

Unexpected discoveries

If someone asks me about my experience on the International House (ihouse), I would have to start my answer saying that it has been way more than what I expected. My original expectations with the ihouse were really low. I was expecting just a place to “eat and sleep”. However, I found here way more than that. Actually, if I would have to talk about my Berkeley experience, an important part of it would be about the ihouse.

This place has allowed me to explore other cultures, but not has you can learn about them in textbooks. I’ve learnt here directly from the people from those places. When you learn like this, the histories from that culture become alive. They are part of the life of the person who is talking with you. The story that you hear has an emotional meaning. It makes you be more respectful and helps you to understand it better. I’m surprised about how much I’ve learnt been here. I study Biology and usually topics related with history, economy or international politics are not widely discussed among my friends in the department. But, when we talk about them, I’ve surprised myself about how much I know (I’ve learnt, really) about those things.

During my bachelor and master in Chile most of my friends studied things very close related to what I do. Our topics of conversations and even our points of view tended to be very similar. I don’t think this is inherently bad, but during my PhD the situation has been different. Although the relation with my friends from the department is pretty much the same that I had with my friends in Chile, now I have a whole group of friends with a completely different academic background. Living in the ihouse, I have made friends whose study sociology, economics, business, drama, engineering, history, philosophy, mathematics, etc. Totally, different things to what I do!

In the daily life you can meet people who studies or work in those areas, but as there is small or not direct relation with your field there is not that much conversation about these things. But, living in the ihouse, the situation is different. As we are students an important part, sometimes the center, of our life are our studies. Then, naturally you start talking with your friends about midterms, assignments, courses, etc. However not because you are necessarily interested on that topic, it is because you are interested on your friend's life. As an inevitable consequence you start learning about the stuff that he/she studies. Then, this friend becomes into a window to a new area of the human knowledge.

This interaction is interesting by itself, but here it gains a whole new dimension with the international perspective. I've realized how for some topics that I thought I didn't know anything; the simple and many times crude description of the situation in my country could stimulate a very interesting conversation with someone who knows about it. In that kind of situations I've felt this thing of "to be an ambassador of my country and culture". Actually, these kinds of situations have stimulated me to learn more about my country and culture in order to be a better "ambassador". Ironically, or maybe obviously, been more than 9,500 Km from home I've become more interested in what's going on and the history of my own country. Living here, I've realized that the world is big and things that I give for granted about Chile are not obvious for people from other countries. In some way, my experience in the ihouse has been an experience of reaffirmation of my own identity.

But, living here I've realized in a new way how unequal the world is. I've realized how the opportunities are unevenly distributed and how fortunate I am having the chance to experience live here and study in Berkeley. I've also realized how good the education that I got in Chile was, but at the same time, how many of the difficulties

that I had to face just don't exist in other places. For me, these simple observations represent a motivation on itself to work for a more egalitarian and equal world.

In the same way, I've realized that even if the people that come to the ihouse are very diverse, they represent a biased proportion of the people of each country. A wise Swiss friend told me once: "I think I have more in common with you, than with a lot of people in my country". The fact that we are all students in a very similar age range generates a lot of commonalities among us that are many times stronger than our potential "cultural differences". This makes me aware about the fact that even if I can learn about other cultures here, I am not having the whole picture. I will only get it visiting and living in those places. The intercultural experience in the ihouse is only the first step.

Finally, there is another aspect that became important for me in the last months. One of the greatest things about live in the ihouse is you are always with company. I've lived with my family whole my life and in my transition to Berkeley I have had the fortune to don't feel home sickness or loneliness at any time. I believe this is directly related with live on this place.

This is my second year here and I think I didn't point out many those things during my first semester. So, I would say that I've kept having unexpected discoveries. Now... If someone asks me about my experience on the ihouse, I will say: "learning and frineship".

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