From an out-of-state medical student, dropped into the heart of Alabama:

Class of 2017,

While most of you have roots or are from Alabama, there will be quite a few of you who are from out of state and will appreciate the advice coming up in this letter. As an out-of-state student myself, I am writing this letter to all of you, as I was in your shoes not long ago.

Throughout my life, I have lived in the Middle East, Europe, Florida, NY, and California, but none of those experiences fully prepared me for the culture shock I experienced in August of last year when I packed my bags and settled into Birmingham, AL. Here is a short list of all the difficulties I encountered:

1. The accent. I am not usually one to have difficulty with accents, but for some reason, the southern accent created a huge gap between me and the locals in the ‘ham. I didn’t find any difficulty in class or with lecturers (mostly), but it became clear that I spoke differently when seeing patients. You will have to get used to understanding patients with extremely thick accents and you will also have to get used to the fact that they will recognize you as a stranger as soon as you open your mouth. This, for me, created a rift between my patients and me and is always something I must work through to gain the trust of my patients.

2. My family. Being separated from my family by a whole day in an airplane and a minimum of $500 has not been easy. I am very close to my parents and my younger brother and was only a short drive away during college, so UAB has been my first real separation from them. I quickly learned to utilize phone calls home everyday when I drive home, Skype calls when time allows, and planning WAY ahead of time to find long weekends that I can go home for. I do not know how much you will miss your family, but just know that they are always with you and supporting you, and you will grow as a person from being away from them and appreciating just how important they are.

3. An unfamiliar territory. I have noticed that Birmingham and Alabama locals seem to not have very high self esteem when it comes to home pride (sans the Auburn/Alabama fans which is another complete topic in and of itself). Everyone I initially met assumed I would not enjoy living in Birmingham coming from San Diego. Much to their surprise and mine, I have grown very close to this city and appreciate it for all it is worth. This began when I became very close to some Birmingham natives at UAB. Slowly, I began exploring every nook of the city and surrounding towns and have gained a valuable new perspective. While San Diego is a hugely populated and bustling county, Birmingham has a fractional population and area. This is in fact a positive, not negative point. What you do in Birmingham matters: the local businesses you support, the effort you put into local organizations, the people you meet, etc. It has a unique personality and much to offer, so don’t let the homesickness keep you home. Explore Birmingham and you’ll find a
multitude of things that matter to you and things in which you matter greatly to. If you were me, you would have joined the Birmingham Sailing Club, began attending St. Elias Lebanese Church, tutored local college students, became a patron to local coffee shops and small businesses. Other students have joined Jones Valley Urban Farm, EAB student run clinic, churches, Interest Groups, sports teams, running clubs, etc. Involve yourself and you will meet likeminded people who will make your transition that much easier.

4. People. On the topic of people, the South has some of the best people in the world, at least from the parts I have experienced. People here are real. They are not too busy for you like in most large cities, they value family and friends, they lack the materialistic traits, and they are warm and welcoming. Not only do they provide a fresh and contrasting perspective, but also they will learn from your fresh perspective. You can spot me as an outsider from a mile away. But I am myself and I know that I am different from the people here in how I look, how I act, what I say/wear/do, but I never felt the need to change or fit in. I was appreciated for my differences and I did the same in return.

Overall, this transition will not be easy in any way. But with this advice and your own personal will and effort, I hope that you gain as much from moving here as I did. I wish you all the best and know that if I can do this, you definitely can. Good luck on your upcoming year!