

University of Missouri/ University of the Western Cape

Exchange Programme: Fall 2017

Johan Fourie (3rd Year Social Work Student)

APPLICATION, PREPARING & ARRIVING

In the second year of my Social Work studies, the University of the Western Cape awarded me the prestigious Henry Mitchell Scholarship and an lifechanging opportunity to exchange my second semester studies to the University of Missouri, in Columbia, Missouri, USA. This opportunity came after the University extended a call for applications and I had made a successful application. The application process was tedious, competitive, demanded a steadfast commitment and biblical patience as there were many phases to the process. However, through it all, I persevered as the University of Missouri's inclusive policies towards LGBTQI identifying persons and its globally acclaimed academic status impressed upon me a commitment to affiliate with the University.



Post the aforementioned application and administrative processes, I left South Africa on Friday, August 11th, 2017 and arrived in Columbia Missouri on Saturday, August 12th, 2017. Arriving in the USA and at my residence felt surreal and I was overwhelmed with emotions as I only then truly realized that I had made it – a first generation college student and a descendant of a working-class family on a prestigious scholarship is in the US. Who would've imagined. I also instantaneously realized the responsibility that weight upon me to academically succeed. A responsibility and pressure that continued to heavily weight upon me throughout my semester at the University of Missouri.

Orientation & Registration Week

On Monday, August 14th, 2017, orientation for all incoming international students began. During that week of orientation several induction workshops were conducted with the students to foster an understanding of American society and help students better acclimate. Also, part of orientation week, we had to register for our courses and mine was a bit challenging. Most of the classes at the time of our registration were already full and we had to write to the course instructors for permission to enrol in their classes. I also had double the course load that a normal undergraduate student would take at the University of Missouri which further complicated and escalated my distress at the time. However, upon referral to the International Admissions and Registration Office, the matter was resolved. I was given space in all my seven courses and had agree to academic probation. Irrespective of the challenges I experienced with my registration, I still thoroughly enjoyed orientation week. I met amazing people from all over the world – China, Japan, Korea, Denmark, Russia, Paris, London, Mexico, Spain, Nigeria, Zimbabwe, Kenya, only to name a few. I also met



a two South African and former UWC students who had come to the University of Missouri to pursue their postgraduate degrees. Many of the people I had met during orientation week became good acquaintances and people who I occasionally had joined for supper or lunch at the University Dining halls. Moreover, the two South African students became my good friends and safe space.

The Academics



The week after orientation, classes commenced. I formally met my course instructors and was introduced to my classmates. The course instructors and my classmates were welcoming, compassionate, and truly made me feel at home. Instant differences that I noticed was that the classes were much smaller than what I was used to as we were approximately 30 to 35 students per class. The lecturing style was also very different as most of the classes did not have PowerPoint presentation slides and I had to learn but to actively listen, write comprehensive notes based on what I heard, distinguish what is relevant, and still participate in class discussions. A further difference that I noticed and that instantly triggered my anxiety was the spelling and pronunciation of the English words as well as

their Standard Grading scale. I believed that there was no way that I was going to achieve A symbols at the University of Missouri because its percentages for that is much higher than South Africa's. Following my observation and adjustment to the differences, I committed and started the work to achieve the purpose of my exchange to the University of Missouri. Soon after classes have commenced, I had my first exam sitting. Anxiously, overwhelmed, distressed, and with little confidence I prepared for the weeklong sitting. Nonetheless, I successfully completed the exam session as I passed all my assessments. Passing the assessment period boosted my confidence, gave me a sense of potential, and a glimpse into the three exam sessions that were to follow throughout the semester. However, as the semester progressed, it became more challenging to manage my course load. I had submissions every week, wrote every month, and still had to prepare to participate in class discussions for participation marks. I must admit that I was challenged to my core, overworked, overwhelmed, and socially alienated because all my energy and my time was spent on managing my course load or being anxious about my workload. Nonetheless, I persevered and held onto my course load as the thought of repeating my sophomore year was not an option. I submitted all my work, studied, worked hard, and wrote all my assessments even when I had no confidence that I will pass. Amazingly with the publication of my final results, I scored a 3.33 GPA and I made into the Golden Key International, the Honour Society at Mizzou as well as onto the Dean's List: Arts & Science. To say that I was overwhelmed with emotions would be an underestimate. What I realized through this is that when we know what we want, sacrifice for it, and diligently work towards it, we will achieve whatever we put our mind to.

