

You've been studying abroad for several weeks, a semester, or perhaps for a full academic year, and you're about to come back "home", wherever that may be. You're not the same, and neither is "home". How will you handle that?

This handbook on re-entry will help you navigate the mixed emotions of leaving newfound friends and cultures and finding your place in what used to be familiar. You've grown while you've been abroad, and that growth will continue as you re-acclimate to being part of your native culture, your family, your circle of friends, your life on campus or in your new job.

You'll have details to tend to (housing, credit transfer, etc.) as well as the adjustments entailed in dealing with the growth that took place while you were abroad: your intellectual development, your international perspective, and your personal development.

The information in this handbook will help you process and articulate what you've learned and how you've changed to family, friends, teachers, and future employers.

Inside, you'll find:

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## **I. Preparing to return**

Many students find that re-entry is more challenging than adjusting to the study abroad location: You attended pre-departure orientation prior to your time abroad, but there's no similar session to remind you of what's ahead when you come home. The information below will help to address issues you might face as you get ready to return to the U.S.

### **Academic and intellectual changes**

Your program abroad, whether it was practicum, formal classes, independent study, or internship, was designed to stretch you academically and exposed you to new teaching and learning methods, new environments, perhaps a new language.

If you're one of the increasing number of students who've gone to a non-English-speaking country, you've been immersed in a setting that forced you to speak in the native tongue; you had even more opportunity for this learning if you lived with a host family. Either way, you've gained more than you ever could have in a campus-based language lab.

Your courses in the host country was probably more self-directed and required more independent work and better time-management skills than the more guided U.S. approach to coursework. You've been trusted to take responsibility for your own learning, and you've seen that there are other ways of doing things than what you've been exposed to at ISU. As a result, you might have a different perspective on your major, a different focus for the remainder of your degree plan, and maybe even new thoughts about future career directions.

Your experiences in your host country have exposed you to new information about history, politics, economics, and culture, and you can take this information into the books you read and the courses you attend after your return. Being open to new perspectives will help you formulate your own opinions on issues and help you be more intent on *learning* as opposed to *memorizing facts and earning grades*.

Be aware that these positive changes can have some negative repercussions: perhaps friends won't want to engage in in-depth discussions on ideas that are now of interest to you, or faculty might be so tied to lectures and quizzes and homework that your newfound independence may feel stifled. Remember that there are ways to integrate your experience into your life in the U.S. (see Section IV in this handbook) despite what might seem as a return to an insular environment.

### **A change in international perspective**

While you've been abroad, you've had the opportunity to see how things are done in another country and compare that to how things are done in the U.S. You've also had the chance to see your own government and culture in a different light and perhaps have had to defend, or at least explain, U.S. foreign policy and other aspects of life in

the United States. As a result, you've developed some skills in seeing beyond yourself and have broadened your perception of the world, and you may find that you're more interested now in learning about other countries. Perhaps this has made you feel more "connected" to the world community; this connection will become increasingly important to you as modern media bring the world to you and as you develop an appreciation for the diversity in your own locale.

Perhaps your time abroad is the first time you've heard real critiques of your country's government or policies. If your sojourn was in a country that is economically, culturally, and politically different from the U.S., you may find it difficult to integrate the positive aspects of both countries into your view of the world. Your point of view is now more complex, and you'll find yourself drawing on your skills in evaluating facts and opinions as you come to acknowledge what you and others see as your reality.

### **Changes in your personal development**

As part of your time abroad, you've adjusted to a new culture, a new language (or new accent), and new academic expectations, all without the advantage of your familiar support network. As a result, you're probably feeling more independent, more self-confident, more self-sufficient, and more willing to try new things. This will lead you to setting new goals and being less reliant on other people's opinions, and perhaps you've re-examined the morals and principles you grew up with.

These changes, while positive and typical of study abroad students, may lead you to discover that familiar people still expect the "old you"; you'll need to draw on your newly-acquired self-confidence and tolerance of others as you negotiate your way through those who knew you "then" and introduce them to who you've become. And while you've changed, they might not have. See Section III for information on how to deal with friends and family whose reactions might be different from what you'd hoped they'd be.

#### **Keep in mind that:**

- There will be these academic and intellectual changes, a change to your perspective, and changes in your personal development.
- You'll need to disengage from the people and locations that have now become familiar.
- You're about to begin the process involved in being back home, back on campus, and back in U.S. culture again.

