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Finding Home: International students face different choices as they consider life after Colby

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Neba Zaigham '08 of Lahore, Pakistan, joins family members from Pakistan, the United Kingdom, and California for a graduation photo.

FINDING HOME

International students face
different choices as they consider
life after Colby

*By Gerry Boyle '78
Photos By Fred Field*



Kostadina “Kossi” Nacheva ’08 sees it every time she tells someone about her post-graduation plans. There is a moment of hesitation, a searching look, because Nacheva, an economics and mathematics major who spent a year at the London School of Economics, has taken a job with the French bank BNP Paribas.

In Sofia, Bulgaria.

Nacheva is going home.

“They’re trying to decide whether to be happy for me,” she said. “For a second, they’re [thinking], ‘Oh. Should I congratulate you or not?’”

Nacheva is one of the few economics majors among the international students at Colby to take a job at home after graduation last spring, she said. Most are bound for Boston, Wall Street, or London, but she interned at the bank in Sofia last summer and decided both the bank and Sofia were a good fit.

“There is this nostalgia that is growing and growing,” she said. “By the end of the four years you’re just worn out from living out of a

suitcase, unpacking and packing all the time, moving your life from here to there.”

That friends and acquaintances both at Colby and at home aren’t sure how to react to Nacheva’s plans is indicative of the pressures international students feel as they study abroad.

While no two international students have the same experience, they often grapple with issues that are very different from those considered by their American counterparts.

As international students, should they aim to stay in the United States or return home? Should they major in humanities or potentially more lucrative sciences or economics? If they do return home after as many as six years abroad, will they still fit in there? How do they balance their intellectual needs with the expectations of their families and cultures?

“A lot of times it’s very dichotomous,” said Annelene Fisher ’08, from Cape Town, South Africa. “Our lives here at Colby and in North America are very different from our realities

in South Africa or wherever you’re from in the world, especially if you’re from a developing country.”

Fisher arrived at Colby after two years at Pearson United World College in British Columbia and a gap year spent teaching in Canada’s Northwest Territories and in Uganda. A jazz singer who performed in Cape Town clubs, she decided to major in music at Colby.

“I got a lot of flack for starting as a music major,” Fisher said. “‘What are you going to do with a music major?’ If not pressure from communities or families, there’s just this need to succeed. ... Because of the opportunities you’ve been granted and the sense of the community that you belong to, you want to be able to give back.”

Now majoring in international studies with a minor in economics, Fisher already sends money from her campus-job earnings home to her father, a carpenter who is retired due to health problems.



"There's just the expectation that you're going to keep doing that," she said. "So I know for both myself and my family, I need to be able to get a good job. I need to be able to provide for both myself and them, should the need arise."

For Fisher, music was at one end of the spectrum and investment banking was at the other. She found a middle ground, working as an intern for two summers in Washington, D.C., for an international public-health non-governmental organization. She was headed back there after graduation, though she did not have a job offer in hand.

"I feel that I could do what inspires me and what I'm passionate about and still be able to mediate the need to support myself and contribute to my family when needed," Fisher said. "Eventually you have to make those difficult decisions. Focusing on myself is not necessarily turning my back on my responsibilities or my commitment to community and family and giving back to them."

For many international students, profes-



Kostadina Nacheva '08 said she got odd reactions when she told friends she was returning home to Sofia, Bulgaria, to work in a bank after graduation. After four years abroad, it was time to go home, she said.

kanmarveettil '07 was working in consumer operations for Google at its Mountain View, Calif., headquarters when he got a chance to move to the company's new gleaming offices in HITEC City, a technology center in south central India—just 700 miles from his home,

"I've been away from family for more than seven years now, from sixteen to twenty-three," he said. "You miss out on a lot of stuff. Your cousin's wedding, someone gave birth. You sort of lose track over time."

Vadakkanmarveettil said the move back

"EVENTUALLY YOU HAVE TO MAKE THOSE DIFFICULT DECISIONS. FOCUSING ON MYSELF IS NOT NECESSARILY TURNING MY BACK ON MY RESPONSIBILITIES OR MY COMMITMENT TO COMMUNITY AND FAMILY AND GIVING BACK TO THEM."

Annelene Fisher '08, Cape Town, South Africa

sional opportunities—even apart from finance and medicine—simply can't be matched in other parts of the world. Renzo Mendoza Castro '07 works in Boston for ACCION, an international microfinance organization. Recently promoted, Mendoza said he loves his job. If he could find a similar job at an NGO at home in Peru, it wouldn't pay enough to support him. "I would have to have a second job," he said. "It would be hard."

For some students and international alumni, economic booms in their home countries make the decisions easier. Jayadev Vadak-

kanmarveettil is in the Indian state of Kerala.

Vadakkanmarveettil wanted to see the economic changes in India firsthand, he said from his Google office in Hyderabad. "It's really important for me to be close to my family at this point in my life."

