

Calcutta lad Gourav Kumar Nandi had dreamt of studying in the US ever since he was in high school. After Plus Two, he applied to a dozen US universities for undergraduate studies and was accepted by eight of them. Although four were top of the class — part of the Ivy League — Kumar chose Montana State University (MSU), a public university located in Bozeman, a scenic town in northwest US. “Personally, I have never been an admirer of city life with its material aspirations. Life here revolves around the university,” says Nandi who is pursuing a major (honours) in mathematics. However, scenic

STUDY IN THE US ● If you have limited finances, want personal attention and like a quiet life, forget the Ivy League and choose a rural college, contends **Prasun Chaudhuri**

beauty is not the only reason he chose MSU. The interdisciplinary approach of the university — “honours programmes here ensure that an evolutionary biologist learns to appreciate the symphonies of Beethoven and an arts major knows about the Big Bang” — and the scope for part-time, on-campus jobs were other major factors that drew him to MSU. “The cost of study (tuition and accommodation) can be met by working 20 hours a week. The university administration employs students from all majors.”

Nandi is not alone in shunning top-ranking US universities for a lesser known one. Says Debarati Ghose, who is pursuing a PhD in biological sciences at Northern Illinois University, “A top-ranked university was never a priority for me. My field of interest and the specific opportunities were more important.” Also, she enjoys a full fee waiver as she works as a teaching assistant for graduates. “Just an hour’s drive from Chicago, life here is a blend of the fast and the quiet,” she says. She finds little logic in the ranking pattern of US universities for they are “too generalised and not course or department specific”.



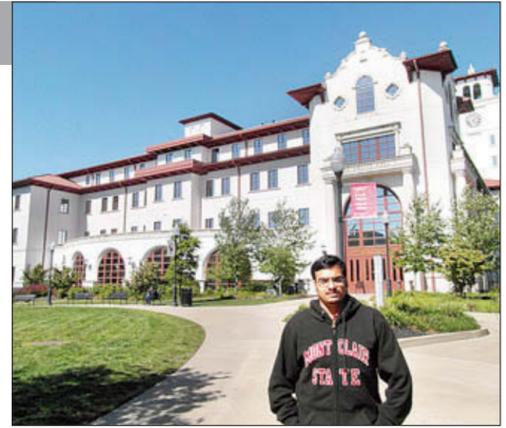
SMALL IS

BIG



USEFUL WEBSITES

- chea.org**
Website of Council for Higher Education Accreditation — organisation of degree-granting colleges and universities
- ope.ed.gov/accreditation**
A database of accredited postsecondary institutions and programmes run by the US Department of Education where all accredited programmes are listed
- collegeboard.com**
Resource for official college planning and preparation tools to help you succeed
- petersons.com**
Provides data on over 4000 colleges, universities and graduate programmes. Also, provides financial aid information and test preparation resources



Abhishek Roychowdhury at Montclair State University

in southern US and is not that expensive. “Most graduate students in general science get teaching or research jobs to cover their fees,” he says.

For Abhishek Roychowdhury, who is studying for a PhD in environmental management at Montclair State University in New Jersey, the goal is to provide that he can do as well as a student from the more famous Rutgers University or New Jersey Institute of Technology. “My PhD advisor is a leading geologist in the US. This gives me the opportunity to work with the most sophisticated instruments and mingle with top professionals. I don’t miss the ambience of a top university,” he says. Moreover, he’s got a full scholarship and a cushy campus job.

The biggest advantage of studying in a small university is that the student-teacher ratio is low and students get personal attention. Says Arindam Roy, director, EdXcare, an education consultancy in Calcutta, “In mega universities you can have a class with 900 students. In

‘large lectures’ — a primitive method of instruction. Nor do you have professors — too busy organising research grants — passing the buck to graduate or teaching assistants. For instance, Grand Valley State University (GVSU) — in mid-west US — has 40 graduate programmes in science and arts. “All our courses are taught by professors. We don’t have teaching assistants to teach students. The faculty members are actively engaged in their disciplines,” says Christopher Hendree, associate director of admissions, GVSU. Ken State University (KSU) in Ohio too has professors teaching classes that have fewer than 50 students. Says Jyotsna Misra, manager, India office of KSU, “We offer the resources of a large research university but students still enjoy personal care and attention at campuses spread across eight different locations.” Adds Sneha Jose, who is studying for a master’s degree in applied engineering at KSU, “It’s an ideal place for a student like me. It has a big city vibe within the comfort of a small town.”

A college or university should be chosen only after one has understood one’s goals and plans so that the right fit can be found between the university and one’s own abilities, says Rao of Usief. But she also has a word of caution. To guard against fraudulent small town colleges, “It’s imperative to choose an accredited institute. To check accreditation two very useful websites are <http://chea.org/> and www.ope.ed.gov/accreditation,” she says. Yet some experts believe that attending a highly reputed college helps a student land a better job. “Being surrounded by people who constantly challenge you provides an environment where you can learn better,” says a Calcutta-based scientist who studied at the hallowed California Institute of Technology for seven years.

Roy of EdXcare begs to differ: “I have seen many meritorious students who have been lost in the crowd of a Ivy League university. Suddenly they find that they are no longer at the top of the heap; they’ve to study hard just to pass. Sometimes their scholarships don’t get renewed because of poor results”.

