Changing Places, Not Our Flag: My Experience as an International Student

Before coming to the United States, I dreamed of traveling by plane. When I started university in Mexico, my goals grew, and I began dreaming of visiting the United States. The country felt close because many relatives lived here. I also wanted to learn English, although for a long time I thought I never could. I used to say that English and I were like water and oil: we simply could not mix.

The language was my biggest limitation. I wanted to explore this country, but I knew it would be difficult to manage everyday situations if I could not communicate. I understood that learning English was important not only for communicating but also for becoming independent instead of always depending on my husband. My strongest motivation was also connected to my son. As a mother, I want him to learn English while he is young and have better opportunities, whether in the United States or somewhere else.

Adapting has not been easy. Driving intimidated me. The highways seemed enormous, and cars moved at frightening speeds. One of my first challenges at the University of Delaware happened on my first day of classes. The day before, I had visited the buildings where my classes would take place, but I did not realize they were in different locations. The next day, I got lost trying to find my second classroom. I get nervous in new situations, and I honestly do not remember exactly how I found my way back. Somehow, I did. I parked again where I had left my car and arrived late. To make the day even more memorable, I received a $75 parking ticket because I did not know I had to pay. What a way to begin a new chapter!

The biggest challenge, however, was the language. I arrived with almost no knowledge of

English. I discovered that the alphabet was not pronounced the way I had imagined and that I needed to start with vowel sounds. I listened to my professors and recognized a few words, but often could not understand their explanations. I kept asking myself, “How am I going to communicate if I do not even know the basics?”

I was embarrassed to participate because I was afraid of making mistakes. Even now, I sometimes struggle to understand conversations and pronounce certain words. Still, I had a simple but powerful goal: I wanted to walk into a store by myself, buy something to eat, and order a hamburger for my son without needing someone else to speak for me. My English has improved a great deal, although I still have much to learn.

Studying at the University of Delaware has also given me something wonderful: the chance to discover that the world can fit into one classroom. I have met classmates from Saudi Arabia, Japan, Turkey, South Korea, China, Turkmenistan, and many other countries. Through them, I have learned that cultural diversity helps us question our assumptions and understand others in new ways.

One experience that has especially influenced me has been getting to know classmates from Saudi Arabia. Before meeting them, I had preconceived ideas about their culture and relationships between men and women. I thought stereotypes I had heard represented their entire society. However, by talking with them and learning about their families, I discovered kind and respectful people who value their families and traditions. I realized that I had judged a culture without truly knowing its people. This experience taught me not to define people by their nationality or religion, but to give myself the opportunity to know them.

I have also been able to share my Mexican culture. I enjoy talking about our food, customs, and traditions. One is Día de Muertos, or Day of the Dead, which has a special meaning

to me. I explain that it is not Halloween. It is a tradition in which we remember loved ones through offerings, photographs, flowers, food, and prayers. It keeps our family history alive. Although I now live far from Mexico, this is my second year preparing an ofrenda with my husband and son. Living in another country does not mean forgetting where we come from.

I have learned that adapting to a new society does not mean giving up our identity. As a song says, “We change places, not our flag.” I carry the green, white, and red of the Mexican flag in my heart. I can learn another language, meet people of different religions, and share new customs, but I will always be proud of my roots.

To people thinking about studying at the University of Delaware, especially women arriving with children and feeling afraid to begin a new life, I would say: do not be afraid. This country offers many opportunities. At first, everything may seem difficult, but do not let the language or fear of making mistakes stop you. It does not matter how long learning takes. Two, five, or even ten years may pass; what matters is not giving up.

I repeat that advice to myself every day: “Anayely, even if it takes ten years, one day you will achieve your goal. You will enter the Ph.D. program in Entomology that you dream of, and you will accomplish great things, in this country or in Mexico.”

Today, I understand that my journey was not only about getting on a plane and visiting another country. It was about discovering that I can face challenges I once believed were impossible. I still have much to learn, but I am no longer the woman who thought English and she could never mix.

I am a woman who continues to learn, a mother who dreams of better opportunities for her son, and a Mexican who carries her roots wherever she goes. Moving to another country can change how we see the world, but it does not have to change who we are.