Returning from Study Abroad  
By Dr. Pat Ponto  

The focus of this article is the very important annual spring transition (“a natural process of disorientation and reorientation that marks the turning point of a path of growth”) at “K,” the return of the juniors who have been away. What can you expect when you return from study abroad?  

There are many challenges in the process of returning. Four of the clearest are: facing the second part of the W curve, realizing that many important people may not understand fully the experience of living abroad, finding an effective, post-study abroad way of being at “K,” and planning your SIP.  

The W curve suggests that the first couple of weeks back should be pretty exciting and fun (seeing your friends and hearing their stories, learning what’s happened on campus this year, checking out Hicks, meeting the first years), but by mid-term time, you are likely to feel more dissatisfied with “K” and wish you were still away. The fact that this process is normal does not make it easy. Do remember, though, that the W curve predicts that by the end of the quarter you will integrate your study abroad experience with your on-campus life.  

Two of the frequent complaints of returning students are that they have more stories to tell and more pictures to show about life abroad than people want to hear or see, and that others who have not had a similar experience really cannot relate to all that they’ve learned and how they’ve changed. These realizations are hard and do cause frustration and at least temporary distance from those who are not as interested. The good news is that you are not alone, you know other returnees – and, hopefully, you can discuss these frustrations with each other -- and also share your stories, pictures, and changes.  

Third, many students report that it’s tough to come back to the “K” way of doing life. For some, the pace here seems unhealthy; for others, grades and accomplishment don’t seem as important; for still others, the consumerism of the U.S. has become toxic. It’s a struggle to know that you’ve changed and your values have been transformed, but the College is still much the same. Expectations for academic work will still be rigorous. Time will be at a premium. The good news is that you will have a broader perspective now and, hopefully, be clearer about what really matters to you.  

Last, the push to figure out a SIP, while taking three classes is a struggle for many recent returnees. Some students are still away psychologically for the first weeks of the quarter. Taking three classes is usually plenty of challenge, but the SIP also has to be planned. For those of you who haven’t been thinking about your senior project, this quarter can feel like a collision between study abroad and “K.” Please remember, many students have been in your shoes and have done well. Take a deep breath and go to see your advisor.  

Welcome back! We hope this turning point leads to satisfying new growth.