

# FAR FROM HOME

BY LAUREN RUBENSTEIN



MANY STUDENTS CREDIT ORIENTATION WITH FACILITATING THE STRONG, LASTING FRIENDSHIPS THEY FORMED WITH OTHER INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY JOHN VAN VLACK

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or most of her childhood, Nandita Vijayaraghavan '13 grew up in the conservative Southern Indian town of Chennai. But when it came time to choose a university, her father urged her to consider a school in the United States. And he was pushing hard for Wesleyan.

Nandita's parents had lived in Middletown for a few years as newlyweds, and her aunt still resides in town. "My dad knew Wesleyan had a strong reputation and was very prestigious," Nandita says. "He remembered how homesick he was when he came to school in the U.S., and thought it would be nice for me to be near my aunt." In retrospect, she says, "I think it was the best decision I made to go somewhere where I had a support system built in. It's very hard for international students the first few months when you're adjusting to a new country, new culture, and new school."

Nandita has had plenty of company. Wesleyan's international student body has grown steadily over the past two decades, according to Associate Dean for International Student Affairs Alice Hadler. When she came to Wesleyan in 1995, the newly-established Freeman Asian Scholars Program—which funds the education of exceptional students from Asia—catalyzed an explosion in the number of international students. Today, the Freeman program still funds the educations of one student from each of 11 Asian countries per year—translating to a total of 44 Freeman Scholars on campus in any given year—but accounts for a much smaller portion of Wesleyan's overall international student body. In the 2012-13 academic year, there were nearly 250 international students on campus. Hadler expects this growth to continue, particularly from countries such as China, Vietnam, South Korea and India.

Every year in late August, new freshmen from countries around the globe arrive

on Wesleyan's campus for International Student Orientation. For three days before the rest of the freshman class shows up, the international students participate in fun activities—a shopping trip, visit to the fitness center and campus scavenger hunt—have an opportunity to ask questions of upperclassmen, and are introduced to key administrators and resources.

"It was a great experience," recalls Zhicheng Jared Wang '15 of Hangzhou, China. "I rolled down Foss Hill. We had a scavenger hunt, ate s'mores, watched midnight movies—all without homework. I wished it could be longer."

Many students credit orientation with facilitating the strong, lasting friendships they formed with other international students.

"The International Student Orientation was one of the best memories I have of this place," says Gideon Too '14 of Eldoret, Kenya. "Everyone was really friendly. We all came from different parts of the world, but we were all experiencing the same new things at the same time. I'm still really good friends with some of the people I met the first day here."

The support international students receive during orientation continues throughout their four years on campus. Hadler and Janice Watson, coordinator of international student services, see to the "general well-being of international students," as Hadler puts it. "I advise students on everything from academics to transportation to their social lives. I keep my door open as much as I can, and encourage people to come see me." Hadler and Watson assist international students with visa issues, organize a shopping trip to buy warm clothes in the fall, and they arrange for international students to spend Thanksgiving dinner at the homes of Wesleyan faculty and staff. This year, the school launched a program called WesMiles, through which alumni donate air miles to allow international students to return home over winter break.

In India, Nandita attended a small Christian school, which housed about 800



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students in grades K-12. It was a tight-knit community in which the teachers took a strong personal interest in students; when, at age 16, Nandita lost her mother, her teachers and friends at the school were incredibly supportive. This helped cement her decision to attend a small college.

During the “gap year” she took after high school, Nandita visited American colleges and universities, took interviews and contacted random students for advice. She had many questions and concerns about life at an American college. Would she be pressured to drink and do drugs? Is there a lot of clique-iness in the social scene? Does “class hierarchy” prevent freshmen from getting many opportunities available to upperclassmen? Nandita also says, “I was terrified of being blocked in with other Indian students. If I thought that was going to happen, I would have stayed in India.”

She was impressed by the enthusiasm with which current Wesleyan students spoke about their school, and how generous they were to her as a prospective student. She also was swayed by an interview with a Wesleyan senior—an Indian girl who had grown up in Hong Kong—who spoke frankly of the difficulty she had had adjusting to life at Wesleyan, but assured Nandita that it gets easier. “I found it really refreshing that someone was being honest, instead of giving another admissions pitch,” she says.

