



## **A Readjustment Manual for Parents of Students who Study Abroad**

Hopefully, you had the chance to speak with your student while they were abroad, you may have even visited! And so, you are aware of the tremendous growth, both personally and academically they have achieved while abroad. 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 become more dependent. Even though at SJU, they know themselves to be independent, young adults with control over their lives, once abroad, they find themselves dependent on the their hosts, whether that may be a host family, program directors, professors, or local people. Their language ability may be limited; their environment is full of unknowns; they are testing out new foods; navigating new public transportation systems; and above all, they may 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 to being abroad?**

Typically, shortly after arrival, the student begins a process that is essential to their growth; they absorb and learn as much as possible about their new context and culture so they can adapt as quickly as possible. Students focus on figuring out 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. This steep learning curve consists of daily emotional ups and downs as they discover that their life is suddenly full of new challenges and unexpected surprises. Their overall comprehension steadily increases. Eventually, when they are successful in their adaptation process, they feel the thrill of realizing they can function in their new environment.

### **Why is it difficult for students to come home?**

If they have learned how to adapt abroad, what is the problem when they return?

When the students board the plane to return home, these adaptations 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 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 picked up 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 to shed their abroad skin.

### **How long is the reverse culture shock process?**

The process of readjustment is different for each person. Some students spend weeks or months feeling like outsiders in 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 off guard months later. Students often go through different cycles when readjusting. The first few days of being home can be exciting. During subsequent weeks, when the shock of re-entry hits, the student might feel depressed or unsure of him/herself. Mood swings are frequent, as are long conversations about goals and priorities. The problem is made worse by a commonly shared feeling that no one around them can relate to what is

happening to them, except perhaps other study abroad 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.

***\*\*If your student is demonstrating extreme examples of reverse culture shock, or if their re-adjustment seems to be prolonged for an extended amount of time, please seek professional guidance from Saint Joseph's University Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS), located at A504 Merion Gardens; 610-660-1090; [sju.edu/caps](http://sju.edu/caps).***

## **What are some of the main difficulties of re-entry in America?**

### **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. While abroad, students may encounter the perception that Americans allow their lives to be ruled by the clock. 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.

### **Quality of Life and U.S. Comforts**

Some of our study abroad students choose to study in countries that are less wealthy or developed than the United States. Many struggle with the differences between quality of life at home versus abroad. 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. In addition, many students will feel overwhelmed but the unlimited options and modern conveniences that seem available in the United States compared to their host country. It might take them longer to order a meal at a restaurant or go shopping for groceries. Students may have adjusted to procedures- for example, hanging their clothes to dry, taking shorter showers, choosing to walk or bike instead of drive.

### **Personal Communication**

Most returning students are bursting with stories to share, yet many also fear they will not be able to successfully communicate their feelings. They must realize 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. The frustration in communicating their experience, even with the use of today's technology leaves students with a sense of distance both in their family and friends. This 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.

### **Language**

Many SJU students are returning from programs where they were completely immersed in the local language and may find it difficult to speak or write English with the depth and ease in which they were once able. They will want to practice their newly developed language skills.

### **Academics**

Study abroad students are immersed in 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. 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. Some students also express concern about attending class in the U.S. with classmates who will have no way of relating to their experience studying abroad.

## **Worldview**

Many students feel their worldview has expanded enormously as a result of studying abroad. Students often return newly inspired to become more involved in global issues. They may have initial rejection of the ‘American ways;’ even views and beliefs they had before leaving may now closely resemble their host countries position on key issues. 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 relating with others.

## **Self Image**

Many students go to countries where they look different from the majority of the local population. Although this ‘celebrity’ 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. It can be hard to adjust to the fact that you are less important or ignored once home.

## **What can you do as parents?**

### **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 or to jump in to old routines and roles. During the first few days home, a light schedule may be preferable to one that is too hectic. 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, overspending, unawareness of what is going on overseas, and so on. With the support and patience of their family, their frustrations will diminish. Some students may feel the need to make specific changes in their lives or identify new goals for the remainder of their college career. 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 communication can go a long way in allowing a deeper understanding of just what changes your student has experienced. This attention allows them to feel that the results of their study abroad experience are both valued and respected.

### **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. 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.

### **Support**

A final request from students is for parents to support them in finding ways to keep their experience real and important in their lives. Students are worried 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.

Parents can be an excellent resource and support system in this endeavor.

- 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 dorm, 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.

### **Conclusion**

Most importantly, take time to be proud of your son or daughter for all that they have accomplished while they are abroad. Appreciate the new skills and personal developments they have made and encourage them to pursue the new values and interests they acquired abroad. If you and your student need additional information on the re-entry process, please Contact the Center for International Programs. We are excited to hear about our students and will support them in any way possible.

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**Adapted from SIT's Handbook for Parents**  
**by Leo Cavallero, SIT Study Abroad Academic Director, 2009**  
**What happens to college students when they study abroad?**