

FROM VISAS TO JETLAG

The Life of an International Student

by Stella Lorence

Boston University's international community is a large one; international students make up approximately 23% of the student body at Boston University, and represent over 100 countries, according to data from BU Admissions. In addition to dealing with the normal stress that comes with going to college, these students overcome challenges that domestic students might not realize they face, ranging from vastly different time zones to an extensive visa process.

Despite sharing many of the challenges of going to college in a different country, each international student has a different perspective on what being an international student means to them.

“As a Canadian, I find it funny to be considered an international student, because I actually live closer to Boston than a lot of my peers,” said Madeline Grubert (COM '19). “The only thing I think is unique about my BU experience as an international student is the immigration process I had to go through to be here.”

Grubert was born and raised in Toronto, Canada, going to a non-denominational Jewish High School there. While Toronto may not be the farthest away geographically, it still means that Grubert must go through the student visa process.

“Having a student visa means my work eligibility here in the US is restricted to my designated major,” Grubert said. “Additionally, I have to receive academic credit for every internship, and my Visa has to be updated each time I get a new job to reflect my employment. Additionally, after college, I only receive one year on a work visa before having to obtain sponsorship to stay in the country.”

Gaby Gomez (QST '21) also mentioned the visa system as one of the struggles international students must face. She said that getting papers to stay in the U.S. after college causes fear and uncertainty when she thinks about her future.

Gomez was born and raised in Guadalajara, Jalisco Mexico, one of Mexico's biggest cities. She attended the American School Foundation of Guadalajara for her entire pre-college educational career, receiving an education based on both Mexican and American curriculums. Gomez said adjusting to the semantics of a new culture was difficult.

“Greeting people can turn into a very awkward and uncomfortable situation because I grew up with greeting people with a kiss on their cheek,” Gomez said. “And well, they don't do that here. Here they shake hands and every now and then hug.”

Despite these challenges, Gomez had an optimistic perspective on what it means to be an international student.

For Gomez, being an international student means representing her country and “the obligation to succeed academically to then go back to my country and make a positive impact.”

According to the most recent data from BU's International Student and Scholars office, there are 9,742 total international students from 140 countries. The top three countries of origin are China, with 4,705 students; India, with 998 students; and South Korea, with 440 students.

“I never really feel isolated because there is a substantial population of international students at BU,” said Wenting Yu (CAS '22). “To me, BU is actually a great place for different cultures to interact with each other. International students might be from different parts of the world, but we could communicate with one another through the same language.”

Yu was born and raised in Shanghai, China, and studied at Chinese schools until sophomore year or high school when she attended a rural high school in Nebraska. Yu said that one struggle international students face is being cut off from what is going on in their home countries.

“Their friends might be gone when they come back,” Yu said.

Sydney Kim (CGS '19), who was born in Seoul, South Korea but grew up in Singapore, also said how difficult it can be to be so far from home. For Kim, the journey home is a full day's worth of travel, and with long flights comes jet lag and different time zones. Many international students can only visit home twice a year.

The financial burden many international students face can also get overlooked by domestic students. Some international students, such as Tommy Jin (ENG '21), feel that a common misconception international students face is that they are “filthy rich.”

“That's definitely not always true,” Jin said. “Not all of our tuitions are paid by our parents.”

Jin was born in Taiyun, Shanxi, China. He lived in Guangzhou, China until he was seven, then moved to Switzerland, where he lived until the age of 13. Since then, he's lived in Germany, where he attended Frankfurt International School.

Jin, who identifies as a European, said that even though it feels like there are more international students than there are, there are still times when he finds himself the only one, like in his acapella group. He said he sometimes finds himself not completely getting along with or understanding students from the U.S..

“People’s moral values and people’s views on global events and issues vary between places around the world,” Jin said.

Max Sapozhkov (QST ’21) also cited encountering different cultural values and misconceptions about finances as struggles international students face. Sapozhkov was born in Beijing, China, where he lived for 13 years before attending high school in California. Sapozhkov also said international students sometimes have to deal with stereotypes about their countries and the shift in identity that comes with moving to a new country.

“Everyone assumes that you’re integrating yourself into American society,” Sapozhkov said.

Despite many of the challenges associated with being an international student, no one can deny that international students contribute greatly to the culture of BU, and that campus would not be the same without them.

“I love being international because I feel that international students tend to make most of their friends with other internationals and it gives me the opportunity to meet people from all around the world with different cultural backgrounds, thus, allowing me to expand my knowledge and be more open-minded,” Gomez said.