

Student Article

Why I Love My Turtle Socks: Reflections on Being Welcomed into a New Community as an International Exchange Student from the UK to the USA

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Many new students chose to arrive at Beloit College wearing their new ‘turtle socks’ – a fun gift sent from the admissions department to welcome all new students prior to their arrival. The turtles represent the college’s ‘un-official’ mascot, but for me the socks themselves represent something more. Gifting 400 new students the same pair of custom-socks each year seems like a clever way to foster a sense of belonging. I have later come to realise that the arrival of these socks was the first sign that my new college would make welcoming me a priority of theirs, and that a great deal of time and energy would be used in trying to show us that we had now become a ‘Beloiter’ and that we were important to the Beloit community.

There were a great many differences between my first ten days as a first-year undergraduate student at my home institution, the University of York, and as a new exchange student at Beloit College in Wisconsin. My transition into university life in York was made easier by having grown up just 80 miles from the city and being familiar with what to expect from a typical British university’s ‘Fresher’s Week’. However, the arrival period at Beloit College surprised me in many ways, and although it was a hectic and tiring time, I can reflect positively on the ways in which my host institution was able to assist me in feeling welcomed.

Beloit College is a small liberal arts college with just 1,350 students, of which almost all live on the campus or within a five-minute walking distance. With almost the entire student body living in its provided accommodation, the college is able to easily direct when different groups of students can arrive. New international students arrive amongst the earliest in order to participate in a three-day weekend of ‘international orientation’. They are then joined by new students from US and a week-long ‘New Student Days’ programme begins, at the end of which the existing students return to campus and classes begin.

Having experienced the very relaxed culture of a typical British ‘Fresher’s Week’, I was greatly surprised by the huge number of requirements of my ten-day orientation period at Beloit. There were compulsory activities and events scheduled for each of the ten days, beginning early and continuing into the evening. It was a challenge to find time to take a moment for myself, sleep off my jet lag, or even properly unpack. We were required to prepare for each day by completing homework the night before, often taking over an hour, something I could not imagine being included as part of a typical ‘Fresher’s Week’ in the UK. Most activities took place in classrooms, usually with small groups of other exchange students and sometimes together with new US transfer students with which we the shared experience of previously being at another college or university.

Many of the activities were memorable. We gave each other ‘nicknames’ to help learn names, gave short presentations about our ‘life journeys’, and together read the beautiful graphic novel *The Arrival* by Shaun Tan in which the character encounters a new and

unfamiliar culture. Towards the end of the week we brought in objects that were important to us and told their stories. I remember one young man in the group becoming very emotional as he spoke; over-come with homesickness. We also discussed what we were finding difficult so far, giving our orientation leaders an opportunity to resolve some student's previously unmentioned problems, such as accommodation issues.

Outside of the classroom, we explored college facilities and places in the local area, met informally with professors to discuss academic opportunities, and socialised with other new students. Another very prominent difference between my US orientation and my UK orientation was the absence of alcohol. Given that the legal drinking age is 21 in the US, there were no organised or advertised events that involved alcohol. As someone that seldom drinks, I found it extremely refreshing to be able to attend popular social events that did not centre on alcohol consumption.

The orientation period also covered serious topics. We spoke in depth about the college's drug and alcohol policy, learnt what we might expect in terms of how sexuality and gender preference is expressed and recognised on campus, and discussed issues surrounding students' race and class. Following a six-hour online video seminar we had a serious discussion surrounding sexual assault on college campuses. Every member of the student body at Beloit is required to complete this seminar and attend a discussion group prior to beginning class. It is likely that this choice to extensively educate students about these issues contributes to the fact the college has proportionately one of the highest rates of reported sexual assaults of all US colleges and universities. This does not necessarily show that more assaults are happening at Beloit, but that more people feel able to report incidents.

The orientation period ended with a very touching and memorable celebration. After the first day of classes a 'convocation ceremony' was held to celebrate the beginning of the new school year. The ceremony began with a large parade through the campus led by myself and 40 other international students, each holding their country's flag to signify the 41 countries represented by the student body. We were followed by almost 400 other students, all the new exchange students, transfer students, and the entirety of the new class of 2020. As we approached the campus's chapel we were greeted by every faculty member, all wearing their full academic dress of colourful gowns and caps. They formed a long pathway and cheered and applauded as we walked between them and into the chapel.

Inside we listened to speeches and watched live performances. The event was broadcast live on the college's website, and my family tuned in from at home in England and watched me approach the stage and place my flag amongst the others. At the end of the ceremony, the flag bearers stood and retrieved the flags and formed a line standing in pairs ready to lead the exit from the chapel. I found myself standing at the front with another exchange student and together we led the group down the aisle of the chapel. The doors were opened as we approached revealing a large crowd of students waiting outside, ready to cheer and applaud us. We walked through the crowd, leading 400 new students and the entire dressed faculty behind us. The event ended with a sunny picnic for the whole campus with games, activities and music. I felt more than ever that Beloit was proud of its international community and had succeeded in welcoming us to America and to Beloit College.

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