

Going to the U.S. as a Participant

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In recent years, an increasing number of VN civil servants have been sent by the government to the U.S. to participate in in-service training programs. For the majority of these civil servants, their first visits to a foreign country have caused a lot of anxiety. Two years ago, I was in such a state of mind myself, and upon arrival in the U.S. I suffered much from this lack of experience. The purpose of this article is to describe some aspects of the life in the U.S. in the hope that it will save some trouble for future Vietnamese participants.

The greatest matter of concern is the living conditions; one should be healthy to be able to study. As we move from a hot country to a cold one, the most necessary thing is that we bring with us warm clothing; however we should not be too concerned about this problem, as boarding houses in America are fully equipped with heating facilities. The best procedure is to arrange for a departure in Spring so as to have six months before us to prepare for Winter. American students usually wear a type of very convenient and advantageous boots and jackets which cannot be purchased in Vietnam. Nearly all Vietnamese new comers to the States feel an itching on their body (allergy?) but they usually get rid of it two weeks after their arrival. As to foods, they are not tasteful, but at length we can get used to them; thanks to an abundant use of milk during the meals, most Vietnamese get an increase in their weight.

Homesickness is one of the most difficult problems to solve; to weep in the night, while in bed, is something which occurs very frequently. One remedy against homesickness is to have a program of activity. Our most natural program of activity deals with study and observation; we should therefore plan for a full use of our stay in the States to carry out this program: to talk with American people, to read, to look at the TV, or to travel. The ICA is usually obliging in granting plane tickets and allowances for our pleasure and observation tours. My own experience is that travelling while in a serene state of mind is a pleasure, but travelling while feeling sad and melancholy is not a very agreeable doing.

"Is there anything which doesn't appear with a mark of sorrow
"Nature never looks happy when Man is sad." (K.V.K.)

If we work hard and acquire a hard-working habit, homesickness will gradually become a problem of minor importance.

"To study is a miraculous way
"To seek for happiness while we are sorrowstricken by separation."

The language problem is also one of the most difficult to solve. The study of a foreign language consists generally of four parts: reading, writing, understanding and speaking. To most of us, reading and writing are relatively easy matters; understanding and speaking are much more difficult. Those who are able to read and write will get on easily in understanding and speaking the language; it is therefore desirable that we should study English as much as we can before we start for the States. If we have a solid background in English our stay in the States will be much more significant, profitable, and we shall have much more opportunity to learn. Our relations and contacts with American people is, first of all, to learn, to understand and use the spoken language; it is only after that we can try to learn about the way of reasoning and conceiving of these friendly people. If the first objective is not achieved, it is quite impossible to do anything better with the second one.

Let us talk now about the in-service training, which is the main objective of our Government in sending participants to the States. In our country we are generally familiar with classes in which the teacher speaks slowly and the students are absorbed in writing down notes in their copybooks. In American Universities, this state of affairs is almost unknown, because textbooks and periodicals are so numerous and changing that students and professors often use them at the same time, and class-rooms are only places where they exchange ideas and experiences.

For a subject such as political science, this teaching method may be extremely advantageous for students who already have a background in the subject but very inadequate for those who lack such a background or are not well informed on current events and news. Most of our participants belong to the latter group. As an example I may cite the classes in which they analyzed and discussed the work of a certain Mr. X., or an event which happened some time before in Chicago. At first I thought that the discussion would last only some ten minutes

and then change into a "lesson," but they actually discussed for the whole hour and all along the discussion I failed to discover the topic of the discussion. Another time I had to write an essay on: "Why our political parties fail to obtain full public confidence?" It should be noted that the term "our" means here "the American." To get out of this dilemma, I could not do anything better than to use the argument found in Vietnamese newspapers attacking the Vietcong, to attack the American Republican and Democratic Parties. I denounced their abusing the people's patriotism and ignorance as untruthful propaganda, their taking advantage of political activities for their personal wealth, and so on... And what I did not expect was that I got a fairly high mark for my copy; that accounts for a similarity in the mind and action (?) of people, despite a difference in the color of their skin.

While becoming familiar with the American higher education system, I made the following observations:

1. The American Higher Education puts emphasis more on practical work than on efforts of memory; the more difficult the work is, the higher is its value. An example of it may be found in the instance of a student who set for himself the work of building an automobile engine; he bought the metal necessary for the work and started to work on building the engine under the guidance of his professor. I have seen an automobile entirely built by the students.

Performance of work is the main element of success. In all works, the students have opportunity to develop their individual abilities according to the program they set for themselves. This method has many strong points and also many defects, but I believe that their desire to perform realistic and practical work while in the university will be very useful to students after leaving school.

2. Study programs are divided into many short terms which fit very well the needs of students. In our country the time unit is one year, the knowledge unit necessary to obtain a diploma is usually a one year study term. In other terms, if the school-year is 9 months, and if the student can attend the class for 8 months only, all he has done during these 8 months will be forfeited; if the curriculum comprises 10 subjects, and if the student succeeds in 9 subjects only, all he has learned in the curriculum will not be taken into account.

In the States, the time unit for study is generally three months, sometimes 5 or 10 weeks only; the knowledge unit necessary to be credited is a subject. In other words, if we

have in each year one 5 week leave, we can register for one or two subjects. When we have completed the study of ten subjects, we are qualified for a M.A. examination (which requires two more study years than our License). After the M.A. if we study for some 20 more subjects, we are qualified for the Ph.D. (which requires one more year of study than our Doctorate).

Thanks to such a practical organization, many employed American people can continue their study in Universities to increase their knowledge and get more diplomas. Opportunity to learn at school is not a privilege of younger people.

3. Admittance to an American College or University is generally difficult. Many colleges or universities require from their students High School marks or scores higher than the average, but nine out of ten people who take the (final) examination pass it; final examinations are not so severe here as in our country. Many reasons contribute to the situation:

a) Curricula are established here (in the States) in a more flexible way; if the students fail to get satisfactory results at the end of a school term, they may reduce the number of subjects in the next one, and focus their efforts on this limited number of subjects and in order to get better results.

b) In the American national economy there is a great demand for university graduates. Only four out of one hundred university graduates work for the U.S. Government, while in VN 85 out of one hundred university graduates work in the Government. Our economy is still too weak to use university graduates. A result of it is that our university is requiring more and more from its students, for fear that a large number of graduates would increase the crowd of unemployed people. Restriction in the number of university graduates means also limitation in the education of the population.

c) The sight of prosperity in foreign countries reminds me of our real situation.

Like many other people, I often ask myself: Is there any way to improve the situation of our students? And below is the general answer to my question:

In the life of a nation, there are three main components: the administrative organization, the productive forces, and the colleges and universities. If there is

coordination between these three factors, the nation can be developed in the normal way. The administrative organization would, for example, help the productive forces to operate in security, order and justice, provide statistical data, determine the foreign trade policy, regulate the productive mechanism, act as arbiter in conflicts... Colleges and universities supply the personnel and technicians for productive forces. As long as higher education institutions fail to accept this major duty, there is no hope to get out of the impasse and the direct victims of such a situation are the students themselves.