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Are we Foreign or Fellow Spiders?

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It is a wonderfully odd thing to be a part of “The Internationals.” It involves the chance encounter of 92 students from all corners of the world studying here on exchange. It is the cobblestone streets in France and the barbeque-burning, kangaroo-hopping backyards of Australia mixed with the soothing steam of English breakfast tea from the U.K. and the exotic roll of the tongue from Spain.

You can just imagine an inimitable canvas splattered with language, culture, landscape and experience.

The wonderful thing is that it is the universal desire to experience American college life and culture at the University of Richmond that brings us Internationals together. At the beginning of the semester we were sitting in an unfamiliar building surrounded by foreign bodies and today, the group is a family. The Internationals live together, eat together, study together, and travel together.

The odd thing is that these great things aren’t quite what we came for. The Internationals came to meet the locals; we traveled ridiculous numbers of miles to immerse ourselves with all the American students who attend the University of Richmond. We came to join clubs with Americans, have American roommates, and go to American college football games.

So then how, you ask, have students from more than 10 vastly different countries so seamlessly connected with each other, yet feel so distant from the students from the one country they are actually in?
This is not an issue to be taken lightly and it certainly is not an issue that is unique to the University of Richmond. And yes, it is an issue.

It is an issue because one of the many reasons behind student exchange to create a learning environment involving students from all over the world with local students? It is an issue because don’t exchange students who come to America have an expectation and deserve to have that expectation met?

It is an issue because international education is the absolute key to opening the minds of globally aware citizens.

It is an issue because exchange students are currently disappointed.

Disconnected. It’s such a heavy word yet one that seemed to be on repeat when I spoke to my fellow exchange students. Not because they feel as if it’s been a mistake coming to Richmond. In fact, exchange being a mistake is not even on the table. Many students feel that they have played their cards right in coming to Richmond; the campus is beautiful, the education is world-class, and it will be a once in a lifetime, unforgettable experience.

It’s just this ugly word disappointment seems to keep popping up, creating cracks in the surface, and it doesn’t take long to identify the main problem areas. That is, housing arrangements and difficulties in student connection.

The first disappointment, and the most prominent among exchange students, comes from the housing arrangements. The idea of becoming roommates with an American is one of the most exciting parts of exchange, especially for students who usually live at home with their parents. Living with an American was an expectation that many had, yet did not receive as most exchange students were roomed with fellow exchange students.

As Krittika Onsanit, director of International Student and Scholar Services points out, because of the turnover of exchange students and requests posted by local students in advance, it makes sense logistically for the Housing Office to room exchange students together. But, the decision to keep exchange students together, like a dangerous species that cannot mix with everyone else, limits exchange students’ ability to integrate.

It is therefore not surprising that the rare species, the few exchange students who were assigned American roommates, feel satisfied with the friendships they had made with American students. Having that one connection with a local student opened up so many doors for those lucky few that get the chance to not only meet friends of their roommates, but also friends of friends who would invite them to social events.

Without such a connection to return to each day, exchange students only immerse themselves deeper and deeper into the international student world. They have little choice.

For the 14 females who live in the basement of one particular student dorm this semester, the expectation of American roommates is nowhere in sight.

They were assigned a corridor that is completely separated from American students, comprised of exchange students only.

Not once have American students walked past their rooms. Not once have they met someone new in the hallway. Not once have they felt a connection to the American students in the same dorm. In fact, many of these students said they felt as if they were excess baggage, the leftovers that the university had nowhere else to put so they were all shoved in a corner.

One of Richmond’s newest spiders, Dr. Martha Merritt, Dean of International Education, has made a note of this in her shiny new notebook of issues to address as the new dean.

“Those who work on housing brought this topic up with me throughout my ‘listening tours’ across campus over the past two months, so they are keenly aware and trying to get traction on what is a difficult challenge,” she said.

As an issue, or disappointment, that is obviously not as simple as a flick of a switch and is on Richmond’s radar, it really could enhance the integration experiences of exchange students and positively push our International Center in front of other universities.

Another concerning issue is an exchange student’s inability to bridge the gap between themselves and the local students. Do they know we are here? Do they care?

By their second or third year, many local students have formed their friendship groups. The spots are filled and although there is always room for more, why bother when the group works just the way it is?

Deborah Westin speaks passionately about the subject, seeing a pattern among the exchange students she has taught over the years. “Although norms are so radically different, they all seem to have the same experience,” she said. “They all seem to have a disconnect with American students.”

As elementary as it may seem, exchange students just really want to make American friends. They want to live at the all-American college campus and make American friends who will show them around campus, take them places in their cars, introduce them to their friends, and maybe even take them home for Thanksgiving so they can experience a grand holiday that, they have only seen in movies.

There is clearly a long way to go and the solutions are there. It will take time and it will take dedication but the future looks optimistic. “We will do our best to open up opportunities,” Merritt said. “As with our students who go abroad, it will be up to the newcomers to make the most of them.”

But is seamless integration an impossible dream, something that only exists on the pages of the glossy brochures? Or is the future of international education at Richmond as positive and vibrant as the canvas of culture, where disappointments only come from an exchange student’s first try of “cheese in a can”?

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-Martha Merritt, Dean of International Education

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