

Life After Your Study Abroad Program

After being abroad, the transition home and to Iowa State University may be challenging. Re-entry is not as simple as some people may expect it to be. You may notice that it is very difficult to pick up where you left off, especially when you realize all of the new insights you have gained.

The Study Abroad Center staff hopes the following information on reverse culture shock and on how to integrate and utilize your international experience for yourself and for future employers will be beneficial as you begin “life after study abroad”.

Reverse Culture Shock

Re-entry to your home culture can seem both as challenging and as frustrating as the adjustment to living overseas. Contrary to the expectation that going “home” is a simple matter of resuming your earlier routines and re-establishing prior relationships, reverse culture shock has its own set of social and psychological adjustments. Often there is too much to do in too short a time. The simple logistics of getting settled at home or school can be daunting and time-consuming. Although you may think about the recent overseas adventure constantly and want to discuss it with anyone willing to listen, eventually the daily reality of home life begins to set in, and just keeping up with class and/or work schedules, friendships, and impending graduation and job searches is difficult enough.

Just as initial culture shock has definable stages and a relatively predictable progression, so does reverse culture shock. The “honeymoon” phase of initial euphoria or at least relief at being home is often present for some period, followed by some degree of irritation and alienation and then an eventual readjustment.

What causes or exacerbates reverse culture shock? First, you might not anticipate experiencing reverse culture shock and therefore are not prepared for the adjustment. Second, you may not realize how much you have changed. Third, few people in your home culture are likely to be familiar with the concept of reverse culture shock and might respond to your difficulty readjusting by bluntly suggesting you “get over it” as though the difficulties were a conscious act on your part. Finally, unlike experiencing culture shock while abroad where fellow students are likely to be sympathetic, upon re-entry the pressure to conform quickly and substantially can be intense, with tolerance in short supply.

One common result of the readjustment is the tendency to “shoebox” the study abroad experience. This can have two related meanings: One is to literally put your mementos (letters, ticket stubs, photos, brochures, etc.) in a box and put it away to be taken out and looked at when you feel the need to reconnect with or relive your experience; the other is to mentally compartmentalize the experience as a completely or largely separate part of your college experience. You might draw upon it at a party as a conversation starter or perhaps in an academic setting when it seems relevant, but in general you don’t really know how to integrate the experience into your life.

To avoid “shoeboxing”, your study abroad experience, here are some suggestions for coping with reverse culture shock:

- Acknowledge re-entry as part of your study abroad experience. It is easier to deal with the mood swings that often accompany reverse culture shock if you are aware that it is normal to have these feelings.
- It takes time to get used to being back home, and it can be quite stressful. Do not try to jump back into your old life. If possible, give yourself time to relax and reflect before returning to a busy schedule.
- Remember that people will have a varying level of interest in your study abroad and travel experiences.
- Keep a journal. This will help you make sense of what you are feeling, how you have changed, and what you have gained from your time abroad.
- Keep in contact with the friends you made in your host country through e-mail, skype, facebook, phone calls, etc.
- Try not to idealize the host country or to criticize your own country (and vice versa). Attempt to remain objective.
- If you find that you miss your host country, see films, eat food, listen to music, etc., from that country. Look at your photo albums and reread your travel journal.
- Be patient. Re-entry may take some time, but most returnees find the process to be a valuable experience leading to personal growth and increased self-knowledge.

Ways to Integrate Your Study Abroad Experience

- Volunteer with the Study Abroad Center.
- Apply to be a Study Abroad Center Global Ambassador. Paid positions are open to recently-returned study abroad students. Information and applications are available at the Study Abroad Center or on our website at <http://www.studyabroad.iastate.edu/Application/gblamb.html>
- Check with your college’s international office to see if they need volunteers.
- Enter the Study Abroad Center’s annual photo contest to share and reflect on the value of your experience abroad. The contest is typically held in September.
- Volunteer at the International Students and Scholars office, and look into their programs (Friendships International, English Conversation Program, International Student Council).
- Consider another study abroad or work abroad experience:
 - Explore Peace Corps opportunities.
 - Apply for a Rotary International Ambassadorial Scholarship.
 - Apply for a Fulbright award.
- Share your experience with other students who might benefit from study abroad. Talk to your friends or add information to your Facebook page.
- Consider how you can use your knowledge of another country in class discussions or the papers you write. Consider submitting your writing to *Glimpse Magazine*, *Transitions Abroad*, *Ethos*, *The Iowa State Daily*, etc.
- Use your language skills and become a tutor (<http://www.dso.iastate.edu/asc/tutoring/becomeatutor.html>)

- Complete a Study Abroad Center returnee evaluation. Your thoughts about your program and site are very important, and your comments will help students trying to select a program.

Add a Major/Minor

- Foreign language: Chinese, French, German, Portuguese, Russian, or Spanish.
- International Business Secondary Major
- International Studies Secondary Major, and/or Minor

Join an ISU Club

- Foreign language clubs: Spanish, Chinese, French, German
- International Friendship Connection
- Society of International Engineers
- International Business Club
- World Affairs Series
- Student International Medical Aid Club
- International Agriculture Club
- Join a sports club or participate in intramurals using your newly-gained interests

Utilizing Your International Experience for Employers

Have people told you that your experience abroad “looks great on a résumé”? They’re right! But it’s up to you to effectively communicate the skills and proficiencies that will benefit an organization and convince the employer of the value of your specific experience.

