

# GRAPEVINE

SUMMER 1990 NO.6

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OSEAS - East Asian Region Quarterly Newsletter  
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GRAPEVINE is a quarterly newsletter from the Overseas Educational Advisers (OSEAS) of the East Asian Region. This sixth issue, reviewed and approved by DOMENICK R. DIPASQUALE, Assistant Public Affairs Officer, USIS Singapore, is edited and produced by MARIA SOH, Educational Adviser of USIS Singapore.

The items included are contributed by educational advisors and others involved in educational exchange. Apologies for any typographical error or misspelling. Please contact the authors directly for further information or permission to reprint an article.

SURVEY: SINGAPOREAN GRADUATES OF AMERICAN UNIVERSITIES

Ettie Zilber  
USIS Singapore

Advisers at USIS Singapore felt a great need for some form of feedback from Singaporeans about their experiences while studying abroad. An average of about seventy students come to the advising office every day to make use of the services. We advise, direct and guide these students in their search for a suitable institution.

Sometimes, we are fortunate enough to see a few that come in with further questions and deliberations about application forms and/or acceptances. This is culminated by the brief group contact during pre-departure orientation, where all those eager and nervous eyes are upon you before their departure to the "other side." And then, a void, an abyss. We never know if they were happy at the university, impressed by the U.S., experienced culture shock or froze the hair in their nostrils during the first midwestern winter.

The idea arose to conduct a survey of Singaporean graduates of American institutions. A questionnaire was compiled based on input from the advisers themselves. The preliminary results met with an enthusiastic audience at the Senior Advisers' Workshop in March 1990, which involved participants from USIS offices in Singapore, Brunei, Indonesia and Malaysia.

General information was gathered pertaining to schools, degrees, dates, etc. The results show that the students studied in a great variety of different schools, such as:

North Dakota State College; U. Texas (Austin); George Washington U.; Indiana State U.; Purdue U., U. Wisconsin; American U.; U. Oregon; USC; Pepperdine U.; U. Texas (El Paso); U. Akron; Chaminade U.; Ohio State U.; U. Oklahoma; Mills College; UC Berkeley; U. San Francisco; U. Arizona; UCLA; Rutgers U.; Cal State U. (Long Beach, Fresno); Indiana U.; U. Miami; Columbia U.; Stanford U.; U. Hawaii; Memphis State U.; Scripps College.

This list demonstrated a noticeably low number of eastern schools.

Fields of study were equally diverse, such as: English, Occupational Therapy, MBA, BBA, Chemistry, Electrical, Industrial and Systems Engineering, Finance, Architecture, Computer Science, Sociology, MIS, Management, Marketing, Advertising, Public Health, Biology, Physical Education, Environmental Science, Psychology, Statistics, Music, Humanities, Labor and Human Resources, International Business and Public Administration.

The decision to study abroad was not an easy one. Why did these students embark on such an endeavor? Since Singapore requires equal proficiency in two languages for admittance to the National University of Singapore (NUS), those without that proficiency or those without high grades had no alternative but to study abroad, as were those who were accepted to NUS for a major which they dislike.

Some believed that U.S. study would advance their career and potential job opportunities since they felt that the U.S. was the world leader in fields such as computer science, finance, marketing, advertising, biological research, and was more technologically advanced than the U.K. (which had often been the first choice for Singaporeans in the past.)

The flexible and practical system of the U.S. higher educational system was noted numerous times, especially with respect to change of majors and variety of courses. (This should be noted with respect to the rather inflexible nature of the Singaporean system.)

Friends and/or relatives were of the more mundane reasons given, as well as exchange programs and pre-dictated scholarships. One student wanted to study physical education, for which there was no degree offered at that time.

Less tangible reasons were: a desire to experience American culture and way of life, greater exposure, progressive educational system, well-rounded education and the chance to meet Americans.

Students chose their institutions by combinations of the following criteria and sources: curriculum, cost, community environment, climate, competitiveness, proximity of friends/relatives, calendar deadlines, personal recommendations, size of school, prestigious reputation of school, vacationing students/alumni talks, AACSB, professional journals, reference books, PSC ratings and lower competitiveness rankings for those with lower grades.

