-corporate, anti-America. We associated the States with Wal-mart. Especially in the ‘90s, there was this mentality that the U.S. was failing the world, socially, environmentally, etc, and America, even though it had so much power, was just failing to intervene. There was just this dissatisfaction, a general malaise toward the country.

With the election of George Bush and particularly after 9/11, we didn’t really like the American government. It was very common for Canadians, especially the youth, to hate Bush. But that was just the government side. Socially and personally, until I got here, I didn’t really know the American people. I thought they were generally loud, arrogant and less sensitive to
differences. That’s largely informed by what was going on at the time. The fact that they could elect the same guy twice also informed my view.

While I was doing my undergrad, I went on an exchange to Australia, back in 2007. I got to know lots of Americans there, and they all pretty much filled the stereotype. Like with lots of them, there’s this rah rah rah, we’re loud, and we don’t really care how people perceive us. Then again, almost all of my friends were Americans while I was there, so there was their weird duality. There were a number of Americans who weren’t of age in the States but they were in Australia, so we’d go to a bar and the Americans would just get wrecked, like they were at a frat party, even though they were out in public. But one-on-one, Americans were always nice, very friendly. Kind of assertive friendly. Especially the ones who study internationally, they’re always very charming, very likeable.

After I graduated from Queens last January, I went to DC to intern with the Canadian embassy. I was there until last May. Living in the States, I noticed a lot of differences. The proportions of food are obviously larger here. Everything’s just very big. And there’s a culture of driving that I find here a lot more. I have lots of friends in grad school, who even though they have lots of debt, they still feel the need to have cars, which I find weird. And there’s this unique distrust of the government, like when it comes to taxes. Maybe it’s just that I’m studying policy, but there’s this general belief that people can do it better than the government. In terms of the people, there’s this general softness to Canadians that Americans don’t have. We’re a quieter kind of friendly.
Americans are loud, and not in a bad way. But they do ask me a lot of silly questions about Canada, especially with the healthcare debate that’s going on. There are also lots of differences in consumerism, like this general idea of wanting things and having things and buying things that we don’t have as much in Canada. Up north, we’re just assumed to be under the radar.

I do enjoy the passion that Americans have. They have this passion for the government and for debating things and for trying to make things better. I find the political culture very active here, but maybe it’s just because of the times with healthcare. I like that people take a lot of pride in improving things. In Canada, our healthcare system works but it’s going broke, and there’s no public debate over it to improve things. We’re involved in the war, but people don’t really want to get their hands dirty in it. And issues of race here are really interesting. In Canada, we call races “ethnic differences” or “visible minorities.” We don’t even like the term “race.” In DC, I noticed a lot of race differences. During the week, everyone you saw driving in to work was white, but on the weekends, everyone serving me was black. And that hit me like a brick wall. It was so stark. In Syracuse, it’s the same thing. There’s a primarily white student body, and then in other parts of Syracuse, it’s all black.

I think social progressiveness in the U.S. is kind of behind. In Canada, we’ve legalized gay marriage for instance. And the influence of conservative values is different, like in Canada, we like to preserve our national myths. We like to think of ourselves as this great peacekeeping, progressive kind of place, when really we’re not that big of a power, especially in the last twenty years.
I think being here has strengthened my sense of Canadian identity. I’ll be the first one to tell my friends that I’m really not that happy with everything that’s going on in Canada. We’re certainly not a perfect country and there are lots of things I’d like to change. I wouldn’t be opposed to staying and becoming a dual citizen, if only for the job opportunities. People tease me about being Canadian, just jokingly, of course, but I think that strengthens my identity. I get teased about the maple syrup and coffee, and being a socialist or a communist. But I like to think I’m a little bit more of an ambassador to get people informed of Canada and maybe even come to Canada. It was fun during the Olympics this year when Canada hosted. We had an opening ceremony at my house. And if there were no Americans in the race, my roommate would root for Canadians. When this Canadian guy won a gold medal, I got tons of texts of congratulations. I don’t know if I’ve opened up anyone’s mind, but it has been kind of fun.

I would always consider myself at least partially Canadian. If I were ever to work here and have a family, maybe that things would be different. I’ll always be primarily Canadian. If I ever became a legal American citizen, that would influence me. If I could vote, that would really change my identity and how I felt. Where do I want to go from here? I’m in the Fulbright program, so I have to spend two years on Canadian soil before I can work in the U.S. So I’m heading back to Canada for some time. The Fulbright program was established to bring in international students to learn from America and then return. I’m on an exchange visa, and before I can apply for a work visa for the States, I’d legally have to spend two years in Canada. It’s kind of weird, like ok, you can come study here
but afterwards we want you out. It’s kind of frustrating, but I do get the logic. The job market here is pretty rough, even without the restrictions I have. I have a job in Toronto, and I’m waiting on some other jobs. And I am happy to be going back. I did love DC, and if I wanted to work for an influential body, I’d work there, in the IMF or World Bank or something.

If I hadn’t come here to study, I don’t think I’d consider working in the U.S. Being here has definitely opened my mind and broadened my horizons of what I could do or want to do. And it’s given me a better perspective of my own country. My attitude toward the U.S. has improved a lot, and I’ve made great American friends and seen lots of other perspectives. I have this American friend who grew up in a small town in Florida in a rather affluent family. And he has this very informed pride for his country. He knows so much about Congress and the American government and policy, and he’s probably one of the smartest people I know. He campaigned for Obama when he was running for president. On the day they passed the Healthcare bill, he was the only person I know who literally watched CSPAN all day. But he’s not the tough all-American person you’d think of when you hear this. He’s actually gay. I think that says a lot about him and his American pride, when half the people in Congress don’t think he should have the same rights as everyone else. He has this kind of tongue in cheek love for the U.S., but still this kind of immense passion for his country. He’s probably the best American I know. I’ve met a lot of people who are like that. We think Americans are either blindly patriotic or they’re a marginalized minority, and a lot of the time, we only see the “rah rah,” lots of money, lots of
power part to Americans. But I think the typical American is very proud, very “go USA.” And they have this view that America can still be improved.

I think the American Dream is the idea that you can start from nothing and make a life for yourself. It’s a lot of clichés, like you can have a house, opportunities and you’re free. When it came up in class, I said that the American Dream was an issue of equality, but someone immediately shot me down. In talking with my friends about it, I realize it’s not just about equality. It’s about being a self-made person. I think it’s a national myth, because it’s not actually true in a lot of cases. And Americans know it’s a myth. If I were ever to get over the hurdles of immigration, I would probably have an easier time, being white and educated, than a lot of Americans would. That’s what’s kind of sad about the American Dream. I’m more of the American Dream than a lot of people in Syracuse right now. It wouldn’t be something that I’d strive for personally, because of my background, but it would come pretty easily I think.

When I go back to Canada, there are some things I will take back with me. I’ll definitely be more of an advocate for the U.S. I’ll probably stick up for the U.S. more now. I won’t ever be the “rah rah, America is the greatest” type but I’ll be more attuned to what the U.S. is doing. Before, Canada’s dependence on the U.S. was always an annoyance. But now I’m much more accepting of that reality. I used to wish for a different reality, but now I don’t think I’m so opposed to the way things are.

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For some, coming to the U.S. has been a personal choice, a decision that had to be made independently of family and parental wishes. Choosing to leave one’s home country in search of greater opportunity and access to greater resources doesn’t always come with full parental guidance support. Such is the case with two students, both women, one from Japan and one from France, who found that coming to America forced them to be more independent than they had at first realized.

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Japan  

*A Chemistry PhD candidate from just outside Tokyo, Japan, this is the story of a young woman who was trained to be independent from an early age.*

I came to Syracuse, first of all, because I wanted to study English. In Japan, there’s not a lot of opportunity to use English. Everyone uses Japanese. It’s an island, so we don’t really care about what’s going on abroad so much and it’s really not necessary to be able to speak another language. But I think English is a world language and if you can speak it, you can talk to so many more people. So for me, it’s important. Of course, I also came to study Chemistry. That’s what I’m doing here; I’m working on my PhD in Chemistry, which is a five-year program.

I also did my undergraduate studies in America, in South Dakota. Before then, I had never been to the U.S. Of course, I had watched lots of American movies and American TV shows. In the shows and the movies, all the Americans seem so friendly. But when I came here, I realized that was just a stereotype. The
people I’ve been around in America who are also studying Chemistry, they aren’t so interested in international relations kinds of stuff. And they have stereotypes for me too.

To come here, I had to take the TOEFL, this English exam, and the GRE, just like Americans. The TOEFL is the most important thing for international students I think. Even from the beginning, when I was taking those tests, my parents supported my decision to come here. But they asked me to do everything by myself. I had to decide everything for myself. If I really want to do something, I decide it on my own and I take responsibility for that decision. Some of my friends have come to the U.S. as exchange students, but only a few of them have come here to study. I know that there are many Indian and Chinese students who come to the U.S. to actually study and get a degree, but Japanese people normally just come here to learn English and then they go back to Japan to get a degree.

In Japan, the schools are public and they are very organized. In junior high, for example, everyone has to be involved in some kind of club, like music club, basketball club, language club, that kind of thing. The schools require us to be members of these clubs. I was in track and field. In America, I think the community provides clubs, but in Japan, the schools provide them. Each junior high teacher in Japan has to be in charge of one. My coach in track and field taught science, and he had experience in this because he was also in track and field in his junior high. When the teachers organized it, we had competitions with other schools.
After junior high, there is high school, of course. We think when we are high school students, we must study a lot to get admission for the university. For me, I had to take nine exams to get into the university, like chemistry, biology, English, etc. You just have one chance to get into university. But most people do go, either to private or public university. Public and private are basically on the same level, but private universities can provide their own exams and public university exams are given by the government. I took both exams for public and private universities so I had to prepare for both. People try to take as many as possible. Some even go to a training program to cram for and prepare for the admissions exam. Once you get in to the university, you don’t have to study so much, there’s not a lot of homework and it’s easy to graduate. Japanese people think it’s hard to graduate from a university in America. And they think it’s so expensive. Tuition wise in Japan, public university is about half the price of private university, at about $3,000 or $4,000 for one year. Some of the private universities are very expensive. But not like the U.S.

I think for studying, America is a very good place to come. For myself, I wanted to get a degree here. As a freshman, I went to Vancouver to study English intensely, and I decided it is better to go to a university, better to learn English by taking classes. And that way I could see American culture more directly. What does it mean to be American? I don’t really know. I used to think Americans were so friendly, but that was just from the TV shows, that was just a stereotype. Now I just think Americans are the same as Japanese, in many ways. But in some ways Americans are a little different. Americans are always carrying
laptops, whereas in Japan, instead of laptops, they are always carrying cell phones. And we do everything with our cell phones, email, watch TV, take pictures. For Americans, laptops are the most important thing I think, but for Japanese, it is cell phones.

Even though I have been in America for a while now, I still miss lots of things about Japan, like our food and our transportation. I wish I could get Japanese transportation in the U.S. In America, I really care about time. If I miss a bus, I have to wait one more hour for the next bus, so I am very on time in America. But when I went back to Japan this winter, all the buses come all the time, so I could be late. Sometimes in Japan, I am late when I don’t schedule out the buses and the trains, but not very often.

I’ve seen a lot of differences between Japan and America. Like holidays, for example. In Japan, New Years is a very big deal, but instead of just celebrating with friends and family, we go to temple or shrine too. And we also have holidays specifically for kids. Like in November, all the five-year old boys go to shrine with their families to celebrate. And for girls, it’s when they turn three and seven. We go to shrine or temple to wish for them to grow up safely and healthfully.