Adds Saheli Roy, another education advisor at EdXcare, “For mediocre students, our advice is not to go for the top 50 or even top 100 universities. Most of them can’t cope with the pressure of top colleges where the competition is cut-throat. The situation makes their life tough and they miss out on all the fun in campus life.” So small can be big in the long run, if you choose carefully.

5 THINGS TO LOOK AT

- JOBS:** Immigration rules permit international students to work up to 20 hours a week, but only on campus, during their first year of study. By working 10 to 15 hours a week, you could earn enough to pay for books, clothing and personal expenses. Typical jobs include tutoring and assisting professors/researchers
- TUITION FEES:** Based on your first year grades, some colleges award partial tuition waivers



SPORTS SCHOLARSHIPS: Some US colleges offer gifted athletes the opportunity to play for the college team as a means of paying for their education. For more information talk to the education advisor at the Usief

INTERNATIONAL AWARDS: Ask about financial assistance from foundations, organisations and the US government. The little aid that exists through such sources is usually earmarked for advanced graduate students. Again, talk to the educational adviser at the Usief for more information

LOANS: You may be able to negotiate a loan to fund part of your education costs. You must usually have a US citizen co-signer to act as a guarantor for any loans from US loan programmes, and in most cases you must be enrolled in a US university before you apply

Source: www.educationusa.state.gov/home/financial-assistance

CHOICES GALORE

The US has more than 4,000 accredited universities and colleges — offering a wide range of choice for international students. Says Renuka Raja Rao, country coordinator at the United States-India Educational Foundation (Usief), “Some students prefer to study in a small campus or class while others

thrive in a more diverse and populated environment. The cost of living and climate vary greatly from one state to another and the fees too vary. Some universities can be extremely expensive and students must either be ready to finance their studies or explore the option of getting a university or external scholarship.”

Says Sayan Chakraborty, who is pur-

suing a master’s degree in chemistry from the University of Texas at El Paso (UTEP), “It is not possible for everyone to get into Stanford or MIT because of their high parameters, steep fees and extremely tough competition for scholarships. But I am happy to have joined UTEP’s chemistry department which ranks among the top 12.” El Paso is a beautiful city near the Mexican border

such ‘large lecture’ halls, the professors will never know your name; you won’t be able to ask a question. In many cases professors are also too busy with their research or lecture tours. Teaching assistants take their place.”

PERSONAL CARE

But at small universities you don’t get

Genius in class, failure outside

Indian students who feel at home only with Indians abroad fail to develop multicultural skills, says **Zahir Ahmed**

cultural skills or had real experience living and working with people of diverse backgrounds.

My point is that there is an equally important education to be had outside the classroom, that while Indian students do exceedingly well in the classroom, they fail outside. Parents and students need to understand the importance of education outside the classroom and encourage students to enjoy these experiences. Universities with several hundred Indian students, large cities with huge Indian communities or where the Indian student already has friends leads to barriers for the student to get a multicultural education. It defeats a major purpose of studying abroad, that of developing multicultural skills, the ability to interact and live with those from other cultures.

To some parents, sending their

son/daughter to a major institution is more of a status issue. It is akin to someone driving a Rolls Royce to work vis-a-vis going the same distance in a Toyota.

At the undergraduate level, it does not make sense to pay more and send students to a huge university where the student is going to be surrounded by other Indians and least likely to participate in university life.

If the goal is to do a graduate degree in the US, it is enough if it is an accredited university of good quality. What is important is to ensure that Indian students get a diverse education both inside and outside the university campus, such that it leads to development of multicultural skills.

MIX AND MATCH

Having a well-equipped international

student office that constantly encourages and tries to create opportunities for Indian students to mingle and develop friendships across cultures is important. At our university, we arrange to pick students from the airport and immediately introduce them to each other. Thus, when we pick an Indian student, we are also picking students from other countries arriving the same day. We follow this up by ensuring that American students help new students in finding a suitable accommodation, opening bank accounts, getting student identity cards. We also arrange for campus tours to all new international students.

We hold international “coffee hours”, sponsor international student teams in various campus recreational activities where Indian students and other international students form teams and participate in co-ed volleyball, basketball and soccer.

We provide “conversation partners” where Indian students and American students meet each other over coffee or tea. We ensure that Indian events such as Diwali attract other international and American students and encourage Indian students to reciprocate by attending multicultural events.

(Zahir Ahmed is executive director, international programmes and services, at Southeast Missouri State University. He had earlier served as director at California State University, University of Dayton, Ohio, University of Michigan-Ann Arbor and State University of New York)

CLOSED CIRCLE

The Indian students’ life off campus revolves around hanging out with other Indians, watching Bollywood movies and staying in touch with friends and family in India.

In many cases, a student lives as if he or she is in India, goes to classes and returns to the little Indian community. He or she hardly participates in campus life and often graduates 2-4 years later having had little contact with American students and even less with students from other countries.

These students often learn very little of the US and do miserably in postgraduate job interviews. Those who manage to get jobs are rarely seen as having management potential since they have not attained any cross



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*Source: CIMA India Salary Survey 2012
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