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Foreign Students Struggle at USM during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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“Foreign Students Struggle at USM during the COVID-19 Pandemic” by Maegan Williams (she/her)

ABSTRACT. *The University of Southern Mississippi administration has failed to fully consider international students when implementing policies, deadlines and other plans during the coronavirus pandemic. As an international student herself, Williams has seen and experienced first-hand how inconsiderate Southern Miss has been towards international students during this pandemic, especially when it concerns matters that they cannot control such as travel bans and financing. The international building is branded with the quote "Above All Nations Is Humanity" but when international students needed help the most, they were hung out to dry. All of the international students she contacted for content in this essay praised her for writing about their struggles, but no one wanted to be named. It is sad that they live in fear of demanding the help that we rightfully deserve. It is sad that they are so scared that they might offend or insult someone, somewhere, who is not doing their job, that they subject ourselves to being miserable and angry but silent. Even now, at the end of the semester Williams cannot say that much has changed for international students in particular. The school has implemented certain policies which protect the general student body such as moving classes online and putting devices that measure your temperature in all the main buildings, but very little has been done to ease the burdens faced only by international students.*



STUDENT BIO. Maegan Rose Williams is a junior Biological Sciences major from Kingston, Jamaica with a minor in Chemistry at The University of Southern Mississippi. She is the Lead Student Fundraiser at The USM Foundation and is also involved in The Afro-Caribbean Society, and the wider international community at Southern Miss. Most recently, Williams placed first in the USM's Got Talent competition where she performed as a part of a duo, showcasing Jamaican reggae and dancehall dances. She submitted her academic essay titled, “Foreign Students Struggle at USM during the COVID-19 Pandemic” initially for her English 102 class in Fall of 2020, as an outlet for expressing the overwhelming challenges faced by international students at that time.

Foreign Students Struggle at USM during the COVID-19 Pandemic

The University of Southern Mississippi administration has failed to fully consider international students when implementing policies, deadlines and other plans during the coronavirus pandemic. As an international student myself, I have seen and experienced first-hand how inconsiderate Southern Miss has been towards us during this pandemic especially when it concerns matters that we cannot control such as travel bans, and financing. The international building is branded with the quote "Humanity in Diversity" but when we needed help the most, we were hung out to dry. All of the international students that I contacted for content in this essay praised me for writing about their struggles, but no one wanted to be named. It is sad that we live in fear of demanding the help that we rightfully deserve. It is sad that we are so scared that we might offend or insult someone, somewhere, who is not doing their job, that we subject ourselves to being miserable and angry but silent. Even now at the end of the semester I cannot say that much has changed for international students in particular. The school has implemented certain policies which protect the general student body such as moving classes online and putting devices that measure your temperature in all the main buildings, but very little has been done to ease the burdens faced only by international students.

I first want to elaborate on the position that international students are starting from, because it will help you to understand why we are affected so woefully. We hail from all parts of the globe. USM's website boasts that seventy-one countries are represented by the student body. Many of us are from third world countries, and we either came here because we are academically gifted, and looking for a higher standard of education than our countries can provide, or we are athletically gifted and qualify for partial or full scholarships from the school. For those of us that don't get athletic scholarships, the financial strain on our families is unbearable. International

students are not eligible to work outside of campus, which limits us to campus jobs that pay very little, and we are not able to work many hours since we must maintain 12 credit hours per semester to remain full-time students, and legal in the country. According to U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, few exceptions can be made for students who are offered a job in their field (after a long and rigorous approval process) or under extreme economic hardship. I would argue that being stranded in a pandemic, homeless and away from my family when there were no available jobs on campus would be an example of extreme economic hardship. The school said otherwise. We cannot receive federal or state financial aid, or even take out federal school loans. I, like many of my international friends, have a 4.0 GPA and I pay roughly \$12,000 per semester. My American friends who are barely passing school pay next to nothing. I am from a lower class family in a third world country. My family is beyond broke, as all the money goes towards sending me to college. How is it fair that we carry the schools GPA on our backs but we can't receive any aid? How is that not discrimination?

In addition to financial stress, international students often fall into spells of depression, being away from their entire support system. Flying miles away from home, in some cases for days on your own, then having to settle in a new environment with no means of transportation is not something any freshman could enjoy. "The many sudden changes, along with the chronic stress of the pandemic, may pose mental-health challenges, particularly if students suffer from pre-existing mental-health issues," says Amoneeta Beckstein who is a multicultural positive counseling psychologist at Webster University Thailand. Upon my arrival at Southern Miss I was told in orientation that my first order of business should be to "Get a friend with a car". Needless to say most of us are bound to staying on campus day in and day out. For many of us, it's hard to make friends because the way we interact socially is so different, and

generally speaking the rest of the student body isn't interested enough to overcome language barriers and cultural differences to make an international friend. I thought it would be easy to make friends, being an extroverted person who is down for anything and loves to party. I have one non-international friend. I was wrong.

On the other hand, the International center provides students with resources such as the iFriends Hattiesburg Facebook group that is available for international students to make friends and express their need for help with other international students and friends of our community. Although the group is not affiliated with the school, it is a wonderful resource that can help us find roommates, rides to and from the airport and Walmart, houses to stay at temporarily and any other type of help we need. During the height of the pandemic they provided masks, and activities for us during quarantine.