And when she arrived on campus, Nandita did have difficulty adjusting. “The number one thing I had to get adjusted to was coming from a very homogeneous society to one that was very diverse in terms of race, language, culture and sexual identity,” she says. “Also, American students are reared with a knowledge of what is correct to say here and what isn’t, whereas back home, you just say what you feel. If you see someone who is fat, you say, ‘You’re fat, you need to lose weight.’ It’s coming from a place of concern. But here if you do that, people think, ‘Oh my God, that person’s just rude.’ I had to be very careful.”

Nandita also struggled to understand Americans’ need for personal space and privacy. “Where I’m from, there is no personal space. You always have people around you all the time who know everything about you.” So when her new friends wanted to go off on their own

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after hanging out together for a few days, Nandita felt hurt and confused. “I’d say, ‘I don’t understand. Why?’ and they’d say, ‘I need my space. I need my ‘me time.’”

Other international students described different challenges they faced upon starting college. As a high school student at a boarding school, Bingxin Wu ’13, of Shenyang, China, had a rigidly defined daily schedule that made it “very hard for you to stray.” At Wesleyan, she says, “You take whatever classes you want; you organize your schedule the way it suits you best. That can be a very daunting task for someone who’s used to an organized lifestyle. At the beginning, I was struggling to fit everything into my schedule. I remember in freshman year, I was always running around from class to meetings.”

And though Bingxin had spent years learning how to read and write English in school, having to use it in daily conversation was another matter altogether. She recalls confusion at hearing certain expression for the first time; when a departing

student announced, “I’m gonna bounce,” she remembers thinking, “I was surprised you could say something like that.” Moreover, she says, “I watched all 10 seasons of the show *Friends*, so my concept of American urban life is forever built on coffee shops and people sitting around and talking about things.”

Similarly, Boyuan Julian Zhong ’13, of Beijing, China, said he was initially confused about the proper way to answer a very common question: “How are you?”

“I used to answer that question honestly in detail every single time,” he remembers, laughing.

Though she studied English in school, the class time wasn’t enough to truly master

the language, says Huyen Le ’14 of Hanoi, Vietnam. Since private English lessons were very expensive, she spent hours watching the Disney Channel to learn English. “I picked up some weird phrases that no one actually says,” says Huyen, a Freeman Scholar. Her accent also took on a bit of a Southern drawl.

Also a non-native English speaker, Jared Wang says he was shy at first about reaching out to other students. The first semester, he says, “I was really nervous to speak in class because when I was back home, raising your hand or speaking up wasn’t really encouraged. It was more about the teacher lecturing you. After I came here, I realized the amount you learn also depends on how actively engaged in class you are.”

In Vietnam, when Huyen Le studied history in a gifted program, she knew she wasn’t getting a complete picture. “It’s a Communist regime, so the education is shaped to benefit the party. When I was in history class, I felt it was biased. I was angry and thought, ‘There are so many flaws in the argument.’ But I couldn’t talk back to the teacher. It was not acceptable. There was no critical thinking and no channel for feedback.”

The most important thing she has learned from her Wesleyan classes is that it’s okay to disagree, Huyen says. “As long as you can offer a logical argument and you don’t violate any ethical principles, then it’s fine. It’s important because it helps develop your intellectual maturity.”

According to Hadler, American higher education—and liberal arts, in particular—is unique in delaying the point at which young people must choose a specialty, allowing students to explore a wide range of subject areas. For Chazelle Rhoden ’15 of Port Antonio, Jamaica, this was one of the

main reasons she decided to study in the United States.

“Our education system is very streamlined, so from 9th grade on, you decide if you want to pursue a career in the humanities, sciences or business. Your high school education is tailored to fit that. Then, after high school you go to college, pursuing whatever you decided years ago,” she explains. “But I couldn’t make up my mind. I just enjoyed everything. I did the humanities, the sciences, and business. I think I really wanted the liberal arts experience that the U.S. offers.”

