An Online Connection

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After graduating in English Literature from North South University a year ago, 25-year-old Rumana Yasmin decided to move into a different discipline of study. As a student, Rumana had always been actively involved in the many student activities taking place both on campus and also outside her university. According to Rumana it is obvious that several changes are taking place in society, but what is interesting is that it often takes months or even years for a society like ours to accept these changes and implement them into our every day lives. "I wanted to do my masters in Social Work or something in this particular line, outside Bangladesh," says Rumana. She came across several institutions that offered such courses, but had questions about various issues, such as the process of applying for financial aid, the availability of work for international students and also, the average expenditure for student per month. That is when Rumana came across goSwoop, a website which answered many of her questions.

"A virtual office for international students, goSwoop.com helps students study outside their home countries," says M Fayaz Taher, one of the co-founders of the online portal. "We have created a community that cultivates the interaction and the exchange of information among international students, educational institutions and companies that provide student-related products and services in an effort to help international students achieve their educational goal."

Students, in any part of the world, who want to experience life outside their home countries can visit the goSwoop website (www.goswoop.com) and interact with other international students and educational institutions. "It is nothing less than having a face-to-face conversation with an institution's actual admissions office," explains Fayaz. "Students who wish to study internationally can find the right educational institution through this website and can go to the extent of interacting personally with the students and alumni members of that institution."

It was during a study tour to Vienna in early 2007, when Fayaz, Jake Cacciapaglia and Cort Johnson, the co-founders of goSwoop, realised that things were not as clear as they seemed earlier on paper. "I had already gone through a series of problems when I had gone to the United States for my undergrad from Dhaka," says Fayaz. Once in Vienna, he realised that he was not the only person frustrated with the lack of clear information available to international students. The trio came across a number of international students in Vienna who were going through similar kinds of problems, when they decided to come up with a common portal where students from different countries could get in touch with each other and interact accordingly.

Rumana eventually got admitted into the Department of Social Work at Columbia University, with lots of help from goSwoop.com, she says. "Once I registered, I met two other students who were applying in the same field," she says. "I had a bunch of questions that I would ask them and we would discuss so many things starting from housing costs, books and how to get financial aid." In fact, in addition to discussing all the logistics of being an international student, Rumana also claims these students provided her with helpful tips while writing her admission essays.

"Personal interactions between a prospective student, current student and an alumni member of an institution is probably much more realistic than going through a school website," says Fazle Taher, who looks after the research and development section for goSwoop." Headquartered in Massachusetts, USA, where most of the marketing activities take place, goSwoop is being developed here in Dhaka by Infra Blue Technology, an enterprise of Fortuna Group, owned by Engr. M Abu Taher.

"While working on this website, we have also had to train ourselves to work with web 2.0," says Fazle. "Through this website, not only can users interact with others with an international educational experience, they can also have their relevant questions answered by experienced international students and institution staff, who record their international experiences by writing stories and posting photos.

"goSwoop.com is partnering with Universities and Colleges in the United States," says Fayaz. The portal has three universities as partners so far, namely, Babson College, Bentley College and Wenthworth Institute of Technology. "Within a span of 40 days, goSwoop is about to confirm Clark University and Simmons College." Universities in Dhaka, namely North South University and Independent University of Bangladesh have also been approached for this partnership. "Very soon we will have many more universities from all over the world as partners, though this will definitely be a very slow process," says Fazle.

This global online portal is also for those who look for short-term exchange programmes. "Students living outside usually want to visit countries in the Asian and African regions for research work and other kinds of cultural exchange programmes. These kinds of programmes can also be found on goSwoop," says Fazle. "Interested students can know more about this online portal at the US Trade Show, which will be taking place from February 27 - 29.

"It won't be long before goSwoop becomes the google of education and connects students, knowledge seekers and both individuals and institutions looking for a multicultural atmosphere," adds Fazle.