

# FINDING COMMUNITY AT A COMMUNITY COLLEGE

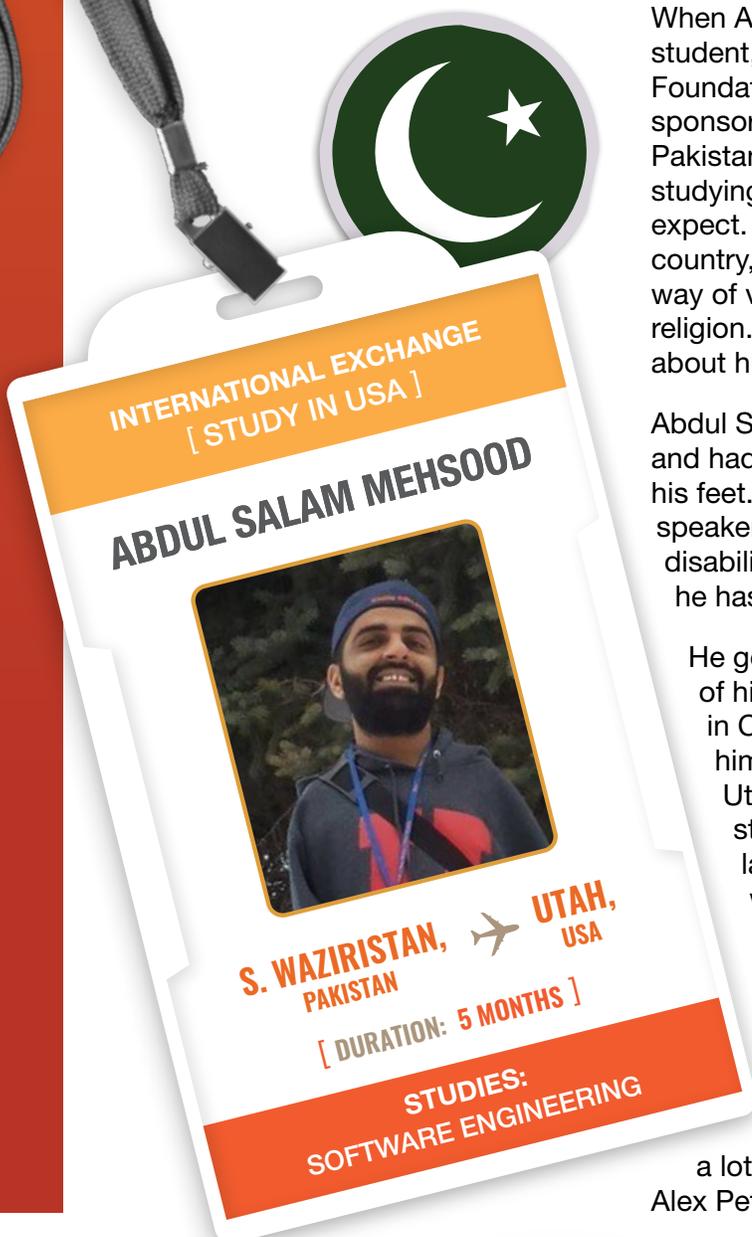
I wondered how people would react to me in the United States because I have a different culture and a different religion. I worried a little about that, but the people were awesome.

When Abdul Salam Mehsood, a software engineering student, was chosen by the United States Educational Foundation in Pakistan for the U.S. Department of State sponsored Global Undergraduate Exchange Program in Pakistan (Global UGRAD Pakistan) to spend a semester studying at a U.S. college, he did not know what to expect. He thought, the United States was not a Muslim country, and Americans would probably have a different way of viewing the world and him because of his religion. They also might have a different way of thinking about him because of his disability.

Abdul Salam lost his arms during a childhood accident and had to learn to complete daily tasks only using his feet. He became a social activist, motivational speaker and a trainer for daily living skills to people with disabilities, so they can enjoy living independently as he has.

He got his first taste of what Americans thought of his disability when he was at O'Hare Airport in Chicago waiting for his flight that would take him to Ephraim, a small mountain town in rural Utah, where he would spend the next six months studying at Snow College. He took out his laptop, placed it on the floor, and began typing with his feet like he normally did as a software engineering student. No one reacted. He did not get any of the stares or looks that he had been expecting.

The other pleasant surprise was the community around Snow College. Abdul Salam, like other international students, got a lot of support from the international student office. Alex Peterson, the Director of International Programs at



Snow College, invited him to spend his first week in Ephraim with his family.

He arrived a week early, and representatives from the international student office met him at the airport, and helped him get to the campus. They set up his classes based on his schedule, and worked with the campus Disability Services Office to ensure that there would be a place for him to sit in all the classrooms that had the appropriate workspace. This accommodation helped him to write with his feet as he was accustomed.

The international office and disability services offices worked together to hire a fellow international student as a personal assistant to support Abdul Salam with shopping, getting food from the cafeteria, and other items he might have needed. He preferred to have a male personal assistant, and the international student that they hired matched this preference. The personal assistant was also Muslim, and they were able to share more cultural customs such as going to the dorm to pray. The personal assistant was funded by the disability services office.

Yet for Abdul Salam, the most important thing was immersing himself in his new community. An experienced soccer player, he volunteered to coach the local team, and took a soccer elective at the college. He also jumped at every chance to share his culture with those that he met, and to learn about U.S. culture from them. That included giving a talk about Pakistan to a group of his peers. He found an opportunity to go hiking, and accompanied his roommate to church on Sundays. His roommate is a member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. "It was good experience for me to learn about the Mormon culture and the Mormon religion."

As he finishes his software engineering degree, Abdul Salam is already thinking about how he can pay it forward. He is mentoring a fellow Pakistani with a disability who wants to apply to join the next Global UGRAD cohort, which is administered by IREX. He also hopes to return to the United States to earn his master's degree.



## Global Undergraduate Exchange Program (Global UGRAD)

The Global Undergraduate Exchange Program provides one semester or one full-academic year scholarships to outstanding undergraduate students from selected countries around the world for non-degree full-time study combined with community service, professional development, and cultural enrichment.

Visit the U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs Exchange Programs page to see if your country is listed and to review other scholarship opportunities!

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