Graduate Student Life in a Post-9/11 World: An Indian Graduate Student’s Reflection in Finding Sanity and Staying with it

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ABSTRACT

The everyday lives of international graduate students are often assumed to be similar to their American-born colleagues and therefore rendered invisible. In a post-9/11 America, juggling various uncertainties including social conservatism in small college towns and immigration restrictions on employment can truly test the limits of an international graduate student’s sanity. However, student resources including international student groups can provide the space for a more comfortable dialogue between them and their American peers as well as among international students. This essay highlights some of the issues I have faced as an Indian graduate student, and provides pointers for other international students in coping with stresses and maintaining sanity. As we solemnly mark the tenth year anniversary of the September 11th attacks, this essay is dedicated to all those international students who have lived through these painful yet transformative years.

Key Words: international students, geography, post-9/11 America, sanity, graduate school.

INTRODUCTION

One of my first mentors in graduate school once remarked that a Ph.D. equips one with a license for lifelong learning. As I near the completion of this degree in geography, I reflect on these wise words while navigating life across two different worlds on opposite ends of the globe. In what has quite possibly been the most challenging time of my life, I have realized that balancing sanity while maintaining efficacy as a graduate student requires much grace and a willingness to persevere against all odds. As a graduate
student from India, I am writing this essay from my own personal experiences living in a post-9/11 America.

As I near my tenth year as a graduate student across three graduate degrees with experiences in two large American universities, my experiences are therefore enriched with some telling everyday events that many students in my generation have known all too well. As a graduate student from India, I began my journey to graduate student life in America with much hope, yet anxiety about what lay ahead. At every step, my graduate student life has reminded me of the mythical Roman God Janus, the god of the gates with two heads facing in opposite directions — one head looking back and one looking forward into the future. I look at my past experiences that have given me much support while simultaneously looking into the future with its infinite possibilities.

MAINTAINING SANITY IN A POST-9/11 AMERICA

Coping with graduate student life as an international scholar is similar to the life of an explorer in a strange new land. There are numerous cases where international students had to make difficult choices and even return home halfway in their program for personal as well as immigration reasons. For those of us who have survived and have come as far as completing our degrees, coping involves commitment to work with personal and professional partners. This is done so by finding resources both within and outside the university. For example, here in Stillwater, Oklahoma, which is otherwise a small college town, several native Stillwater residents open their doors to international students and invite them to Thanksgiving meals. For many of us who are several thousand miles away from home and family, a warm meal with a family nourishes the mind, body, and the spirit.

On the other hand, a post-9/11 America has posed unique challenges. In this regard, I am reminded of one of the most important moments of my life that helped me mature in my graduate studies and my personal journey as a geographer. Just over a month after I arrived in the United States, the terrible tragedies of the 9/11 violently shook the social fabric of an otherwise sleepy college town in Oklahoma. With every passing day, misunderstandings and local apprehensions changed my experience as a graduate student. For example, in the days and even weeks following September 11, 2001, many South Asian students including myself had to wake up the middle of the night to shop at our 24-hour grocery store. Growing xenophobia during daytime by some ignorant people who mistook us as radical Muslim terrorists held us back from shopping in the daytime. Looking back, as I have grown older, I now understand that these hateful remarks came from fear and confusion. But as a young 20-year old barely a month away from home, these harrowing experiences were terrifying. To this day, those dark days in September ring in with a certain sense of pain and yet those days also helped me to appreciate geography at a deeper level.

A big part of maintaining sanity, therefore, has been in navigating attacks of xenophobia yet working toward long term goals of a successful graduate life. In this regard, I wish to highlight and in some ways give voice to graduate students, especially from other countries, who have managed to cope with their sanity in some of the more socially conservative college towns. In no measure is this comment mean to reflect any one region in America, but it is simply to point out new challenges of 21st-century graduate students and their unique position in history where 9/11 changed lives despite national and political boundaries. What remains largely untold even today is that in the months and even years following the 9/11 attacks, many South Asian and Middle-Eastern graduate students from various national, cultural, and religious backgrounds were generalized by the ignorant few with categorizations including “towelheads”, “ragheads” and even “sand niggers”. Sadly, there are sporadic reports of these incidences even today. In this essay, I make it a point to bring to surface the post-9/11
everyday life of international students, since as geographers, we are only naturally inclined to seek, nurture, and maintain our interest in our role in changing world. Negotiating everyday life while being misunderstood by the broader society requires much poise and tactfulness while navigating graduate student life. For instance, recently alliances with citizens of college towns have helped in healing the wounds on both sides—international students and local citizens alike. With economic downturn in recent years, students and local citizens have carried the burden of increasing food prices. Smaller college towns such as Stillwater, Oklahoma now see the importance of bringing in more international students as consumers to help boost local economy. But even within a climate of misunderstanding, one can finds moral solace; to me, that has been within the geography community. Native-born geographers have a global outlook due to personal and professional interests and I suspect among the social sciences, geography departments around the nation are proud to have a larger share of international community within their faculty and student group. These departments offer a “safe space,” an international community within a University. Here at Oklahoma State University’s geography department, for example, we are proud to have students and faculty from Cameroon, Iraq, India, China, Mexico, Nigeria, and several other nations.