**See Section II for information on "reverse culture shock" (also called "re-entry shock") and how to deal with it.**

## II. Reverse Culture Shock

Anyone who has been abroad for an extended period of time, even if this was not the first experience abroad, will encounter what has come to be called "reverse culture shock", the period of readjustment to life as you knew it.

Before you went abroad, you learned about the stages of "culture shock": the excitement, then the discontent, and then the adjustment to your host culture. You probably were shown a picture of a U-curve to depict how one stage follows another. But researchers are finding that the drawing would be more accurate as a W-curve, and it's the second half of this curve that can come as a surprise to returning travelers. And because it's a surprise, returning to your home culture can feel more challenging or complicated than what you experienced when you first went abroad.

Granted, "home" will never feel as "foreign" as the location you adjusted to overseas, and your experience adjusting to that new culture has provided you with the tools -- - keeping active, finding a support group, maintaining a sense of humor, expecting differences, allowing yourself to make mistakes, staying flexible --- for the challenges of readjustment; but in general you'll find that the more fully you integrated yourself into your study abroad environment, the more difficult it will be to go back to your former notion of what was "normal". That said, being aware of the changes and being willing to learn from them will make the process smoother.

### **Keep in mind that:**

- Your experience abroad has been life-changing, but you might not yet be fully aware of just how much you've changed.
- The people who've been waiting for you might not have changed as significantly as you have and might not have a new perspective on U.S. culture, politics, etc.
- You may now be seeing life in the U.S. in a different light. Students often report feeling as if they're not at home but in a foreign country that seems a lot like home.
- You were jet-lagged when you arrived in your destination, and that's probably the case now; give yourself some time.
- Just as you were homesick when you first arrived at your study abroad location, you should expect some "reverse homesickness" for the people and places that were part of your days overseas.

- What was fascinating to you might be greeted with only polite interest by others. In spite of your wonderful adventures and how much you've changed, your friends and family may treat you as if you've never left home.

- It's not uncommon for those who have spent time abroad to feel superior to others, and others may not recognize your "status". Be patient: If the friendship is worth maintaining, adjustments can and will be made; if not, your new perspectives will help you develop new friendships.

- Personal issues, career questions, and other problems that you put "on hold" while you were abroad may still be waiting for you at home.

- The structure of academic studies in the U.S. isn't going to be like what you experienced abroad; the structure and expectations of your ISU classes may not allow you the independence you learned to deal with overseas.

- The pace of life at home may not match what you adjusted to abroad: The flexible attitude toward time, the laid-back feel, or the bustle of a large metropolitan area may be absent in Ames or your home town. Clock-watching and making your schedule a priority over spending time on relationships and situations may be unsettling for you.

- If you studied in a nation that is less wealthy than the U.S., you may have been struck by the quality of life of people who lack what you had thought of as necessities, how those people share what they have, and how they value their family relationships. You may now feel some guilt or confusion when contrasting your own standard of living with theirs (returning students seem to feel this most acutely at Christmas).

- The period of absence may have taken a toll on your relationship with your boyfriend/girlfriend; the added pressure can lead to separation as well as alienation and depression.

- You may come to the realization that others don't want to hear all the details of your adventures. You may find it easier to relate to other students who are returning from study abroad, either on your own program or a different one, since those students are experiencing some of the same feelings you are and have exciting adventures of their own to talk about.

- If your study abroad program involved a fieldwork component, an internship, service-learning, or volunteer work in the community, you may feel that your time in structured on-campus classes no longer feels relevant to your needs and interests.

- Others may seem to have only a superficial understanding of world issues; be reminded that you, too, might have been one of them prior to your time abroad.

- As an American, you might have been the center of attention abroad, which is both exhausting and flattering; your self-esteem might suffer a letdown once you're home.

- Having ups and downs is normal as you make this transition; there will be times that you're excited to be home and others that you feel "out of sync" with what's going on around you.

- Whether or not you kept a journal of your thoughts and feelings while abroad, you might want to consider keeping one now. Being able to process what you've experienced and think positively about it will help you in dealing with relationships, expectations, and integration of your time abroad.

- You may find that you simply can't fully articulate what your experience was all about and what it meant to you. By the same token, people in your audience may not have the same frames of reference or experience abroad that you now do. You can tell them about your trip, but you may fail to make them understand why you felt the way you did; that's okay.

- You may have the feeling that others misunderstand your growth or see the "wrong" changes in you; you may, in turn, become overly critical in assessing life back in the States.

