

Chapter 17

Dealing with Reverse Culture Shock for Students Returning from Study Abroad Programs

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ABSTRACT

When students return from their study abroad programs, they can often feel distress, anxiety, and cultural identity confusion. Many university campuses within the developed world are providing resources to help students deal with these feelings. However, this is not always the case with the universities of developing world. An increasing number of students from developing countries are going abroad for their studies and many of them are part of study exchange programs. It is important for universities in the students' home countries to become abreast of these difficulties and prepare students to deal with them on the university campus. This study uses a large public university in Sindh, Pakistan to determine what kinds of resources are available to study abroad students and the role these resources play in helping students with feelings of reentry shock. The study also provides suggestions to assist in culturally ambiguous situations experienced once students return home.

INTRODUCTION

In an effort to create a student body that is well-rounded and culturally-aware, universities around the globe are making study-abroad programs an integral element of their curriculum. The number of students participating in study-abroad programs is taken as one sign of overall institutional quality-- demonstrating that a university is providing a stimulating learning environment and a focus on globalization in higher education (Stroud, 2006). Short-term study abroad programs are a special focus of education institutions because these programs offer study-abroad opportunities that can be availed by both traditional and non-traditional students. During 2000-2010 timeframe, the number of U.S. students participating in study-abroad programs increased from 150,000 to 270,000, an increase of 80% (Open Doors Report, 2011).

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With all of this hype about the benefits of study abroad programs, universities have heavily overlooked one very important aspect of these study-abroad programs-- the reverse cultural shock students experience when they return home after completing their study abroad. While many universities have programs available to prepare prospective study-abroad students for the culture change they will experience abroad, very few universities focus on how students will manage the reverse cultural shock when they return home. The reverse cultural shock is similar to culture shock. While a culture shock refers to difficulties encountered in adapting to a new culture, reverse cultural shock refers to difficulties encountered when readapting to the home culture. According to Casteen (2006), this reverse cultural shock can make it difficult to manage personal relationships and emotional well-being. Some typical feelings associated with reverse cultural shock include a disconnect from family and friends and being unable to associate and interact within the environment. According to Adler (1981), Storti (1997), and Sussman (1986), while students typically are prepared for cultural adaptation when they move abroad, they are generally not prepared for the same when they return home. Due to less emphasis of this aspect of study abroad programs, it is no surprise that many universities may not have the adequate resources to assist their study abroad students with dealing with the re-entry shock. The objective of this chapter is to explore the challenges of re-entry shock and to suggest some ways that students can deal with the associated social and psychological challenges of this re-entry shock.

STUDY ABROAD AND RETURNING HOME

When students first arrive at their study abroad location, they may feel bored, homesick, have difficulties developing and managing changed relationships, and they may be unable to associate within the environment. For example, they may feel lonely or experience feelings of isolation. Students may develop similar feelings after they return home from completing their study abroad program. The feelings of culture shock are normal, and show that, while studying abroad, students were able to develop a new perspective on life (North Western University, 2015). However, the reverse culture shock is very severe and may present more significant challenges even for those students who were able to successfully manage the culture shock (NAFSA, 2015; Maideen & Aminu, 2015). Sussman (1986) and Akhtar & Kröner-Herwig (2015) suggest that students who successfully manage the culture shock can also successfully manage the reverse cultural shock. However, the challenges associated with reverse cultural shocks can be related to the amount of time spent abroad and the degree of cultural differences between the students home country and the foreign destinations (Casteen, 2006; Geary, 2014; Wu, Garza, & Guzman, 2015).

Acculturation and Reacculturation

Acculturation is a process in which members of one cultural group adopt the beliefs and behaviors of another group. Although, acculturation is usually in the direction of a minority group adopting habits and language patterns of the dominant group, acculturation can be reciprocal--that is, the dominant group also adopts patterns typical of the minority group (Rice University, 2015). Reacculturation is the process by which a person joins an unfamiliar social group by learning its language, customs, and social processes. Adler took this concept a step further and contended that “counselling about re-entry transition can be a natural extension of orientation programming offered during the entry transitions (and can) assist with the closure experience of leaving a host country” (Adler, 1980, p. 176). The model

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