

Bringing It Home: Multifaceted Support for Returning Education Abroad Students

THE CROSS-CULTURAL REENTRY PROCESS OF U.S. EDUCATION ABROAD STUDENTS has received increasing attention in the past 20 years. As a result, programming to support returning students' needs has become more commonplace on U.S. campuses. Such programs have taken a variety of formats. A recent survey of SECUSS-L (a listserv for education abroad professionals) found that reentry activities currently in place in the United States include social gatherings where students can interact informally, counseling sessions, alumni panels, peer-mentor programs, credit-bearing courses, résumé workshops, mock job interviews, and more.

Four years ago, the Boston Area Study Abroad Advisors group (renamed BASAA: New England Education Abroad Community in November 2005) pooled its resources and organized a full-day conference for students returning to the region from abroad. Modeled in part on the reentry conference that has been held successfully for many years in Philadelphia, the Boston event has been repeated annually since then. It includes guest speakers, small group sessions focusing on the emotional side of coming home, concurrent sessions dedicated to "professional development" (Peace Corps, teach/work abroad options, graduate schools, scholarships and fellowships, resume critiquing, etc.), and an international opportunities fair. When asked about the benefits of the conference, student attendees have commented on the opportunity to connect with peers who share a common background, to talk about their feelings and their readjustment to the States, to think about how they have changed, and to learn how to communicate what they have gained to friends, family, faculty members, and potential employers. One student was able to channel his energy into encouraging others to venture abroad as well. "I feel I have formally gained the language in which to describe the international experience in terms that would encourage others to have one of their own," he said. This feedback can be affirming for education abroad professionals who often wonder if offering reentry programming is worth

the time and resources it takes to plan.

Every institution has its own particular context and realities, and students who come through education abroad offices after an overseas experience may have very different needs and motivations. Common goals of reentry programming include a recognition of the value of study abroad experiences, the integration of education abroad into one's academic career, the acknowledgement of new skills and perspectives, emotional support and development through a focus on students' personal growth, preparation for future career and professional choices, and the formation of life-long goals and relationships influenced by students' cross-cultural learning.

Some of the activities that have been successfully used at the Boston Area Student Reentry Conference and in other settings to address these common goals that can be readily adapted to a variety of institutional settings (Many of these activities are available online in the BASAA resource packet at www.academicintl.com/downloads/BASAA.pdf.) We'll discuss a sampling of these activities here.

Letting Students Tell Their Story

It is not at all uncommon for returning students to realize that others rarely have the interest or patience to hear about their time abroad in detail. After a few sentences of description, friends' and family members' eyes tend to glaze over, often leaving students feeling

frustrated and misunderstood. To create a supportive environment, it can be helpful to incorporate some activities that give students the chance to think about the high points, the low points, and the moments that stand out from their study abroad experience. Sharing their own experiences with fellow students who have studied abroad can help students identify the common elements of their reentry experiences, as well as build community among participants. These exercises also provide a built-in empathetic audience for students' storytelling.

Cultural Bingo

A good activity to help break the ice with a group of students who don't know each other, cultural bingo is a chart with 25 squares, each representing an activity students may have participated in while abroad (e.g., traveled on a boat, went to a local festival, got lost on the subway, etc.) Students mingle amongst themselves, trying to find people who have accomplished the activity for each square. While "Bingo!" may be their goal, along the way they will meet many people and get to know their names and one thing about them, which allows for setting up a comfortable and friendly environment.

Self-disclosure Exercise

This activity consists of 25 leading questions, such as: "What was the most interesting food you ate?" "How were the bathrooms different?" or "What do you miss most about your host country?" The activity helps students focus in on specific moments of their study abroad experience. The facilitator places the questions in a basket and lets students choose one, think briefly about their response, and share it with the rest of the group.

Encouraging Critical Thinking

While it is important to give students the

space to tell their story, to truly learn from their experiences they will need to take a closer and more evaluative look at them. These activities can help students move beyond a superficial understanding of what was really going on during their time abroad.