While some of the stresses of graduate school are universal, some are unique to international students, such as the restrictions imposed on them by U.S. immigration laws. As U.S. student visa holders, international students are prohibited from working more than 20 hours per week, or from working outside their respective campuses. Exceptions to the work hour limits are made only during University-sanctioned holidays, and often these vary among different schools. Furthermore, when international geography students seek internships during summer terms, they are required to enroll in graduate hours with their respective schools and often at times required to pay full tuition and fees. International students pay local and federal taxes, but at the same time are prevented from obtaining federal loans or several scholarships that are limited to U.S. citizens. Along with other international students, I have been limited to seeking funding only within the University due to these immigration restrictions. However, several opportunities exist within home departments. Graduate assistantships and travel grants within my department have supported my graduate studies. Furthermore, I have worked as a Research Assistant funded through grants offered to Professors. Despite these restrictions due to U.S. citizenship requirements, surveys of international students in Social Sciences points to growing enrollments. For example, the Open Doors project conducted by the U.S. State Department’s Institute of International Education indicates Social Sciences with 4.4 percent increase in international student population (Open Doors 2010). While there are inadequate datasets concerning the particulars of international student enrollment in geography, recent studies by geographers (Hazen & Alberts, 2006; Alberts, 2007; Pandit 2007) indicate growing interest in enrolling foreign students in US departments. However, the effects of the post-9/11 climate have resulted in decreasing trends among students from certain regions of the world. As Alberts (2007) points out, a sharp drop of around 15 percent in numbers of Middle Eastern students in 2004/2005 when compared to 2000/2001 is indicative of this trend.

As a student of human geography, I have taught myself to build peer networks by reaching out to other geographers from diverse backgrounds. Three scales of networks have been useful in this networking. At the departmental level, active participation with the graduate student organization such as OSU geography’s Forum of Geography Graduate Students (FOGG) has facilitated interaction between native and international students alike to help develop social and professional skills. Further local chapters including OSU’s chapter of Gamma Theta Upsilon—geography’s primary Honor society — helps interna-
tional students to connect to a key academic culture in the United States. At the campus level, international student organizations for various national groups help me connect and learn everyday life of other foreign students. Finally, at the national level, the Association of American Geographers (AAG) annual meeting provides a critical link to help international students to connect with their fellow compatriots in other departments. In addition to networks, prioritizing student life, and keeping faculty as well as research supervisors appraised of pressures through regular contact, ensures higher degree of success and lowers graduate student life anxiety.

Beyond personal contact, the virtual online world has opened newer vistas for international graduate students to help stay connected. Whether through online social networks such as Facebook or sharing ideas about campus-wide cultural events through blogs and Twitter, advancements in internet technology in the post-9/11 world have helped graduate students reach beyond spatial limitations to seek sanity. In this regard, the importance of online video chat and internet phone calls remain as one of the most important tools for international students in staying connected. Using popular video chat tools such as Skype (which benefit from the faster internet connections as well as advanced computers in college campuses), I see more students today spending part of their leisure time connecting with their friends and family both within and outside United States. During University holidays when not all international students are fortunate enough to be able to visit their family in their home country, online video chat becomes a vital part of staying connected and maintaining sanity, especially during cold winter months.

