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Distancing Strategies, Exclusive Clusters and Other Ironies of my American Peers

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Distancing Strategies, Exclusive Clusters and Other Ironies of my American Peers

Abstract

Being able to study abroad is a huge privilege. I am very lucky to have been given that privilege twice. I was accepted to Gettysburg College two and a half years ago, and studied abroad in the United States. Now, I am studying abroad again in Copenhagen, Denmark with a program that connects many colleges and universities in the US. It has been a month now and I am having a good time.

But my first few weeks in Copenhagen were not the same as my first few weeks in Gettysburg. Strangely enough, it was much more uncomfortable and harder to adjust. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

American, american privilege, Copenhagen, exclusion, Gettysburg, Gettysburg College, international students, Privilege, Study Abroad, studying abroad, Vietnam

Disciplines

Civic and Community Engagement

Comments

Surge is a student blog at Gettysburg College where systemic issues of justice matter. Posts are originally published at surgegettysburg.wordpress.com Through stories and reflection, these blog entries relate personal experiences to larger issues of equity, demonstrating that –isms are structural problems, not actions defined by individual prejudice. We intend to popularize justice, helping each other to recognize our biases and unlearn the untruths.

SURGE

[VERB] : to move suddenly or powerfully forward or upward

DISTANCING STRATEGIES, EXCLUSIVE CLUSTERS AND OTHER IRONIES OF MY AMERICAN PEERS

February 28, 2019

Being able to study abroad is a huge privilege. I am very lucky to have been given that privilege twice. I was accepted to Gettysburg College two and a half years ago, and studied abroad in the United States. Now, I am studying abroad again in Copenhagen, Denmark with a program that connects many colleges and universities in the US. It has been a month now and I am having a good time.

But my first few weeks in Copenhagen were not the same as my first few weeks in Gettysburg. Strangely enough, it was much more uncomfortable and harder to adjust. All of the people I met here come from US colleges and universities. Some of them are Mexican-American, some are Asian-American, but most of them are American. Reasonably, I thought my academic experience was going to be the same as that in Gettysburg College, because I was still going to be in a classroom with American friends.

Yet, I was singled out from every discussion with my peers for the first two classes. From our group table, a person would initiate a conversation, asking where everybody is from. "I'm from Minnesota", "I'm from LA", "I'm from New York", everybody would say their origin city until it was my turn, I said "I'm from Vietnam". I would get some "oh, cool" or occasionally some "nice" from one of the people in the group. And for the next hour, they would discuss and talk among themselves, and seems to completely forget that I am also there. Unless I initiated a question, or spoke my opinion, they would not talk to me. When we finished class, the friends in my group would make plans to go get coffee, while I stayed and finished our group assignment.

After the first day, I got home, definitely confused, but still excited for the rest of the week. For the next day, and the days after that, from orientation sessions to academic classes, my American friends all tended to find themselves in a group of other Americans. Classes were not getting better, because I constantly felt the need to grab my friends' attention before I even speak my opinion. I had to make sure that I was in the conversation, I had to try so hard to break into the current circle of discussion to make my point, because no one would listen or respond to what I had to say. After a few times, as a coping mechanism, I would always introduce myself as a contradiction of some sort, to desperately fit in with the rest of my friends: "I'm from Vietnam, but I go to Gettysburg College."

For days, I would come home tired and unmotivated. The only thing that I looked forward to was seeing my host parents and talking to my boyfriend on the phone. Fortunately, I did not let what was going on affect me too long. I started to ignore what was going on in class and just do my work. In group discussion, I said what I wanted to say and did not mind if no one was listening. As time wore on, my classmates started to view me as a “rebellious” sensation in class, for being outspoken and too “engaging”.

Of course, I ignored all of that. Now that I have gone past all the insecurities and doubtfulness, I have become very critical of what I see. Why would most of my American friends choose to live in student housing, where they are surrounded by similar friends, rather than living in a home stay with a Danish family? When put in a new environment such as Copenhagen, why would my American friends treat me differently than when we were in the United States? Do they feel a need to distance themselves from other friends who are from a different background, because they are not in America anymore? Why do I have to try to fit in with them, but not them trying to get to know me a little more?

I am making a broad statement, and I am not saying this applies to everyone. I have met a lot of open-minded and friendly friends in the States. But most of the U.S. students that I have met and interacted with here in Copenhagen have an obsessive need to belong to a group of similarities and not differences. As humans, we all tend to be afraid of changes and wanting to stay with what is familiar. But we do not have to. And many international students, like I am, simply cannot do so. My U.S. friends have the privilege of doing so, because there are so many other American students here. They cluster themselves in their own circle, their little bubble of American culture, American background, and American identity.

On a personal level, I understand that for a lot of my American friends here, it is their first four months away from home. For me, four years away from home is expected. I can relate to the uncomfortable first few weeks, and the need to be in your comfort zone, and thus the awkwardness in handling new situations.

Yet, I do feel like a number of U.S. students lack enthusiasm for and are ignorant of new cultures, and therefore new people. America tells itself that they are not only a big, powerful and advanced nation, but they are an **exception**: a place of promising opportunities, of equality, creativity, freedom, liberty and most of importantly, of superiority. Sadly, it is undeniable that the powerful economical wealth has manifested itself into a sense of cultural and moral superiority. Perhaps this is the reason why many of the U.S. students unconsciously allow themselves to get a “pass” on fitting-in: they get to stay “American” while others will adapt to them because they emulate the bigger, better, nicer ideals.

In short, I am okay with my American friends hanging out with each other and staying in their comfort zone. But it is a little unfair when their comfort zone invades mine. The fact that we come from different backgrounds and inherit different privileges will not change, but our attitudes towards it can be better. Our differences should be a conversation-starter, not a silent pause.

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