Back in March when COVID-19 was declared a pandemic by the World Health Organization, many of us were extremely worried about the safety of our families and friends. The travel bans suddenly implemented all over the world meant some students, like myself could no longer return home for the summer. Those of us who had the option of returning home worried that we might not be able to re-enter the country. One student, when speaking with The Philadelphia Inquirer, stated "according to The Centers for Disease Control, foreign nationals from China, Iran, Europe Schengen, the United Kingdom, Republic of Ireland and Brazil are still not allowed to enter the U.S., unless they are green card holders, which many students are not." This information still holds true. The future was so uncertain, but anyone could have seen that coming. The student body was told that the dorms were to be evacuated, leaving international students and those who had nowhere else to go behind. This dimmed our college experience because the school became like a ghost town, and classes moved online, but we understood that

this was for everyone's wellbeing. What I cannot understand is empty promises. Everyone paid to be in the dorms until the end of the semester; May 8, 2020. Naturally I began to worry about where I was to live after this deadline, because borders all around the world began to close. The International Center knew that many of us were in a state of panic, and promised us that we would be fine and no one would be left homeless. Day after day I called, pleaded, begged for answers and all I was told was not to worry. Imagine relaying that information-or lack of- to your helpless parents miles away. After this deadline I, like many other international students, was forced to move out and live with people that I barely knew at the time because the school had in fact, left me without a place to live. When you are living in someone else's home rent-free, as I was, you have no voice. You have no control over what you get to do or when you get to do it. You are vulnerable and embarrassed. You live in fear of "biting the hand that feeds you".

On top of that, the main cafeteria on campus had all but closed, producing only one meal option for brunch and dinner with limited hours to come eat. One Canadian study says it perfectly, "Students related feelings of depression, homesickness and identity loss, hunger, difficulties with weight loss or weight gain, and stories of being forced to compromise religious beliefs in order to eat, as some of the implications of a lack of access to familiar and culturally appropriate foods." The portion sizes were downright embarrassing, just about enough to feed a six-year-old and if we requested more we were sometimes told by the staff that they were not allowed to give it to us. We received no refund, not even a partial one, from our meal plans, although most of us had to resort to snacks and off-campus places for food. One would imagine that since the school barely had anyone to feed, and the majority of the on campus population was now international students who are accustomed to flavorful meals from a variety of cultures, they would put more effort and seasoning into the meals. I was wrong again. There

were many nights when I was brought to tears simply because if I ate the bland, under seasoned, tiny portion of food, I would torture myself and receive no satisfaction, but if I didn't then I would starve. One cannot survive on snacks, and not everyone can afford to purchase meals night after night after paying that school fee. Many international students lost weight because of missing brunch or dinner times, opting out of eating because of the limited food options available or simply not getting enough to eat. We were fed but we were never full.

One resource provided to us was Eagle Nest, which is the food pantry on campus. They supplied fresh produce, dairy products and even some meats during the summer. This was a resource that I utilized heavily when I could not afford food. There are also individuals such as teachers who are quite understanding and helpful when it comes to helping us. I must commend Ms. Amy Carey who showed me so much kindness during this time. She provided me with groceries at the height of the pandemic and supplies to start this semester. She really showed me that there are teachers who care for and take action to help students.

After a long and brutal summer, we returned to classes in the fall only for many of us to have our classes dropped on the second day of school due to incomplete payment for the fall semester. In my opinion, international students should automatically be put on a payment plan, as I was in the spring when I had just arrived. The options for this semester however, were for me to pay just over \$10,000 by the start of the semester, or sign up for a payment plan that would charge an extra \$135 in fees then split the bill into four quarters across the semester. \$135 is already quite a bit of money but when you consider the fact that families in third world countries work just as hard and earn half as much or when \$135 is converted into other currencies you face the gruesome reality that most of us simply cannot afford to pay even a dollar more. As Kai

McNamee from the Financial Times puts it, “International students typically pay higher tuition fees: at public universities, that means paying out-of-state tuition, which can be more than twice the in-state fee. At private universities, where international students are usually ineligible for financial aid, the difference in fees can be even greater.” In my opinion, dropping classes on the second day of school in a pandemic due to incomplete payment is absolutely preposterous and is a cruel and rude way to scare families into forking up money that they don’t have, or scare students into believing that the school really has no option but to cancel their college education. This caused a huge panic and Go fund me accounts for students started to pop up all over social media. For a lot of us banking services in our countries cannot be accessed. For a lot of us, our family members lost their means of income because of COVID-19. For some of us, family members became gravely ill. The fact that we are expected to pay full tuition, meal plan, housing, insurance and “other fees” under all these conditions by day two of the semester shows that the administration simply does not care. After having our classes dropped, many students were unable to re-enroll in the classes they desired which could affect credit hour requirements for scholarship eligibility and for remaining legal in the US. “Would you pay \$75,000 for front-row seats to a Beyoncé concert and be satisfied with a live stream instead?” (Smith, 2). We are receiving an online education at the same cost as the face to face classes that we had last semester, but an online education is obviously cheaper. Why USM, Why?

After classes had moved online many students like me had all their classes dropped on the second day of school. Of course, since the classes are online one could not even continue to go to classes and make arrangements with his professors regarding assignments. We were completely shut out and at risk of deportation. Luckily, friends of the school, and organizations

like the Mississippi Rising Coalition helped students like myself pay their fees for the semester. I cannot express the relief I felt.

International students are already suffering, being away from home in a new place with no friends or family in the middle of a pandemic. Being told that you will be homeless because you cannot fly back home, barely being fed enough to stay alive, being dropped from classes (just to name a few) demonstrates to me that there is no compassion. It makes it clear to me that we are only here to keep up the school's overall GPA and pay, pay, PAY; as international students tend to outperform Americans and we do not qualify for most financial aid. I want the USM faculty to hear me and CARE. I want them to understand that we are all somebody's baby. We are not cash cows. We are people, we have lives and loved ones and we already have it hard enough. The least they can do is show some compassion and understand that we are in an even worse position when compared to the rest of the student body. I am forever grateful for the resources that have been provided because I would not be able to survive without them, however I want to do more than just survive. I am tired of feeling like I was recruited from my country to come and suffer for someone else's glorification.

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