IMMEDIATE REINTEGRATION CHALLENGES

Returning from study abroad often includes special challenges as students settle into their lives in the U.S. and the College community. Below is a list of difficulties common to the re-adjustment process (to reduce some of the surprises) along with a few ideas to pave the way for successful reintegration.

BOREDOM: Living abroad can offer new insights, sometimes on a daily basis, and it is natural to miss the excitement of so many learning opportunities. It may help to consider the routine activities of life at home through the lens of your broader perspective. You may find there is much to explore at home as well.

NO ONE WANTS TO HEAR: Most friends and family members will ask about study abroad, yet few can set aside the time needed to understand all the ways your journey impacted you. Prepare a few brief responses to the questions folks from home often ask. It is also important to dedicate time for in-depth discussions over a meal or on a quiet afternoon. Remember to be open and interested in what close friends and family have encountered while you were away. Listening to their stories may make them eager to hear yours.

IT MAY BE DIFFICULT TO EXPLAIN: Talking about your international journey may not convey everything you want to express. Creative outlets may help you share your experience more fully. Photo albums, playlists of songs from abroad and sharing recipes from your host country are a few examples that can reflect the meaning of study abroad for you.

Another reason relating to people at home may be frustrating is most of them cannot share your frame of reference. In light of this, making time to connect with students who studied abroad with you can offer some much needed understanding, support and reflection.

REVERSE HOMESICKNESS: Intense nostalgia for your life overseas is a natural part of an intercultural experience. Staying in touch with friends and mentors abroad can help ease the feelings of loss. Sending postcards, emails and photographs from home often makes a difference. Remember that getting over reverse homesickness usually takes time, but if this process is expected and accepted, it shouldn’t be as overwhelming.

RELATIONSHIPS HAVE CHANGED: Unique ideas, different attitudes and new abilities are common traits of returned students. At the same time the people who remained at home may have changed also. The old familiar ways of interacting may suddenly seem strange and uncomfortable. In most cases time and patience increase mutual understanding and close relationships can be re-established.
PEOPLE ARE NOT COMFORTABLE WITH THE CHANGES: The benefits gained from study abroad probably affect your behavior and way of thinking. Sometimes these changes confuse those in your social circles. Being open and flexible as they learn about and accept the ways in which you have changed may ease this adjustment.

PEOPLE MISUNDERSTAND: Frequently others will misinterpret something you have said or done because they are not accustomed to your new views and insights. Think about ways to intentionally introduce and share your perspectives so family and friends can better understand what you are trying to express.

FEELINGS OF ALIENATION & CRITICAL TENDENCIES: Your broader perspective may keep home from feeling familiar or comfortable. Living abroad often opens travelers’ eyes to some of the faults in our own communities and it is common to feel your host country has better ways of doing things. Keep in mind that integrating your new ideas is also an adjustment that takes time. Eventually, as you find ways to keep your sojourn alive, you will also settle into activities, reconnect with others and begin to “feel at home”.

APPLYING NEW KNOWLEDGE AND SKILLS MAY BE A STRUGGLE: Outlets for the social, academic linguistic and coping skills developed while overseas typically are not readily available. Be prepared to research groups, activities and events that will allow you to apply your new abilities and locate environments where your new point of view is appreciated.

Remember skills gained overseas can also be applied to your re-adjustment at home. If you became more independent while away, for example, participating in unfamiliar activities may not be as intimidating.

LOSS OF AND COMPARTMENTALIZATION OF THE INTERNATIONAL EXPERIENCE: Students typically face re-adjustment along with the expectations of family, academic and work-related demands and the pressures of post-graduation plans. All these may urge travelers to consider their international journey as an experience that no longer requires their attention. It may be difficult, but continuing to reflect on the benefits of study abroad, reminiscing about your adventures and strengthening friendships overseas will help you weave your time abroad into your new life at home.

Adapted from a list compiled by Dr. Bruce LeBrack, School of International Studies, University of the Pacific