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Going the Distance: Nitish Rajbhandary



Rajbhandary came to Illinois Wesleyan sight unseen, except for pictures that he viewed on the Internet. Since arriving, he's been impressed by the friendliness of the campus and surrounding community. (Marc Featherly)

“Culture shock “ is a phrase often used to describe the emotional state of international students who come to college for the first time.

For Nepal native Nitish Rajbhandary, it wasn't really shock — more a slight disorientation. “The sights and smells are different,” he says. Everyday experiences like eating required adjustment — for example, salads. They don't have them in Nepal. “We cook all of our food,” he explains.

Another challenge came in the form of language. “We learn English at an early age, but there are not many opportunities to speak it,” he says.

Rajbhandary, a physics major, came to Illinois Wesleyan sight unseen, except for the pictures of campus that he saw on the Internet. He knew Bloomington was a small town relative to Kathmandu, population 1.5 million, where he attended Nepal's national high school and where, he says, most graduates go on to study at universities outside the country.

Political turmoil back home hasn't made it easy to be far from family and friends, and Rajbhandary hasn't returned home during his four years at IWU. In Nepal, “many things have happened,” Rajbhandary says. During his first year on campus, a new king ascended the throne who took complete control of the government in 2005, but popular pressure caused him to return power to the parliament last year.

In the midst of such strife, “I just pray for my family's safety,” Rajbhandary says. Though he acknowledges that most of his fellow students don't know anything about his country's current situation, Rajbhandary is forgiving. “I don't blame them for not knowing,” he says.

Rajbhandary stays in regular contact with his family via phone and e-mail, and says he's seen his cousin during his time as an IWU student. Though far from home, he says he's felt welcome here

from the moment he arrived. “The people I met were very friendly,” he says. “Our international student orientation was a lot of fun. We had food from four or five different restaurants — like Mexican, Italian, and Chinese. I’d never had Mexican food before.”

Being a physics major has kept Rajbhandary busy. His most challenging class was a May Term course called “Experimental Physics.”

“I spent 10 hours a day in lab,” he says, “but I got a lot out of it.” Despite the demands of his major, he’s found time to get involved in Illinois Wesleyan’s International Society, the South Asian Student Association, the Society of Physics Students, and WESN, the campus radio station. He’s also worked as a physics tutor, a lab monitor in Buck’s Language Resource Center, and assistant to IWU’s Assistant Director for New Media Ann Aubry.

Rajbhandary says that all of these experiences have prepared him well for life outside IWU. “Illinois Wesleyan has given me a lot of skills that will definitely help me later in life,” he says. After graduation, he plans to work for one year, the maximum allowed by his student visa. Then he’ll pursue a master’s degree or Ph.D., he says.

International Student Advisor Reenie Bradley describes Rajbhandary as a “quiet, capable, and thoughtful leader. ... I can always count on him for assistance or to offer an honest perspective on a situation. He has been a terrific mentor to the younger students, no matter what their country of origin.”

Rajbhandary advises incoming first-year international students to be open and avoid stereotyping others. “Take things as they are,” he says. “You’ll enjoy life more that way.”