On Campus

Where 'They' Becomes 'We'

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Real American yellow cabs beneath a bright blue sky. Police sirens and the hasty footsteps of omnipresent crowds. The smell of fried food and hot pavement. People speaking En-glish with a different accent on every corner. New York is a colorful maelstrom of cultures, exuding creativity and ideas. It is a place everyone wants to visit at least once. When I arrived at Columbia in August, I stared at the campus, Low and Butler already familiar from pictures, and felt that I was one of the luckiest people in the world. This is where I would live for the next academic year.

International student orientation was where I first got a taste of the differences between Europeans and Americans. It didn’t take long to get into animated political discussions. I am a German student based at a French university, so American students identified me with French and German criticism of the U.S. I was quite surprised the first time I was asked, “Why do you Europeans want to tell us Americans how we should conduct our foreign policy?” Americans tend to use the terms *we* and *us* when talking about their government; Europeans usually use the term *they*. Americans identify themselves much more with the actions undertaken by their leaders than Europeans do. A European offending an American without even aiming his critique at the person he is talking to is one of the most typical intercultural misunderstandings. But with more than 5,000 international students from all over the world, Columbia creates a space where such misunderstandings are inevitable, and even useful. Here, everybody is confronted with “the other.” Columbia is a place where misunderstandings can be solved and new thoughts developed.

Still, as a foreign student, maybe especially as a French-educated one, I needed some time to adapt to the American academic system. France and the United States both hold the value of equality very high, but each country understands and

practices it differently. In France, tuition is low. At my university, Sciences Po Paris (Fondation Nationale des Sciences Politiques), the leading French institute for political science, the tuition is about € 1,070 (approximately $1,355) per year, and the fee is adjusted according to the income of the student's parents. Thus, a university degree is much more accessible, or at least affordable, in France than it is in the United States. But members of the faculty are much less accessible in a French university. Professors don't keep office hours, and have very little contact with students outside of class. Within the classroom there isn't much discussion, and when there is, students are careful not to challenge the teacher. In France, the professor's point of view comes first; in the United States, discussion plays a much larger role.

At Columbia, the availability of professors and the level of intellectual debate in the classroom amaze me. The different backgrounds of the students — geographical, professional, and financial — enrich the conversation even more. Also, since Americans often return to school as graduate students, or enroll as nontraditional undergrads after having spent time in the workforce, students bring varying experiences and perspectives that contribute to the dialogue.

College in America is also tailored much more to the individual than it is in France. Americans are freer in their choice of classes; "course hunting" was completely new to me. In France, one simply registers for classes, most of which are mandatory, and gets in. Here, students sometimes have to fight for a spot in a popular class, and that can require meeting with the professor to make one's case. This was especially challenging for me, since the relationship between French students and professors is more distant. I wasn't accustomed to approaching professors and speaking freely. In France, having respect for the professor implies not bothering him.

An international student wrestles with contrasts. My life is full of striking juxtapositions: the beige furniture in the quiet depths of Lehman Library and the colorful, never-ending rush of life in downtown New York; a French academic background and an American year surrounded by so many varying points of view. There can be nothing more invigorating than a life with contrasts.

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