I haven’t decided about what I want to do after I graduate. Eventually I want to return to Japan, but I do want to work in the U.S. for a while. I still want to have some work experience in America. But eventually I want to return to my family. My family is still all in Japan. I have an older brother who works for a bank and a younger brother who is still in university. My younger brother wants
to come to the U.S. but just for studying English. He doesn’t want to get a degree in America. My mother stays at home and my father works in insurance. He has to travel one hour to get to work in Tokyo. My father has a bachelor’s degree in economics and my mother has a bachelor’s degree in accounting. That’s how they met, at work. My father’s parents also live with us, but they’re both retired. My grandfather on my mother’s side went to the university, he and my maternal grandmother live with my uncle, my mother’s brother. Usually grandparents live with their son, it’s just traditional culture. But these days, grandparents generally just live close to their son, but not in the same house. Like ten minutes away maybe. Close enough that their kids can be there quickly if they need to be.

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France

*Born to a strong Catholic family from the Southern Alps of France, this is the story of a French woman who came to America for a masters degree at the age of 19.*

I was born in Burgundy, France, which is a region very famous for its wine. I studied for two years in Lyon, to prepare for the Ivy League university, which is called the “Grands Écoles” in France. Lyon is a very beautiful historical town, and it is the second biggest town in France, after Paris. I didn’t pass the exams for the Grands Écoles and so I went to study at a normal university in Strasbourg for my undergrad. I finished there last year.

My family back home is from a very scientific background. My father is an anesthesiologist and my mother is a biologist. They both work in the hospital.
They come from the middle classes and from very Catholic backgrounds, and from the French Alps. I think their political views are toward the right, not very socialist for France, but for here, their political views are very socialist. I also have one younger sister. She is 16 and I am 20.

My decision to come here was a little bit difficult. When I first told my father, he was at first thinking that it was a joke. He thought it was like a present, they give me money to teach and to study in America. He was thinking it was not possible and he did not believe me. And then when he realized that’s what I wanted to do, he was happy and very proud of me. He has never been to the U.S. and it was his dream to come here.

My mother didn’t support my desire to come here at all. She was thinking I would be wasting my time and I would lose my European-ness. And she told me, if you go to the U.S. then you will become superficial and violent. She was afraid I would be more violent if I came here, and that I would eat badly and make bad habits and get fat. She was thinking I would not sleep, I would not cook, I would just work all the time. And she was afraid that if I got a degree here that it would be useless in France because it would not transfer. And she feared that I would come back and be very rude. It’s funny, French people think that American people are so rude, but American people think French people are rude too.

Since I have been here, I don’t use skype a lot to call my parents. But when I do call them and I talk to my father, he says he feels like he is on the earth and I am on the moon because I am so far away from them. He thinks it is like a
myth that I am in the U.S. I think a lot of my friends feel the same way. But with some of my friends, they don’t even want to speak to me because I am here. And that’s difficult for me. Some of them are jealous, I guess, or they think I am a bad person for coming here. I have since made some other friends in France and some of those other friends are curious and they want to know how my life is here. Of course, every French person would not say the same thing about me being here.

I came to America because I wanted to improve my English, of course, and to teach and learn about American culture. I am a teaching assistant here, and I love to teach. In France, you don’t really learn a lot of English. German people learn English of course, but not the French. The French are very much against the United States. French people think that Americans are very selfish and that they work a lot but only for their own opportunity. And they are not very socialist and they are very capitalist. I wanted to see if this was true. I was also very interested in the war in Iraq. I didn’t understand a lot of things about the war and I wanted to see how Americans think about it. I was very lucky when I first came here, because I lived with eight army people and so I could ask them all of the questions I had. And that was nice.

At Syracuse, I am studying for a masters in French Literature. I think it is very strange because I am here to learn my native language. But the teachers, even the American ones are very good, and it is making me aware of my own language. I also teach French literature to undergraduates. In my classes, I have to discuss with the students, which is good. I don’t like to talk to the teachers in France, especially in literature. But here, the students and the teachers all
exchange a lot and even my students are influencing my research and my ideas here, and I like that.

There are a lot of differences between France and America. For example, in France, the napkins are all cloth, but here, they are all paper and you can throw them away. And it’s not just the napkins; the streets and the buildings look like they are made of out paper too. And everything changes so much here. Every week is different for me. Every week, I meet different people and I have different challenges. People are more dynamic in America, and not as lazy; they don’t do the strikes. There are no strikes. And people are more kind. When I ask my students, they tell me that they really care about social programs, and they care about the war, and they have social admiration for France. And I think in general, they don’t criticize. If I fail in my exams, they don’t yell at me or criticize me in a bad way and that’s good. I think people are more sensitive in America. Myself, I criticize a lot and people get very hurt. I’m used to being criticized and so I do it to other people and then they get mad at me. I think it’s very French of me.

And another difference, grocery stores. Wow. I went to Wegman’s and Price Chopper in the beginning and I don’t have any car or any driving license, so I have to ask other people to drive with me. The prices at the grocery store are very good. French people think there are no good vegetables in America, but that is false! There are things like sweet potatoes. I prefer to buy food in the little shops like the Middle Eastern shops because I am used to cooking with olive oil and things like that. But I do like peanut butter, and turkey and cream cheese and maple syrup a lot. I discovered these things here, and they are very good. I think
food is very interesting in the U.S. Of course, I cook French food, but I can also
cook Chinese and Indian food, foods that you can’t cook in France. But
Starbucks, I don’t like Starbucks. I’m used to Arabic and Italian coffee. Here
there is too much fat and sugar and there is no taste. Just like everything in
America. And I am disappointed with Marshall Street. All they have is fast food
and Mexican food. Not so good.

I also think there is less depression here than in France. In France, it’s a
shame if you have a disorder or a psychological problem. Here, you can go to a
counseling center and they won’t say that you are not able to live. I think that’s a
very good part of the American society. And as far as health care in general, I
think that, with Obama, the American system will become more like France. And
now, France is becoming more America, so we are almost at the same point.

It is difficult to be an immigrant in the U.S, even if you are French. I am
not black or Chinese, but I think it’s still hard to live in a foreign country. And
being French, people have a lot of stereotypes about me. They think, okay, she is
French and so she must be beautiful and she wants to have a lot of boyfriends, but
that is not true. Otherwise, the stereotypes about French people are mostly right.
We are rude, and we do criticize people. It’s in our culture. But we don’t like it
when people speak without saying anything. If something isn’t interesting, we
just prefer not to listen. Often in American classrooms, people speak even if they
have nothing to say. And that annoys me.

The fact that people talk without saying much is both positive and
negative. It is positive because you are not afraid of being judged by students,
and you can try to say something without being sure that you will be able to do it. For me, I think it is positive because I am shy and this way I can say what I want to say. In America, in the classroom, they won’t say you are wrong but in France they say you are wrong all the time. Here, they will say, I have another idea, or something like this. But outside the classroom, I was surprised to see that American people are shyer than French people.

I must admit, I am somewhat of a pessimist, so it is difficult for me to make friends, even in France. All of my classmates here are 25 to 28 but I am only 20, so I cannot go to bars with them, only to tearooms and things. It’s difficult to be younger than my classmates. My students are my age but I can’t speak with them because that would not be professional. They are like 19 and 20 or so and I have to play like I am older. They think I am 23. If I speak with undergrads or people who are my age, they are not really like me. I think American people are very immature and then they just get old.

For me, I don’t feel 100 percent French. After almost two semesters here, I feel, maybe 15 percent American. I like some parts of the American life. Like people don’t judge you too much, and when I make decisions about my life or my studies, my friends won’t say to me, I am not your friend because you made this decision. Sometimes in France, it’s like this: if people don’t agree with me, they won’t speak to me for months. Sometimes my friends at home don’t understand me, like how I organize my work, why I want to stay here. Here, perhaps it’s the same, but it’s not so black and white. It’s very ideological in France. Or very
religious perhaps. Maybe it’s because I am Catholic. In France, sometimes people do not agree with me or they laugh at me.

It’s the same in the artistic field. In France, you have to create things that will be good for the public, and that you are sure the public will like. Here, you can try things and maybe the public will like these things and maybe they will not. It starts from your own desire.

I don’t know what I want to do after my program at Syracuse. Coming to the U.S. has given me the desire to travel. I do like my hometown in France, and I like France, but now I want to travel to the Middle East and to India. I hope I will be able to do this. And I hope I will be able to work with American people after this. They’re very serious and professional in their work. In Europe, German people are very professional. But French people are difficult to work with, especially when you are in a team or you have a project to do with other people. Most of the time if you want to do something good, you have to do it on your own. American people are very helpful; they give good criticism, and good advices.

Maybe after this, I will be a teacher, but maybe just for part of my life. I like to teach. I think they are teaching me how to teach here. My masters program is two years, and I think I will finish those two years out. And then I would like to get a PhD in French, but that does not exist at Syracuse. So I will apply to other American universities and if I get in to a good school, then I will stay. Perhaps I will stay, but I know I don’t want to stay in America for more than eight years.
If I could bring something from America to France, it would be the hope that everyone can succeed and everyone can do what they want. If I could bring something French here, it would be the structure of time in the day. Perhaps I will do something like this next semester. If I could, I would organize a lunch or a meal in the middle of the day where you can eat very healthy food, maybe even cook perhaps and sit and talk with other students. And not a place like Starbucks. A lot of the time in France, we have places where we can go for lunch and sit and talk with friends for an hour, and not about the homework. And it’s not like once a week, it’s every day. I think that’s the most important.

In sum, I think I am happier in America. In France, when I am happy it is because I have a good lunch, I like the teachers and I see the landscapes I like. Here I am happy because I am proud of what I did. I hope that I can take that feeling back to France. In France, even if you are confident in yourself, there is the suspicion that you are not able to do anything. I think it’s a lack of confidence. Some historians of France say this is from the Second World War. The country was divided; some people were collaborating and some were doing the resistance and that made a gap between people. And I think that’s true; the first thought I have about people is to doubt them. I say, oh, are they really reliable? But here I think, okay, it can be possible. I can rely on them. I would really like to bring this to France. It’s very important; I think French people really need this. One of my teachers had studied in the U.S. and she was like this, she didn’t doubt people. And I found that this was good. And it made me want to come here.
I think the American Dream is that everything is possible. It’s not because of American society; it’s because of a kind of hope that people believe in. People believe that things can change. And it’s true; things can change a lot here because people believe in it. If a student comes from a low social class, but he works a lot, he can be very rich. I was very surprised when I was in a taxi with a taxi driver in America, and he was listening to something about the American Dream on the radio, on NPR. This man was very poor, old, unhappy and sick and he had a lot of difficulty breathing. But he was able to listen to this talk on the radio and he still believed in it. And he was still very kind to me. So I think the American Dream is true.

…

For many, the chance to study in America is not a defining moment, but simply a part of becoming a global citizen. Not every international student who comes to the States wants to settle down with an American spouse, build a house with a picket fence and put down roots. Some are here as a mere way station along the lengthier road to becoming a world citizen. Two men in particular personify this attitude, one graduate student from Morocco and one from Ukraine.

…

Morocco

You get the impression he almost lives here, in the grad bay at the Maxwell School. A 5:00 shadow around his cheeks has turned into a 27:00 shadow, a product, no doubt, of the midterms and classes he’s been juggling lately. This is the story of a native Moroccan man, the quintessence of a global citizen.
I was born and raised in Casablanca, Morocco. My family is about middle-income. My dad was a mid level employee at the bank and my mom worked as an assistant to the head of a company in the private sector. Both of my parents have their diploma from after high school, which is probably the equivalent of undergrad here. But back in the days, they didn’t really need to go that far. In the 1960s and 1970s when they were getting their degrees, that was enough.

