

Overwhelmed and In Retreat: Expectation, Preparation, and Realized Experiences Clash on an Exchange Program

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Tags

Cross-Cultural Issues; Education Abroad; Ethics, Equity, and Social Justice; International Student and Scholar Services; Internationalization and Global Learning; Student Learning and Development; University/Higher Education

Setting

This case examines the dynamics of a semester exchange program between two campuses of a prominent technological university: its main campus in a major northeastern U.S. city and its branch campus in an East African capital. While both campuses share institutional branding, degree requirements, and English as the medium of instruction, they operate in vastly different contexts. The East Africa campus has approximately 300

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students, which allows for a close-knit community. In contrast, the main campus serves over 15,000 students; it is a large, decentralized institution where students mostly navigate administrative systems autonomously.

Students in the exchange program were assigned a program contact and an academic mentor and received guidance to support their transition. Even with this support, some real-world experiences, especially new or unexpected ones, were still difficult to navigate.

Case

Amara was a female Master's student specializing in Human-Computer Interaction and AI ethics who undertook a four-month exchange to the U.S. campus. Amara stepped off the bus in her new city, convinced she was ready. She had attended every pre-departure orientation at the Africa Campus, secured her visa without complications, and had even traveled to Europe recently to practice adapting to new environments. The Office of International Education had been thorough, sending automated updates on immigration and logistics for weeks. Theoretically, she was prepared to transition from her role as a student leader in East Africa to a visiting student in the United States.

The first three weeks shattered this confidence. What followed was not a single disruption, but a series of challenges that revealed gaps between preparation and the realities of navigating a new environment.

It began with her leg. Severe inflammation made walking to class agonizing. At nearly the same time, a water bottle leaked in her backpack and destroyed her laptop, her primary tool for coursework and communication. Back home, Amara's student insurance covered everything, and navigating the healthcare system was straightforward. In the U.S., she encountered a fragmented system of copays, deductibles, and out-of-network restrictions that no orientation had explained. She did not know where to begin or how much care would cost upfront, and the fear of unexpected bills made her hesitate to seek help at all. Without a student job and surviving on a fixed stipend, the potential costs sent her into a spiral. She called the program director in tears: "Please book me a ticket back home. I want to go home."

The isolation compounded in ways she had not anticipated. In her home city, a bus ride was often social. Passengers acknowledged one another, struck up conversations about the weather or politics. In this particular case, Amara's attempts to greet fellow passengers were met with silence or confusion. "Twenty years of my life growing up doing that," she later reflected, "and then I got here, and it just didn't happen like I was used to."

These experiences extended into the classroom, where the challenges were less visible but equally impactful. Coming from a culture where professors are addressed by title and viewed as superiors, Amara found the U.S. insistence on first names and peer-like debate disorienting. Her discomfort peaked during a lecture when she asked a question. Her pronunciation differed from local norms, and the professor struggled to understand her. The class stopped. All eyes turned to her, the only Black African student in the room. "Do they judge African people based on their experience with me?" she wondered afterward. The incident made her hesitant to speak for weeks.

Academically, Amara had come specifically to take courses on AI ethics and human-computer interaction that were unavailable at her home campus. Yet she quickly perceived that "global" often meant powerful, influential countries. Classroom discussions about AI governance focused on U.S. innovation frameworks, EU

protectionism, and Chinese sovereignty models. When she raised concerns about low-resource African languages in AI systems, or the risks of machine translation errors in multilingual contexts, she felt her points were acknowledged but not absorbed. “I found myself constantly speaking up for Africa,” she said. “I learned about every other country other than my own.”

What unsettled Amara was not one isolated problem, but the cumulative weight of these experiences, each revealing gaps that her preparation had not fully accounted for.

These challenges began to converge. Three weeks into the semester, Amara sat in her apartment. Her leg was still painful. Her laptop remained broken. She was hesitant to ask a question in class since the pronunciation incident. Her faculty mentor had offered to drive over and talk. A domestic classmate had noticed her fatigue and suggested she might have Vitamin D deficiency, something Amara had never considered. Former exchange students had reached out, urging her not to give up. The program director had not yet booked that ticket home. Amara must decide what to do next.

Discussion Questions

As you consider this case, discuss:

- Amara is a graduate student and a campus leader in her home country. Then, Amara struggles with many of the tasks she encounters in daily life in her first weeks in the U.S. What is she likely to be feeling emotionally?
- The faculty mentor has arrived to talk to Amara, who requested to go home. What topics or talking points should the mentor cover during their conversation? If Amara stays, what actions could help shift her from "survival mode" to meaningful engagement with her academic goals?
- How can international offices teach international students about the health care system of the country they will be studying in? What additional topics are often missed in pre-departure orientations?
- Amara's support came primarily through informal channels: a mentor who drove to her apartment, a classmate who recognized vitamin D deficiency, former exchange students who reached out. Is there a way that formal support structures could be put in place for students in need?
- Amara felt the burden of being the “representative voice” for an entire continent because the curriculum lacked African perspectives. How can faculty design global course content without placing the educational labor on international students to teach about their countries?
- How should exchange programs acknowledge and leverage the professional expertise that international graduate students bring, rather than positioning them solely as learners?
- Learning theory tells us that optimal learning happens when there is some level of challenge, complemented by support structures. Learning is hindered by too little or too much challenge, and too little or too much support. In this case, are the levels of challenge and support that Amara is facing appropriate for her intercultural learning?

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