

Top Ten Immediate Reentry Challenges

Professor Bruce La Brack from the University of the Pacific has been a leading proponent and observer of students in study abroad for nearly 20 years. Based on his experience he has compiled the following list. We are grateful for Dr. La Brack's consent to use his suggestions with our students.



Cartoon by Sebastian Maharg-Bravo

1. **Boredom.**

After all the newness and stimulation of your time abroad, a return to family, friends, and old routines (however nice and comforting) can seem very dull. It is natural to miss the excitement and challenges which characterize study in a foreign country, but it is up to you to find ways to overcome such negative reactions.

2. **"No One Wants to Hear"**

One thing you can count on upon your return: no one will be as interested in hearing about your adventures and triumphs as you will be in sharing those experiences. This is not a rejection of you or your achievements, but simply the fact that once they have heard the highlights, any further interest on your audiences' part is probably unlikely. Be realistic in your expectations of how fascinating your journey is going to be for everyone else. Be brief.

3. You Can't Explain

Even when given a chance to explain all the sights you saw and feelings you had while studying abroad, it is likely to be at least a bit frustrating to relay them coherently. It is very difficult to convey this kind of experience to people who do not have similar frames of reference or travel backgrounds, no matter how sympathetic they are as listeners. You can tell people about your trip, but you may fail to make them understand exactly how or why you felt a particular way. It's okay.

4. Reverse "Homesickness"

Just as you probably missed home for a time after going abroad, it is just as natural to experience some "reverse" homesickness for the people, places, and things that you grew accustomed to as a student overseas. To an extent it can be reduced by writing letters, telephoning, and generally keeping in contact, but feelings of loss are an integral part of international sojourns and must be anticipated and accepted as a natural result of study abroad.

5. Relationships Have Changed

It is inevitable that when you return you will notice that some relationships with friends and family will have changed. Just as you have altered some of your ideas and attitudes while abroad, the people at home are likely to have experienced some changes. These changes may be positive or negative, but expecting that no change will have occurred is unrealistic. The best preparation is flexibility, openness, minimal preconceptions, and tempered optimism.

6. People See the "Wrong" Changes

Sometimes people may concentrate on small alterations in your behavior or ideas and seem threatened or upset by them. Others may ascribe any "bad" traits to the influence of your time abroad. These incidents may be motivated by jealousy, fear, or feelings of superiority or inferiority. To avoid or minimize them it is necessary to monitor yourself and be aware of the reactions of those around you, especially in the first few weeks following your return. This phase normally passes quickly if you do nothing to confirm their stereotypes.

7. People Misunderstand

A few people will misinterpret your words or actions in such a way that communication is difficult. For example, what you may have come to think of as humor (particularly sarcasm, banter, etc.) and ways to show affection or establish conversation may not be seen as wit, but aggression or "showing off." Offers of help in the kitchen can be seen as criticism of food preparation, new clothing styles as provocative or inappropriate, references to your host country or use of a foreign language as boasting. Be aware of how you may look to others and how your behavior is likely to be interpreted.

8. Feelings of Alienation/Critical Eyes

Sometimes the reality of being back "home" is not as natural or enjoyable as the place you had constructed as your mental image. When real daily life is less enjoyable or more demanding than you had remembered, it is natural to feel some alienation, see faults in the society you never noticed before or even become quite critical of everyone and everything for a time. This is no different than when you first left home. Mental comparisons are fine, but keep them to yourself until you regain both your cultural balance and a balanced perspective.

9. Inability to Apply New Knowledge and Skills

Many returnees are frustrated by the lack of opportunity to apply newly gained social, linguistic, and practical coping skills that appear to be unnecessary or irrelevant. To avoid ongoing annoyance: adjust to reality as necessary, change what is possible, be creative, be patient, and above all use all the cross-cultural adjustment skills you acquired abroad to assist your own reentry.

10. Loss/Compartmentalization of

Experience Being home, coupled with the pressures of school, family, and friends, often combine to make returnees worried that somehow they will "lose" the experience; somehow becoming compartmentalized like souvenirs or photo albums kept in a box and only occasionally taken out and looked at. You do not have to let that happen. Maintain your contacts. Talk to people who have experiences similar to yours. Practice your skills. Remember and honor both your hard work and the fun you had while abroad.