

Email from abroad: Hawaii, USA

Written by Khourn Chantevy

Wednesday, 22 September 2010 15:01



I had never dreamed that I would be studying in America. My high school ambitions consisted of studying in Phnom Penh and getting a good job. Coming from a fairly isolated environment in my childhood, I really had no idea what the world had to offer. But while studying sociology at the Royal University of Phnom Penh (RUPP) I began to realise how many opportunities existed. It helped that I was selected to stay in the Harpswell Foundation Dormitory and Leadership Centre while I studied at RUPP. My newfound sisters were an endless inspiration, and hearing about their experiences studying in America, Japan and Australia inspired me to strive for a much brighter future.

With that said, I have been vaguely planning my adventure to study abroad for the past four years, but I couldn't have anticipated what life is actually like out here in Hawaii.

Earlier this year I won a scholarship from the East West Center to pursue my master's degree in sociology at the University of Hawaii at Manoa (UHM). If I didn't know what this entailed upon submitting my application, I soon found out. "Tevy! Graduate school is really hard and you have to read hundreds of pages per week," said Elaine, an American woman who is one of the Harpswell dormitory residents. And she was right. I have to read hundreds of pages each week and must write an analytical response for many of them. At the moment I feel overwhelmed and shocked with the educational system here.

In Cambodia, your grades are based mainly on the mid-term and final exams. We listen to the lectures, take notes and follow what our professors say. Our exams are based on the notes from these lectures so we are largely dependant on our professors throughout our academic experience.

This is not the case out here. Students at UHM must be independent and intellectually active. Readings are assigned before every class and in order to participate in discussions, which is required, you must understand the material. If I didn't do the reading I would honestly have no

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idea what was going on in class. More interestingly, almost every class is run like a seminar. After the professors finish their lecture, each student is supposed to come up with questions for discussion.

I also have to write an analytical response to these readings. Due to my relatively poor English and fairly weak background in sociology, this task can be an incredible challenge. Fortunately, all of my professors have office hours and are happy to help me and provide feedback on my ideas.

On the bright side, Hawaii is a beautiful and warm state inhabited by many other Asians. That is not to say that I feel at home, as homesickness and loneliness visit me often.

However, this is just the beginning and I know that everyone in my situation must deal with these feelings eventually. I am sure things will be going well after I have settled down for a couple months. Studying abroad might sound a bit terrifying, but challenges and change will only make us stronger. No pain no gain!

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