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“How will living through a pandemic while gaining an international education help me make a difference in the world?”

When you first heard of the COVID pandemic, what was your first thought? My first thought was about my future, specifically how my journey in the U.S would be affected. Coming from Vietnam, whose borders are next to that of China, my family and I had learned about COVID as soon as its first outbreak happened in December 2019. I knew that it would also affect the U.S. soon. I would have had enough time and opportunities to come back home, but instead, I chose to stay in the U.S.

I did not know what to do after my high school graduation. Nevertheless, in the summer of 2019, after visiting some West Coast colleges, I had a chance to learn more about what international education is. Because of quality education, unique curriculum, multicultural environment, and abundant opportunities, I decided to go to the United States for education with a curiosity for the outside world. Going to college abroad is, indeed, a tough decision but also an absolute privilege. It is not only financially challenging, but there is also pressure as I am a first-generation college student in my family. Having gone through the Vietnam War, my parents are hard-working, middle-class people. One of their biggest dreams is to get me the best education, which would give me a better life. Therefore, I have to make sure that this whole journey is worth the effort, so my parents would be proud of me. International education is the pathway that I genuinely want to invest myself in.

I first started college when I was seventeen. I found Business a fascinating area because of its diverse effects on one community and even the world in many different ways. With the multicultural environment and abundant opportunities on campus, I decided to pursue a degree in Business. The United States, which has retained one of the strongest and largest economies worldwide, is one of the best places to pursue a Business degree. I chose this degree because of my home country, in which the economy remains weak and unstable. I want to use what I learn here to make impactful changes to my country. My goal is to level up the lives of several middle-class Vietnamese families just like mine so they could have a chance to pursue whatever they dream.

After studying in America for almost a year, throughout this pandemic, my goal has broadened. Since the COVID hit the United States, I have watched the economy continue to drop. It came to my realization that the purpose of pursuing a Business degree is not necessarily limited to my home country affairs. As *Business* includes relationships across borders and even cultural barriers, I believe the ultimate goal of studying it should be to make the world a better place. It means Business-related activities should benefit all lives one way or another. So, how do I achieve that? Narrowing the scope of that question, I became aware that education is also a business. The overall present online schools are so frustrating and ineffective. As Gwendolyn Brooks once said, “*We are each other's harvest; we are each other's business; we are each other's magnitude and bond.*” Therefore, I feel compelled to do something beneficial for my college as a business I am actively involved in. With my effort and contribution, I hope the online school would get more sense of unity, so students could find enjoyment and support and stay enrolled. This is how I comprehend the mindset of studying for a Business degree, one step at a time.

On-campus activities are helpful for students to learn new things and expand their social network. Yet, the pandemic has made social interaction nearly impossible with online schools. I feel compelled to do something for my virtual campus. Clubs appear to be an excellent channel that I could utilize as a student. It provides a productive space for connection, recreation, and even creativity. I became a part of the Phi Theta Kappa Honor Society (PTK) in April 2020. In the online environment, PTK weekly meetings created a common ground for fellow students and professors to gather and share their academic life and scholarship opportunities. I also have prepared to charter the WCC Sustainability Club by January 2021 for the last two months with other students. Our goals are to not only keep on educating ourselves about sustainability but also pass accumulated knowledge to our fellow students and community. In a word, clubs should not be limited due to the online environment.

Moreover, I also have officially taken the role of Director for Academic Success Programming. It is a part of the Associated Students of Whatcom Community College. As an ASWCC student leader, my mission is to enhance the experience of every student at WCC. We serve students by providing diverse opportunities for campus involvement, community building, and representing student concerns in college decision-making. Despite the physical distance created by virtual learning, I have worked collaboratively with other student leaders and staff to transform traditional in-person activities and events into the online format and plan for new events accordingly. One of our most significant activities is student-led conferences. It gives students a chance to meet professors or guest speakers from within and beyond my community college to discuss a wide range of topics. All activities and events have been planned to give the students as many benefits as intended before the pandemic.

Even though *international education* is still a debatable term, for me, it is a valuable journey of people, minds, and ideas. It is the journey of not only academics but also cultural and social connections. It broadens perspectives, encourages development and changes *across the borders*. I am glad that I did not choose to go back home back in March. Personally, this journey would be incomplete if I did not remain in this country and experience the ups and downs of life here. Taking online classes in my home country would have been much different from here. The difference in time zones would lead to an unhealthy lifestyle. By staying here, I have had the chance to use more English daily since I live with a native host family. Although there are many types of hardship for people now due to this pandemic, I feel it has only strengthened me. The pandemic has given me the perfect opportunity for creativity and inspiration for better changes. All of the school activities above helped me gain essential social skills and also helped me stay optimistic throughout the pandemic. So, remaining here would be more advantageous for my education and future goals. I believe this has been a unique experience for me. Despite all challenges, I did not and will never lose hope or determination in pursuing globally higher education because my family and I have sacrificed a lot for the present. The sacrifices we have made now will increase the benefit of our future as this pandemic will soon be over. So, with this scholarship, I believe it could help me one step further on this journey.