

## INTERCULTURAL ISSUES

One of the most rewarding aspects of study abroad is the experience of being immersed in another culture. Students often return from abroad with an understanding of new foods, art, sports or models of business, science, or government; this expanded knowledge helps former participants to be more effective and innovative in their working lives and more satisfied on a personal level.

### **First, what is culture?**

One possible definition—among millions—is that culture is the set of basic life assumptions shared by a group of people. It includes how the people see themselves, how they see the rest of the world, and how the group arranges itself economically and politically.

### **Only some differences are immediately apparent**

In looking at people from other countries, you can easily see some things about them, such as what they eat, how they speak, and how they dress.

You can learn all of those things from books or TV or movies. But to learn the deeper things about another culture, you need to spend time living in it. It is only through immersion that you will come to understand how other people think about their work, spirituality, money, or politics.



### **The rewards of being immersed in another culture...**

- Increased self-reliance
- Better language skills
- Discovery of priorities and interests that you never knew you had
- Greater insight into world events
- A more complete understanding of America's role in the world
- Desirability in hiring

### **...and the challenges**

But of course, anything worthwhile is also challenging. While abroad, you will come to understand that your host country has its own way of handling...

**...meeting people and fitting in.** A frequent criticism of Americans is that we are superficial – overly friendly when first meeting people, but then not very good at building or maintaining lasting friendships. Until you understand local ways, it is wise to be slightly more formal and restrained than usual in dealing with people.

**...space and contact.** All cultures have different notions about physical contact or space, for instance how far away to stand or sit when conversing, or how to discipline children, or how to greet people (a handshake? a bow? a kiss on the cheek?)

### **Each program site has multiple cultural influences**

Expect to encounter many different points of view and ways of doing things within your host country.

## Stereotypes

### **Work against your own stereotypes...**

One of the goals of study abroad is to help students to challenge and overcome these negative stereotypes and ideas about particular people or cultures. In the era of global business, media, and frequent international travel, stereotypes are more counterproductive and unnecessary than ever. Maintain an open mind about what you see. If something seems strange, try to understand it by discussing it with your program leader or someone else who understands both your culture and that of your host country.

### **...and those of others**

There are many stereotypes about U.S. Americans (e.g., loud, immature, wasteful, ignorant of other countries, etc.). We suggest that you act in a way that will convince your hosts that these stereotypes cannot be applied to all Americans, or at least not to yourself.

- Watch local people and model your public behavior on theirs, especially in the areas of how loudly one speaks and how one uses alcohol.
- Learn at least a little of the local language. Be able to begin vital inquiries with “Excuse me, do you speak English?” Also be able to say “thank you.”

### **A word to “heritage students”**

If you are going to a country where you have some ethnic heritage, do not expect that you will slip easily into Polish, African, or Vietnamese culture. If you have grown up in the US or in another country, you may be viewed as a US American and as an outsider. While you can gain rewarding insight into your heritage and family, be modest in your expectations about fitting in or having an instinctive understanding of your host country.

## Culture Shock

### **Cultural adjustment is a process**

Many travelers go through different stages in relating to a new culture. One of the simpler models to describe this process:

- **The “excitement” stage.** Everything around you is new and exciting. An open air market appears picturesque, the vendors seem lively, the food smells fragrant & tastes exotic.
- **The “disillusioned” stage.** You have the same experiences as before, but now you make a negative assessment, not a positive one. The same open air market now seems run-down and chaotic, the vendors may seem aggressive or obnoxious and the food is no longer appealing.. “Culture shock” may be a factor at this stage.
- **The “balanced” stage.** With time, you realize that there is good, and bad, in the new culture as in your home culture – they are just arranged and presented differently. Your anger and disappointment fades, and you realize that you can function effectively outside your home culture. It’s clear that the open air market is different from the store where you buy food at home, but you see that both have their advantages. The vendors are different from the grocery clerks at home, but they all get the job done. The food is indeed different from food at home, and you’re glad you’ve tried so many new dishes.

### **But getting back to culture shock...**

“Culture shock” is a name given to the collection of feelings that sometimes arise when travelers are overwhelmed by cultural differences. The symptoms can include feeling lonely, homesick, overwhelmed, fearful, angry, confused, or judgmental.

Having culture shock does not imply any shortcoming on your part – it’s just an occupational hazard of living an international and intercultural life. Just as an athlete cannot get in shape without going through the uncomfortable conditioning stage, so you cannot fully appreciate new cultures without first going through the uncomfortable stages of psychological adjustment.

We can't prevent you from experiencing culture shock, but we can reassure you that culture shock has been overcome by thousands of study abroad participants before you. Actually, many people experience culture shock in their own country, for example, by visiting a new region for the first time.

### **Smoothing your cultural adjustment process**

As you approach the challenge of adapting to a new culture, remember that you have already done this at least once, on at least a modest scale, in leaving home for college. Until making that step, you lived in the "culture" of your high school and your parents' home. Think of everything that you have learned since then and how different your life is now!

With a little advance preparation, some flexibility and persistence, you can adjust as successfully to the new surroundings of your study abroad program site.

### **While abroad**

- Stay physically and psychologically well. Eat well, sleep enough, and don't drink too much.
- Deal with any dissatisfaction promptly & directly. If you have concerns about your housing, your academic program, or anything else having to do with your program site, address these quickly so you don't feel worse.
- Be patient with yourself & others. Remember that cultural adjustment is a process and that everyone goes through it at a different pace.

### **Checking your progress**

You will realize how much you have learned about and adjusted to your host country's culture when you interact with other people visiting the country. Your familiarity with the local customs, environment and language will enable you to explain the significance of national holidays, help them order local cuisine, make sure they know about the local hazards (like crazy drivers or thieves), or give directions to tourists who might be lost. That will show you what you have learned!

### **Returning "home" is an intercultural experience, too**

Many people find it challenging to return to campus from study abroad or other travel experiences. It is often while trying to settle back into their former routines that returned study abroad participants realize how much they have grown and changed. Some report that their overseas experience changes their perceptions, their ways of doing things, or even what it means to "be themselves."