Growing up, we didn’t have a lot, but I always had what I wanted. I started in first grade and then went up through high school there, in Casablanca. After high school, I decided to go to France for what would be the equivalent of my undergrad work. That’s what most students in Morocco do; they naturally go to France to continue their studies. It’s just like when Indian students go to the UK to study after high school. I would say that not many Moroccans go straight to the U.S. right after high school. But anyway, I moved to France in 2001 when I was 18. It wasn’t really a culture shock; I had been to France before to visit my brother who was studying there. That was maybe 1997. So I was comfortable with France, and my French was perfect already since I’d grown up speaking it. French and Arabic of course. I did two years of preparatory school in France and then three years of business school. In the French system, you can’t go straight to business school before prep school.

There wasn’t a whole lot to get used to in France, other than living on my own for the first time. I was 18 and had to learn to pay my own bills and cook my
own food. But I would have had to make that kind of adjustment anywhere in the world. Every kid has that experience at some point.

I moved to the U.S. in 2006 for an internship with Valeo in Cincinnati, Ohio. Valeo is an automotive equipment company. They’re pretty big now. They invited me for a six-month internship and when they liked me, they extended it another six months. Internships in the French system are different that way. When you go to business school, you usually intern at the company that will hire you.

My parents and I had talked about America, of course, but never a lot. When I was younger, they asked what I wanted to be and I guess the U.S. came up. My parents had both been to New York City for two weeks, back in 1998. I was still in high school when they went. I think they liked the city but they thought the food was pretty terrible. They got to see Bill Clinton because he happened to be there at the time. And they survived on their English okay. My dad’s English is pretty sketchy to say the least but my mom’s is good because she studied it in school. And she has to speak in English at work a lot. So they got around okay. And they liked America.

I have to admit, I did have some culture shock when I first came to the U.S. It’s very different from Morocco and France. My English wasn’t very good and I couldn’t really understand when I was spoken to. I had weird wording, you know. And so many things other than the language were just very different. Take transportation for example. In France, you take public transportation everywhere. But here, you have to have a car just for basic stuff like grocery shopping. That
was frustrating when I first got here. And when I did get to the grocery store, I couldn’t find the stuff I wanted, like cheeses and breads. It’s very different. There was definitely more of an adjustment from France to the U.S. than from Morocco to France.

I think when you move to America, there’s this pretty standard timeline. For the first two weeks, you have a honeymoon where everything is great, you know. You love the country and the people and everything is so new and you just love it. And then the shock hits and then you spend maybe 15 days to a month when you hate the country. And then you adjust and you start being American. For me, I was lucky because I’m pretty social and I met people pretty quickly. I only hated the U.S. for a month and I had friends in about 15 days. So it wasn’t too bad. Coming from France to Ohio, I didn’t know anyone. I was 23 and starting work in Ohio where all the women were ugly and the men were much older. But I met people randomly and I made friends. That’s the hard thing about moving from one country to another. The social thing doesn’t last long though and you eventually hang out with people.

After a year of working at Valeo in Ohio, I realized that wasn’t quite what I wanted to do and instead I wanted to go back to school so I started applying to grad programs. I picked the Maxwell school because they offered me more money than Johns Hopkins and they were doing better at the time, better in the rankings. Maxwell wasn’t an adjustment at all. But I do feel like if I went back to France or Morocco now, it would definitely take adjustment.
Last summer, I interned in Singapore at Tomasic, which was a really great experience. Tomasic is like a sovereign wealth fund; it manages government portfolio assets. So it was basically consulting. I went there for the internship, but also because I love big cities. I fell in love with South East Asia and Singapore while I was there. And there really wasn’t any culture shock. It’s very human and family driven and big. I have a thing for big cities. I want to go to Shanghai at some point and really, the rest of Asia too. In Singapore I lived right next to the former president. Every day, I’d walk right past his house and there would be these big guards in front with their AK 47s. I was basically living on the equivalent of 5th avenue in New York. It was great. The food was really cheap there and the hostel I stayed at was great. I was really pleased by Singapore. It was a good experience and I learned a lot.

After I graduate in May, I’ll probably do something in banking, although it’s really not a good time to go into banking or finance. But doing something with finance and economics means there are a lot of companies I can apply to, big groups, that wouldn’t be a problem. I’m applying to almost everything. I just know I want to live in a big city. Global mobility, that’s my thing. I’m looking at three continents, Asia, Europe and America.

I speak four languages now, Arabic, French, Spanish, and English. We spoke mostly Arabic in my house, and I grew up speaking French. I learned Spanish in high school and I’d go up to Spain on weekends when I lived in Morocco. When you spend time in Tangier, Morocco, you start picking up the language. Tangier is in the north of Morocco where they speak Spanish.
Morocco was a protectorate under the Spanish and French, so the king remained in power, legally and status-wise. So they speak Spanish in the northern part near Tangier and French in Casablanca. I’m working on German now and after that, who knows. If you have English and Spanish, you’re pretty much set. To be really pragmatic, one should learn Hindi or maybe Chinese. That would be good. I think languages are key and English is the main medium of communication in the world.

So I’ve traveled a lot in my life, but who do I identify with? Certainly not the French at all, but I’ve never really thought about my identity. I definitely live as Americans do; I’ve adopted their way of living. But then, when I go to a country, I don’t want to meet people from my own country; I want to meet internationals or people from there. I was born and raised in Morocco, so I still identify as Moroccan, I still follow what happens there, very closely. But I also follow the news here, what happens here. I’m not American no, definitely, I might leave in May and go somewhere. But I’d just like to go where the jobs are. And with the crisis like it is and unemployment as high as it is here, at what, ten percent? That’s a little too high to just hope to stay in a country and plan on being there for a while. That’s suicidal. I try to tell myself not to hope to be in a particular country, just hope to be in a good country, an affordable country. All I want is a good opportunity or a good job, I really don’t care where it is. So it’s a new start. Maybe in America. We’ll see.

So what is the American dream? I think it’s more than just education. If I had to summarize it in one thing, I think it’s owning your own house. That’s the
most significant part of the American dream, in my opinion. The American dream is for the middle class. The vague hope that you can win big money, that might be part of it, but that’s a rare phenomenon. Your home is your real asset. The crisis now is pretty linked to that, to the housing bubble. You know you have these banks that give you a loan and they don’t even look at what you earn; it’s the undocumented loan.

You know when you dream of something, you don’t dream of climbing the ladder, you dream of the end, the result, and that’s owning your own house, in my opinion. Honestly, the idea of the American dream didn’t have any impact on my decision to come here, largely because I want to be global, so obviously, I don’t want to get roots and buy a house right now. The thing with America is that you either love it or hate it. Anybody, anywhere in the world, they have this specific, well-defined relationship, because America is the biggest, the most powerful. You can’t just say, oh, America, who cares. Definitely, I was curious to see what it was like. You know it through movies, through Hollywood, and what not, and you come and see that it is real.

…

Ukraine

He jumps up out of his seat to greet me and introduce himself. As he settles back down into his chair, he quickly skims through a full inbox of email, closes the computer and then excitedly looks back to me. You get the impression that this is how he lives, with undivided attention, from moment to moment, and passionately.
This is the story of a young Ukrainian man who came to America to study public
diplomacy.

Growing up, my family always had enough. Of course, the definition of
enough can be very different for different people. When I was a little kid, we had
milk soups, oatmeal with milk, for breakfast, lunch and dinner. I was never super
below the poverty line, I’m not like a malnutrition kid coming from Africa, we
always had just enough. Of course, “just enough” doesn’t mean we have the
money for a fancy American education. I’m on fellowship here, the Hursky
fellowship for Ukrainian students.

My parents divorced when I was very young, so I was raised by my
mother. We lived in a government owned apartment that we shared with my aunt
and sometimes her two kids. My mother has a six-year degree as a hydro-
geologist. She had a very high GPA and before the Soviet Union collapsed, she
had a good job doing field research in Russia. Now she is a housekeeper. When
the Soviet Union collapsed, she was laid off. Work shrank, unemployment grew
and she was out of work for many years. My grandmother supported us because
she had a government pension and she had had a successful business. For the past
seven years now my mother has been helping Americans with basic stuff, like
helping them pay their bills and do the laundry and whatnot. She has a decent
income now, better than if she had stayed with her previous job. I never met my
dad. I think he’s a military officer in Russia, because that’s where his child
support was sent from.
My mom always supported me when I wanted to do things, especially when I wanted to come to the United States. The kids around me always hung out and drank in the evenings, and they would work to support themselves drinking, so that was a good situation to get out of. Anyway, my mother always wanted to advise me. Before I came to America, I lived in Serbia for nine months and I went back every three months to the Ukraine so I think that was a good transition period for her between me living at home and living in America.

When I was little, I was sick a lot, so I skipped like 40 or 50 percent of my school growing up. In Ukraine, you can skip up to half of your school and study on your own and you will still pass and get an education. My mom hired a tutor to help me make up what I had missed. That was when we had money. Anyway, I caught on quickly with English, so that tutor put me in touch with another tutor who I worked with extensively. He introduced me to these American missionaries downtown. I think I was about eleven then. That was my first exposure to real English, rather than just academic English. The missionaries gave me this broken VCR, which I fixed and then started borrowing and watching these English movies. You know, fun, family movies, like Mrs. Doubtfire. And there were no subtitles, so at first I understood maybe twenty percent of what was going on. And the more I spoke with the American missionaries and worked with the tutor and watched the American movies, the better my English got.

The Americans also taught at the university where I went for undergrad in Ukraine. I think that’s why it was so expensive. It was like $6,000.
I went to public school in Kiev, where I’m from, which is the capital of Ukraine. There is no mandatory age, but you must complete nine years of school, plus two more optional years. I think Kiev has the highest official enrollment in college. There is a tremendous number of colleges and people going to those schools. So the quantity is there, but the quality is not. In Ukraine, I got what they call a masters there, but it’s the same as a bachelors here. It takes an extra year to get a masters, and people are doing it more and more. It’s good enough to get a job, but I don’t think it’s challenging enough to call it a masters.

Coming to America has always been my dream. I first came here in 2005 as a camp counselor on a work and travel program. And of course, all I knew about America was from the missionaries and the family movies I’d watched. The program pretty much paid for itself, but my mom gave me 100 dollars. I spent four of the dollars on a postcard to send to her from Poland. So I got here, to America, Arizona actually, with 96 dollars in my pocket. And I was working with all these kids and using all these fancy words you learn in the dictionary, which obviously were useless to the kids, so my vocabulary shrank by like 20 percent. But my speaking speed picked up like crazy.

Coming here in high school made me want to come for college. But there’s more money available for graduate students than undergrads. I tried to come for undergrad, but it didn’t work. So when I found out about the Hursky program, I applied for it. I took the TOEFL and the GRE and I followed my dream to come here. It’s funny, you feel like you’re attached to a computer, not a human, when you take those tests. Anyway, I got in, after a couple of attempts,
and I came here last July for the summer semester at Newhouse. I’m dual degree with Newhouse and Maxwell.

When I first came to Syracuse, I thought, wow. What a big city. And I was fascinated by how the administration and the faculty at the school care about making students feel welcome. In Ukraine, it’s like students are asking for a favor when they need something from the administration or the faculty, but here, they’re just helpful. In Ukraine, the professors are like gods and the students are mortals. But here, you are the customer and you pay in cash. And you have crazy things like office hours.

