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## **Gipson: Academic life in Singapore proves more intense than in United States**

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One week until freedom — this mantra is probably running through your head right now. You've clocked out, had all you can handle and need a few days to breathe. You still have to pack your bags, confirm your hotel reservations and plan your days and nights accordingly. Spring Break 2015 is almost here. You've waited all year for this moment and, as much as you love it, Syracuse is the last place you want to be.

Meanwhile, 10,000 miles away during my version of recess week, I sit here in the library — reading, highlighting, scribbling some junk in the margins of my notebook and, of course, slowly wasting away at a desk while my friends back home prepare to throw beach parties. Then, I look around and realize that so are most of my classmates. In fact, the library is busier than usual — much busier.

There is truly no such thing as downtime for Singaporean students. Every waking hour seems to be devoted to some sort of scholarly endeavor or academic ritual — studying during meals, reading on the bus, reviewing printouts while walking to class. Nothing is off limits for these kids.

When I read about how tough my exchange would be, I panicked. Founded only 15 years ago, Singapore Management University is known to be one of the most competitive post-secondary institutions in the country. If you manage to earn a coveted spot, get ready to spend the next four years of your life contending both friends and foes alike. To say the least, SMU is not for the feeble-minded or weakhearted.

This is a place where sucking up seems to sometimes be a sport and minor details just might win you the grade. That's right — I said win, and I meant it. Unlike other universities in Singapore, SMU is the only one that utilizes the 4.0 grading scale. As a result, the bell curve runs practically everything around here.

But this is not the bell curve we all know and love in the U.S., where students are rewarded for their peers' errors on tests and quizzes. SMU's bell curve enumerates the percentage of students in each course who receive an A, B, C and so on. Generally, a single digit number of students will garner that top mark, while the others tend to hover around the B–C range. In other words, not everyone in the course can earn an A — it's impossible. This surely creates hostility both in and outside the classroom, a rational explanation for the heated rivalry.

To top off this terrifying bell curve system, classes are incredibly long. Granted, you have each only once per week, but every lecture is more than three hours in length. Therefore, if you have several classes in one day, expect to be at school for what feels like forever.

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Also, there are presentations, presentations and even more presentations. Minus exams, class presentations are the most important part of each and every one of your courses. Most are done in groups, so I have mostly let the Singaporeans take over and run the show. After all, I wouldn't want to ruin their lives and spoil their prospects for employment. They just don't trust me with such a tedious task as designing a PowerPoint.

Sure, getting an education in Singapore is tough. But keeping up with your coursework is even more difficult. When asked how to do well at SMU, some students cite consistent participation as key. Asking for help and speaking up when confusion arises make for a successful collegiate career. In regard to the competitive nature of Singaporean students — well, some claim it's all on you.

"Competition is as real as you want it to be," said Anna Santiago, a first-year business student at SMU. "Some people aim for the top, others pray to the bell curve gods that they'll do decently."

If I've learned anything at SMU thus far, it's that I'm doing this college thing totally wrong.

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