What's Been Good,

What's Been Hard

In this activity, students are instructed to divide a page of paper in half, listing on one side what has been most rewarding about being home and, on the other, what has been most challenging. The facilitator then invites participants to share their responses with the full group and, if one is available, these comments can be transcribed onto a flip chart or blackboard. In addition to furthering the goal of allowing students to tell their stories and recognizing that others may share elements of their experience, the resulting discussion allows students to think critically about how they have grown from having been abroad and from the reentry process itself.

Top 10 Immediate Reentry Challenges

Using Bruce LaBrack's list of "Top 10 Immediate Reentry Challenges," [see sidebar on page 66] the facilitator asks students what they think their biggest challenge was when they first returned home and what it is now. Students are given a few minutes to talk in pairs about this, and are then asked to share with the whole group their biggest challenges and strategies to cope with them. The facilitator allows the group to brainstorm possible strategies and writes these on a flipchart or blackboard.

Encourage Students to Join ACT Upon Reentry

Student and scholars have experiences—and can tell the stories—that policy-makers must hear to get involved in helping to further international education and exchange. As part of your institution's reentry program, encourage students to register for NAFSA's Advocacy Centered Team (ACT). Students will then be able to contact members of Congress to talk about their experiences abroad and the benefit of learning with international colleagues. For more information and to register for ACT visit www.nafsa.org/actdescription. To ask questions about ACT, please contact grassroots@nafsa.org.

Catalyzing Personal Assessment

When considering ways to best support students upon their return home, Bruce LaBrack emphasizes a "Say No to Shoeboxing" approach. In this case, "shoeboxing" describes the tendency to treat the study abroad experience as a unique yet isolated event, worthy of being stored away with like memories and only taken out and appreciated on special occasions. LaBrack advocates for a different conception of education abroad, one that links the experience to students' past and future, and allows them to grow in ways that can be effectively integrated into their character and sense of self. While students are often fiercely proud of new opinions and attitudes they form while they are abroad, they sometimes don't realize all the new skills they gain as a result of their cross-cultural learning. These activities give students the chance to take stock of new abilities they have developed while abroad, while considering various facets of their personal growth.

How Have I Grown?

This three-part activity includes both visualization and creative components. First, the facilitator asks students to think back to the day they decided to go abroad. They mentally walk through the entire process (applying, getting accepted, going to orientation meetings, packing, arriving in the host country, the best and worst moments of living abroad, and finally, returning home). Next, students are asked to draw two pictures of themselves: one of who they were before studying abroad and one of who

they are now. Last, students share their pictures and explain them to their peers in the group. The facilitator keeps track of growth and skills mentioned by students and points these out where appropriate. If art does not seem the best way to connect with a particular group of students, they can make lists of five adjectives that could describe them before and after their experience, and share those with the group.

Possible Outcomes of an International Experience

This list of skills and qualities in the materials from *Maximizing Study Abroad: A Students' Guide to Strategies for Language and Culture Learning and Use* serves as a great resource to help students articulate what they learned abroad. Students choose three skills and three qualities from the list that they feel they gained while studying abroad. They are instructed to take a few minutes to

associate each skill or quality with a specific anecdote from their time abroad, considering the source and context of their learning. They are then allowed time to talk in pairs or small groups, sharing at least one of these anecdotes. The facilitator then helps them brainstorm ways that these skills and qualities could be used to work through the challenges they face in readjusting to life in the United States, whether these involve academics, personal relationships, or work issues. This activity can allow students to make connections between their study abroad experience and the rest of their lives.

Focusing on Future Plans

Once students have had the opportunity to evaluate their new skills, they should be encouraged to think about how they want to put them to use and where they might lead them in the future. While it is true that readjusting to life in the United States can

sometimes challenge students' ability to see the big picture, these activities and resources can inspire students to dream up ways to take their involvement with the world to the next level.