The goals for education in the Ukraine and America are very different. In Ukraine, the goal is to provide you with information for your brain to remember and regurgitate. In America, the goal is to teach you to think about what kind of information you need, how to find it out on your own, process it and make a product out of it. It’s more about critical thinking, to use the cliché term. And I believed in critical thinking for the first few months. I think schools here are teaching critical thinking, but most students don’t really critically analyze. I went to bible studies that the American missionaries held when I was in seventh or eighth grade. And I remember someone asking, “What do you think?” And there was nowhere to go for the answer, so that got my critical thinking going on. I’m picking it back up here. And I think my own educational curve has skyrocketed since coming to the States. I can’t help but think, gosh, what did I do in college in Ukraine for five years?
When I initially came here, I was guided by the financial opportunity, so I had some restrictions. I had done my undergrad in business administration and I was always interested in my country and the international part of my country. I don’t really have an interest in what’s going on in the Middle East, but I’ve always been interested in what’s going in America, and between America and the Ukraine, and the Ukraine and Russia. I’m studying Public Diplomacy here, and I would love to go back to the Ukraine and get a program going in public diplomacy.

I don’t know if I’ll go back to the Ukraine after I graduate. Right now, I don’t particularly want to. With this program, I’m receiving $60,000 of education for free. So if I go back to the Ukraine and I only make $700 a month, that would be a waste of an investment. Maybe after this, I’ll go to Europe and get a job. The second reason why I might not go straight back to the Ukraine is that I am not happy with the politics in the Ukraine at the moment. The executive government is highly politicized. Where American government swings back and forth between democrats and republicans, in the Ukraine, the swing in politics is much bigger. And frankly, I just don’t like our president. I was hoping for a more rapid shift in our culture than has happened. Things like professional integrity, law enforcement, business reliability and trust. Those are the things that make places like America good and make unstable states like countries in Africa bad. And those are the things that are not happening in my country right now. I was hopeful that in a few years, our country would be like Poland, but we’re not. To give you an example, Ukraine is co hosting with Poland for a big soccer game
coming up. Poland is almost up and running, but Ukraine has only just awarded some of the major contracts. The political and the executive were just trying to grab the biggest, fattest piece of bacon for themselves, which endangers the whole country. It makes me angry and not want to go back. I’m generally an optimist.

I should mention that there are perks in going back to Ukraine. For example, I could go and get a job and having housing and whatnot. Even though I like a lot of things about the U.S., I don’t think I want to become an American. I see the cultural differences we have and I feel like, with the dangerous path that America is taking, I don’t want to stick around and be responsible for the long term of it. There’s overregulation, ramping up the government, and social attempts to reform the country. As a student in public diplomacy studying public relations and international relations, I should have known better. If I want to live here and stay here, I’ll have to change myself completely.

I don’t think my original perception of America was true. I thought people were happy and successful here, and I was just awestruck by how many people there were. I thought Ukrainians just sat on their bums and complained. People are much less preoccupied with jobs there. But I’m surprised by how many people there are here who aren’t appreciate of what they have. And they do have a lot. There’s also this rigidity in social interaction. Americans aren’t as open minded as they think they are. The restaurants aren’t really all that different; all the food is the same, pre-cooked stuff. All the windows look out on to a view of the parking lot. You always drive up and park your car, and the waiters come
and ask for drink orders first, and you never just have time to sit. In Ukraine, they
don’t give you water for free, so you never even order the same drink. At home,
in the capital city, I hop on the subway, which is super cheap, so I don’t feel
restrained in how many trips I take. It used to be a dime, now it’s a quarter and
everyone’s outraged. When I go out with a girl in Ukraine, we walk around the
beautiful streets, and the interiors are different and no two restaurants look alike.

In America, the prices are all pretty much the same, but in Ukraine, I
never know what I’m going to spend. That’s the other thing that drives me crazy
about Americans, especially American tourists. They’re willing to pinch a few
dollars to go to a cheaper place. Most of the restaurants have the same fixed cost,
but the markup is crazy. For me, I just want to go out and have the best quality
thing I can afford. I’m not going to go out and get a chicken and mashed
potatoes. And shoot me now with what Americans think is a salad, lettuce, cherry
tomatoes and Italian dressing. They overuse the lettuce here and I don’t even eat
it.

There is something about America, from a pure business perspective, that
it ticks like a clock and it produces GDP, but it’s almost this incredible rigidity.
Here, Americans rely on the general public opinion or what tastes good or feels
good, or the advertisements, which isn’t always best. I have a really hard time
with the advertisement driven consumerism.

I live today, now. I think about what is going to impact me and change
my character, rather than work towards a certain goal. I try to work on the way I
view the world, if I can help it. In general, I feel like Europe is the place for me
to be. In spite of all the TSA restrictions and whatnot, America is very open for immigration. You make friends quickly. I think Americans are like peaches, Ukrainians are like coconuts. Americans make friends quickly, and then you get to where there’s this strong personal barrier or border. This country has given me 60 thousand dollars worth of education, and when my family had hard times, the American missionaries would send my family gifts out of kindness. But there is still a barrier that is hard to get across. With Ukrainians, once you make friends with them, they’ll help you with just about anything and they’ll tell you just about anything. In England and America, they say, how do you do, and how are you. But it’s not really a question, it’s just hello. And since it’s not really a question, people here don’t really answer it. In Ukraine, if you ask people how they are doing, it’s really a question, and they’ll give you a 15-minute debriefing. So it’s peaches and coconuts.

Before living here, I lived in Serbia for nine months for an internship. And at first I was all excited and I tried to stay later at my internship so that I could make friends. Now normal Americans, if they talk about something in front of you, they’ll invite you to it. But Serbians never invited me anywhere, even though they would talk about things right in front of me. For half a year, I was the loneliest soul in Serbia. My friend said I had the wrong attitude, but he was American. I finally went camping with this guy and we became friends and when my mom came to visit, he took it on his own expense to drive us around for two days. In America, I come to this program, and the next thing I know, I’m
planning potlucks with this guy I’ve known for only a week. So it’s very different here with my peach American friends.

America has a lot of inefficiencies that are not very sustainable, like consumerism. I think a lot of American people are getting it wrong with they spend their money. They spend a lot on housing, but not as much on food. If you spent more on food, and you exercise more, you won’t be as sick. Healthcare is expensive. I don’t want to stay in this country with that. When I got here, I had some money from my internship in Serbia and I bought a nice racing bike. I was careful on my bike in Ukraine, because if I got hurt, I didn’t know if an emergency vehicle would come, or if I did get to the hospital, if I would get medical attention. Now I can do whatever I want because I have health insurance. I know that if I call 911, someone will come. Now, if I smack myself on a bike, health insurance has to pay to patch me up. That’s not sustainable.

I’m also the kind of person who, in daily details, I have these very frustrating experiences going grocery shopping and I think, I never want to live in this country. At Wegman’s, I have a hard time with the yoghurts and the milk. It’s the illusion of choice. Communist people had a small selection of products but essentially the selection you have here is the same thing. I can’t find regular milk here. Milk should go bad. Here, organic milk doesn’t even go bad. And yoghurts? What’s up with the yoghurt? What’s up with low in fat in high in sugar? Yoghurt shouldn’t be that way. The yoghurts take up maybe 10 feet worth of space at the grocery store, but there is maybe 10 inches worth of good yoghurt.
After all of these differences that I don’t like here, I still can’t say I feel 100 percent Ukrainian. In Ukraine, people say I’m so Americanized. Here they say, oh, he’s a Ukrainian. I wouldn’t say I’m blindly patriotic, but I do hope I can do a lot for my country.

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For many, America and the American Dream represent a world of opportunity and romantic wonderment. It is a country where anything is possible and the opportunities are endless, if only we take a moment to look around and find them. Some have been disappointed with their home countries, when comparing the vast amount of cultural opportunity in America with their land of origin. Such was the case for a graduate student from Russia.

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Russia

Born at the height of the Soviet Union, this is the story of a well-educated Russian man who came to the U.S. for his third higher education degree.

I was born, raised and educated in Cheboksary, which is in the middle region of Russia. I have two higher educations from there, from the Teachers Training Institute, the Foreign Language department in 1981 and the Economics Department in 1997. In Russia, I was the dean of the department of economics and management at an institute in my city. It’s one of twelve branches of the Moscow Humanitarian Institute.

I’m here at the Moynihan Institute on a program called the Edmund Muskie fellowship, which provides masters degrees in the field of public
administration for post-Soviet countries. There are 19 people total on the program who come from Russia. The representatives in the Washington office decided I would come here. And the MPA is for 16 months.

This isn’t my first time in the States. I was here at the Maxwell school 10 years ago as a visiting scholar, with a junior faculty development program from one of the universities in Russia. There were 50 people who were chosen to go on that program. And now they enroll fewer people than that and for only half a year.

The first time I was in the U.S. was in 1995. I came to New York University to do a summer seminar in American Studies for six weeks. With that program, we were taken across the country for two weeks. We visited Washington, Chicago, and New Mexico, which was a wonderful change from New York. But everywhere we went, the culture of excess of possibilities surprised me. I found that people could visit wonderful museums in almost every city, especially in Washington. When the Soviet Union collapsed in the late ‘80s in our country, people lost interest in reading newspapers, visiting museums, going to theatres. There are still some people who do things in our country, but rarely. Under the Soviet Union, it was normal to go to the theatre at least once a month and to subscribe to three different newspapers. Some people even subscribed to eight or 10 newspapers and journals. Now people just buy newspapers from kiosks if they even buy any. In the U.S., so many of the museums are almost free. I wish we had museums of that kind in our country. Back in 1995, the representatives of the university who hosted asked us to give
feedback. I told them they were lucky to have the opportunity to raise the cultural level with so many things. Here you have many facilities to have your own greats, like Rostropovich. So many famous people.

Coming to New York was actually kind of surprising for me because I’d read in books that New York is a city of stone jungles, and I saw that myself. I saw the huge buildings, and no parks, and no place to relax. I was also surprised by the people. I’d read in books that in a capitalist society, people are raised to be greedy, and they just want profit from everything. So it was surprising to see that some American people volunteer, and they do things just to contribute to their community and to please others.

My conviction is that in Russia, you can barely make both ends meet. In the U.S., you can be on welfare and enjoy life, and that’s amazing. In Russia, you have many cases of violence, even by the police, and huge corruption. But here, maybe there are cases of this shooting or that shooting, but I haven’t encountered any, and this is my third visit to this country. But I was surprised by the huge bureaucratic system you have here. I thought our country was bureaucratic, but your country is too. When I was here ten years ago, I wanted to bring my family to Washington. I just needed one document to get my family here. Unfortunately I sent it to Russia with the ordinary, local mail and a local stamp, and so it didn’t get to Russia and it got lost in the mail. I bought the plane tickets for my family and everything was lined up. When I realized we were missing that document, I went back to the U.S. government to get another, but they said the person who handled that form was out and so I couldn’t get another. Just like that. I tried to
arrange a visit for my wife and my son to come here as tourists, and I got a support letter for the former ambassador to Russia and I arranged for a letter for the senator. They got all those documents in Moscow and my family went to the embassy there; we live 700 kilometers from Moscow. My wife and son were expected to get a visa at the embassy, and so they squeezed through the line, and when they finally got to talk to someone, the embassy said my family could come back in three days, but that would be after the plane had taken off, so we lost the tickets. All because of the failure to get a small piece of paper. That’s bureaucracy.

When I was raised in Russia, we viewed the U.S. as the enemy who was just trying to occupy the whole world. We thought America, with its high crime rates, was just looking for a chance to attack the Soviet Union. But when I came here, I was surprised to see the low rate of crime, especially in Chicago, and New York.

