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Vu Tran
University of Central Florida

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My Mistake as an Immigrant Student Was Viewing My Difference as a Drawback

By Vu Tran
UCF Forum columnist
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As an immigrant and first-generation college student, I have overcome many challenges throughout my life that I have had trouble sharing with others. For most of my childhood, I was ashamed of my background because I did not feel that I could connect with my peers.

However, because ABC's new TV show *Fresh Off The Boat*, about a family experiencing culture shock in a move from Washington's Chinatown to Orlando, I began reminiscing about my own life because the show closely portrays challenges I have faced.

I was born in Da Nang, Vietnam, in the early '90s as a part of the post-war generation. The economy was still recovering and families were beginning to move past the loss of their loved ones. My father had just finished serving in the military and was unemployed. He trained and worked as a medic during the Cambodian border conflicts. My mother worked as a kindergarten teacher prior to her pregnancy.

As I was their first-born child, my parents wanted to provide me with better opportunities than they had in their lives and decided to move our family to the United States. My aunt and uncle and their three teenage children also immigrated with us.

Although I was very young when we moved, I can only postulate about many of the struggles my joint family faced when we first arrived to Central Florida. We did not have the same financial and emotional support we had in Vietnam. My parents, aunt and uncle spoke very little English and had barely any money.

We stayed at a distant relative's home for quite some time but were seen as nuisances rather than guests. We eventually moved and managed to rent a small apartment with only two rooms for eight people.

For many years, the adults in my family worked at various minimum-wage jobs to make ends meet until we took a chance and opened our own restaurant, serving primarily Vietnamese cuisine near UCF. Again, we had to overcome another set of hurdles, but we were determined to succeed because we pooled all of our finances to invest in this fledging business. By some miracle (and the immense efforts of my family), we managed to maintain a successful restaurant for over 16 years.

Growing up, I would feel alienated because of my cultural background and my status as an immigrant, even though I was granted citizenship.

Like many people in this situation, I tried to become someone I was not.

It was not until I entered college and matured enough to realize that being different was acceptable. I finally understood that growing up in a multicultural environment actually put me at an advantage above my peers. I could fluently speak more than one language, and I seemingly had a more open-minded and culturally relative perspective when assessing different problems.

School was a major challenge to me on a regular basis because English was not my first language. It would take me much longer to think and complete my assignments than my classmates. As a result, I would often teach myself the class material to keep up and became increasingly independent. So when I started taking classes at UCF, I was able to quickly adapt and transition from high school to college.

I owe much of my success to my family because they were the ones who supported me and instilled values of hard work and dedication.

My biggest mistake was seeing my difference as an immigrant and first-generation student as a drawback. I was limiting myself from many opportunities by thinking this

way. Instead, I should have looked at this as an admirable quality because it defines who I am today.

These challenges that immigrants and first-generation students face can be more internal than perceived. It is not because the United States is unwelcoming to immigrants, but living in an unfamiliar setting can be culture shock to most people. The regular struggles that we face cannot easily be expressed.

Reflecting on my own journey has made me realize that I am fortunate and thankful to have immigrated to the United States because of the many opportunities to succeed.

Vu Tran is an anthropology graduate student in UCF's College of Sciences and a recipient of the UCF Order of Pegasus for academic achievement. She can be reached at vuqntran@knights.ucf.edu.