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A Readjustment Manual for Parents:

*A handbook for parents of students
returning home from studying abroad*

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“You can’t go home again,” wrote author Thomas Wolfe. Could he have been thinking about SIT students? For some students, the transition back to life in their home country after studying abroad can be a difficult and lengthy process. For many, it can seem even harder than the initial adjustment to the host country the student just left.

Readjustment also can present challenges for parents, families, and friends who may not immediately understand why the returning student is having problems.

The goal of this handbook is to look at why return culture shock occurs, consider some of the common concerns expressed by students going through re-entry, and finally, discuss what parents can do to assist their student during the re-entry process. Quotations from students are included in italics to provide additional, firsthand perspectives.

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“The hardest part of re-entry was people seemingly not caring how my life had been transformed.”

“For me, the hardest part was finding myself in the lives of others who have been without me for so long.”

Introduction

As an academic director in Ecuador with SIT Study Abroad, one of the most important responsibilities I have is helping students adjust to life in a new country and culture, particularly in the days and weeks following their arrival. In the program’s final days, I also present sessions on return culture shock to help students anticipate the readjustment process in going home.

Despite this experience in helping other students with their adjustment and readjustment process, it was not until my own daughter returned from participating in an SIT Study Abroad program that I had the opportunity to see a student go through the readjustment process firsthand and fully comprehend what the experience for the student and family can entail.

It was an eye-opening experience. Driving back home from the airport, I glanced over at my daughter. I was so happy to see her! Somehow she seemed a little disoriented, although I knew she must be excited to be back, after spending four months in France. “Exhaustion and jet lag,” I thought to myself.

After a few days, the situation at home was becoming difficult. She wanted wine with every meal. She requested cloth napkins. She wanted to listen only to French music and look through her photographs. She kept describing the wonderful places she had been and the food they had eaten. She complained about the quality of our cheese. She didn’t want to call her old friends. She didn’t really seem happy to be home. Frankly, I was a little concerned and frustrated. How long was it going to take her to readjust to “normal” life?

Time went by. After three weeks, I was ready to have a fit! She still continually criticized everything. She moped around the house. She didn’t seem to want to get out and find a job for the summer. I could feel myself running out of patience. I was tired of hearing about her life abroad, and I wanted her to be glad to be home. Even though I knew it was normal to have some difficulties adjusting to being back, it seemed to me that this had been going on long enough. It was time for her to get over it. I wanted my sunny, positive, energetic daughter back again.

After this experience, I realized it was likely that many parents were also feeling confused and troubled by their student's behavior upon returning home from studying abroad. While on sabbatical for a semester, I researched and wrote this handbook as a resource for other parents and families who have a student studying overseas. I enlisted the assistance of many SIT Study Abroad alumni including many of my former students in Ecuador. I am extremely grateful for their contributions and suggestions. This handbook would not have been possible without their participation.

What happens to college students when they study abroad for an extended period of time?

By the time their student is about to come home, most parents have become familiar with the core components of an SIT program. They know their student has lived with host families, interacted extensively with the host culture, and learned new customs or even a new language. They are aware of the program's strong academic focus and the ways in which their student has been challenged both interculturally and intellectually.

What parents may not be aware of, however, is the emotional impact of living and studying abroad. When they arrive in the host country most students, on some level, temporarily regress to a more dependent stage of life. They know themselves to be independent young adults with control over their lives. Yet, they find themselves dependent on the graciousness of their hosts. Their language ability is limited; their environment is full of unknowns; they are fed new foods at family meals; and above all, they no longer understand the nonverbal cues that are going on around them. This experience can be stimulating and exhilarating as well as disconcerting, exhausting, and occasionally even frightening.

How does the student react and adapt?