For me, it’s funny personally, because I was raised under the Soviet Union and I can compare what we had then and what we have now. Many people would like to get back to the old system, because it was much more fair, socially, politically, economically, almost in every aspect. But today, we have something horrible. They say we have a democratic society, but it’s not; we’re far from that. Comparing our present day situation in Russia and the U.S., I can see why many Russians have stayed in the United States. Under the “work and travel,” a lot of people come from Russia and stay here. Under the Soviet Union, if I had had the chance to come and stay, I wouldn’t have. Now my dream place to stay is Canada.
or Australia. In the U.S. you have more chances to get more money, but I wouldn’t want to stay here, because the social welfare system is very underdeveloped. Even for the people who are on my program, our insurance covers severe cases only. It doesn’t even cover teeth. I’m looking forward to going back to Russia to get my teeth problems taken care of. If I had that done here, it would cost $1000, maybe more. It’s horrible. Especially if you’re low paid. It’s unfair to make money on peoples’ health, and it’s certainly not a good system. If Obama succeeds with his plan, maybe the situation will change for the better. If it changes, maybe more people will come here.

Since the movie Pretty Woman came out, I think a lot of people, especially young ladies, have dreamed of coming to America. They think it’s some kind of a paradise. They think they can find an American prince and get married and have a better fate than they would have in Russia. I think that’s what the American Dream is, it’s the idea that America is a country of wonderment, like today you are nothing but tomorrow you are a prince or a millionaire, or a boss of a huge company. But I think it’s interesting that it was the Soviet Union that influenced a lot of the American social situation and social policies in the 1960s. U.S. was pressed to change their attitudes, especially toward minorities. Unfortunately now, Russia is moving backward from where it once was.

From here, I’m planning to get back to Russia. But I’ll see, maybe I’ll go to Canada if I can find some work there. I’ve found that even American people would like to go to Canada. I once met an American lady whose dream was to go to Canada. She said she wanted to live there because the social system is so great.
Then again, there are limitations are the number of people who can move there. I think it’s capped at 30,000 people a year. Maybe that’s why my dream is to go to Canada.

Who do I identify with? Maybe I’m half Russian, half an international guy. I say that because this is my third time in the U.S. and I spent two months in Great Britain in 1991, and a week in Sweden and Spain.

In the Russian education system, there are eleven years of mandatory school, and then you can go to the university or institute. I spent five years there, in the economics department. Some institutes are for two years, but a bachelors degree is four years, and then you can spend two more years for a masters degree. While it’s shifting to that system, it’s not as popular. One of my points of being here is just to get familiar with American curriculum. After this degree, my director is waiting for me to come back to Russia. There is a temporarily hired person in my position, and if she succeeds to keep my place for me, then I can go back. Otherwise, maybe I will explore new countries.

My wife was educated at the university level, as well as my parents. My mother was a dentist and went to a technical school, and my father worked in psychiatry. Both of my parents have passed away now. My son has also studied at the university level. He is twenty-two now and graduating from the university in Cheboksary soon, in the world economy department. He wants to continue to get his masters and his dream is to go to the Moscow Institute of International Affairs, but he needs money for that. Many masters degree programs are paid, but otherwise, the cost of the school and the university depends on the region.
For an economic specialty, the cost is about 2.5 thousand dollars a year, which is a big sum, considering that the average salary in our region is 200 dollars per month. I think over 80 percent of the people have no higher education, though many people try to get it. Our domestic education level is going down.

In our region, maybe even in Moscow, if you don’t have any higher education today, you have no chance to get a managerial position. In the mid 1990s, they said there’s no need for higher education; you can get a good job with just school education. It was a surprise for me that they said that, but it was so. Now they understand that they need people with brains. The infrastructure is destroyed, which is why many enterprises lack specialists and professionals. There are those who are lucky like me who had a chance to get an education abroad. I think those people will be great demand in Russia soon.

Due to the system that they’ve created, Russia is number one in oil, but I don’t know where that money goes. Maybe it goes in to the pockets of the guys at the top. Under the Soviet Union, if you had a job, everything was paid for, including health care, education and an apartment. Now everyone must pay for everything. And everyone must pay for an apartment because you can’t afford a house.

Overall, I think Putin is better than Yeltsin was. Yeltsin was always drunk and he didn’t care for the country. Putin tried to centralize Russia, but he did nothing to improve its social situation. And in the eight years that Putin was in charge, he made 1.5 billion dollars. That number was published in a journal for everyone to see. And that’s not in rubles, that’s in U.S. dollars. Normally the
Kremlin denies something if it is wrong or misprinted, but in this case, there was nothing to deny. The Kremlin didn’t even object. Last year, the head of nanotechnology in Russia had a salary over one million dollars, which he also published. When you think about how much the average Russian person makes and how he can’t even afford to buy a house, you know that something is wrong there.

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For many, the idea of coming to the U.S. has been a dream for their whole lives. Images of coming to America, making a fortune and returning home a hero captivated them as children. But they have come to find that they must adjust their dreams and alter their aspirations to the America they now see before them. And they have learned that, in the affairs of humans, there must always exist a bit of luck, if one is to succeed in life. Such was the case for two graduate students, one from Italy and one from Uganda.

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Italy

There’s something nonchalant about him. Perhaps it’s the purple scarf wrapped effortlessly around his neck over the gym outfit or the casual way he leans back in his chair. This is the story of an Italian man who came to study languages.

I was born and grew up in Lucera, Italy, which is in the southeast part of Italy. For studies, I went to Buscara, which is on the east side of Italy, right on the beach, an hour and a half away from Rome. In Buscara, I studied foreign languages.
I first came to the States in 2005 for an exchange program with my college. I went to Nazareth, in New York, to take English and French classes. The program was only for a semester, but I came back a year later to do research for my undergrad dissertation for a month and a half. My dissertation focused on media languages, and I wanted to compare the difference between two cultures. When I got back to Italy after having been in the States that first time, I had been using the Internet and iChat to keep up with my friends in the states, and my Italian friends thought I was crazy. Then the Internet boom happened in Italy and I wasn’t so crazy.

Around that time, I had a relationship with an American girl, for about two and half years. So I would come to the U.S. for 90 days, work for a bit, like as a male au pair in Florida, stay out my visa and then return to Italy. After I graduated from my undergrad in 2006, I took a break, worked for a business company, and traveled all over China and Europe because the guy I worked for had a company in China. After that, I decided to go back to my studies. I started a masters program in Italy in January of 2009. Then I decided to go back to Rochester to be an Italian assistant, while still finishing my masters. One of my professors told me there were French positions available at Syracuse, but I still had to take three more finals in Italy for my masters. So I explained the situation to SU and to my university in Italy and they said, take your time. And they put me in a position here at Syracuse and they said, okay, let’s give him a chance.

Here I’m a masters student in French Literature. I came to Syracuse because I thought it was going to be a great opportunity to experience teaching
and improve my languages. I’m an Italian native speaker, speaking my second language, English, and teach my third language, French. I’m getting to know so much about other cultures, like French and Korean. Last semester I had a class on Haitian culture for example. I keep learning new things, improving my skills and getting to know more about American culture.

What I love about languages is that we’re bridging the gap between cultures. The program I’m on now is about literature and teaching, but in case I don’t succeed there, and you never really know in life, I wouldn’t mind focusing on translation. I’ve been working on translating, Italian to English, Italian to French. Now it’s easier for me to translate from English to French because the environment here is English, and the classes that I’m taking and teaching are in French.

Being in the States has been my dream for my whole life. So once I got here, it was like yes, I made it. On the one side, it’s exciting to do what you want to do. My parents have always told me you have to do what makes you happy. I have them for that. I really do think you have to experiencing things yourself; if you hurt yourself, you’re going to learn something. So from one side, the U.S. is a great country because you can express yourself. Now I miss my friends and family, but it wasn’t that way the first years I was here. Maybe because I was too excited, and I was so young when I first got here.

Being here is a great opportunity, especially for a student, but really for anyone who wants to express themselves in the way they want to. In my small town in Italy, there are a lot of prejudices about the way you dress and your
sexuality, etc, but here you don’t see that. What matters is who you really are. And it’s good that I can enjoy myself and do what I really like. I started studying foreign languages because it was what I really wanted to do. I didn’t study to waste time and money. I do what I like. I don’t know if languages are a gift I have, but I’ve never really needed to study. When the professor talked, I just put it in my hand. So I liked it. Learning a language from a book is very different from speaking a language, which I found out the first time I came to Rochester.

Another difference between the U.S. and Italy is the relations between professors and students. In Italy, professors want you to feel that they are important figures. But here, professors and students are more comfortable and less strict. I don’t have the fear of talking to a professor here.

I think the American Dream is that you can come here and make a fortune and become somebody. Now times have changed. Now there’s this free market and globalization and that changes things. If I came 70 years ago, I could have become somebody. My dream was to come here and make a fortune, and even though I haven’t done that, I can still come and get a job. Now, with globalization, there are too many people, and with the economic crisis, too many things have changed. You can still improve your life. For a poor Mexican guy, who was once sleeping on the streets and now he isn’t, maybe that’s the American Dream for him. That dream used to be for Italian people, 70 years ago. Now Italy is higher than many countries on the scale. I can still improve my quality of life here, but not as much as I could have 70 years ago, strictly for an Italian person. So I don’t think I’ve encountered the American dream. 100 years ago,
people came and made a fortune. I know people who came here with zero money and they started working hard and that happened for them. But things got complicated, everything changed. People can still realize their dream, but it depends on what your dreams are made of.

I think the American dream is for people who come here, not for Americans who are born here. It’s not an illusion, if you’re really lucky. What you really need is luck. You can put yourself out there, but you still need this little bit of lucky.

My parents weren’t as excited about America as I was. When I told my parents about going to study in the States, my mom almost passed out, she was so shocked. As a mother, she worried that once I came here, I would never come back. When I first started coming here, I could never stay for more than three months. 70 years ago, you’d have to take a boat for two months to get here, and I don’t think you’d even need a visa. But now you just take a six-hour flight and you’re here. So I can get back easily if I need to.

In Italy, after you finish school, there’s like a question mark. It’s a big contrast with American culture. If I pursue the American Dream, I want to pursue it for my own skills. I want people to say that I got to this point because I made it on my own.

I have these friends in Italy who just got married, and they’re 40. I see my parents, and they grew up together and then they got married. But even then, the culture was very different. It used to be that once you got your diploma from high school, you were educated. During my parents’ time, there wasn’t high education
and you could get a good job with just a diploma. Now, if you just get out of high
school, you’re nobody. For me, I took a year off after undergrad to find a job, and
then I decided to go back to school because there was a strong need for someone
with a masters.

For me, the marriage and the wedding is a big deal. But here, you can get
married – snap – in Vegas, and you can get divorced anywhere. 80 percent of my
friends from Nazareth are already married. It’s like a chain. When I was in a
relationship with the American girl, she asked if I wanted to get married. I don’t
want to get married until I realize myself, and I’m in a good position to get
married. I need to know that my future with someone is going to be for sure. For
me, getting married at 23 wouldn’t have worked for two reasons, I was too young,
and I didn’t want to realize the American Dream just because I was marrying an
American girl. Before, you could get married with an American girl and that’s it.
Now, you have to have a bank account for five years after getting married. And
now lawyers will come knocking on your door in the middle of the night if
something isn’t right, if something isn’t completely legal.

It’s funny, here you can be a legal citizen and go out to the opera and all of
these other things for entertainment, but if you accidentally cut yourself or
something, you can be dying in front of the hospital and they can’t help you.
After 9/11 things here going down, but I think they’re going up again.
When I see myself in the mirror, I see my parents. My parents only finished high
school, 35 years ago. At that time in Italy, with a high school diploma you could
be a teacher, or an accountant, or whatever. You were educated. Most of the
people went through middle school, especially in the south of Italy, because it’s based on agriculture. But my mom and dad decided to go to school and to get jobs. My mom is a housewife and my dad works for my uncle, who runs a business where they take the waste from dentists’ offices. My dad goes to the offices and signs the papers to make sure things go where they need to. My mom was an accountant for my cousins for 25 years, and then she decided to stay home. I have one sister who’s going to be 30 this summer. She finished high school, but she didn’t really want to study after that, so she decided to work. She’s working for a company that sells stuff like cell phones and computer.