- Many students develop problems when adjusting back to the local cuisine or the local viruses; you might have diarrhea, colds, or other minor illnesses after your return. If you don't feel well or have returned from a developing nation, schedule a doctor's appointment.

- Feeling that your experiences abroad are lost or are cut off from your current life is common, but with patience and effort you'll be able to use those experiences.

- Re-entry is a process, not a simple debriefing. Give yourself time.

- Many students find that a session with a study abroad advisor or with a professional from Student Counseling Service can be helpful in dealing with the readjustment process. Don't be afraid to ask for help.

**See Section III for help dealing with issues surrounding family and friends.**

**Section IV for how to integrate what you've learned and done into what you're learning and doing now.**

### III. Family and Friends

Dealing with family and friends is often the primary source of stress for those experiencing reverse culture shock; you may find it a challenge to reconnect with the people who were previously a huge part of your life.

#### **Family**

Your parents and siblings will gradually absorb the changes that have occurred in you, and research indicates that family reactions to those changes are usually positive. After all, you're more independent, more mature, and have begun to take the next steps in growing up and "leaving the nest". But until that happens, be aware that not everyone who asks, "How was your trip?" is willing to listen to every detail on the first encounter.

#### **Friends**

You had a circle of important friends prior to your departure, and perhaps you've stayed in contact with them while abroad, but it's often the case that friendships dissolve either while you're gone or soon after your return. You've changed, and their changes may not have been as significant. They may be apathetic and uninterested in hearing all your stories, and this can be alienating.

Additionally, most study abroad students (and their peers) are at a stage in life in which relationships are fluid and less stable than they may be later in life. Your absence might have created an open space for other friends to join the circle; the differences in perspectives and interests makes the space larger, and you may find yourself on the perimeter of that circle.

Surveys suggest that the most challenging situation occurs when one partner in a relationship has studied abroad, especially for more than a short-term program, unless the other partner is willing to ask questions about the experience, has also studied abroad, or has shared part of your experience by traveling with you as part of your time away.

#### **Keep in mind that:**

- No one will be as excited to hear about your adventures as you are to tell about them. This is not a rejection of you or your experiences --- just the fact that, once they've heard the highlights, they may have heard all they wish to hear.
- Whether or not they financed your time abroad, your parents will feel it's important for you to share information about your time abroad with them --- and perhaps with their friends. Luckily, you'll be happy to tell them all about it; these people may become your best audience.
- Aunts, uncles, and other family members will also have questions about your trip; tailor your responses to what is of interest to them.

- Your "low-maintenance" friendships (ones that don't need much nurturing) will survive, and you'll probably pick up right where you left off.

- "High-maintenance" friendships may be another matter: Without the usual amount of attention during your time abroad, you may find that you no longer have much in common with these people.

- Discerning the difference between high- and low-maintenance friends will help make the changes easier to accept.

- Some people just won't "get it"; likewise, you'll need to internalize some of your experiences so that you can express them better, either verbally or by your actions. Don't be discouraged by this.

- Listen to friends who didn't go abroad. They've changed, too, and need you to be as interested in their experiences as you want them to be in yours.

- People may misinterpret your words or actions. New ways of showing affection or greeting others, being silent in deference to elders, and new mannerisms or new slang may be viewed as attention-seeking, inappropriate, or in some other negative light. Be aware of how you may look to others and how your behavior might be interpreted.

- The people who might relate best to you right now are other students who studied abroad with you: you have shared experiences that can make for great bonding. Once you no longer have the common experience of living, studying, and traveling abroad, though, don't be surprised if you and some of these friends also begin to drift apart.

- Another type of relationship that will change involves friendships you built with people who remain in the host country, who didn't come home with you. These could be members of your host family and neighborhood, or perhaps host-country, international, or other U.S. students who studied with you. New technology will help you remain in touch, and you can plan visits for them to come here or you to return there. This will help you deal with the loneliness of being away from them at the same time that you're not really "back" with your friends from home.

- You formed close ties while you were abroad, and that means you'll be able to make new friends now that you're home, a skill that will serve you well in years to come. This is your chance to form connections to new people and new places.



**See Section IV for information on how to integrate your experience and your new skills into the rest of your life.**

## IV. Using What You've Learned

Studying abroad was an adventure, and some students choose to see it as only that: a chance to travel, to meet people, to see places they've always dreamed about. For other students, the time spent abroad was life-changing in many ways. Regardless of how your time abroad has affected you, there are ways to use those experiences to enhance your academic, personal, and career life for years to come.