Typically, shortly after arrival, the student begins a process that is essential to his or her psychological well-being, namely, they seek to absorb and learn as much as possible about their new context and culture so they can adapt as quickly as possible. Since knowledge equals power in this situation, the student focuses on unraveling how the society is structured, understanding cultural priorities, and discovering what is considered appropriate behavior in any given situation. This experience continually requires students to grow. Their dramatic learning curve consists of daily emotional ups and downs. Their senses are heightened, and they discover that their life is suddenly full of new challenges and unexpected surprises. Their overall comprehension steadily increases. Eventually, if they are successful in their adaptation process, they feel the thrill of realizing they can function in their new environment, simultaneously accepting, and finding a certain level of acceptance by, the host community.

Why is there a problem when they come home?

Have they become different people than who they were when they left to study abroad?

In a way, yes, they have. Culture, after all, is a learned process. People around the world face many of the same problems; however, they develop very different mechanisms for dealing with them. To genuinely feel a part of the new culture, students have to sincerely accept, believe, and participate in its practices and customs. What at first appeared unfamiliar – whether eating with one's hands or greeting perfect strangers with a kiss on the cheek – has become accepted everyday behavior. Interestingly enough, this process occurs regardless of which country the student has chosen for his or her study abroad experience, and eventually, at least in many cases, the new customs become automatic.

When the students ultimately board the plane to return home, these learned responses to social situations and different ways of perceiving their environment come right along with them. Although these newly acquired customs, behaviors, or worldview are not necessarily commonplace or relevant back home, it is virtually impossible for them to be dropped overnight. Many students are also not sure they want to forget or discard what they have acquired while studying abroad. They do not want to return to being exactly who they were before they left. Many feel this would invalidate their experience as well as the care and love they received from the individuals who helped and supported them through the learning process.

“I definitely felt I had become part Ecuadorian, and had no way to express that new part of myself.”

“It’s so tough to return to your own ‘reality’ (or what it was before leaving) and realize that you don’t necessarily agree with your life or your culture or the values underlying it”.

Some changes fade with time, of course. The process of readjustment is different for each person. Some students spend weeks or months feeling alienated from their home environment. For others, the readjustment period may take even longer. Other students seem to readjust to being back home with little or no difficulty. These individuals may experience a delayed return culture shock that can catch them unaware months later.

“I stayed inside for three days before going out.”

“For three weeks after I got home I ended up just trying to recuperate, rarely going out.”

“I was a good wreck for a couple of months.”

“In total, return culture shock lasted about a year.”

Is there a way to tell how long the process of adapting to return culture shock is going to take?

Unfortunately, probably not. Students often go through different cycles when readjusting. The first few days of being home can be euphoric. During subsequent weeks, when the shock of re-entry hits, the student might feel depressed or unsure of him/herself and uncertain about previously made plans. Mood swings are frequent, as are long conversations about goals and priorities. The problem is compounded by the feeling that no one around them can relate to what is happening to them, except perhaps other newly returned SIT students.

There are students who feel out of place from the moment they walk through the door. For them, readjusting to home actually feels harder than the original culture shock they felt when they left to go abroad. It may take weeks to integrate the new person they have become into the reality they left behind. While they are struggling with this process, it is not uncommon for some students to try desperately to find a way to go back overseas.

Students who have traveled extensively or have lived abroad before enrolling in an SIT program often struggle in the same way as students who had never previously left their home country. Frequently, the only difference is that these students remember having gone through the readjustment experience previously and realize that it will eventually pass.

“Re-entry is an emotional roller coaster that no one in the home community is likely to fully understand.”

“I’d say that there isn’t one formula to make your kid’s re-entry smooth. In fact, there may not be, and that’s probably just part of the whole process. It is not easy to go away so it makes sense that it should not be easy to come back.”

What are some of the main difficulties faced by students returning home?

Pace of Life

Although many of us know that other cultures have a far more flexible attitude toward time, it may come as a shock when we realize how well our students have adapted to different schedules or perceptions of time. This particular cultural idiosyncrasy is often treated lightly, even jokingly. However, it may bring up a deeper issue. While abroad, students may encounter the perception that Americans allow their lives to be “ruled by the clock”, ignoring mitigating factors and circumstances beyond one’s control. Upon their return home, some students may express new points of view related to “watching the clock” and prioritizing people and situations over schedules and deadlines.