What does it mean to be American? You can always find good people and bad people. I’m not going to say that all Americans are good or they’re all bad. That’s one thing that happens everywhere. American people are social and they give you the chance to express yourself. One thing is they do everything the way it’s supposed to be. They don’t take a short cut. If the rule says you have to do it this way, you do it this way. In Italy, if you can do it shorter, or under the table, you do. Probably there are some people who do it like Italians here, but I don’t know them.

My friends here treat me like a brother and their parents treat me like their kid. Some of them, I feel, are friends just because they happen to be friends, and sometimes you see them again after a long time and it’s not the same. They just do it because they have to. My friends back in Italy, they never change. And their feelings toward me, and the way I am with them, it never changes. And then sometimes, the way you follow the rules, I was one of the people who did things
differently, so sometimes, it’s hard for me to stick to the rules. But I can’t change the system. I can’t make a revolution. Even with small, regular things, sometimes I don’t know if Americans don’t want to see, or if they’re afraid. Sometimes I think Americans just do things because they don’t want other people to judge them.

I still feel 100 percent Italian. I’ve traveled a lot, and I take the best part of the cultures I encounter and I try to put it together, as in life. That’s what I do. I know a lot of bad people and I know a lot of good people, and I take the best part of all the people. In life you never know what happens. My friends in Italy call me the American boy, but I’m 100 percent Italian. Both of my parents were born in Italy, so you can’t deny it. I’m an Italian living in America.

I think that if I get the opportunity to work for 10 years here, maybe my identity will change. Now I only have a contract for a year. At first, when I was always leaving like I did, I didn’t give me the chance to get involved in American social life. I just came as a tourist to see a girl friend. Now if I have a long-term job, that will give me a different perspective. If the culture is going to envelope me, I can’t really tell yet. All I know is that there will still be a good plate of pasta for lunch or dinner, because I can’t get rid of it. Even now, when I finish teaching, I go home and make some pasta. I can’t help it.

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_Uganda_
He’s quiet, not quite sure what to do with his hands as he looks about the room, waiting for questions. This is the story of a Chemical Engineering PhD candidate from Uganda.

I am from Kampala, the capital of Uganda. I am here to do a five-year PhD program in chemical engineering. I came for the research projects and to advance my knowledge. One of the Environmental Science and Forestry professors from Syracuse came to where I was and so I became interested in this program. I had to take the GRE, apply for admission and then apply for a visa and all of that. It was a very long process.

I did my undergraduate work in food technology, which is sometimes called food science. It’s somehow related to chemical engineering. But chemical engineering is more about designing the process. For example, a food scientist will take care of the development and a chemical Engineer will develop the process. The university I went to is called Makerere University. It is the main university in Uganda. It is very competitive and it awards scholarships from the government to high school students. I was lucky to get one of these scholarships. The Food Science program is one of the most competitive. 200 students applied but the program only had 27 students. It was like the third most competitive program at the university.

I speak Luganda. Buganda is my tribe. When the colonial guys came to my country, Buganda was the most civilized tribe. When they had to come up with a name for my country, they got the name Uganda from Buganda, which
contributes like 50 percent of the population. I can also speak Chinese, some French from school, but very little, and a little bit of Swahili, from East Africa. I learned English starting in primary school, up through college. In Uganda, there are different tribes with different languages, and English is the common language, so that’s what we use, even though the colonial masters brought it to us. Actually, nowadays, families with young people where both parents went to school speak more English than the local language. Kids who are like four or five, they speak more English than the local language. There are some strict schools that will even penalize you if you speak the local language, to encourage students to speak English.

When I was growing up, I never really thought about studying abroad or even the United States. When I finished my undergrad, I got a job with a cooking oil refinery plant, and that plant was owned by Indians. My boss was an Indian, and he had a Masters in food science. He encouraged me to study Chemical Engineering. At that point, there was no university in Uganda that offered Chemical Engineering so I decided to look abroad. Before that point, I had applied to American schools and I had tried coming here, but I was never invited. In Uganda, it is not very common to go to college. If you don’t go to a good high school, or you don’t do well there and your family doesn’t have enough money to support you going to the university, your chances for a good score on the national examination to get into university are low. I went to a pretty good high school, and I got a good score and so I got a scholarship. I was very lucky.
My sister and brothers and I grew up in a kind of rural village. It was very different from America. First of all, back home, if you have enough money, you can have your own land and build your own house. If you don’t, you can maybe rent two rooms for your whole family. How big your house is depends on how much money you have. So maybe you will have one room for living, one room for the bedroom, and one room for the bathroom. That’s very common. You share a lot of things, like the bathroom. And maybe you have another shelter and that is your kitchen. If you are a poor family, and you have a small job, you cannot afford to rent an apartment.

Education was always important to my parents. They were teachers, and they both have their diploma, which is what you have after high school. If you study for only two years, you get a diploma. If you study for three or four years after high school, you get a degree. My grandparents didn’t get diplomas. Back then, there was no formal education. My grandfather used to work for these British guys. He could read and write but he didn’t finish elementary school. My grandmother couldn’t read or write so I don’t think she went to school at all. My sister and brothers have all completed high school. Two of them went to the university, but all of them, my three big brothers, my older sister and my two younger brothers, they all prefer working to studying.

In Uganda, education used to be very expensive for poor families. A big number of students can enroll in elementary school, but only 80 percent will finish. Then out of those students, maybe 60 percent will go for junior high, but only 40 percent of those students will graduate from junior high, and the numbers
keep decreasing. For families who live in villages, their income is very low and it is hard for them to get an education.

Transportation is also very different. Back home, few people have their own cars and so there are many buses for people to use. But here, you wait for an hour for a bus and it still doesn’t come. And tall buildings like you have in America are not very common. And when you go to church here, like the Catholic Church that I go to, there are maybe 50 people. But back home, there are many people who go to church. The family encourages you to go. When I lived with my grandparents, if I didn’t go to church one Sunday, instead of eating the chicken and beef that they had prepared, I would have to eat beans. So people are much more prayerful back home.

From undergrad, I got a scholarship from the government to go to China for an engineering program. They needed two guys, and I was lucky enough to be one of them. China was a very big adjustment for me. Everything from the environment to the culture was so different. Like the food, for example. Back home, we added salt to food. In China, they didn’t do that. But they would eat so many weird things, like dogs and frogs. It was so strange. And I don’t think they had seen a black person before. They called me “he ren” which means black person in Chinese. They asked me if I was American and if I came from America, did I play basketball? It was so shocking. You’re walking along on campus and they’re all turning their heads. Other people even came on the weekends because they’d heard a black person was there, and so they came to
take pictures. Sometimes they’d stand next to me and take pictures, without even saying anything.

My program was taught in English, but I had to learn some Chinese for basic things like shopping and so I that I could fit into the community. The program there was two years. And after that, I came right to America. Coming to America was also kind of different. So it’s like this: there are so many different styles of clothing Uganda, and then it’s different in China, and then America is different from both Uganda and China. In China, the people are very friendly. But you come here and people mind their own business. And sometimes here, people are scared of you, and you have to be very careful just walking around and be very aware of where you are even standing. Sometimes the people here make me feel insecure.

The education system is also very different here. I am a PhD student, but I have to do lots of homework, as well as my research. There are so many things going on at the same time. And the administration is very nice; their communication skills are very good. In China, they don’t tell you what’s going to happen tomorrow. Someone just comes and tells you, like today you are going to have an examination, and that is that. The professors are very respected and their word is final. But here, they ask you what you think more.

Before coming to America, I had lots of expectation. I saw all of these beautiful things and beautiful people in movies, and so I thought, ok, that’s how America is. That is not the case. And I assumed that I could work while studying here. But that is not the case either. When you are a student, they say you should
only work on campus, if you are going to work at all, and you should only work for 20 hours a week. That was a surprise for me.

I don’t know whether Americans know how popular or important their country is in other countries. Most Americans don’t seem to care about what happens in other countries. I think they are willing to help some countries, like us low countries. They look at other countries like, you guys don’t have these things and so we will help you. But other Americans are like, you don’t contribute things to us and so maybe we won’t help you.

I think America is good. You can get anything you want here. You can buy stuff you want, and have entertainment, and cable TV, and it’s affordable. And you can have an apartment for a good price. America is a good place. It’s a good environment, very clean. There are some free things like water and I can have as much as I want. In Uganda, we don’t have enough technology, and so you cannot drink the water from the tap, but you must buy it. And this place is so green. China was so dirty. And they are constantly thinking of making money, making money. Here, they take care of you. Back home, the employers think it’s good just to give you a job.

Even though I haven’t been back to Uganda since I left for China, I am still Ugandan. There is no way I can say that I’m an American just because I live here. So far, I haven’t seen the benefits of being an American or not being an American. But I do like being with people from all over the world. I could not live in China, but maybe I could live here.
From here, I’ll go home. I’ll go back home. I hope to work here for like two or three years and then go back. When I go home, my dream is to have a food processing plant. Of course that will require lots of capital. Maybe between now and then, I will be a consultant or work part time at the university. Everyone back home says that when you go to the U.S., you will make lots of money. They don’t say you will get a good job. So I don’t know how you will get the money. They also say you get a nice car and a nice house so that when you go back home, you will have a lot of money and you can help your family. Maybe you can start a business, or something else. And people will see that you have been in America and your dream has come true. I don’t know if that is the American Dream or not. I don’t know what the American Dream is. But the farthest I have traveled is Rochester. Maybe when I travel farther, I will see what they call the American Dream.

For one of the following persons, America has represented the chance for a perfect life, and an environment where self-expression is a thing to be celebrated rather than feared. For the second person, America represents a world of possibility, a world where hope and tenacity are tools that can be used to transform poor, third-world citizens into educated, influential people. Such was the case for a doctoral candidate from Taiwan and an undergraduate from Nigeria.
Taiwan

Sporting a Starbucks cup and a Tiffany’s ring, this is the story of a young Taiwanese woman who has, without a doubt, found her commercial comfort zone here in the United States.

I’m from Taiwan, Taipei to be exact. This is my first year at Syracuse, but I’ve been in the U.S. for a while now. I first came here in 2003. I graduated in 2006 from my undergrad at University of Arizona and then I went back to Taiwan for a year where I was a research assistant at an economic institution. Then in 2008 I went to the UK for my masters.

I’m here at Syracuse for my PhD in Economics. Both of my parents are in similar fields back home; they’re entrepreneurs in international trade. They both went to a kind of community college. As defined by income, we’re probably from the upper middle class.

Since my parents both supported my decision to come to the United States, I didn’t really think too much about coming here. And I never thought I would come here for undergrad. But I just took some English exams and I passed them and then I came.

The first time I came to the United States I was 16. I went to Seattle, which is my favorite city. And I thought everything was fantastic in the U.S. I got a really positive perspective of this country when I came that first time to visit and that hasn’t really changed since I started living here in 2003. I would say I didn’t really have culture shock when I first moved here. Actually, the only time
I’ve really had culture shock was when I went to Beijing. People just weren’t very polite. I think in China, people have high economic goals but they still have a long way to go as a developing country.

Back to the U.S. though, there are certainly a lot of differences between here and Taiwan. For example, here, people can separate personal life and work very well. But in Taiwan, most people are not very professional. Their professional life and their personal life is mixed, maybe because the working hours are so long. And I think people can respect other peoples’ values more here. For example, if you wear strange clothing, people won’t judge you and think you’re bad. But in Taiwan, people are more narrow minded, maybe because Taiwan is so small geographically. People are also very influenced by the media. And the people only have short-term vision; even in business and government, they only see the short term profit.