Since moving back to India last spring, Vadakkanmarveettil has visited his grandparents and parents, his younger sister, his extended family. For the first time since he left for Mahindra United World College in India, outside of Mumbai, he was home for the Solar New Year festival.

was relatively easy, trading one Silicon Valley for another, with his meals, housing, and transportation provided by his employer. But not far from the shining glass buildings are occasional reminders of the area's other economy, he said.

"As soon as the car stops there are these mothers carrying their little babies who come up to the car and start scratching the windows, start begging for money," he said. "They don't have anything. This is in HITEC City, of all places. Even though the change has been dramatic, there are always reminders of the India



that is not getting free food every day.”

Vadakkanmarveetil, who took a semester off to work at the Cambodian Women’s Crisis Center with 2004 Oak Fellow Chanthol Oung, and with Burmese refugees in Thailand, said the economic disparity in India is troubling. “At Colby I was fairly critical of all the people who took those high-paying jobs on Wall Street,” he said. “It was like they were betraying some of the ideals that UWC tried to instill in us. But, in the end, I had to make one of those sorts of choices. I made it out of my free will but, when the opportunity presented itself, I would say that I was not terribly different from some of those people.”

However, Vadakkanmarveetil said, it is important to build a foundation that will allow him to eventually “do some of the things that UWC and Colby and other places and people have inspired me to do. ... I can’t preach on an empty stomach.” Nor can he always preach the beliefs he has formed in his time away from India—views formed through a liberal arts education, reflecting different values than those held by some of his coworkers.

“Occasionally, when I sit in the office or I go out to dinner with coworkers—still there’s a lot of tension between Hindus and Muslims in India, so you go out to dinner and this is a super-educated person who works at a company like Google or at Oracle—you’ll occasionally hear them say things that you personally find unacceptable about another religion or any of these other classifications.” Sometimes he speaks up, he said, and other times he holds his tongue.

“There are times when I can actually step in and shape someone’s perception of a certain issue,” Vadakkanmarveetil said. “And there are times when it’s better for me to be silent and not put on my progressive, U.S.-educated liberal hat.”

He isn’t alone in finding that his worldview has changed in his time abroad.

An economics and mathematics major,

Demeke Wondmagegn ’06 is teaching mathematics and studying German in his home city, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. While he is afforded “automatic celebrity status” for having studied in the United States, he said, he also is seen by some in Addis as “extremely [perhaps to some distastefully] liberal, capitalist, and individualist.

“I have developed an appreciation for diversity of opinions and ways of living,” Wondmagegn wrote in an e-mail. “Well, some may consider this disbelief in moral absolutism moral degeneration, but I call it tolerance.”

For other international students who are considering returning home, the move may bring a more jarring cultural transition.

Sanval Nasim ’08 said recent political changes make it more likely that he will return to Pakistan. But Nasim, who has been studying abroad for six years, wonders how he and other Western-educated students like him will fit in a place where conservative religion has become a dominant cultural force.

“My lifestyle is very different from what is acceptable in Lahore,” he said. “Going out and having a glass of beer is not what is socially acceptable at home.”

Nasim said he hoped social mores could be changed. But some customs are in Pakistan to stay, said Neha Zaigham ’08, who also is from Lahore. If Zaigham returns home, she will be expected to live at home with her parents until she is married.

“That’s a very alien concept for my friends who are from the West,” said Zaigham. “And you know, before I left, I may have never questioned that fact. I would have lived there under my parents’ roof until I was married off or something. Never thought twice about it. You live in this independent environment [here] and you’re absolutely responsible for everything you’re doing. Having to go back to that [expectation] is very difficult. As a woman I cannot completely disregard it and say, ‘I’m going to go back and I’m going to live on my own.’”

But living arrangements are not the only, or even the most pressing, social issue for Naigham. She spent a summer working for an organization that works to increase awareness of contraception to women in Pakistan. In impoverished communities outside Lahore, many women came to the NGO workers for advice—but these women were afraid to tell their husbands, Naigham said. “Living

Brian Wadugu ’09 works in the chemistry lab at Colby. A stint working at a rural clinic in his native Tanzania compelled Wadugu to plan to return to Tanzania to practice medicine after he completes medical school in the United States.





here, where it's so open and these things are encouraged," she said, made her acutely aware of the situation women face in her home country.

International students who return home even for visits often confront glaring inequities in healthcare and living standards. Some are torn between needs in their own country and the opportunity to work abroad to help support family at home.

Brian Wadugu '09, a biochemistry and mathematics major, has his sights set on medical school. But he wasn't sure of that until he went home to Tanzania for Jan Plan to work in a medical clinic.

The clinic was in the village of Sota, five kilometers from Wadugu's home in the larger town of Shirati, in northern Tanzania close to Lake Victoria. Wadugu, who hadn't been home in two and half years, assisted a group of American doctors doing a house-to-house survey. He also translated for the doctor who

ran the local clinic as she met with patients. Wadugu found that soon he often could diagnose ailments, including malaria, on his own.