“People in the US are far too tense, selfish and in a hurry.”

“It was difficult to adjust to the pace of life back home -- the dependence upon time and scheduling.”

Consumerism

Most SIT students choose to study in countries that are less wealthy than the United States. Many are struck by the quality of life of people abroad who lack what US culture has taught them to consider basic and essential. Many students are taken by surprise at the closeness of homestay families, the warmth and friendliness of host communities, and the willingness to share. Coming home, it is not

unusual for students to feel a sense of confusion, guilt, or ambiguity when contrasting their standard of living with the conditions of their host communities.

Christmas is frequently cited by many returning students as a particularly difficult time of year. For some students, the commercialization of some holidays in the United States, and the emphasis on buying presents, contrasts painfully with their memories of the generosity of people who had little and yet gave so much.

“The hardest part of re-entry for me was Christmas and the extraordinary amounts of money that Americans spend at Christmas time and in general.”

“Then Christmas hit. The extravagance was overwhelming and depressing to me – the waste, the excess.”

“I found myself many times completely unable to cope with the fact that I live in a society that glorifies material wealth and in a country that dominates the world economy.”

Personal Communication

How can one fully describe the learning experiences, growth, expansion, and realizations made during the months studying abroad? Is it even possible to share the importance of the relationships made, the poignancy of leaving, and the joys and sadness experienced throughout, made even more intense by the awareness that the time abroad was temporary? Most returning students are bursting with stories to share, yet also feel apprehensive that they will not be able to adequately communicate their feelings. They must also realize—though it may come as a shock—that life has gone on for everyone at home as well and that their friends also have had new experiences during the time they were abroad.

Some returning students experience an additional strain when the student is returning to a boyfriend or girlfriend, since the person who left may be different from the person who has returned. Although some couples do remain together, for others the added pressure can lead to separation. The frustration in communicating their experience, even with the use of email and cell phones, frequently leaves students with a sense of alienation both within their own family and among their broader group of friends. This, in turn, can lead to withdrawal and depression. Often it is easier for returning students to relate to new friends who are also returning home from study abroad programs and may be experiencing the same difficulties readjusting.

“The hardest part for me was reconciling how much I had experienced and therefore changed with people and things that had remained the same at home.”

“I felt like I was unable to really communicate to people what my semester abroad meant. Few people want to take the time to hear about what really touched your heart and changed your perspective.”

“My biggest desire was just to be around people who understand, who would listen to me, validate my feelings and not expect me to ‘get over’ my depression or confusion or anger or frustration too quickly.”

Returning to School

As part of their program, SIT students complete four months of experiential learning where their education reaches beyond the four walls of the classroom into the sphere of everyday life. They observe, almost on a daily basis, their progress in language acquisition, interpersonal skills, cross-cultural awareness, and self-confidence. Every moment holds the potential for new learning and growth. Each program also provides a built-in support group with other students going through similar experiences. The friendships formed during an SIT semester abroad are often very profound.

Following this extended period of intensive, highly interactive experiences both in and outside the classroom, many students feel anxious about returning to a traditional learning system in which it may appear as if some coursework, such as language classes, may no longer have immediate relevance to their daily lives. Some students also express apprehension about engaging with classmates who will have no way of relating to their experience studying abroad.

“School was really hard to get back into. I just didn’t want to be there... didn’t want to be reading about other people doing things, I wanted to be doing them.”

“When I went back to school I was hit with the reality that the lives of my friends had changed and I was no longer a part of the close knit circle I had had before.”

“It is crazy to think it was two years ago and is still so important and the source of most of my best friendships.”

Worldview

Many students feel their worldview has expanded immeasurably as a result of studying abroad. Students often claim a deeper awareness of critical global issues and a broader perspective on topics such as the impact of globalization, natural resource management and ecological challenges, health care delivery and access, and international income disparity. They speak of the intensity, magnitude, and significance of having firsthand experience in another cultural context. Students often return newly inspired to become more involved in global issues and in pursuing development or social justice work.