Since all the respondents applied to schools at least six years ago (and many as long as 10-15 years ago), most of the existing USIS services did not exist. After that "prehistoric" era, the services have expanded greatly. A volunteer advisers program has been established which offers the woman-power necessary for patient, individual advising; reference books and college catalogs are numerous; and there has been excellent word of mouth publicity, as well as local newspaper recognition of our reputable services.

The majority of Singaporeans applied to U.S. schools with "A-levels"; however, many applied with "O-levels" and Polytechnic diplomas. A few applied with full or partial combinations of all, and one with a Teacher's Training Certificate (TTC).

Although the average range of institutions applied to was four to six, we at USIS were surprised to hear that many of the interviewees had applied to as many as 20. This could become very expensive and, therefore, we advocate applying to only five schools, a number we feel is reasonable and realistic.

The subject of transfer credits for "A"/Polytechnic level work is one that we feel needs more clarification and investigation. During the Linden Group visit in March 1990, the representatives believed in the students' "right to know" in advance, in order to make the best decision. Unfortunately, many institutions do not fulfill that request and most respondents claimed that they could only find out about exact number of transfer credits after they arrived at the University to begin their studies. Perhaps, in the future, we should advise the students to write to the school continually until they get the desired response. One representative even stated that a



University that repeatedly ignores requests of information about transfer credits (or any other information) certainly isn't transmitting a sense of warmth, caring and sensitivity to the student.

With regard to financial aid and/or campus employment, some received merit or athletic scholarships once they demonstrated good grades, and the majority found some form of on-campus employment.

University foreign student services and/or advisers were rated from "so-so" to excellent, on the helpfulness scale. Only one was rated as very bad.

The sensitive subject of ethnic discrimination was touched upon. Each student, understandably, had their own experiences and, of course, their own subjective perceptions and interpretations. One was told, "go back home to Vietnam" in Oregon, while another said that Asians were accused of being too competitive. In one campus the local and foreign students had an extremely strained relationship. One student felt discriminated against by a professor at his University and when he pursued the issue he discovered that other Asians had similar stories. The Los Angeles airport immigration officials were felt to be rude and unhelpful toward Asians and a bartender consciously ignored a student while he served others around the bar. Having described these incidences, the majority of the respondents still felt that there was no real discrimination demonstrated.

The majority of the students did not transfer to another university while in the U.S., however. Of the few that did, they received almost all credits. The reasons for the transfers were:

- to take up honors programs;
- better course of study;
- more enjoyable atmosphere;
- climate;
- environment better for studying;
- to escape from smog;
- to go to an accredited school;
- to go to a more prestigious/competitive school;
- better facilities.

Almost all students felt that the courses were academically challenging, and that was always dependent upon the individual professor.

Loneliness and homesickness was dealt with by letter writing, telephone calls to home, club and association involvement, national support groups, relatives, friends and their families, travel and religious groups. The majority felt that homesickness was a rare caprice that passes and was easily overcome because there was not enough time, with all the activities in and around the college campus.



From the responses it seemed like the students were a very talented troupe of individuals who arrived in the U.S. with the following hobbies: singing, soccer, jazz music, rugby, guitar, public speaking, sports, sailing, squash, bowling, computers, volleyball, set design, martial arts, swimming, tennis, table tennis, waterskiing, reading, art, photography, French and music.

They also left the U.S. with even greater assets, having acquired proficiencies and interests in the following areas: golf, mountaineering, rockclimbing, racket games, baking, tennis, juggling, bowling, sailing, trout fishing, cooking, driving, pools, board games, scuba diving, karate, surfing, beer drinking, American football, raquetball, snow skiing, ethnic foods, rafting, windsurfing, theatre, ballet, graphic art, film, French, German, Japanese, social skills, organizational skills, computer, counseling foreign students, aerobics, white water rafting and camping.

Housing was not a problem for anyone except one student who, after arrival on campus, asked to see his dorm room. The clerk could not find his request form and the student quickly realized that dorm housing was a separate request not automatically included in a package deal. All other students managed to find solutions according to personal preferences either on or off campus. The helpfulness of university offices, student organizations and friends was repeatedly noted.

Almost all respondents said that they were very happy with their choice of institution. One said that he would have chosen a warmer climate, some faced problems upon return to Singapore because it wasn't a prestigious, big name university and one claimed that he should have found a cheaper university.