Putting It All Together

Now that students have identified how they've grown and what the rewards and challenges are of being home, the facilitator can introduce them to the "shoebox" metaphor and ask them to brainstorm ways they can "unshoebox" (or unpack) their experience by integrating their newfound skills into their lives at home. This can often be a perfect opportunity to inform students about opportunities that may be available on campus (e.g., to join international or foreign language clubs, to mentor international students on campus, to be teaching assistants in classes related to their new skills, etc.) and/or in the local community.

Top 10 Immediate Reentry Challenges for Students

By Bruce LaBrack

Editors' Note: Sharing this with students upon reentry may ease their transition back to campus life at home.

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—remember: a bored person is also boring.

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 arriving overseas, 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 "Wrong" Changes

Sometimes people may concentrate on small alterations in your behavior or ideas and seem threatened or upset by them. Others may ascribe "bad" traits to the influence of your time abroad. These incidents may be motivated by jealousy, fear, or feelings of superiority or inferiority.

Getting Abroad Again

We all know that the moment certain students set foot on U.S. soil that they are already focused on the idea of leaving for parts unknown as soon as possible. There are many ways that international educators can help them make this happen. One is by preparing resources about available fellowships and scholarships for graduate study abroad, work abroad, volunteering abroad, and the like. Examples of such materials are also available in the BASAA resource packet.

Finding an Approach that Works for Your Institution

While no program fits all students or all institutions, the above resources can provide educators with an effective toolbox from which to draw when addressing their students' reentry needs. Which of these resources will work best for your institution will depend on a variety of factors, from

budget and time constraints, to student and institutional culture, to your own personal style, and comfort level facilitating such activities. Although we were initially apprehensive about how students might respond to the activities, we have found students to consistently participate fully and enthusiastically when presented with the above activities.

The larger challenge for educators is not how to engage reentry program participants in the activities once they are there, but how to reach out successfully to returning students so that they will attend reentry programs at all. We have occasionally found students who stand to benefit the most from reentry programs to be the least aware of what they might gain from attending—and the most likely to tell others that the program was invaluable to them once they have been enticed to attend. Our collective experience has been that promotion campaigns that emphasize the opportunity to share stories with an in-

terested audience and to explore international career options and opportunities for future travel have been more successful at attracting students than those that emphasize words like "coping," "reentry" or "reverse culture shock." In fact, the Boston Area Student Reentry Conference, which has filled to capacity three years in a row, promises the following benefits on its Web site (www.studyabroadconference.com): "Learn about international opportunities in Boston. Share stories with people who aren't tired of hearing them. Internationalize your résumé and interviewing skills. Discover how to go abroad again." And its past participants have been its strongest advocates. **IE**

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ority. 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." Conversely, a silence that was seen as simply polite overseas might be interpreted at home, incorrectly, as signaling agreement or opposition. New clothing styles or mannerisms may be viewed as provocative, inappropriate, or as an affectation. Continually using references to foreign places or sprinkling foreign language expressions or words into an English conversation is often considered boasting. Be aware of how you may look to others and how your behavior is likely to be interpreted.

8. Feelings of Alienation

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 remembered, it is natural to feel some alienation. Many returnees develop "critical eyes," a tendency to see faults in the society you never noticed before. Some 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, technical, linguistic, and practical coping skills that appear to be unnecessary or irrelevant at home. To avoid ongoing annoyance: adjust to reality as necessary, change what is possible, be creative, be patient, and above all, use the cross-cultural adjustment skills you ac-

quired abroad to assist your own reentry.

10. Loss or Compartmentalization of Experience (or "Shoeboxing")

Being home, coupled with the pressures of job, family and friends, often combine to make returnees worried that somehow they will "lose" the experience. Many fear that it will somehow become 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 abroad; seek out and talk to people who have had experiences similar to yours, practice your cross-cultural skills, and continue language learning. Remember and honor both your hard work and the fun you had while abroad.

BRUCE LABRACK is the director of Pacific Institute for Cross-Cultural Training at the University of the Pacific's School of International Studies. This "Top 10" list as well as other materials are available on the "What's Up With Culture?" Web site (<http://www3.uop.edu/sis/culture/index.htm>), which is funded through the U.S. Department of Education.