Networking: key to happiness

Friends are important. For international students, who do not speak the native language of the host country, friends are the bedrock for sustaining a satisfactory life. With friends, come the improved language skills and smoother acculturation. This helps foreign students cope with the challenges that would otherwise torment every aspect of their lives. Similarly, professional development is important, as it is the main objective for joining a university. For both purposes, making friends and professional development, having good networking skills is paramount. However, to make friends with people who do not even share their language, let alone their culture, their ideologies, or their way of life could be a daunting task. Similarly, to network with peers and senior academics when you know you are not articulate enough or could be easily misunderstood could be very difficult. Like every other non-native English speaking international student in the United States, I have lived through this networking dilemma.

I guess it is one’s natural tendency to seek out your own type. Most international students seem to prefer making friends with people from their own country or with the ones who speak their own language. I would too I think. But at Rice, there was only one other person from my country. He was the only one to speak my language. Our similarities, however, ended there. Socially, this scenario made the first few months of my first year at Rice very adventurous. The events organized by the OISS provided plenty of fodder for me to have interactions with other foreign students. Sheer curiosity and my chatterbox-nature compelled me to talk to people. I had made innumerable acquaintances and quite a few friends from all around the world in little-to-no time. I did not feel any networking dilemma whatsoever. Things seemed easy and natural in the international friends front.

Making American friends was a different proposition altogether. Initially, there seemed no necessity to look for making American friends. I already had enough friends to divide time between anyway. But soon, the honeymoon period ended, and classes and finding a thesis advisor became real priorities. Now, I needed to network with people to get information on research and advising style of professors so as to choose the right thesis advisor. With that, I had more and more interactions with Americans. I had decent spoken-English, so short exchanges such as greetings and small talk were never a problem. It was the extended oral communication in talking issues or articulating a point in business matters that I found myself being uncomfortable with. At that point, I knew quite a few Americans but had no American friends.

It wasn’t until I soul-searched and learned about myself that I started making American friends. I realized that I had certain fears that prevented me from opening up to them. On the
back of my mind, I would ask, “How will I be able to contribute to a conversation? What is politically correct and what is off-limits? Will they understand me? Will they get my point-of-view? Will I understand their jokes? If not, should I still laugh at them? Do they want me to be around them at all? What if they ignore me? What if they talked football or comic books or classic rock? Will they criticize the lunch I packed? And so on.” All this seems silly to me now, but I had to overcome my internal demons, that feared failure, non-acceptance and even shame, for my own peace of mind. I convinced myself to be a willing learner, and not to evade situations that were outside my comfort zone. Getting the confidence to do it was slow but sure. The more I reached out and networked, the better I felt. I was lucky to have a couple of phenomenal American friends who went out of their way to make me feel comfortable around them. By the end of the first year, I was going to house parties, watching football and hockey, going barhopping and camping, in addition to playing soccer and attending ‘Deepotsav’ and ‘International Culture Fair’. I felt enriched. I was a much happier person.

Over the years, things haven’t actually always been smooth. Time and again, you meet an ignorant person who is prejudiced and will dismiss you simply because you are not a native English speaker or do not look like one. Just recently, a guy replied, “Knock it off, Jose!” to my “Hey, What’s up? I am…” The funny thing is I am not Jose or Hispanic for that matter, and I don’t think I look like one either! Another example that is less hateful but equally severe is when a colleague I was working with in a business project flatly called me stupid in public and maintained that he was not willing to have “such foreigner” in his group. His over-the-top reaction was after I asked him what the word “bellwether” meant. It’s easy to hurt your confidence from instances like these, but these incidents happen few and far between numerous positive experiences.

I have learnt in the past few years that reaching out to people and connecting does a lot more good than harm. Not being a native English speaker and not knowing a lot about the local culture makes it difficult to network with people, but it is important to overcome the fear of failure, non-acceptance and shame with willingness to learn and immerse yourself in the local culture and to expand professional contacts. Doing this helped me make more friends, both internationals and Americans, and more importantly, has enriched me, helped me have a balanced social-professional life, and made me a better person.