U.S. graduates' experiences were largely and predominantly positive and all felt that they had benefitted greatly by:

- being exposed to and getting to know the American people, culture and country as well as that of foreign nationals;
- cultivating friendships and social skills;
- meeting influential, impressive, friendly and approachable professors;
- experiencing seasonal changes;
- traveling;
- feeling and learning to be independent/respected;
- being challenged and succeeding;
- gaining self-confidence;
- being exposed to a new way of life with a more complete education;
- learning to analyse a problem systematically and not accepting a pat answer;
- earning a practical education;
- being exposed to additional fields, i.e. art, music;
- learning to think positively and adapt;

- being free to choose what you want to be;
- studying and appreciating the U.S. Constitution;
- changing one's philosophy and attitudes

Unfortunately, with all the positive experiences, there were negative ones, which manifested themselves in the following ways: sudden tuition hike of 200%, financial constraints and difficulties, cooking, some racial discrimination, loneliness during campus holiday exodus, adapting to group living with compromises and noise, unreasonable landlords, car accident, U.S. inefficiencies at post offices, banks, etc., insecurity and less mobility due to crime, language barriers, exclusion by clubs or fraternities, high cost of living, and lastly, getting lost at a subway station in Harlem on a Sunday morning with two suspicious and frightening-looking characters barring the exit.

Marketability upon return to Singapore varied greatly among the respondents depending upon the realities of their individual re-entry experiences. Those that answered negatively claimed the following reasons: Singapore's recession led to a shortage of jobs, employers and ministries were biased against a degree from outside Singapore and the degree was not recognized. Positive responses came from graduates of well-known prestigious schools that had high PSC ratings or popular degree holders in the fields of CIS and MIS.

Major adjustments the students had to make were usually based on the lack of "self-sufficiency and independence" skills such as cooking, washing, family separation, finance and time management, cleaning, coping, decision making, compromising and responsibility. American lingo/slang gave newcomers some problems in addition to pronunciation difficulties. Americans' openness called for Singaporean adjustment just as much as crime-induced fears. And lastly, the cold climate called for body adjustments from tropical citizens.

Numerous surprises awaited our respondents. They were amazed at the diverse ethnic and racial groups that make up the face of America, as well as the number of hippies and transients; the friendliness and helpfulness of midwesterners, as opposed to the insincerity of east and west coasters; the conservatism of America, as opposed to the liberty and freedom of public demonstrations for gays and lesbians; the sheer size of the country as demonstrated by its large, sprawling parking lots; the advanced computer systems, as opposed to the primitive banking system and general lack of organization; the difference in the two English languages and the similarities between Singapore and the States; the incorrect Hollywood portrayal of America as modern and advanced; and Americans' ignorance of geography. (Many thought that Singapore was communist and in China.) Lastly, American turned out not to be as bad as some had anticipated.

Some students felt that they could, or should have prepared -

themselves better before coming to the U.S. and had the following advice to offer fellow Singaporeans embarking on a similar path:

- know your terminology
- know your geography, distances, travel time, cities
- plan to be picked up from the airport
- research your curriculum load
- emotional preparation
- investigate financial aid and job opportunities
- prepare what to bring with you
- contact American Family Friendship programs
- improve your English
- get work experience before going
- group departure of students from the same university
- be prepared for culture shock
- age and maturity is a factor in adjustment
- mix with others, don't stay only with Singaporeans
- take prerequisite courses here so you can spend your time and money on advanced courses in the U.S.
- interview graduates/alumni/Americans re: the university
- consider other countries, too
- leave time to develop friendships
- accept diversity and differences in peoples
- keep an open mind
- don't miss out - this is a once in a lifetime opportunity
- know your costs
- research schools well
- don't look only for elite schools
- go to a warm climate
- must solve the dilemma between choosing a big-name school for reentry vs. a smaller, caring, personal and less prestigious one
- be prepared for the work
- research accreditation with professional bodies
- visit USIS
- write directly to the university for more information
- learn to cook, make car repairs, etc.
- travel
- keep your goal in mind - don't be misled
- try to contact a fellow Singaporean at the university; experience life NOT books
- there is a lot to be learned beyond the class walls
- know population ratio of foreign/local students
- go as early as possible
- go after "O-levels", if possible
- choosing a university according to location is just as important as according to curriculum
- no matter how old/young you are, you should live in the dorm for the initial period
- go where your interests take you
- don't stress out
- get involved
- get organized
- ENJOY



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# Questionnaire

April 18, 1990

Dear Graduates:

We thank you for giving us the opportunity to conduct this survey during your A.U.C. meeting. We hope that you will spare us 15 minutes to fill out the accompanying questionnaire. If it is impossible to do this, we would appreciate it if you could forward it to our office.