Frequently, many students also express frustration at what they perceive to be superficial priorities or a lack of international awareness in the lives of those around them upon returning home. Some returning students recall that they themselves did not have the same perspectives prior to studying abroad. Many, however, forget this fact. The challenge for many returning students is to not forget what they have learned abroad, while at the same time, not allowing their dismay or indignation to get in the way of productive dialog with others.

“My views were so changed, my eyes awakened, and I could not continue as I had before leaving.”

“I was listening to my two closest friends talk during my first week back, and I was shocked and appalled. I assumed that they had grown and matured as much as I had. Boy, was I wrong.”

“One hard thing for me was finding myself among peers who don’t share the same global consciousness that I had acquired while I was away. I wanted to smack a lot of people and tell them to wake up and look around them, even though I could easily have been one of them four months before.”

Self Image

One of the final issues faced by returning students is to confront their self image. Many students go to countries where they look different from the majority of the local population. Both male and female students often find themselves receiving far more attention from the opposite sex than they had been accustomed to simply because of their American appearance.

Although this constant fishbowl effect frequently is exhausting, it can also be flattering. For some students, it is a powerful experience to be considered special and beautiful, simply because they are from somewhere else.

Additionally, because of different perceptions of body images, female students studying in certain countries may be actively encouraged by host families to gain weight to become “even more attractive”. Once the student returns home, however, they are confronted by the American obsession with weight loss and physical fitness. This can be a serious letdown and difficult on a student’s self esteem.

“I definitely felt the shock of ‘being normal.’”

“White girls are viewed as being beautiful overseas simply because of their blue eyes and pale skin – but when they come home, they are back to being average looking with about 10 unwanted pounds.”

What can we do, as parents? What does our student need from us if the readjustment is unexpectedly difficult?

Patience

Readjustment is a very individual process, and no one pattern holds true for everyone. Your student might not immediately feel ready to become immersed in large gatherings of family members or friends; in fact, even a visit to the supermarket can seem overwhelming for some returning students.

During the first few days home, a light schedule may be preferable to one that is too hectic. Although

your student is once again physically present, emotionally and psychologically they may not have arrived completely home. They may need time to reacquaint themselves with their home environment as they readjust.

It is not uncommon for students returning from abroad to go through a stage in which they criticize much of what is around them, including what they see at home. Complaints can range from wasting food, producing too much garbage, driving instead of walking or taking the bus, over-spending, unawareness of what is going on overseas, and so on.

With the support and patience of their family, their indignation will diminish and in many cases will transform itself into a determination to work toward new objectives. Some students may feel the need to make specific -- occasionally radical -- changes in their lives or identify new goals. These can include looking for fellowships to go back overseas, switching majors, expressing interest in a new career, changing schools, or even relinquishing personal possessions. Although this can be disconcerting for parents, patience and dialog can go a long way in allowing a deeper understanding of just what changes your student has experienced. Students sincerely appreciate the effort their parents make in trying to comprehend how their worldview may have changed and broadened. This attention allows them to feel that the results of their study abroad experience are both valued and respected.

“My parents realized that I was going to be changed by my experience and they saw that as positive.”

“Be proud of me and all that I’ve accomplished in a few months!”

“Accept that I have changed, don’t put pressure on me to act the same as I had before. Be accommodating in my changes in habits and help me incorporate this amazing experience into my life.”

Listen

The other request most often heard from students going through the readjustment process is for parents to be open and willing to listen. Since most parents are already curious and eager to hear about their student’s experience abroad, why can this become an issue?

One of the challenges is that students process their experience in different ways. Some returning students want to talk continuously from the moment they arrive home, while others need time before they can share their stories. Some find it difficult to put their experience into words. They need to process within themselves before they can talk to others. In these cases, parents might give their student an empty photo album or a scrapbook. This can serve as an excellent tool to spark communication, while allowing the student to create a visual display of the semester. Occasionally, students find it easier to talk about their activities or experiences abroad weeks or even months following their return as events can trigger specific memories over time. For some students, this can be an easier way for them to open up about their study abroad experience rather than immediately sitting down and answering questions from curious family members.

