

1. Stories from Madison, Wisconsin: From “a reporter turned student”

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I was excited when in the middle of last year I learned that I would receive a scholarship for the first time in my life to study at the Department of Life Sciences Communication, College of Agricultural and Life Sciences, at the University of Wisconsin during the second semester from January to May 2010.



This program was the result of a collaboration between the Wisconsin Alumni Association Thailand and the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Funds were provided by the Isara Amantakul Foundation and many other generous private sector organizations.

Becoming a student again ten years after my graduation required me to prepare myself. The system of education in America is different from that in Thailand.

One important difference is the language of instruction, which I expected to be the major obstacle. Students who have studied abroad should be well aware of that.

The University of Wisconsin-Madison is located in the state of Wisconsin in the Midwest of the nation. It is one of the oldest educational institutions, having been established for over 120 years. The university covers an extensive area in the center of the city of Madison. The city is not large and crowded like other American cities. That could be one of the reasons students from around the world are interested in studying there.

Information provided by the university shows that there are 42,000 students, with an average class size of 29 students. The school offers 135 majors, with a total of 4,300 courses.

Last year, UW-Madison was one of the 10 top universities in the U.S. There are several prominent faculties such as education, engineering, etc.

On the campus of the university there are over 40 libraries with a total of 7.3 million books available for students in 50,000 subject areas. One of the main libraries is Memorial Union. The university is located on a hill with many trees, facing Lake Mendota which provides a very good environment for studying. As this is the winter season, the area is covered with snow. That provides a different impression, but it is not an obstacle to studying.

The first hour of the course on news I attended was taught by Michael J. Flaherty, a former local newspaper man who serves as a senior Lecturer. The course was exciting even though the subject was one with which I am familiar as my profession is mass communication. There were about 10 to 15 students in the course, which made it easy for each of the students to express their ideas about the assignments they had been given. This is different from Thailand, where it is difficult to limit the number of students in a class.

The teaching method of Michael J. Flaherty is to give the students an assignment to read prior to the class, then to have each student raise issues during the class about the news articles that interest them. The atmosphere in the classroom was relaxed. Students were free to express their ideas, whether they were correct or not.

Teaching guidelines throughout this department are similar. In addition to giving students freedom to express themselves, the instructors aim to have the students learn from experts in the field, not just from the instructor. For example, the Campaigns and Public Relations course conducted by Dominique Brossard invited a speaker from the Olbrich Botanical Gardens at Madison to speak on management of that facility, including describing how people are encouraged to help conserve the area and prevent it from being encroached upon by expanding urban areas.

In addition to the willingness of American students to express their ideas, their acceptance of responsibility for studying and completing assignments was clearly superior to that of Thai students.

Information provided indicates that there are over 100 Thai students in many faculties studying in different areas at the undergraduate and graduate levels. As Chongchit Sripun Robert, recently retired from the Department of Mass Communication, Chiang Mai University and currently pursuing a Ph.D. degree in the Department of Life Sciences Communication, told me, the department is open to students from other areas who are interested in Life Sciences Communication. It seems that the department provides a good variety of educational opportunities.

English is a problem for all Thai students to a greater or lesser extent. They have to practice speaking, reading, and writing. Listening to the news, watching TV, and reading books can be very helpful for them.

I learned from the chair of the Department of Life Sciences Communication, Jacqueline Hitchon McSweeney, that there are many courses taught including print and on-line media design, website design for sciences, perspectives on science and technology, applied marketing communication, and production of advertising media. Every Wednesday at noon there is a discussion on topics of interest focusing on research conducted by faculty members. Everyone is afforded an opportunity to attend and to exchange ideas at the discussions.

All this is only a small portion of what I have experienced directly myself when I first arrived. I will relate to you my further experiences next time.