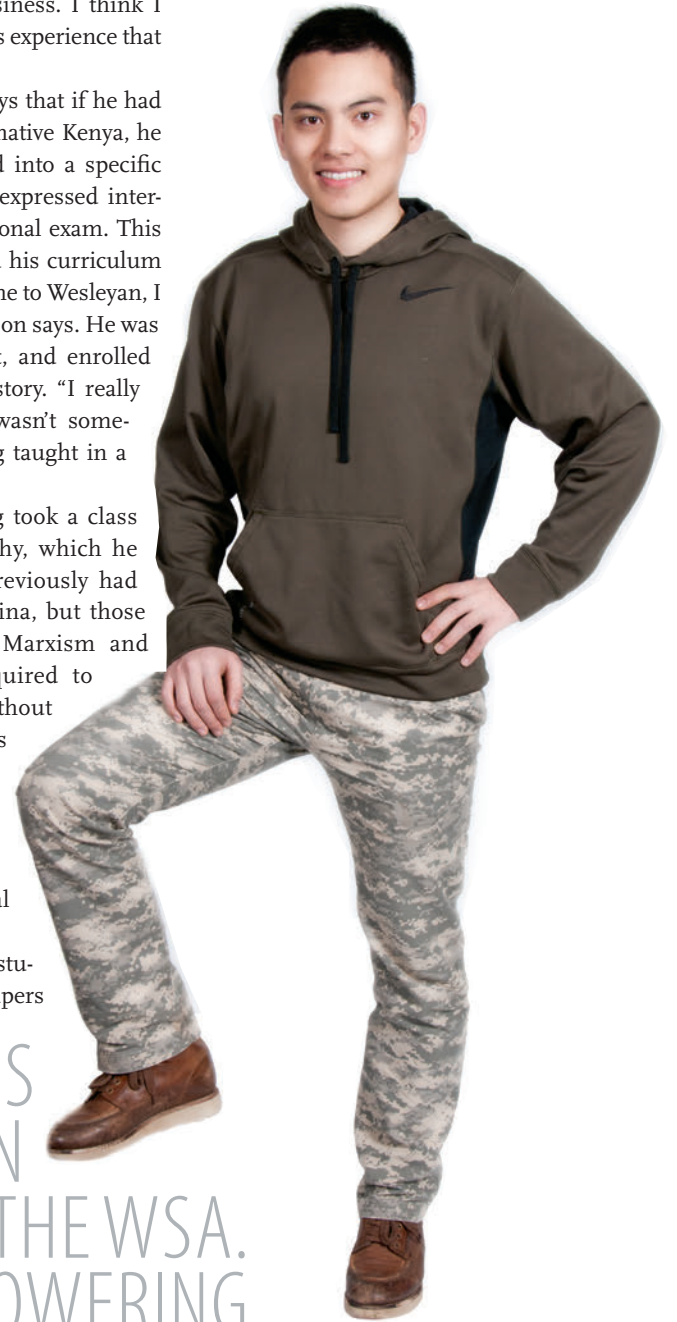
Similarly, Gideon Too says that if he had attended university in his native Kenya, he would have been admitted into a specific course of study based on expressed interest and his score on a national exam. This choice would have dictated his curriculum for four years. “When I came to Wesleyan, I enjoyed the freedom,” Gideon says. He was encouraged to experiment, and enrolled in a course on Roman history. “I really enjoyed it,” he says. “It wasn’t something you could find being taught in a university in Kenya.”

This year, Julian Zhong took a class in Post-Analytic Philosophy, which he found challenging. He previously had studied philosophy in China, but those classes had focused on Marxism and socialism. “We were required to memorize the material without really analyzing it,” he says of the Chinese classes. In contrast, the Wesleyan professor guided the students in a free and open discussion on the material they had read.

For many international students, writing academic papers

posed a particular challenge—both due to the strain of writing in a non-native language, and because writing generally hadn’t been emphasized in their primary and secondary education. According to Hadler, many international students take advantage of the introductory writing class she teaches, as well as individual writing tutoring services offered.

Julian Zhong availed himself of this support. At Chinese schools, he says, reading



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and writing is downplayed, and students demonstrate their knowledge primarily through exams. In Hadler's class on the English Essay, Julian was required to do lots of reading and write a paper every other week, as well as write in a journal about the reading assignments. He also had an individual writing mentor who met with him once or twice a week to work on his writing. When the class was over, Hadler invited the students to her home to make dumplings.

"My writing skills in English were okay," Julian says. "The writing was understandable, but didn't really capture the reader's attention. The writing mentor helped me understand how a native speaker presents an idea; how they use different sentence structures to make a paper more attractive. I improved a lot from that."

"Writing is not a big part of education in Japan, so I didn't have much practice," adds Yusaku Takeda '14 of Hokkaido,

Kenya. It took me a while to master the courage to go see a professor, having come from a background where you'd never do that."

Nandita says her advisors in the government department, Professors Mary Alice Haddad and Douglas Foyle, have been supportive above and beyond academic advising.