I think I also started to respect peoples’ values more since being in America. Most Asians use their own thoughts to think about other people. I think American culture is very diverse; you can have different perspectives and jobs and people won’t judge you by your background. But in Asian culture, the parents always compare their kids and the students always compare their grades and people compare salaries. Everything is very competitive. In certain big cities, like New York, it might be like this. But otherwise, life is very flexible here. For Americans, I think kids grow up with a different perspective. Their parents give them different values, to be happy and responsible for their own stuff. In Asia, kids always have high expectations from their parents. Often, they
don’t even know why they go to college or choose a certain major; they just know
they will make a lot of money and that’s important, so they do what they have to.

Who do I identify with after almost five years in the United States? If I
didn’t have a language barrier, I would say that I act more American. I’m not as
biased as I think Taiwanese people are, in the way I think, talk and observe
people. Five years ago, if I’d seen a student working really hard because he did
not understand something or was not very smart, I would think that he is just a
certain type of person. But now, I’ve started to respect that person more and think
that maybe if he’s not good at academia, he’s good at something else. Here, they
accept diversity. In Asia, education is the only way to distinguish yourself from
other people.

As an international student here in America, if you can overcome the
language barrier, you have a lot of opportunities. More opportunity means you
can compete with a native speaker. But the assumption, of course, is that you
have the same profession, the same knowledge, and the same skills. For me,
maybe five years from now, I could compete with a native speaker. But now, I
don’t think so. It depends on if I can work in a multicultural company; there you
just need to communicate well. If you want to work in academia, it’s harder and
your English must be really good.

From what I’ve seen, I think the U.K. is not as competitive as the U.S. I
think the best people come to the U.S. to compete. U.S. policy has absorbed all
the people who are really intelligent; European countries are more relaxed. They
are not as capitalist. I think in the U.K., everything is the product, everything is a
manufacturing line. Even PhD students are an example of this. In the U.K., a PhD is four years, but in the U.S. it’s five years, and you can spend up to seven years working on it here. Most people think that PhDs are generally more competitive here than in the U.K. If you graduate number one from the London School of Economics or Oxford, maybe it’s a different story.

As far as the America Dream, I do think it’s possible. If you work really hard, you have the opportunity to stand out. The American Dream means that you can pursue something you really want and nothing is impossible. If you work really hard, if you insist on achieving something, you can get it. In the U.S. educational system, the school gives students a chance in the very beginning; they won’t say it’s impossible from the beginning. In Asian countries, the parents and the older generation will say, “I don’t think it will work” based on their experience. But in the U.S., everyone is very open minded. Everything can be possible if you are willing to try. For me as a foreigner, I think the concept of the American Dream is possible. But in reality, there are still regulations; it’s not as easy for us to achieve the American Dream. You must be very outstanding if you are a foreigner and want to achieve the American Dream.

Do I want to stay here after I graduate? It depends on the opportunities. I’m pretty open mined about where I get a job, maybe the U.S. or Canada or Taiwan, I don’t know. It’s pretty hard to say. If I marry a Taiwanese, I can invite him to come to the U.S. or maybe I will stay in Taiwan. I don’t know yet. Of course, there are also visa and working permit issues for me. That’s another
difference between competition in Taiwan and here. In Taiwan, I don’t have a language barrier so competition is easier for me.

I do know that I want to work on development economics. I really want to help poor people. I think that people are multidimensional. I want to do research related to inequality, gender and income. I know people are born into inequality. But we can impose policies, or do something through the government to eliminate that inequality. We can make things better. In places like India and Africa, people have made things better. I think this is important for economists. Money is a part of your life, but not all of your life.

After having lived in the U.S., when I see the news or I’m evaluating an event, I use a global perspective to analyze those things. Do I see myself as a global citizen? I’ve never thought about whether I feel like a global citizen or a Taiwanese or not. But I know what it means to be American. It means you can be yourself. There aren’t too many restrictions here. If you do something responsible and not illegal, you can have the perfect life in America.

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Nigeria

He has a comfortable countenance. Then again, I’ve never seen him look anything but at peace with himself. This is a young man who has struggled for the past half a decade to get where he is, but there is no chip on his shoulders from his struggle. Rather than resisting the world around him, he embraces it with endless enthusiasm. He is the image of conviction. He is what happens when passion and excellence meet unbelievable tenacity, tenacity for his future
and his promise to himself to achieve, and even surpass his potential. “The audacity of hope.” It fits.

I was born and grew up in Benin, a city in Nigeria. I went to elementary school, high school, everything there. Nigeria itself is in West Africa, close to Cameroon. English is the official language. It has more than 150 million, and it’s the most populous in Africa. Actually, one out of five black people in Africa is Nigerian. And we have more than 250 ethnic groups and 300 tribes.

Even though I grew up in a city, I was fortunate that I had a chance to know rural life. My maternal grandparents passed away before I was born, but my paternal grandparents lived in a village outside of Benin, and we visited them on holidays and in the summer, one or two months out of the year. We are still close to them, actually we’re close to my whole extended family. They live in a large village where both of my parents are from. Everyone in the village is a peasant farmer and when I was growing up, I got to see that, I got to see how they raised crops and things, and how village life is organized. Village life revolves around subsistence farming, and we got to eat fresh fruit and food directly from the farm, harvest maize right from the field and then cook it. We ate bush meat, like antelope that we killed in the forest and then butchered it and ate it. Just like that. You couldn’t find that in the city.

Everything in the village is done manually. I used to think it was so hard, but everyone was used to it. We moved my grandfather to the city when he was about 70 because his body was degenerating and we knew he would keep working on the farm if we didn’t. Older people aren’t supposed to be doing farm work and
that’s the mentality that informed our decision to move him. But now I think if we hadn’t moved him, his body wouldn’t have degenerated so quickly. I think he needed the farm and that kind of work to keep him going. That was what he knew.

The extended family life goes into everything in the village; family is very significant in there. I didn’t realize how privileged I was to get to spend so much time with my grandparents in the rural village setting. In high school, I got to document some of my grandfather’s stories to use for a family tree. But so few city people had that chance, the opportunity to interact with the village people and go to the village. They didn’t get the chance to see the rural intricacies and ways of life that are dying in the face of globalization.

I enjoyed being in the village, but schools were better in the city. My father had had at least some high school education but my mother grew up with just her siblings so while she had a very close-knit family, she didn’t go to school as much, and that informed some of her own values. She wanted to make sure her kids got a good education and that we were close to each other as a family. My father had joined the military back when Nigeria was under military rule and I remember, he used to get so angry when the military would act badly because that was the country that he was willing to sacrifice his life for and they were ruining it. That’s how my father was, very strong. And he was very much a disciplinarian. When you’re growing up, you face peer pressure, and that can influence you, but with my dad, we knew we had to stay out of trouble. The same was true for my father’s younger siblings. My aunt who lives in New Jersey tells
me how my dad used to discipline them all and of course they were afraid of getting into trouble with him.

There were six of us kids when I was growing up; now there are four. Two of my siblings have passed away. My older brother is one of the people who has really influenced me. I remember when we were growing up, he used to write poetry and articles and play soccer and I always wanted to do what he was doing. I just picked them up and they became part of me. My brother did well for himself. He’s still in Nigeria, at the university he graduated from. He has a sponsor for his master’s and his PhD and he wants to go into Nigerian politics, but for political reasons, he is still waiting for these opportunities. My brother has charisma. He’s an eloquent speaker and he can move crowds. I’m the one holding him back from Nigerian politics. I’ve got to work that out with him. I’m trying to get him to come here for graduate work but that’s still in the pipelines.

My older sister has done well too. She’s married with three kids. She’s a nurse over there. She would like to come over here because she knows nurses make good money but it’s hard to get a visa. Anyway, I’ve always looked up to my siblings and for that, I am lucky. Having people ahead of me that I admired really helped me. I think when you’re older and you’re able to do certain things or resist certain things, you realize that your family values are actually playing a strong role in your life.

After high school, I started to apply for this diversity visa lottery program to come to the United States. It’s run by the U.S. state department, originally for the Irish when Ireland was having problems. You play the lottery and if you are
among the winning candidates, you get permanent residency in the U.S. and a green card. During the Clinton administration, they opened the program up to Africa. I played the visa lottery for two years and I finally won it in 2003.

When I first came to the United States in June 2004, it was very interesting. I hadn’t been outside of Nigeria before that. I knew British English from high school and I had an accent from my tribe, but I was okay with my English. And I have to tell you, there’s so much high expectation about the U.S. when you’re outside. The impression is that the hardship and the lack of opportunities outside the U.S is not the same in America. It’s somewhat true but it’s also somewhat overstated. I was lucky because I had some idea of what I wanted to do. I wanted to go straight to school when I first got to New Jersey, where my aunt lives. I wanted to get my PhD and to take advantage of as many opportunities as I could.

When I got here, I was told that as an immigrant, I had limited opportunities. Other immigrants laughed at me when I told them about my aspirations. They said that if you want to make it as an immigrant, there are specific jobs for you that you can fit in to. Like you can get a license for nursing at a community college, or something in medicine with low competition. I knew that I could maybe make a lot of money, but I never had a passion for that. Anyway, when you have an accent, you’re black, and you’re an immigrant, people laugh at you. In the job market, you’re competing in jobs where other people are advantaged. I was really disappointed sometimes that I couldn’t do
what I wanted to, so I developed this fear of failing or lacking something, and those two challenged me in a way.

Before I did anything else, I had to understand how everything worked. The first few months, I was trying to get a job but I didn’t have a car, so I couldn’t really get a job. Finally I found one at a warehouse packaging company, so I was happy. I had to wake up at 5 to catch two busses, and then I worked until 3 p.m. It was very physical. It killed the hell out of me. I didn’t know it was against the law when they made us work 48 hours a week without overtime.

After I worked there, I was able to save money and get a driver’s license, and bought a car, a Nissan Sentra, and then I could go to college because I could work and go to school at the same time. So I got a security job, and a pay raise, and I got to go to SS Community College in Newark, New Jersey in the fall of 2005. It was hard work to do both, but I was determined, and I made straight As. And then I got a letter from honors because my history professor had recommended me. The following semester I had free tuition and everything was free to me and it gave me the kind of exposure that I never expected. In the honors program, I was exposed to so many things. I was working full time and going to school so without the honors program, I wouldn’t have even known about American social life, like Phi Beta Kappa.

I had a fear that I wouldn’t get a job after my bachelor’s, and that fear made me buckle down. I became almost too focused. That was good in a way, because in the process I met some other immigrants who shared my aspirations, and now they’re some of my best friends. Not all the immigrants I made became
my friends though. There were immigrants who had arrived 20 or 30 years before who were telling me that I couldn’t do what I wanted to; it was just reality. My friend said, let’s take the path less traveled, and through peer support, we still make sure we’re still on the course and assuring ourselves that we can do it. So far it’s been interesting. I have no cause to regret.

I vowed to prove the immigrants who doubted me wrong. But it’s not over yet. There’s always lots of pressure. I thought, if I can go to college and get a job after graduation, I’d be on the course to realizing the American dream. Now, if by next spring, I have a job and have some good feedback from graduate schools, I’ll know that nothing is going to pull me back. The journey so far has been good and kind of impressive to me personally. I owe a huge debt to my community college because that’s where I was first nurtured and first able to take a peep into how the American educational system works. From there, I noticed that if you just know what you want to do and you build your portfolio for it and get the academic credentials for it, the way I experienced things at the community college, then that goes a long way in preparing you for competitive labor markets.

