“It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to heaven, we were all going direct the other way.” (Charles Dickens. *A Tale of Two Cities*). It may seem a bit odd to quote an English novelist when talking about adjustment to a high school, but the quote seems to fit when describing our experiences with students at IMSA.

The first thing is that not everyone adjusts to IMSA in the same way. Some kids have very few to no problems at all, some have a few problems, a few have lots of problems, and probably more have problems that we never hear about. Not everyone likes to talk about adjustment issues or seek out a counselor to talk with. IMSA kids especially like to “handle things on their own.” They are used to being independent thinkers and have already overcome academic obstacles at their home school, so they figure they can do the same here. Sometimes, when things are not going smoothly, they will feel a sense of personal failure or shame that prevents them from reaching out for help. Independent people sometimes feel guilty when they cannot be completely independent! In part, this is strength of character that motivates people to manage their own lives and deal with stresses. However, it can also be a liability at a place like IMSA. If guilt or pride keeps you from talking to someone about how you may be struggling here, then you are cheating yourself out of valuable feedback that can help you grow. Not seeking out someone else to share your feelings with can cause you to stay in pain longer than you have to. It can also cause you to think about leaving IMSA prematurely because you think you can’t handle it …. when you really can (with a nudge in the right direction!).

We came up with the “W-Curve Theory of Adjustment” to describe some of the normal stages kids go through when they come to a residential school full of other kids who are talented in math and science. Actually, we did not come up with it. We believe it came from a math and science residential school in South Carolina (?) and someone here borrowed it, but now no one can remember where it came from (just a brief disclaimer for the
sake of citing references appropriately!). The adjustment curve is in the shape of a “W” because IMSA kids seem to go through quite drastic swings in their confidence about being here. Here is a typical scenario:

- On Monday everything looks good and you are enjoying your classes. On Tuesday you find out you got a “D” on a problem set … and that’s it … you feel depressed, angry, scared that colleges will see this on your transcript, you think about going home, and “please don’t let my parents find out!” Tuesday afternoon you talk with the teacher and find out the “D” doesn’t matter that much in the scheme of things and you have plenty of time to improve the grade for the semester. Crisis over. You feel good again and all the negative feelings are gone.

Students can experience some drastic “up and down” cycles here no matter what year they are in. Sophomores experience it early on simply because they are adjusting to a new environment, but Juniors and Seniors also reignite these issues at different times in their experience here. The bottom line is that we find this to be NORMAL. You don’t necessarily have to expect feeling like this. If you do have these feelings, simply know that it is normal here and talk to someone when it gets really distressing. The theory and its stages are described below.

**The W-Curve Theory of Adjustment**

**STAGE 1: HONEYMOON**

- This stage starts before the student arrives at school and continues for the first few days. For some students, this stage begins when they receive their acceptance letter from IMSA. The thought of being independent and starting fresh at a new school can be very appealing.
- The student feels enthusiastic, wants to meet new people, be more independent and is excited about classes. They have already attended the summer orientation and feel like they have a pretty good introduction to the environment.
STAGE 2: CULTURE SHOCK
• The student must adjust to a new set of physical surroundings full-time: four walls and a roommate, finding their way around the building, finding class rooms, the cafeteria, and eating unfamiliar food. This was not like orientation, which ended after two days. This is being here “full-time” and it feels more permanent, especially since they cannot go home everyday after school.
• There is also an adjustment to new social surroundings: too many or too few people around (often affected by the size of the community the student is from). The student may start to feel like a "little fish in a big pond": no longer the "smartest kid in the class" and experience a major increase in academic pressure. The initial excitement over being at IMSA wears off and the student may begin to feel overwhelmed and withdraw.

STAGE 3: INITIAL ADJUSTMENT
• In this stage, adjustment to the physical surroundings has been accomplished. The student feels more "at home" on campus, knows their way around, has a favorite place to "hang out" and people to hang out with. Extroverted students reach this stage quicker than introverted students do, mostly because they are talking with fellow students or their RC about how they are feeling. The student also begins to feel like they have developed a personal routine and IMSA is beginning to become their home away from home.

STAGE 4: MENTAL ISOLATION
• Even though the student feels more comfortable with the physical environment, new issues begin to emerge. The student may begin to think, "It's hard to get to know people here", "No one else feels the way I do", and "I'm all alone." A feeling of isolation is then experienced.
• This is a critical stage for most students because a "crisis of confidence" may occur due to an actual or perceived notion of intellectual inferiority. This is then experienced as a loss of status: "Things don't come as easy as they used to"; "I don't know if I can keep up"; “Maybe I'm not as smart as I thought I was"; “What would my friends and family think if I went back to my home school?” An interruption in sleep and eating patterns may begin to manifest themselves due to increased levels of stress.
• This stage is much easier for the student to go through if they are sharing their feelings with friends, parents, RC, counselor or a teacher.

STAGE 5: ACCEPTANCE AND INTEGRATION
• In this stage the student's self confidence rebounds and they begin to feel good about themselves again.
• He or she realizes that there are more similarities among their peers than differences.
• The student feels like they have a role in this new environment and they feel more at home physically, socially, and intellectually. While he or she continues
to express individual differences, the student feels more equal among their peers and no longer feels singled out as unusual or abnormal.

- The student has found “a place at IMSA.” They have their own interests, activities, favorite classes, their not-so-favorite classes (!), familiar teachers, some goals for the future and a readily available support system.

These stages are not cast in stone. Students go through them at different times and under different circumstances. We do find that most students go through them, if even briefly, at some point in their IMSA career, or at several different times during their stay with us. Remember, the best way to get through this is to go through it with someone else! As always, the counselors are ready and willing to help navigate the “Curve.”

Happy hamster successfully completing the “Curve.”

Shimmering sign at the entrance to the W Hotel on Lake Shore Drive in Chicago, Illinois.

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