

Adjustments color the experience for international students

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Moving from home to college is a big step for most. But for international students – who make up roughly 15 percent of Detroit Mercy’s enrollment – it’s even bigger.

Pauline Van Herck, Iris Thioux and Sara Mitrakovic can attest to this.

All were given the opportunity to pursue a college education on full scholarships while playing tennis at Detroit Mercy.

When not in America, Thioux, 21, lives in Lyon, the second largest city in France. She struggled initially in Detroit.

“At first it was scary,” she said. “But I honestly think that it has helped my personal development so much.”

International students face many cultural challenges when making the transition, especially when it comes to language differences.

A key requirement is that they pass the TOEFL, which tests an individual’s ability to speak and apply English.

For Mitrakovic, 21, this was no problem.

“My parents enrolled me in language school in Slovenia at 4 years old, and by the end of high school I was fluent in Slovenian, English, Croatian and Spanish,” she said.

For Thioux, however, language was her biggest obstacle. She failed her first attempt at the test, which stopped her from starting college in fall 2015.

She used the extra time at home to work on her English, to be ready for enrollment in the winter semester.

For Van Herck, also 21, her biggest adjustment to America related to lifestyle.

Coming from a town in Belgium where everything from roads to shops is considerably smaller, she found the move overwhelming.

“Everything is bigger here,” said Van Herck. “The schools, shops, especially the food. At the start it was hard to get used to, but I’ve tried to make it as similar to home as possible.”

Mitrakovic has noticed differences, too, between Detroit and her hometown, Ljubljana in Slovenia.

She believes her experience has made her more understanding of other cultures.

“I’ve learnt how different people operate, what suits them and what they consider to be ‘normal’ in their country,” she said. “I feel like people are a lot friendlier here than at home, much bigger personalities.”

Both Thioux and Van Herck are in their final years of studies. Their time in America is starting to come to a close.

Originally planning to move back home after graduation, both women opted to study a major that would transfer easily to their home countries.

Thioux and Van Herck studied business degrees, as it is extremely versatile.

“Especially with the advantage of being able to speak more than one language, it opens up a lot of opportunities in terms of job prospects,” said Thioux.

Mitrakovic took an interest in architecture with hopes of opening her own business and also offering interior design.

“I think the U.S. provides many opportunities to work, especially for internationals,” Mitrakovic said. “I would certainly like to get some experience, but long term I definitely would like to return home.”

Thioux, Van Herck, and Mitrovic are grateful for the experience and opportunity that has been given to them, and hope to return sometime after graduation to stay in touch with the close friends they have made during their time in America.