Many students recognize they are going through a difficult time. They need to hear about what has been

happening in the lives of those at home to help them relate to the fact that life has not stood still while they were gone. If parents have had occasion to travel and have themselves also experienced return culture shock after living or working overseas, they can share their own stories with their student. Not only will this help create a mutual bond of experience, it will also serve to reassure the disoriented student that this condition is temporary and will indeed pass.

“Ask questions! Show an interest and let me talk when I need to, ask to see my pictures, be positive and sympathize with me, ask who or what I miss the most!”

“Be supportive but not smothering – give your child space and be patient with him/her but be sure you are available and always ready and willing to listen and offer support.”

“Be genuinely interested in the story behind every picture – don’t rush me, let me talk in my own time. Ask specific questions, listen and be excited! Remember the names of my friends from SIT, and ask about them from time to time.”

Support

A final request from students is for parents to support them in finding ways to keep their experience real and vital in their lives. Although many students express concerns about their ability to adequately communicate the impact their SIT semester has had on their lives, they are even more apprehensive that they will forget what they have learned or that their heightened awareness of and interest in another culture and global issues will diminish. Students may express concern about losing the knowledge and competencies acquired abroad, including new language skills, increased cultural awareness, and broadened global understanding.

Unfortunately, if students do not focus on this concern, there is indeed a very real possibility of having the learning and changes of the time abroad fade. This could be regrettable on a personal level and also unfortunate for the members of the host communities who had accepted the student into their lives and homes.

Academic directors regularly conduct sessions on re-entry with their students before the end of the program. This is an opportunity to discuss different ways students can keep the experience alive and relevant upon their return. Parents can be an excellent resource and support system in this endeavor.

Specific suggestions include:

- Identifying neighborhoods where your student can become involved working with immigrants and their families
- Arranging for your student to give talks and presentations to local schools or groups of interested individuals
- Providing your student with information on local radio and TV stations that are related to the language and/or culture of your student’s host country

- Encouraging your student to take classes relevant to his/her overseas experience and to get involved in campus activities that are important to him/her, such as tutoring foreign students, living in an international house, volunteering on ecological projects, presenting a radio program with host country music, increasing political awareness, and organizing fund raisers
- Encouraging your student to cook a meal for your family using ingredients from the host country, with traditional music playing in the background. This experience can provide an enjoyable and positive experience for the entire family.

“The toughest part for me was sinking back into the lifestyle – the bubble – and not feeling that I was abandoning something.”

“I needed to find connections to my former host country in my home community, even just a restaurant. This would have helped me relax, given me a taste of the culture that had become so familiar to me.”

“Be educated about your child’s surroundings, in terms of what s/he could be involved in – like different non-profit organizations or ways to organize groups on campus.”

Conclusion

Looking back, I realize that, as a parent, I simply did not fully comprehend what my daughter needed from me upon her return from studying abroad. I tried to do my best, but I ran out of patience. I got tired of listening and ultimately didn’t know how to be supportive. At the same time, I was genuinely delighted my daughter was home, and I did what I could to show her that by surrounding her with love and affection.

I realize now, in retrospect, that I never expected her readjustment process to last so long, nor that it would be hard on our family. In reality, the readjustment period took more than a few days. It took weeks. For some students and their families, it could take months.

However, with patience, perseverance, and a sincere willingness to listen, students and families going through the readjustment process will survive! My daughter’s SIT semester abroad has had a major impact, both positive and long-lasting, on her and all of our family, as I hope the experience will have on you and your family, as well.

“It is difficult to describe how my semester abroad totally transformed my life.”

“The worst thing my parents could have done was to fail to realize the importance of that time in my life and how hard/sad it was for me to return.”

“My parents were incredible during this process. Even though they didn’t understand me, they accepted that I had changed. It is such an individual process that one must own and struggle with in order to make the improvements.”

For More Information

For more information or assistance on this or another topic, please feel free to contact the staff in the SIT Student Affairs Office at 802.258.3292 or via email at studentaffairs@sit.edu.