The first time I realized this was when I was in the honors program at the community college when I got free tuition. I had a full scholarship there my second semester. Once I was working full time and going to school full time, I learned a great deal. I worked three days and two nights a week. I’d go straight from work to class and it was so hectic. I never really had the time to notice what was going on so I would have completely missed the honors program had my history professor first semester not recommended me. 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. I realized I had to do extra work and do all it took to get where I wanted to be. I started to put in more effort and do more work at that point. The experience taught me that if you keep fighting, you can actually end up somewhere.

I had the audacity of hope when I tried to transfer after community college. I applied to Harvard and Yale. Harvard recommended the extension school because I wasn’t a traditional student. I knew there were obstacles but I just felt that if I could put in some hard work, there was no harm in aiming high. What spoke to that and made me realize that was when I graduated from community college in June 2007. There were many students with 4.0 GPAs like me. My friend at Cornell now got to give the valediction, but all of the students with 4.0s got the chance to speak. We were all given VIP tickets too so I deliberately invited most of the people who told me that I couldn’t do what I wanted to do. And so they sat in the front seats and they read my profile and everything and when I stepped up there to speak, I almost cried. It was just like, wow. I used to pass through that school on the bus when I was working and think, when will I be able to come here and settle down? It was just like a talk with myself. Remember when you came here and become part of these people? Now you’re leaving and you’re leaving with flying colors. I looked around at a class of 900 students and it just kind of occurred to me that look, I can prove you guys wrong. I didn’t give up. I didn’t yield. That was satisfaction. The self fulfillment wouldn’t have been there if I had done what they wanted me to do. I
would have done things just for the money, so I think I would have been miserable. America offers hope and opportunities. That has made me more high-spirited and propelled me to believe that if you are stubborn, you can do it. Standing up on that podium was the moment I realized that yes, this is America.

I got accepted to Syracuse University that spring, and I got a chancellors scholarship, so I came. I had less than $200 in my bank account. I had decided not to work for that first semester so I could just settle down. I got loans to cover the rest but I was scared of loans. And that semester was kind of rough for me, but I survived it. I thought if I put in as much effort as I could, it would pay off; I saw that at the community college. I wouldn’t just hope this time, I would believed that it would.

When I went back to New Jersey for the first time, I had dinner with my advisor from the Community College, who was kind of a father figure to me. He said that he was afraid for me here at SU, with the weather and the predominantly white school and more rigorous academia. And he was so happy that I was making progress here.

Where do I want to go from here? I want to be able to affect people’s lives. Life is miserable for people who don’t have opportunities. I’ve always had the strong desire to influence how things play out in this society. I’d like to get my PhD in something like world affairs or international relations. There’s a disconnect between the real world and academia and policy. Whatever field I end up in, I want to use my career to bring about social change in society. I want to be in a position to influence and effect policy. I want to have a say.
There’s a quote from Samuel Huntington that I will never forget: “They say that America is a lie because its reality falls so far short of its ideal. They are wrong. America is not a lie; it is a disappointment. But it can be a disappointment only because it is also a hope.” What that means to me is that people have different ideals. When you are sick, maybe you’ll be taken care of. Some people think that America is a place where you will never be poor. And some people come close and see poor people who cannot afford health care and so they think that America is all lies. But I think Samuel Huntington is saying that the fact that you are disappointed is maybe not a bad thing. For me, that hope is a reality. The fact that America is this hope, we can transfer that into reality. Like President Obama. He had the audacity to pursue the hope that America had to offer. That’s one thing that’s unique about America, and it’s the way I see this country. I came here and I wanted to become somebody, I wanted to fit well into this society, I wanted to impact my generation, but I got here and my dream was shaken. I went through some hard times and some obstacles. That would have been disappointment to some, but I saw the people who had been here a long time and I saw the hope that they had and I wanted to pursue that.

That’s what America means to me, even with all the contradictions and everything. Imagine that you are a foreigner and you have financial difficulty and you go to the financial office and you say, look at my academic record and they do and then they can do something about your financial situation. That’s amazing. I’ve met amazing people that way.
America is a lot of contradictions though. You have to be ready to see all sides of the country. For example, Syracuse is among the top six most segregated campuses in terms of diversity. I’ve seen some of the bad things of racial interaction but I’ve also seen the sweetest parts. America is such a complex society. Before you draw a conclusion, you have to see a lot. Myself, I’m living like someone from the third world, like I am. I don’t have health care. If I fall sick today, I just rely on the grace of God. If I were in Europe, I would have health care, but if I were in Italy, I wouldn’t be pursuing a degree.

Maybe I’m too idealistic, but there is always hope. There is always something better than what we had before we came here. We can transfer that hope into reality. The ultimate reason I wanted to get a PhD was because I wanted to be able to make a break with some difficult situations, which kind of characterized my background. There was a great inequality in education and I didn’t want to fail. Before I came here, I had this feeling that I would just come here and pursue my dream. I had two passions, one for public service in the form of Foreign Service, maybe becoming a diplomat in the UN, and another for being a professor. So even before I got here, I had made up my mind that I was going to do international relations, or something along those lines.

In Nigeria, my name is Eida Housa. They say, Eida Housa, can you bring me a laptop? For people in Nigeria, it’s overwhelming. How can I help them? Could there be a minimum standard so that people who are hardworking can succeed? I spread my tentacles around to academia and the policy area. But will it be over here or over there? In essence, I can’t really say yet what I want to do,
but whatever I do, I’ll be using my PhD to cause some social change, whether it’s working for the U.S. government or teaching in a classroom or something else. As a professor, you only have so many hands. But if you make your students aware of the problems, they can use their ideas and their careers to inspire change.

For me, the American dream is still on. The fear hasn’t been totally allayed but I hope that with all that, at the end, it will all be fine. I think that’s the lesson that I learned from community college. To get to be in an extraordinary position, you have to go beyond and do the extra thing. Sometimes you have to put in the extra effort. I can write a paper and get an A, and I can just do some extra work, but not because I’m a nerd or a workaholic or something, but because that extra work can add to what I’m going to take from here and it can help me intellectually. I remember, when I was interning in DC in fall 2008, I was struggling with my assignments at work, and my research and readings for class, and everything was kind of overwhelming. I just thought, can I give some things up? And no, I knew I needed to do that extra bit of work. And it has so been worth it. There really is the audacity of hope if you just hang in there.
Conclusion

Throughout the course of this project, there have been a number of recurring themes that have carried through each interview. Chutzpa was one of those resounding motif. These students have left their families for up to years at a time to come to the U.S. and study. But not only have they left friends and family, a number of them have had to leave their ways of life. They have traveled to countries vastly different from their homes, where everything from the way the faucet works to the way people interact and engage outsiders is completely foreign. That takes bravery. It takes chutzpa.

Many of these students weren’t completely comfortable with their English capabilities, but they chose to talk about their experiences anyway. It was clear that many were nervous about sounding unintelligent or not being able to articulate what they wanted to. And talking to an American, many had some views on the States that they were not completely comfortable sharing. But every one of them, no matter their English capabilities, agreed to give their stories. That takes bravery too.

It was surprising how quickly one can get to know others in this kind of setting. Three of the people interviewed were my friends, yet I had never known how or why they decided to come here; I had never known what it took for them to get here, or what they wanted to accomplish or how they saw themselves fitting in or not fitting in to this country. In about an hour and a half, I got to know the details of their lives, and the lives of people I’d never met before, more intimately than I know a number of people I regularly interact with. One has to wonder, how
is it that one can get to know strangers so well in such a short time frame? It was lucky that they opened up so much to me, and that they had such interesting perspectives to share.

Also surprising was that people were quite eager to talk. There were a number of email requests to be a part of this project, so many that I had to turn a few away. Had I wanted to continue interviewing subjects, there would have been no shortage of candidates. Why is that? Why are people so interested in telling others about themselves? Is it because they simply enjoy sharing what they know? Doubtful. After getting to know them, I think the reason these students were so eager to talk was that they wanted to tell their stories. Like the woman from China conveyed, when you are in a country where people shy away from you for one reason or another, it is a relief to be able to talk openly. If no one asks or engages these students, we will never get to know them. I think they were eager to be engaged in dialogue. They were eager to get their voice out in the open, to share what few people seemed curious to know about.

Almost every student has seen the good and the ugly parts of America. They see the peeling paint, the dirty back alleys and the rips in the costumes at Disney Land, the breakdown in this perfect image of America. What’s fascinating is what people do once they see that dirty underbelly of the U.S. Some see that reality and resent it. But oddly enough, it propels other people to work harder. It forces them to cling with more tenacity to the idea that if they genuinely believe in the audacity of hope, their aspirations can be a reality. It’s like the Italian student commented: he knows the good parts and the bad parts in
everyone and everything, but he chooses to see the good parts. And like the
student from Nigeria recounted: upon arriving to the U.S., he was met with
criticism that as an immigrant, he should forget his dreams because they would
never happen for a poor, black man with an accent. But that didn’t discourage
him; it only inspired him to work harder.

Only a handful of people out of all fifteen students actually want to stay in
the U.S. after they finish their studies. That says something about this country. It
says that America is far from perfect. Before we shout “rah rah rah, U.S.A” like
the woman from Canada said, maybe we should reconsider what we’re cheering.
Yes, there will always be hope in this country. There will always be some loose
promise that if you really want something and you’re willing to work for it, it
might be possible. But is that enough? Is it enough to promise hope? It might
encourage people to come here and study, but it doesn’t seem to be enough to
entice them to stay.

Even though they come from a cross-section of socio-economic
backgrounds and experiences, these students as a group seem to pick up on a
number of common themes. One that resounds is the notion that America’s health
care situation is sorely lacking; this surfaces again and again. A second thing:
students argue that while Americans seem open-minded, friendly and passionate,
the country itself lacks a certain level of social progressiveness. And, third, many
have claimed that while the idea of the American Dream may seem like a bright
possibility for some, the reality is that it’s not available to all.
Were it not for these fifteen people and many others like them, I would have assumed that every student coming here had to depend on the U.S. for the sole basis of their higher education. We now know there are equally attractive alternatives right across the proverbial pond. What’s more, I was at one point inclined to believe that every American student should fear the impending competition coming from other parts of the world. Many American students have been raised to believe that our world as we know it is shrinking and that we must fear competitive international students coming to America to take our jobs. But this is not the case.

We must realize that every student coming from another country does not dream of taking our jobs and pushing us out. Many are coming for the same purposes as we are, to improve their minds, to gain knowledge, and to take that knowledge back home to improve the quality of life for their own communities. This is not something to be feared; it is something to be celebrated. And in turn, these people are not to be feared, they are to be learned from. I think that is what makes this country such a strong one, the opportunity to be surrounded by excellence and difference, and the chance to learn from those differences and strengthen ourselves and in turn our country.

But from where I’m sitting, if we truly want to become the beacon of light that we think we are, we have some work to do. If we really want to fulfill any of the promises we’ve made, we have to take this idea of what it means to be American and make is accessible for anyone who is brave enough to come here.
While America embraces the dream that this country is a “melting pot” and a welcoming community for everyone and anyone, perhaps that idea is more of a myth than we care to admit. In theory, the opportunity to encounter and learn from people from all walks of life is one of the many things that makes the American experience so rich. If we can make that theory, that dream, into a reality, then maybe we can become the golden pinnacle of hope for the rest of the world, as America aspires to be. That is what I have learned from my experiences, and I hope it is something that other people, American or not, can take away from this as well.
Sources

Since I have remained as true as possible to the people I have interviewed, the names of my sources for this project will remain anonymous. If anyone seeks further information or verification of any fact or opinion, please direct all inquiries to the author.