### **Academically, keep in mind that:**

- You should talk to your professors about your experience. This will give you practice in describing your time abroad in a professional manner.
- If the professor wrote one of your letters of recommendation to the study abroad program, he/she will be pleased to learn of your success and can use this new information if you need an additional letter at a future date.
- If your program abroad was very self-directed, mention that to your professors; perhaps you can negotiate a means to be more independent in your classes to supplement lectures, homework, and quizzes.
- Beware of talking about your host institution as one of the best in the world. Your professors teach *here*, and you're returning to classes *here*. You learned some cultural sensitivity while abroad; use that new skill now to keep from alienating your audience.

### **Your perspective has changed, so keep in mind that:**

- You can keep up with international issues through on-line newspapers, newspapers and news magazines at the library, and foreign broadcasts on cable TV. Join a group or listserv that covers your favorite part of the world.
- You can consider joining local or international organizations that discuss and/or support causes that are now of interest to you.

### **You've grown as a person, so keep in mind that:**

- It's important not to "shoobox" your experience, setting it aside in a closet in your mind and only rarely taking it out to reminisce.
- Without giving your experience serious thought, you'll weaken its impact and minimize its power over your future academic, personal, and professional life.

### **What else can you do?**

- Submit your study abroad program's evaluation form. The information you provide will help future students who are considering the program you just completed, and it will give you a chance to reflect on your experience and the pros and cons of the program.

- Register for WLC 491, a 1-credit Fall Semester course. Learning outcomes include explaining how you were impacted personally, academically, and professionally by your study abroad experience, how to identify and develop a particular topic of interest from your experience, how to share that topic with local high schools and community organizations, and how to describe how studying abroad has changed you and how re-entry has affected you.

- Apply for a position as a Global Ambassador (peer advisor) in the ISU Study Abroad Center, or check into volunteering there or at your college's international office. Share your enthusiasm and help other students learn about what a study abroad experience can do for them.

- Become a Study Abroad Center volunteer. Opportunities include staffing information tables at the Study Abroad Fairs (September and January), helping at the orientations for students who will soon be studying abroad,

- Consider adding an International Studies major or minor, or an Area Studies or Certificate program (African Studies minor, Latin American Studies certificate), or an international component to your current major (International Business, etc.).

- Volunteer to help in the International Students and Scholars Office. You've experienced the disorientation of arriving in a foreign country (and lived to tell about it); volunteering with ISSO will allow you to help an incoming international student to get acclimated to Ames and the ISU campus.

- Continue to study the language that you were immersed in during your term abroad.

- Study abroad again!

- Apply for scholarships and fellowships (for example, Rotary International Ambassadorial Scholarship, Fulbright Grants, etc.).

- Look into graduate programs abroad to further your studies.

- Consider working abroad; BUNAC, Peace Corps, JET, teaching abroad, and many other possibilities are open to you. Books and articles on working abroad and teaching abroad can be found in the Study Abroad Center's library, public libraries, and on-line.

- Publish your stories and read about other study abroad alumni. Take a look at [AbroadViewMagazine.com](http://AbroadViewMagazine.com), [FrontiersJournal.com](http://FrontiersJournal.com), [TransitionsAbroad.com](http://TransitionsAbroad.com), [Glimpse.org](http://Glimpse.org), and [VergeMagazine.ca](http://VergeMagazine.ca).

- Join the Study Abroad Alumni Association, an ISU student organization for recent study abroad returnees.

- There are many ISU clubs that are multicultural or country- or region-specific and several others that focus on world languages so that you can hone your skills (Society of International Engineers, World Affairs Series, Student International Medical Aid Club, International Agriculture Club, International Business Club, etc.).

- Get involved in community organizations that will use your international skills. Examples in the Ames area include the YWCA; the Friendships International Program; Coffee, Tea, and English; and Engaging International Spouses. See ISU's Student Volunteer Service website for more ideas.

- Apply your international experience to the legislative process by joining ACT, a team of advocates who communicate with elected officials regarding the importance of international education. Get more information at [nafsa.org/actdescription](http://nafsa.org/actdescription).

- Enter photos in the Study Abroad Center's annual (September) photo contest.

- You now have friends abroad; stay in touch by e-mail, postal service mail, Skype, and social media websites.

- Check with your program's coordinator. Perhaps there's a student currently abroad on your program who would like to have contact with someone who has been there.

