

Crossing Cultures and Finding Growth Through Global Learning: Lessons From a Year at Kean University

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This chapter examines a yearlong exchange at Kean University and argues that immersion in a new academic and cultural environment can foster disciplined study habits, confident class participation, and cross-cultural competence. It traces an initial period of uncertainty that is eased by a welcoming campus, contrasts discussion based classrooms in the United States with prior learning routines and highlights sustained TOEFL and GRE preparation. Practical adaptations such as budgeting, simple meal preparation, and shared living arrangements illustrate growing independence. The chapter concludes with strengthened resilience, improved English proficiency, and readiness for graduate study.

INTRODUCTION

As a finance major student from Wenzhou-Kean University, I started my exchange journey to Kean University in New Jersey, USA, in August 2024. This was my first time traveling to the United States, a country often seen as a symbol of strength and opportunity. Before arriving, I had a mixture of excitement and uncertainty.

The idea of studying in a new academic environment was thrilling, but I was also concerned about safety and adjusting to a new culture. However, New Jersey, where Kean University is located, turned out to be a safe and warm place, which helped to ease my initial worries a lot.

My overall experience during the exchange was quite great. The academic atmosphere here was excellent, with open and engaging classroom discussions. Unlike the more structured and formal teaching style back home, professors in the U.S. encouraged students to express their opinions freely. Under this condition, I began to ask and answer questions in class, which I hardly did before. This approach not only improved my academic understanding but also helped me become more comfortable speaking up in class, which I believe would become an advantage of applying for graduate school in the U.S..

On social parts, I tried to make several international friends, even though I am generally introverted and prefer staying in the dormitory rather than attending social events. Despite my quiet and quiescent personality, I found that people were friendly and willing to engage in conversations, especially during group projects and campus activities. I tried to talk to international friends, learning the difference between Chinese culture and American culture. I even invited an international friend to come to Wen-Zhou Kean University.

One of the biggest challenges I faced was preparing for standardized tests like the TOEFL and GRE. These exams required consistent effort and dedication, practicing a huge amount of problems and memorizing a massive vocabulary, but being in the U.S. provided a unique advantage and opportunity. The lighter course workload allowed me to allocate more time for test preparation, which became one of the most valuable parts of my exchange experience.

In the rest of the chapter, I share my lived experiences of my time at Kean University, which was not just about attending classes in a foreign country. It was a period of personal growth, academic development, and overcoming challenges. The most significant achievement I take from this experience is the dedication and effort I put into improving my TOEFL and GRE scores. This journey taught me that stepping out of my comfort zone, even with uncertainty, can lead to meaningful growth and valuable life lessons. It strengthened my mind to apply for graduate school in America.

LIFE IN THE COMFORT ZONE

Before participating in the exchange program, I was a typical finance student at Wenzhou-Kean University. I dealt with my coursework and maintained a steady academic performance, though I was quite lazy on that. While I was interested in

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