The advisers at the USIS office meet dozens of prospective students weekly as they embark on their research into higher education in the U.S. You can sympathize with them since you were in a similar position a few years back. Our job is to guide and direct them through the process, the source books, files, self evaluation and predeparture orientation. However, once they leave Changi Airport, we lose contact and have no feedback.

Sharing your experiences, both positive and negative can assist us in improving the way we advise the students. The completed survey will be published in the Grapevine, a quarterly newsletter from the Overseas Educational Advisers of East Asian Region. Your valuable input will have an impact, not only in Singapore, but in the entire East Asian Region, as well as in the United States.

Again, we thank you for your time and effort in our project.

Sincerely,

Ettie Zilber  
Educational Advisor

Enclosure: As stated

AMERICAN UNIVERSITY GRADUATE QUESTIONNAIRE 'B'

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Tele # \_\_\_\_\_

Graduated from \_\_\_\_\_  
(undergraduate institution)

year and degree \_\_\_\_\_

Graduated from \_\_\_\_\_  
(graduate institution)

year and degree \_\_\_\_\_

Transferred from \_\_\_\_\_  
(if applicable)

If you remember, please give approximate scores for:

TOEFL \_\_\_\_\_

SAT M \_\_\_\_\_ V \_\_\_\_\_

1. Why did you decide to study in the U.S?

2. How did you choose the institution(s) to which you applied?

3. Of the following criteria, which ones were factors in your choice of school: [Please rate - M = most important, I = important, L = least important]

- Climate
- Competitiveness
- Cost
- Curriculum
- Community
- Calendar (deadlines)
- Friends/relatives

4. Did you use USIS services? YES NO  
If yes, please describe the services that were most helpful to you.

5. Could you recommend additional assistance that we could provide or improvement of existing services?

6. Did you use any other service, such as a private college placement agency? Yes No

If yes, did you feel it was valuable in your research and application efforts?

7. To how many institutions did you apply? \_\_\_\_\_  
How many acceptances? \_\_\_\_\_

8. Did you apply to U/C (university/college) with:  
\_\_\_D levels  
\_\_\_A levels  
\_\_\_Polytechnical  
\_\_\_Degree

9. Were you awarded any transfer credits for A, Poly or University courses? YES NO

If YES, how many credits did you receive? \_\_\_\_\_

Did you request transfer credit standing before acceptance? YES NO

When did the U/C notify you of transfer credit standing?  
\_\_\_Before acceptance  
\_\_\_After acceptance  
\_\_\_After arrival on campus

Comments:



10. Did you apply for and/or receive any financial aid?  
Campus employment?

11. Did your institution have a foreign student  
service/advisor and if so, was it helpful?

12. Did you experience any ethnic discrimination while in the  
U.S? If yes, please describe.

13. If you transferred from one institution to another, within  
the US, please give the reason and the success of the  
transfer accreditation.

14. Did you find the courses academically challenging?

15. How did you cope with loneliness and being far from home?

16. What were hobbies, talents or skills that you developed  
before coming to the US?

17. Did you learn any new hobbies, talents or skills while in  
the US?

18. What form of housing did you find and how did you go  
about that search?

19. Do you feel you could have better prepared yourself before coming to the US? If so, how?

20. What advice would you give a fellow Singaporean that was considering studying in the US?

21. Were you happy with your choice of institution and, if not, how would you choose differently?

22. What was the most difficult(negative) experience you had abroad?

23. What was the most positive experience you had abroad?

24. Was your US degree a marketable asset on your return to Singapore? Please describe any difficulties encountered.

25. What kind of adjustments were necessary for you to make while living in the US?

26. What was your biggest surprise?

27. Did you make friends with whom you are still in contact?

28. Aside from the degree, what was the most valuable result of studying in the US?

If you would be interested in helping a student that has been accepted to YOUR university (alma mater), please fill out the following form:

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Tele # \_\_\_\_\_

Institution \_\_\_\_\_

Degree \_\_\_\_\_

Years in US \_\_\_\_\_

Major \_\_\_\_\_

Year of return to Singapore \_\_\_\_\_

THANK YOU.

EZ/APRIL 1990



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