

Crossing Borders: How my international experience has affected my view of the world
by Iryna Bugayova

I have always dreamed about traveling all over the world and exploring different countries and cultures. However, I had very limited opportunities to do this because traveling abroad was a privilege of a few people with money and power in Ukraine for a long time. After my home country gained its independence, the borders became opened giving people an access to the unknown world of capitalism usually presented as a cruel and hostile one in the former Soviet Union. My chance to visit one of the biggest western countries, the United States, came when I became a finalist in the competitive Freedom Support Act Undergraduate (FSAU) Program. After many rounds of evaluation, I was chosen to come to the U.S. courtesy of the United States Government to study at Lees-McRae College in North Carolina for an academic year. Winning this program was a crucial moment in my life that greatly influenced my worldview and future goals.

The program was my first cross-cultural international experience that allowed me to get to know plenty of new things about the United States, its people, culture, traditions, and system of education. My image of America was unveiled by real people instead of the images from Hollywood that biased my perceptions of who Americans were and what they stood for in the world. For example, I believed that American people were always happy and smiling and hardly had any financial and social problems. When I came to the U.S., I realized that the U.S. Americans were very similar to Ukrainians in their everyday worries and problems. They also had to work hard to support their families and save money in order to go on vacation. The American society also had social ills such as unemployment, crime, drug abuse, and poverty similar to my home country.

Although U.S. Americans enjoy more freedoms and higher living standards, they are not much different from other nations in their desire to leave in peace, have loving and supportive families, happy and healthy children, and achieve satisfaction and self-realization in personal and professional lives. This main similarity helped me understand that there was no perfect country in the world. I realized whenever I would go I would still have problems and disappointments, however, my happiness should not depend on the place where I lived. I understood I had to find peace and harmony inside myself and take responsibility for my future.

My cross-cultural experience also influenced my educational interests and professional goals. While studying at Mariupol State University of Humanities in my native Ukraine, my interests revolved around a career in education focusing on teaching foreign languages. Studying at Lees-McRae college I had an opportunity to try different academic fields and learn different perspectives. I was influenced by new and interesting people I would not have met in my homeland. Thanks to my amazing professors I was encouraged to broaden my academic and career interests and improve my knowledge of English, sociology, communications, and American culture. The great interest in communication studies inspired me to further pursue my higher education and apply to UNC Charlotte graduate school to study toward my master's degree.

My studies at Less-McRae college gave me a valuable academic knowledge but most of my priceless experience came from outside the classroom. My roommate, classmates, professors, acquaintances, and friends were a source of information not only about the country, its culture, and diversity but also about myself. I better understood my strengths and weaknesses and learned to be proud of my accomplishments. My ability to

quickly assimilate in American culture and be able to communicate with different people made me more self-confident. I realized I could achieve any goal in my life if I believed in myself and worked hard. My outlook has broadened greatly and I have started to view the world from the position of a strong individual who can make a difference in the lives of others with a sense of purpose and direction. My education and personal experience gave that to me and I wanted to be able to give that to others.

Upon returning to Ukraine from my first U.S. experience, I took advantage of this opportunity to share with others in an effort to enhance their knowledge and understanding of the country misrepresented in the media of Ukraine. I was lucky to personally experience cultural, religious, and social differences of the U.S., and was inspired to present a different perspective about the country. I wanted to help my friends and acquaintances appreciate the uniqueness of the United States and to understand that the stereotypes about its people are not necessarily true. Having witnessed how such deep-rooted misinformation causes many misunderstandings and conflicts between people of different nations, I tried to help my fellow students become more knowledgeable and open minded.

These experiences have influenced my choice to pursue work as an Interpreter/Program Assistant at the National Democratic Institute for International Affairs in Kiev, Ukraine. With my international experience and great desire to make a difference I took an active role in developing democracy in my native country. Making my own small contribution to the long and arduous transition from communism toward democracy has given me new insights into the process of nation building and democratic development. I have been observing this process for years, but the recent political events

around the Orange Revolution led me and many other Ukrainians to begin to realize our power and the ability to change Ukraine for the better.

Looking back at my first cross-cultural experience, I can definitely say that this event has affected my ideas and attitudes about the world, life and my own personality. I have become more educated, open minded and curious person. My experience has opened many opportunities to me and one of them is my graduate education at UNC Charlotte. I am still exploring this horizon and excited to see where it will take me.