Social Life, Church, Thanksgiving



My social life was barely non-existent but every now and then I had one. Prof Uphoff, chairperson of the UM/UWC exchange programme, and his wife, Marcha Uphoff, once a month invited myself and Jade (LLM student) for dinners at their family home in Columbia. Marcha cooked for us and the discussions at the dinner table were always interesting as it varied from politics, religion, academia, equity, racism and even the feasibility of free higher education in South Africa. In addition to the Uphoffs, a South

African family who have been living in the US for twenty years also occasionally invited Jade and I as well Veli (PhD student) to their family home for brunch, lunch, and supper. Likewise, Jeff Carson and his wife, Angela, whom I met during Orientation week became good friends of mine and they occasionally met up with me for coffee or lunch. Each of these families were so kind, generous, and sincere. I will forever be grateful unto them because if they had not force me to come to their homes I would have been more lonely and distressed than I was prior to meeting all of them. I pray for them and their families every night and that God shall give unto them three-fold then what they gave me. Their friendship, their interest, and genuinely caring about my well-being.

Similarly, I pray for the church I attended in Columbia. Urban Empowerment Ministries was my spiritual home and every week I looked forward to attending their Sunday services. I always left inspired, encouraged, and with hope that I will overcome the emotions and strain I felt at the time. The church and its engaging services were part of the things that kept me sane. I pray for them too and I will forever be grateful. Lastly, the International Centre at the University of Missouri placed international students with domestic staff, students, and alumni for Thanksgiving. I was placed with Ms. Chrissy Houton, a staff member, and her family and what a perfect match! It was my first Thanksgiving experience and they went out of their way to make it special. I ate the traditional Thanksgiving meal and got say what I was thankful for. An experience I was grateful for especially because they were so welcoming and happy to have me at their home.

My Recommendation

In reference to experience at the University of Missouri, I have several recommendations for future applicants. One, that the application of students who will have to enrol in more than 12 credit hours (4 courses/modules) at the University of Missouri need further discretion. As I previously mentioned, such a course load is demanding, takes away from participating in cultural activities, travelling, or networking. Moreover, it affects one's psychosocial well-being which can negatively affect one's academic performance

and takes away from it being a holistic learning experience. Secondly, that pre-departure orientation and preparation (academic, emotional, and spiritual counselling) be given to students as it will better prepare students for acclimation in their hosting country as well to perform academically. Lastly, that a thorough breakdown of the financial responsibilities that students are to endure in their hosting country (tax, co-payments to health insurance, meal plans, residence hall, stationary, etc.) should be given so that they are adequately prepared for those responsibilities and expenses. I firmly believe that if this support is given to students, it addresses future needs and give students a fair fighting chance to really succeed as many of the other challenges are either then bearable, not added onto, or completely diminished.

Word of Thanks

Before, I conclude my reflection, I would like to note that the University of Missouri, completely changed my life. Prior to leaving South Africa, I often felt disregarded, without a purpose, and that I was unaccomplished. Even though I was academically performing. However, being at the University of Missouri, I discovered my own strengths, potential, and now know what I can achieve. I have a sense hope, purpose, I feel accomplished, validated, and that the world is my oyster. I am also not as critical anymore of myself and don't feel a need any more to compensate because I am an LGBTQI identifying person. All of this because the University acknowledged my identity, gave me safe space to be, to stand in my truth, and refined my intellectual abilities. I now know that I can survive and achieve anywhere in the world. Based on this experience, I am planning on returning to the US in 2020 through the prestigious Fulbright Scholarship.



Lastly, a special word of thanks to Ms. Debra Lamson and her colleagues at my home University, The University of the Western Cape. Ms Lamson believed in my potential when she selected me for the program and supported me throughout the entire journey. Similarly, thanks to Prof Uphoff, Mr. David Currey, Ms Kristen Colbretch, Ms Carol from Reslife, The LGBTQI Resource Centre, my professors and everyone who supported me and looked after me at the University of Missouri. Also thanks to all my South African sponsors and everyone who accompanied me on this lifechanging experience. I salute and pray for you all.

Sincere Regards,

Johan Fourie

Henry Mitchell Fellow: 2017