**FINDING SANITY AMONG STRANGERS: BUILDING PROFESSIONAL AND SOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS AMONG PEERS**

As a researcher and an instructor of geography, I am constantly reflective and remain appreciative of the various resources that campuses throughout America possess in helping international students navigate their personal and professional lives. In managing a life away from home, I was fortunate to have access to the services of the International Student Office at Oklahoma State University. Through various programs and cultural events, I was able to interact and share life with students from over 120 nations, an opportunity I would not have otherwise partaken of while in India. One of the greatest assets of any campus is its international student community. International student organizations act as voices for several hundred students and can represent over 100 nations. Here at OSU, the International Student Organization acts as the primary institution that caters to foreign student’s social and personal needs. At the social level, the International Expo organized by ISO in springtime showcase culture, food, and pluralism of international students. Other events include the annual Cultural Night show where student organizations from various nations entertain with the sounds and sights of their home countries. These events encompass some of the events in OSU’s international community helping students such as myself to remain connected to others who remain separated from their homeland and families. At a psychological level, this greatly helps in maintaining sanity at the graduate level.

In addition to international student organizations, maintaining sanity for international students can be helped by developing fraternal relationships with fellow expatriates. One such enduring relationship can be nurtured with apartment roommates, and when one is lucky, one may even end up with someone from the same graduate program. I consider myself as one of those lucky ones when during my formative graduate student years, my fellow geography graduate colleague from Nigeria helped me navigate through my difficult years as a new geography graduate student. Like me, geography graduate students from different cultural and social contexts share common
issues including similar immigration status. I refer to immigration status as an “issue” since there are certain obstacles that international students face but quietly overcome them in the interest of completing their graduate program. For example, foreign students need to return back to their home country to renew their student visa once it expires. This would mean that these students, most of whom have limited financial resources, will need to make travel to their home country, sometimes in the middle of their semester, just so they can get their new visa. Until recently, students could have their visas renewed with their embassies in neighboring Mexico or Canada. To give another example, international students are required to purchase insurance, often at a high premium, if they do not have financial support from the university. This creates additional financial pressure and mental agony while restricted to working only twenty hours per week, only on campus, and with no access to any federal or non-private student loans.

International students share pains and tribulations of missing home while attempting to maintain the expectations faced by graduate students. Many graduate students enter the United States leaving behind their wives and children in their home countries. Balancing a full-time professional life in the U.S. alongside a long-distance family life, in some cases several thousand miles away, is daunting to say the least. I have seen international graduate students spending the daytime working on their research and teaching obligations while spending evenings communicating with family in a far away time zone. In other cases and for those students who observe religious practices such as Ramadan, some of the pressures of maintaining a full-time graduate life and managing cultural traditions as a single person is quite stressful. However, by maintaining networks with their international colleagues, and other students who may observe similar cultural practices, I have personally benefitted and seen others better deal with these stresses.

My own experience has been enriched by building networks with peers both within and outside my academic department. I think it is wise to develop these networks early on. Early network building helps to alleviate some of the compounding effects of stress that international students accumulate during the course of their program. Building professional and social relationships with graduate students at the beginning of their programs helps to maintain a sense of partnership while progressing together in their programs of study. Within most departments, there are graduate student groups that try to bring in new students and provide a forum for dialog. In Oklahoma State University’s geography department, for instance, we have two active geography student groups both at the graduate and at the undergraduate levels. At both these levels, the department boasts a high attendance of international students, with faculty members taking students on summer field trips to various locations around the world. As a coping strategy for remaining engaged outside your department and connected internationally, such trips are invaluable, and other departments would do well to emulate them.

CONCLUSION

The ancient Chinese Tao scholar Lao-tzu once noted, “A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step.” As a non-American negotiating a graduate student life in rural America, I find my experiences have had several such single steps, each having its own test of sanity. While my experiences are not unique by any means, they have lent a transformative role in my professional and personal life. I wish therefore to end this essay with two key pointers for incoming graduate students in the interest of helping them preserve sanity during what can be of the most challenging periods in one’s life. First, graduate student life for an international student is greatly enhanced by fostering and maintaining networks. As mentioned earlier, active participation in student organizations and staying connected with peer networks in balancing both professional
and social relationship is greatly beneficial in maintaining a graduate student life that is professionally and mentally sustainable for its entire duration. The Association of American Geographers and Gamma Theta Upsilon represent two key national and local professional groups that help students to stay connected with their peers through their various meetings. Second, graduate student life is replete with juggling life’s many uncertainties while maintaining grace and poise to succeed in graduate student life. The key, therefore, remains in staying connected to graduate students at a multi-scalar level; starting with the department, then to the campus and onward into national level.

REFERENCES