"I've talked to Professor Haddad about just being stressed out in school and needing help. She's been great about advising me on what choices are best, even if it's not what I envisioned for myself," Nandita says.

She describes how Foyle "gave me the chance to really push the envelope" by encouraging her to pursue a 25-page research paper on how the Disney movie *The Lion King* is really a commentary on 1990s Clintonesque politics. "He helped me get a foundation and build an argument.



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Japan, a Freeman Scholar. "It was mind-blowing when I first started [my major in] College of Social Studies sophomore year. It really changed my perspective on writing. Writing shapes your mind, and tells you how to think."

Like domestic students, many international students say they were drawn to Wesleyan because of its reputation for having small class sizes and accessible professors.

"Something I came to learn here in the American education system is that professors are very approachable," says Gideon Too. "They have office hours; they're very willing to sit down with you and talk about pretty much anything. The student-teacher relationship is completely different in

It gave me the confidence to do something really interesting and outside the box in that and all my other classes. I began to get a fulfilling educational experience after that class," she says.

Some students say being at Wesleyan gave them an opportunity to get outside their comfort zones. Bingxin Wu decided to join the Equestrian Team freshman year, though she had never ridden a horse before. His freshman year, Yusaku Takeda took a drawing class, and was shocked when the model stripped down naked and began to pose.

Jared Wang surprised himself by running for a spot on the Wesleyan Student Assembly the first semester of his fresh-

man year. He posted flyers around campus and knocked on doors to introduce himself to students. "Now, I still can't believe I did that. It was really scary," he says. After campaigning door-to-door the first night, Jared says he stopped and thought, "No, I can't do this." But the next day, he gathered up his courage again and went back out to campaign. He ultimately was elected as one of nine freshmen representatives on the WSA. "It was a very empowering experience," he says.

Heran Abate '13 of Addis Ababa, Ethiopia says she signed up to live in WestCo her freshman year "because I knew it was going to be something entirely different from

what I had experienced before. I had lived at home my whole life. WestCo was co-ed. You had meetings at 9:07 p.m."

She adds, "I really was intent on not thinking about international students and domestic students as being different. That's a bit of a constructed boundary. I think we all have very different experiences. The first day the domestic students arrived, I made a point to go room to room and introduce myself to the new students and their parents, and it was really exciting. That's how I found one of my best friends. She was just down the hall."

Yet sometimes it's difficult for students to break away from their comfort zones. International Student Orientation is a great place to make new friends, said several students, but it can be easy to limit yourself to those first people you meet.

"My biggest problem when I came here was that I attached myself to the international student community very quickly," Nandita admits. "Breaking hold of that was very, very hard." It took a while, she says, to branch out on her own. By sophomore year, she performed in several musicals, became a tour guide, started co-editing an Asian studies journal called *Resonance*, and became involved in the South Asian Students Association.

As she has come to know more domestic students, Nandita says, "I think students here are naturally very curious and accepting. One thing I love about this school is that people will never say, 'So, you're Indian. Does that mean you're going to have an arranged marriage?' Instead, they'll ask, 'Do arranged marriages really happen in India?' They really respect where you come from and they want to know more." However, she admits, "There are moments when things can get lost in translation."

For all her difficulties adjusting to Wesleyan, Nandita says her last two years here have been the best years of her life. Now, she says, "I feel a lot less like an international student at Wesleyan, and more like a Wesleyan student." In contrast to her Indian friends who attend other American universities, Nandita says only a small minority of her Wesleyan friends are of Indian origin.

"As you go through your first couple years at Wesleyan, people get to know you more. They get to identify your little quirks and

oddities, and they come to accept them—no matter how offensive they may be at the beginning," she says. "Now, I have not only a friend group, but friends all over campus. There are people who are willing to go to bat for you and push for you to do really well."

Moreover, she says, Wesleyan has changed her. "Whatever those conservative notions I came in with to Wesleyan, those have completely broken down. I feel like I have a much, much wider open mind. People in the

school always surprise me. Those you least expected will be the most amazing, supportive friends you will ever have."

As Chazelle Rhoden puts it: "If you're open-minded, if you can respectfully bring across your point and your personality, if you want to share ideas with really smart, energetic, exciting people—then this is the school for you. The best thing about Wesleyan is it gives you the space to be who you want to be. As long as you're respectful of people's opinions and of people in general, then you'll thrive here. People will support you, and you'll grow from that energy."



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