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New Horizons

Stepping on to CU Boulder’s campus and it’s like you are back in your high school overhearing what party the popular kids went to that weekend. But replace popular kids with sorority girls and frat boys on the hill where every night of the week is a nonstop party. The hierarchy between students makes it impossible to make friends if you’re not part of the “in” crowd.  The campus itself shows off Colorado’s natural beauty as it is centered in the Flatirons which glow under the setting sun.

Stepping into the University of Wollongong’s campus, you notice the Australian heat immediately as the palm trees beckon you in making you feel as if you have been transported to a natural park with lush greenery than a college campus where Sydney, one of the biggest cities in the country is just an hour away.  The visual comparisons of each campus is drastically different, and so are the people.  Last February I embarked on the adventure of a lifetime and within the first week in Australia I noticed a lot of differences between American college students and Australian college students. The first one being Australian students don’t say college, they call it University, or Uni for short. I will be comparing the differences in the college culture, academics, and the countries social dynamics and how they correspond to the Hofstede Insights, and how the two cultures differ in the areas of risk taking, indulgence, independence, and living in the moment.

**College Social Dynamics**

The Uni culture at the University of Wollongong (UOW) is very different from CU Boulder and I noticed this when it came to social interactions with my peers. The first thing I noticed was there was no odd hierarchy of popularity between students. At CU Greek life is a huge part of the student experience along with the parties that come with being in Greek life. This shows how American students group mentality rather than being independent. At UOW there isn’t any sorority’s or fraternities, so the social hierarchy is not present in university life.   One thing I noticed immediately in comparison to American freshmen is their lack of an obsession with alcohol. Australian’s do have a heavy drinking culture, but First-year uni students are already of legal age to drink as their drinking age is eighteen, so there isn’t the need to sneak alcohol in the dorms to be busted by RA’s. The newness of drinking has tapered off a bit once you start uni.  This ties into the countries sense of independence as there isn’t this draw to follow the crowd and have an obsession with drinking that we see in American college culture.

 This brings me to my next topic, Student Leaders which are the Australian equivalent to an RA,

there is no awkward hierarchy between the two of you as they are also college students and are not trying to get you in trouble. This makes it easier to create a and ask them questions about the school and the city of Wollongong.

Another big difference I found was language. When having conversations with my new friends there would be slang and words that I didn’t know and vice versa.   I remember getting coffee with a friend and in the mall and the song *Fifteen by Taylor Swift* started playing, and my friend turns to me and goes “What does freshman year mean?” I was slightly confused thinking that grade levels here were broken up the same way they were in America with freshman, sophomore, junior, and senior year. When it dawned on me that this was an American way of doing things.  I explained that it’s your first year of high school or college. She laughed and went “Oh this song makes more sense now!”  This interaction made me think of Amy Tan’s “The Language of Discretion” and the differences between cultures and how you bring the two together. Her example is English and Chinese. In this article, she showcases being caught between two cultures. At first, you are unsure how to behave and carefully watch those who are from the country you are in. Evaluating their mannerisms and terms of speech, you study it like it’s a complicated dance that you have to perform if you want to have any part in this new social circle.  This piece allows the reader to look outside their own culture and see the differences and how what might be commonplace in their tradition might be very different compared to another culture.  The weaknesses in this piece is that sometimes there isn’t a way to perfectly link two cultures, so you sort of find yourself in the crack between the two.

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| **Year** | **Ages** | **School** |
| Grade or Year **7** | **12**–**13** | Secondary |
| Grade or Year **8** | **13**–**14** |
| Grade or Year 9 | **14**–15 |
| Grade or Year 10 | 15–16 |

By breaking down years of school through Year 7 and so on, Australians are living in the moment as it feels less permanent than saying that you are a freshman, or sophomore which is more rigid and strict and makes students look far in the future of their education to see what is next. Whereas Australians live in the moment with their grade level defined by a number. This

Relives the pressure of the future. While I was there, I was technically a freshman, but no one really cared which also relates to that lack of a social hierarchy that we see in the U.S.

Another large aspect of college culture is housing. No matter where you go to college you usually are moving away from home for the first time and experiencing independence. My accommodation was called Marketview. I really enjoyed it as unlike an American dorm, where you have to go to floor meetings and had access to the dining hall, MV prepares you for the real world in the sense that you have independence. You cook your own meals, have your own room and bathroom, and had to pay rent like you would for an apartment. I found the process of applying for housing in Wollongong to be nothing like CU. Where if you want housing owned by the university you have to apply months ahead of time, which ties back to Americans constantly looking to the long term, where you have to fill out tons of paperwork and then placed in a lottery so everyone gets a chance, and hope that you get a spot.

Unlike CU trying to get a university housing wasn’t that difficult. The university had multiple options for international students and each one you had your own bedroom which was surprising to me as American’s often have roommates and share a room during their first year of college. Upon telling my Australian friends this they were confused and (probably) a little horrified at the idea of sharing a room with a stranger.  When looking at the list of housing for UOW I originally picked an accommodation called Campus East where most American students stay and where you have roommates. I soon regretted my choice not knowing if I wanted a roommate since I was so far from home, so I contacted the university prepared to divulge my medical history, as I’ve had two kidney transplants and was ready to explain this in order to switch to Marketview. I emailed the university and asked, “Can I switch accommodations?” To which the university just said, “sure” and gave me my first choice. My accommodation was previously a hotel that had been converted into student housing and was right in the middle of the city giving me easy access to the mall that was across the street, with a grocery store located in the mall, and the food trucks that were out on Thursday nights.

