More Than a Grade: Finding My Own Meaning of Success

Before coming to the United States, I thought the biggest challenge of studying abroad would be speaking English. However, after becoming a student at the University of Delaware, I realized that adjusting to a new country meant much more than learning a different language. I had to get used to a new education system, a different way of life, and most importantly, being far away from my family. During this journey, I started to understand something that I had struggled with for many years: my grades are important, but they do not define who I am.

Growing up in China, I was used to a very strict education system. Especially in high school, exams were a serious part of our lives. Before important exams, students were assigned to different examination rooms based on their examination numbers. Everyone had to find the correct room and sit in their assigned seat. The atmosphere was usually serious, and every exam felt like something that could influence our future.

For me, the most stressful part was not always the exam itself, but what happened afterward. I worried about my ranking in class and whether my classmates would perform better than me. Sometimes, even when I received a good grade, I was still disappointed because someone else had done better. I was afraid of disappointing my parents and worried about what my teachers thought of me. Looking back, I realize that I was not only studying to learn. I was also studying to meet the expectations of the people around me.

There is one memory from high school that I will never forget. After doing poorly on an important exam, I felt extremely disappointed in myself. I kept thinking about my results and worrying about what they meant for my future. However, when I was feeling upset, my mother made my favorite pork ribs for me.

My mother's pork ribs have always been one of my favorite dishes. That day, they meant something more than just a delicious meal. She wanted to encourage me when I was feeling disappointed. Even though I had not achieved the result I wanted, I could still feel her love and support. Looking back, I realize that this simple moment taught me something important. My exam results could change, but my mother's love would not.

When I first came to the University of Delaware, I noticed that students seemed to have a different attitude toward exams. In China, I had been used to an environment where every important test felt like a competition. At UD, many students seemed more relaxed. They still cared about their grades and worked hard, but they did not always treat one exam as something that would decide their entire future.

At first, I was surprised by this difference. I had spent so many years worrying about rankings that it was difficult to stop comparing myself with others. Even now, I still care a lot about my academic performance. I want to get good grades and achieve my future goals. However, I no longer feel the same anxiety about being ranked against my classmates. I am slowly learning that success is not only about being better than someone else. It is also about becoming a better version of myself.

Besides adjusting to a different education system, homesickness has been another challenge. Sometimes, after a long day of classes and studying, I really miss being home. I miss my family, the familiar environment, and especially my mother's cooking. There are moments when I wish I could sit at the dinner table again and enjoy the pork ribs she made for me.

When I think about that meal now, I understand its meaning differently. In high school, I thought my mother was simply trying to make me feel better after a disappointing exam. Now, living far away from home, I realize that she was also teaching me that I deserved love and support even when I did not succeed. This memory has become something I carry with me whenever I face difficulties.

Studying abroad has not made all my worries disappear. I still feel nervous before important exams, and I still miss my family. However, I have started to understand that growing up does not mean becoming someone who never feels afraid. It means learning how to face those feelings and continue moving forward.

If I could give one piece of advice to future international students, I would tell them to be patient with themselves. It is normal to feel confused, homesick, or stressed when adjusting to a new country. You do not have to become comfortable with everything immediately, and you do not have to compare your progress with everyone else's.

My journey at UD is still continuing, and I know there will be more challenges ahead. I still want to work hard and make my family proud, but I also want to learn how to be proud of myself.

I cannot always have my mother beside me or enjoy her cooking after a difficult day, but I can carry the encouragement she gave me wherever I go. And whenever I begin to worry too much about my grades, I try to remember that one exam is only a small part of my story, not the ending of it.