The Most Exciting Experience I Have Ever Had

Studying at UIS

Studying at UIS has been the most exciting experience I have ever had, not only because it has been challenging, but also because it has helped me to be more mature as a student and as a person. During the three months I have spent at UIS, I have had some really memorable experiences in my academic life and extracurricular activities.

Challenging Academic Life

August 17th, 2009 was a turning point in my life. From then on, I started my life at the University of Illinois at Springfield as an exchange student from China. From the moment I arrived here, I was deeply attracted by the beautiful campus. Besides, it has just the right size: neither too big, nor too small. It will only take me five minutes to walk to my class from my apartment. Moreover, I can see people I know while walking to my class and greet them. This was unimaginable when I was at a bigger campus in China.

The idea of choosing to study in any country far away from home can be a daunting thought for most of the students. Hence, I also have had a hard time getting past the fear of unfamiliar and getting used to the totally new class environment. However, after overcoming these challenges, I feel more confident and began to enjoy these classes. Because of the wide range of courses I can choose from as an exchange student, I registered for four courses this semester in order to make it not too harsh for me to deal with. When it came to my first class here, I can remember clearly how nervous I was when I sat there and how the different ways of teaching surprised me. The U.S. History class happened to be the very first class I have had here, which I though should be a class in which the professor would do many lectures. I
assumed the professor would talk a lot and the students might sit there rigidly while carefully taking notes. However, the truth was far from my assumption. The professor introduced the course briefly while a schedule clearly described what will be discussed in each class in the coming semester. The class turned out to be a seminar, and students are expected to do three papers during the whole semester on given subjects. Since I was not very familiar with American history, I was not even able to utter a word in the first class.

Feeling frustrated, I talked to the professor right after we finished the first class, who is a very friendly woman with gray hair. She had noticed that there was an Asian looking girl sitting in the first row who didn’t say anything during the whole class. To my surprise, she encouraged me to stay in her class. She thought since I am an international student, I would be able to contribute a new perspective about the U.S. history, which would also help the domestic students encounter different experiences in the class. Spurred by her words, I began to strive to give some opinions on the class and gradually got used to the discussion environment of the class. Besides, all my classmates are also very interested in my opinion, which encouraged me a lot. As you can see from my experiences with the history course, the professors at UIS are quite helpful, which is different from many professors in China. No matter what kind of help you need in academic life at UIS just walk into your professors’ office; they are willing to listen to you and help you in every way.

*Exciting Extracurricular Activities*

Besides the intense academic life, extracurricular activities made the campus life more exciting and memorable. UIS has a bunch of student organizations which arrange student activities every single day. I had a busy time attending those interesting activities, whether on
campus or off campus. On September 13th, the UIS Diversity Center organized a tour called “Find Lincoln”, which took us to the traditional music festival in New Salem. New Salem is a typical 19th century pioneer village where Abraham Lincoln spent six years in the 1830’s. This tour gave me a good opportunity to know more about Abraham Lincoln while enjoying the beautiful traditional music and dancing played by the villagers. Although I’m not familiar with those traditional songs played by the musicians sitting in front of those old houses, I was deeply attracted by the beautiful rhythm and melody. I even came to know several traditional American instruments which I had never heard of: like Native American flutes, and Container Rattles. There were also a couple of houses which Abraham Lincoln and his neighbors used to live in. They were decorated in the way of 1830’s, which really brought me back to the old times when Abraham Lincoln was there.

While off campus activities can always broaden our personal horizon, there are also numerous interesting experiences you can absorb from those on campus activities. One I highly recommend is the “Speaker Series” lectures. It is “a one-hour course that is part of the distinctive set of courses taken by undergraduates at UIS to foster the appreciation for and practice of diversity and the active effort to make a difference in the world”. One of my favorite lectures of these I have ever been to is called Shakespeare Behind Bars. It was a film viewing followed by a discussion. The film is a documentary but was really moving. It is a story about some prisoners who act in Shakespeare’s The Tempest. In this manner, the prisoners were able to gain power from art and help themselves to heal and redeem themselves. The prisoners cast themselves in roles reflecting their personal history. Their individual stories, including their heinous crimes, are interwoven with the plot of The
Tempest as the inmates delve deeply into characters they portray. This film really made me begin to think about the condition of those prisoners, and how they can survive after their previous mistakes.

Although attending those activities is a very exciting experience, joining a Student Organization is also a good choice for you to make more friends and enjoy campus life. As an exchange student from China, I joined the International Student Association (ISA). Because it is called International Students Association, students from all over the world are gathered here. Besides nine Chinese students, we’ve also got one student from Korea, six from India and one from Japan. It is such a good place for you to make friends from different parts of the world and get familiar with other cultures. On October 25th, we celebrated the 32nd Annual International Festival, which was a very unforgettable experience for me. Students from different cultures set up booths to show the unique aspects of each of their cultures. Besides that, students from different culture groups also displayed their traditional customs and dancing. As members of the ISA, several Chinese students and I took part in the traditional custom fashion show. We displayed our traditional women custom called “Qipao”. It was a very successful show and all the audience applauded loudly for us; some of them even took pictures with us since it was the first time they saw the “Qipao”. We were also impressed by the fashion show and dancing played by other cultures’ students. It was a really good chance to bring people together to have fun while learning and broaden people’s understanding of other cultures. I feel not only proud of our own culture, but also proud of the cultural diversity at UIS.

Some Tips
As I mentioned above, studying at UIS is really the most exciting experience I have ever had. If you are also interested in studying abroad, especially studying at UIS, here are some tips I would give you:

1. Be sure you are ready to study far away from home, which means you need to manage your time and live on your own. In simple words, studying should always take the priority.

2. Be outgoing person and ready to make new friends. Since you are far away from home, it is really easy for you to get homesick. However, making new friends and sharing your thoughts with them should be the best solution. Your foreign friends are always interested about your exotic experiences; share with them.

3. Feel free to ask someone if you have a problem. It is pretty normal for domestic students to ask the professor or adviser for help if they have a problem. As Asian students we always feel shame to ask someone--especially our professor--for help. Keep in mind they are all willing to help you. Two heads are better than one.

Kecheng Lu is an exchange student from China, major in English. She is obsessed with music, film, and swimming. Favorite quote: There are no gains without pains.

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