**Academics**

When picking my timetable (what they call a class schedule) I was surprised to see that I wouldn’t have classes every day. Unlike CU, the classes at UOW are two hours long versus the regular 50 minutes or slightly longer classes on Tuesdays and Thursdays.  Classes still had recitations which were called tutorials, a difference in the Tutorials versus recitations at CU is that the tutor for your class was only at the university on the day of your tutorial, which made it difficult to schedule an office hour with them. Despite the longer classes and less in-person contact through office hours and multiple classes a week, I feel the courses set up students for the real world and for life once they graduate college where things aren’t as easy and a linear path such as going to the same class multiple times a week ( as maybe you have a work from home day or something comes up so you don’t need to be in the office all the time) there is no hand-holding with students. While this is helpful, it’s also a bit difficult to understand fully the work you are expected to do. This points toward uncertainty avoidance where you deal with the problems as they occur, here Australia and the U.S score similarly. Australia is 51% and the U.S is 46 % (*Hofstede insights*, 2020)

Geographical environment

Another way the University encourages independence from their students is in the environment. You can go to the uni bar, the botanic gardens during breaks, or to the beaches on a day off.

CU is located at a higher elevation, with the only natural scenery being the Flatirons mountains in the distance of buildings that feel like a concrete jungle. The University of Wollongong is full of palm trees and all the buildings were numbered and each of them are pretty close together so you don’t have to run across campus wondering if you will be late for your next class. Due to the closeness of the buildings, not many people ride bikes on campus as a way to get around which was surprising and a relief as I didn’t have to worry about getting hit by a bike. There was also a lot of wildlife on campus particularly ducks, rainbow lorikeets, cockatoo’s and if you were lucky could maybe hear a kookaburra in the trees. On the UOW campus, there is the Uni bar which has beer, wine, chips “fries” and chicken schnitzel ( which was often called a schnitty for short and is very popular in Australia) The Uni bar also holds events such as concerts and comedy nights as well.  Being in such as visually stunning location leads to levels of relaxation. I found

wasn’t as stressed and on the grind which is drilled into American’s from an early age, and that everything is slowed down here. When I say this, I mean Australians are indulgent with their time in relaxing and are not constantly rushing to get to their classes and can just relax outside with friends.

To get to campus every day you can take the UOW shuttle which is like the buff bus, and has an app telling you it’s location. Often I took that bus when I didn’t need to get to campus right away, as it was the long way due to driving through the nearby neighborhood. But if I needed to get to campus quickly I took the Wollongong shuttle which was essentially the free city bus that did a loop of the whole town and ended at the campus and was free. In comparison to the buff bus which is internal to the CU campus and was available to only students and staff. It was cool as not only uni students took the shuttle but anyone in town could use it, and this gave me independence in interacting with the community by gaining access to it and being in the real world.

Repeatedly after getting off the bus I’d cut through Wollongong Central, (which was the mall) to get to Marketview. My accommodation was a fifteen-minute walk from one of the two beaches in Wollongong, City beach and North Gong, which has cafes and such. Right across from the university is the Wollongong botanic gardens where students go to take breaks between classes and is definitely a stress reliever looking at all the flowers and the dense tree groves, which are reminiscent of a walk in the bush, with lots of foliage and vines on the ground that you have to carefully walk around to not get caught in them. The campus itself is like a natural park filled with lots of flora and fauna.

Lastly, I want to share a story which is the perfect example of Australian risk taking.

I’m a big fan of an Australian band called 5 Seconds of Summer. Prior to me leaving I heard that they would be home and would be preforming a show in Sydney, which was an hour away from

Wollongong. I texted my friend whom I met at CU while she was on exchange. I explained how I really wanted to see this band but had no one to go with and didn’t really want to take the train to Sydney alone. Later that evening I get a message that she knew someone who is camping out to see 5 Seconds of Summer and wouldn’t mind if I tagged along. Knowing this opportunity would

not be something to happen again I said yes and camped out in Sydney CBD (Central Business District) in the rain to see a band I’ve been listening to since I was fourteen. Something like this would never have happened in the U.S (and it was one of the best mornings of my life and something I will remember forever) and the fact that I was just like oh sure! And my now new friend was so willing to let me tag along is definitely an example of Aussies and their willingness to take risks.

After returning home from Australia I began to look at America differently and how American culture is based on productivity and always looking ahead in life and never taking a true moment to breathe, which also has to do with capitalism and how rooted it is in our society. I found Hofstede Insights to be very accurate when it came to risk taking, independence and living in the moment as I experienced how Australians live up to these traits and also how they differ from Americans in these areas such as, being more independent in setting students up for the future, more indulgent with their time and going out to have fun, and living in the moment.

Upon examining both cultures I feel more included in Australia over America as not having this sense of hierarchy and a more independent culture rather than a group mentality. I also found while abroad I could just be an American abroad and my race was not the first thing people judged me on. I found myself heavily reflecting on this during the protests that occurred that summer in the U.S over the death of George Floyd and how I didn’t fear police abroad the way that I do here. I found myself disconnected from American culture while I was there, the racism and the entitlement that came with “being American” I shrugged it off the moment my plane landed as I didn’t want to be associated with that. What does that say about multiculturalism in America vs Australia, they have a greater independence and by having university life removed from adult life in location and Greek life and clubs like CU does doesn’t allow students to fully grow and become members of society as there is that learning curve they must get used to in being in the real world versus Australia where university students are integrated with the city, thus making the university and it’s students more inclusive and the U.S can learn a lot from the Australians.

Citation

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