Skills

What skills or proficiencies have you acquired or enhanced while you were abroad? Some of the skills that professionals with international experience cite as being useful in their careers include:

- Enhanced cultural awareness and sensitivity to customs and cultural differences
- Foreign language proficiency
- Adaptability
- Ability to identify and achieve goals
- General improvement in communication skills
- Increased confidence, initiative, and independence
- Greater flexibility and sense of humor
- Awareness of global economic and political issues and realities
- Ability to maintain an open mind and be tolerant of others
- Clarification of goals and improved self-awareness
- General travel skills
- Resource management/budgeting
- Organization
- Problem solving and crisis management
- Patience
- Listening and observation skills
- Specific professional skills or knowledge base

- Greater ability to handle uncertainty

Résumé

Be sure to locate your international experience in the best place on your résumé for your intended job:

- If you participated in a study program, consider listing the program in your education section rather than under activities or other experiences:
B.A. Iowa State University - Communication Studies, 2008
Swansea University, Swansea, Wales, 08/07-12/07
- If you completed an internship, list it as a professional experience rather than an activity:
Communications Assistant, The National Assembly of the Republic of Korea
Seoul, South Korea, 01/07-05/07
- If you did a work program but the work was not particularly related to your intended profession, list it as work experience but concentrate on the cross-cultural learning:
El Faisan Restaurante, Cuernavaca, Mexico
Served patrons in a local restaurant, worked as the only American in a Mexican business, trained co-workers in U.S.-style customer service.
- If your résumé includes a section for skills or proficiencies, include specific skills acquired or improved while abroad.

Cover Letter

It is important to address in your cover letter the specific job you hope to acquire. These questions can help you focus:

- How does your international experience relate to your field?
- What are the transferable skills?
- How might your international experience uniquely benefit a professional in your field?

Develop a strategy to specifically address these points in your cover letter. For example:

- *This position has the opportunity to work closely with the local Latino/a community, and my experience living in Spain will enhance my ability to communicate and interact effectively with this population.*
- *My studies in Japan provided me with a great insight into the cultural differences that influence consumers in different countries and will improve my ability to contribute to international marketing initiatives.*

Even if your career goals do not include a specific international dimension at this time, you can promote general transferable skills such as independence, confidence, and problem-solving. And remember that cultural understanding and tolerance is essential while working in the US given we are a multicultural society.

The Interview

If your interviewer remarks on or asks about your international experience, take it as an chance to expand. Don't let the opportunity pass by with a simple, "It was great!"

- Develop stories and responses in advance. Be ready to share an important learning experience, an amusing story and other specific examples.
- Identify skills in the job description and create examples from your international experience that involved those skills.
- Be sure to use some domestic examples also, and ensure your stories are balanced. It is better to demonstrate your critical thinking skills than to show off or demean one culture at the expense of another.

Prepare yourself for the interview by reviewing the following:

- Share an example of how you set priorities to achieve a desired outcome in your study abroad experience.
- How did your study abroad experience enhance your knowledge, skills, and understanding of your intended career field?
- Share an example of a travel situation that helped you build your understanding of human motivation. How did this enhance your understanding of leadership or teamwork?
- Share an international experience in which you had to resolve a conflict or solve a problem. What skills and personal qualities did you tap into? How did the experience help you grow as a person?
- What was the most significant thing you learned about yourself through your study abroad experience?
- Did you do research or a project applicable to your field of interest while abroad?
- Did you travel independently?
- Did you learn to work with a more diverse group of people than you had previously been exposed to?
- Did you resolve a conflict based on misunderstandings or cultural differences?
- Did you learn new activities, languages, hobbies, or skills?

For more information about career preparation, contact:

Career Exploration Services Office

Student Services Building, Room 3078

<http://www.public.iastate.edu/~stdcouns/Careerservices2.html>

Agriculture and Life Sciences Career Services

141 Curtiss Hall, 294-4725

<http://www.career.ag.iastate.edu/>

Business Career Services

1320 Gerdin Business Building, 294-2542

<http://www.bus.iastate.edu/careers/>

Graduate Business Career Services

1360 Gerdin Business Building, 294-5133

<http://www.bus.iastate.edu/gradcareers/>

Design Career Services

297 Design, 294-0735

<http://www.design.iastate.edu/CAREER/>

Engineering Career Services

301/308 Marston Hall, 294-2540

<http://www.eng.iastate.edu/ecs/>

Human Sciences Career Services

131 MacKay Hall, 294-6466

<http://www.ss.hs.iastate.edu/career/>

Liberal Arts and Sciences Career Services

351 Carrie Chapman Catt Hall, 294-4841

<http://www.las.iastate.edu/careerservices/>

College of Veterinary Medicine

2270A Office of Academic and Student Affairs

294-0772

sources used to prepare this document:

University of Iowa Re-entry Handbook

<http://international.uiowa.edu/study-abroad/students/returnees/default.asp>

University of Minnesota Learning Abroad Center

<http://www.umabroad.umn.edu/students/returnedStudents/defineForEmployers.pdf>

NAFSA: Association of International Educators

http://www.nafsa.org/_/Document/_/ea_handbook.pdf