- Become the roommate or tutor of an international student.

- Identify neighborhoods in which you can become involved with immigrants and their families.

- There are many civic engagement organizations that are happy to have students involved. See websites such as [ActionForChange.org](http://ActionForChange.org), [Campus Compact \(compact.org\)](http://CampusCompact.org), [Idealist.org](http://Idealist.org), and [CampusActivism.org](http://CampusActivism.org) for ideas.

- Start an organization of your own here at ISU, focusing on what made a deep impression on you while you were abroad.

- Look for a job that allows you to use your cross-cultural skills. Your college's Career Center as well as the Study Abroad Center have resources that will help you with your search.

- Visit the Study Abroad Center for help in highlighting your study abroad experience in your résumé and cover letter. Employers say they're looking for applicants with global experience; communicate your abilities to them.

- Kimberly Larsson, a career advisor and author, has identified seven global skills ([abroadview.org/avmag/2008fall\\_larsson.htm](http://abroadview.org/avmag/2008fall_larsson.htm)), many of which are ones you may have gained or strengthened in your time abroad:

- dealing with ambiguity and change --- and loving it
- staying informed about the industry and where the power is located
- taking moderate risks and stepping forward into unfamiliar situations
- acting in a diplomatic way and building lasting relationships
- creating visions about the future and how you fit into the larger picture
- creating strategies and putting them into action
- demonstrating leadership, regardless of your position, and having respect for different nationalities, cultures, and religions

- Skills you may have developed include:

- sensitivity to cultural differences
- proficiency in another language
- adaptability
- ability to identify and achieve goals
- improved communication skills
- increased confidence, initiative, and independence
- greater flexibility
- awareness of global economic and political issues
- increased tolerance and open-mindedness
- increased self-awareness
- general travel skills
- increased resource management and budgeting skills
- improved organizational skills
- better problem-solving and crisis-management skills
- increased patience with self and others
- increased professional skills and/or knowledge base
- greater ability to handle uncertainty

- Depending on the job you're applying for, you'll want to put your international experience appears in the appropriate section of your **résumé**:

- If you participated in an academic program, it might best be listed in the education section rather than under activities or other experiences:

*B.A. Iowa State University, Ames, IA - Communication Studies, 2008*  
*Swansea University, Swansea, Wales, 08/2007-12/2007*

- If you completed an internship, list it as professional experience rather than as an activity:

*Communication Assistant, The National Assembly of the Republic of Korea, Seoul, South Korea, 01/2007-05/2007*

- If you did a work program, but the work is not especially 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.

- Your **cover letter** should address the specific job for which you're applying. Consider:

- How does your international experience relate to your field employment?
- What are the transferrable skills?
- How might your international experience benefit a professional in your field?
- How can you specifically address these points in your 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 transferrable skills such as independence, confidence, and problem-solving. The tolerance and cultural understanding you've developed are essential while working in the multicultural society of the U.S.

- When it comes time for **the interview**, and the interviewer mentions your international experience, don't respond with a simple, "It was great!"

- Take this opportunity to expand on what the experience provided for you and how you interacted with the host population.
- Develop stories and responses in advance so you're ready to share important learning experience, an amusing story, and other specific examples.

- Identify skills in the job description and create examples from your international experience that involve those skills.
  - Maintain balance by also using domestic experiences. It's best to demonstrate your critical thinking skills than to show off or demean one culture at the expense of another.
  - Deflect the stereotype of study abroad students and their wanderlust by emphasizing what you learned *there* will be valuable to the position you've applied for *here*.
- Before the interview, prepare:
    - an example of how you set priorities to achieve a desired outcome in your study abroad experience
    - a description of how your study abroad experience enhanced your knowledge, skills, and understanding of your intended career field
    - 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?
    - an example of international experience in which you had to resolve a conflict or solve a problem; what skills and personal qualities did you tap into, and how did the experience help you grow as a person?
    - a description of what was the most significant thing you learned about yourself through your study abroad experience
- Also consider:
    - Did you conduct research or complete a project related to your field of interest?
    - Did you travel independently?
    - Did you learn to work with a more diverse group of people than you had ever been exposed to?
    - Did you resolve a conflict based on cultural differences?
    - Did you learn new activities, languages, or skills?

based in part on information from the Auburn University Office of International Education and the article by Kimberly Larsson (Packaging Your International Experience) in the Fall 2008 issue of *Abroad View Magazine*