"That made me want to be a doctor," he said.

But where? In the United States with the promise of a sizeable income? Or in Tanzania, where many physicians earn a government-mandated salary of less than \$400 per month?

As the intermediary between doctor and patient, Wadugu was the person to deliver news of test results. And at least twice a day for three weeks, he informed patients they were HIV positive. Sometimes he told parents, because the HIV-positive patient was their child.

"Most of them, you see extreme sadness in their face," Wadugu said. "Once you tell them, that they do have HIV/AIDS, they would look depressed. We would tell them about the [anti-

viral medication], that brings them back."

His decision was made.

"Since I left [Tanzania], I've been thinking of working at home," Wadugu said. "But I didn't know what it was like to be a doctor at home. In my heart, I wanted to go home but I didn't know what I was getting into. Going home told me it truly was what I wanted to do. ... I think they need my help more than if I were to be a doctor here. I think I'll be more useful if I become a doctor at home."

In Tanzania Wadugu is introduced this way: "This is Brian. He's studying in the United States." Like residents of many developing countries, many Tanzanians dream of studying in or emigrating to America, he said.

If he returns home to work, Wadugu likely will be asked over and over: Why?

In Cebu City in the Philippines, Cybill Gayatin '06 said her return puzzled many of her hometown friends and acquaintances. "I got, 'I don't understand why you chose to

A talented jazz singer, Annelene Fisher '08 of Cape Town, South Africa, entered Colby intending to major in music. The need to help support family at home was one reason she decided to major in international studies and minor in economics. She was to begin a job with a nongovernmental organization in Washington, D.C., after graduation.



come back when so many people are thinking of ways to get out,” said Gayatin, 24, editor in chief of a glossy lifestyle magazine, *Zee*.

She said the desire to leave the Philippines for better economic opportunities has spawned such trends as physicians retraining as nurses to have a better shot at a job abroad.

Going against that grain, the international studies major and member of Phi Beta Kappa said she had “three standard answers” to the predictable question.

“One was that I was homesick and I missed the warm weather and I didn’t really want to be in the cold anymore,” she said. “Two was that I didn’t want to be living my life out of a suitcase. Three is that it was always somehow ingrained in me by my parents that it was important to give back, especially when everybody else is leaving.”

The real answer: “I already had my roots here,” Gayatin said. “So I think I didn’t want to have to start from scratch.”

She said she wasn’t willing to take a mediocre job just to stay in the United States for the limited time offered by her student visa. Instead, she returned home, went back to *Zee*, for which she had written in years past, and quickly rose to the top. She loves being back in Cebu City, she said, but there are frustrations—including relatively modest pay for most jobs.

“You can’t help but compare yourself to your friends who also have started working,” Gayatin said. “As soon as they get their first decent job, they can afford to rent their own place. They can pretty much afford to live off whatever they’re making. Whereas here, my friends and I can’t do that. We’re still financially very dependent on our parents.”

Relying on parents after graduation may be a letdown of sorts for any college graduate, but not for Adriana Nordin Manan ’07, who commutes to her investment job from her home in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia—with her mother.



Neha Zaigham '08 shares an embrace with her mother, Ayesha Zaigham, left, and her grandmother Shamsbad Parveen, who came to Colby from Lahore, Pakistan, for commencement in May.

As her mother makes her way to her job in the downtown offices of ExxonMobil, Manan heads for the skyscraping Petronas Twin Towers (the world’s tallest building from 1998 to 2004), a short distance away. Her division of the quasi-governmental company works on issues facing the country, from new industry to renewable energy. It’s not exactly what she was looking for when she started down what she called “the idealist.org” job-hunt route as a Colby senior, but Manan said she’s content in Kuala Lumpur.

“I really am,” she said. “I knew that, from pretty soon after I came home. It was definitely a case of following my heart.”

Her heart already had told her she would only stay in the United States for the post-graduation year allowed by her visa, she said. When a job didn’t materialize before commencement, and with general elections coming up at home, Manan grudgingly began to consider the alternative.

“After graduation, summer was the perfect time for me to sit and think to myself, what is it that I think is important in my life?” she said. “Where do I think I want to be? Try as I might, I saw myself being so

excited about the possibilities of being back in Malaysia.”

And while Manan, like most international students, doesn’t rule out graduate school in the United States, she said she has returned home a very different person from who she was when she left.

Now, Manan said, she is able to think critically, to question policies and positions in a respectful way. She understands how global trends affect countries and has a much keener insight into the dynamics of the United States than she would have if she had stayed in Malaysia.

“If I had been in Malaysia, I wouldn’t have known about the intricacies of U.S. society, issues of race and class, things that every country goes through,” Manan said.

“I have to say I benefited from the best thing in the U.S., which is its education system in terms of college, its liberal arts education system. I’m very thankful for that.”

Another gift from the States left her less pleased.

“People sometimes say I have an American accent,” Manan said, laughing. “No offense to anyone, but I’m just, ‘Oh, dear.’” 