

Dr. Jim's Tips for Directors of U.S. Students Abroad

(As told by students...all learned the hard way.)

A KEY TO MAKING INTERNATIONAL STUDY NOT JUST AN EXPERIENCE BUT an experiential education, is for us students to come up with realistic learning goals that we continuously monitor and work toward under your guidance. Goals should stretch us out of our comfort zones, but not into our panic zones, and should be compatible with our larger educational and life goals.

We U.S. students might often feel more comfortable when we are in control our environments. The discomfort we may feel in unfamiliar environments can be exacerbated when we're living in cultures where a more fatalistic orientation toward life prevails. During the earliest moments of orientation, it can help to openly acknowledge this cultural tendency and how it may interfere with cultural immersion. Encourage us to let go, trust the process, and expect the unexpected. Some languages use the same word for "crisis" and "opportunity." Before events even occur, encourage us to decide in advance to let go of our "inner control freaks" and reframe those inevitable last-minute schedule changes, unpredictable com-

mites, or unexpected living conditions as learning experiences. Groups that adopt "It's All Good" as the group motto have so much more fun.

Getting Us Ready, Keeping Us (and You) Aware

Orientation is an ongoing process. Teach for the moment. We learn much better when there's a need to know. We won't remember a subway map of a strange new city if you show it to us, out of context, a week before we go on the excursion. Please go over it with us again when we get there.

Be our "culture coach." If we tell you how rude a shopkeeper just was, how aggressive we find old la-



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dies on the metro, or how nosey one of our host parents is, seize this teachable moment. Encourage us to explore both the reasons for our reactions and alternative explanations for the other person's behavior. (Warning: This is going to be easier to do when our complaints aren't about *you* or the program.)

As the director, you don't have to know all the answers. If in doubt about the bus routes, where the best cell phone deals or Internet cafés are, or where to eat in a new city, assign us students to figure out the answers as a team and bring them back to share with the rest of the group (in the form of maps, schedules, price lists, etc.). It actively engages us in the host language and culture and it takes the burden off you.

If there are two leaders, share the visibility, convey to us that you trust each other, and settle any disagreements you may have with each other behind closed doors.

Document expenses every day. You may think you'll remember them all later, but you won't.

You're not going crazy.

Eat, Drink, and Be Merry?

Pizza Hut bad; local cuisine good. We all know we've come here to experience something different, but sometimes we forget. Whenever you can, structure our experience in a way that encourages us to get out of our U.S. bubble and interact with the host culture on its own terms.

If we're under the age of 21, we can't legally buy alcohol or drink it at home. Many of us do so anyway, but we usually have to do it behind closed doors. When we travel to countries where we're "legal," it's often such a novelty that we might need a little help making the transition away from thinking of alcohol as something to get away with, to something to be done with respect for local culture, customs, and traditions, our peers, our bodies, and our hosts. Don't assume it will be easy. But don't assume we can't do it either—especially if you teach us the cultural significance of alcohol in the host country and any customs around its use that we might not know, treat us with respect, convey that you are putting your trust in us to be responsible, and ask for our support and help in the process.

Sometimes it can help to remind us gently that we can always come back some day on our own at much less expense, but that right now, we're on a study abroad program earning academic credit (and, in many cases, financial aid), and representing the United States, our home institutions, and our study abroad program, with all the rights, benefits, and responsibilities that this entails. In other words, it's bigger than us.

Try to foster in us a respect for the host culture's ways of doing

things—from meal hours to health care. A goal can be for us to meet each of Maslow's needs (physiological, safety, belongingness and love, esteem, and self-actualization) on the host culture's terms. When we get home, we can always decide which we want to hold on to and which we don't.

Don't waste energy on the uncontrollable.

You're not going crazy.

Communication 411

Remember our group goals and my individual goals? Pull them out from time to time, look at them with us, and ask "How are we doing on this?" One or two well-timed group or individual meetings during the program can serve as a great reality check, rekindling the group energy, and redirecting us all toward the goals we've set for ourselves. If we're not reaching our goals, it may be time to ask why. We may need to either redouble our efforts before it's too late or reassess and rewrite our goals.

Telephone bad; journal good. Phone conversations are transient. Journal entries are free and last forever. You may need to remind us from time to time. But don't nag!

It may also help to remind us at times that, although e-mail can be an invaluable tool to facilitate communication, excessive use of it to communicate with our friends at home can disengage us from the very culture we came abroad to experience—and that's *not* good!

The U.S. orientation toward authority and power is complex: We don't want to feel we've been manipulated and controlled, but we do want to know we're in a safe environment to explore and grow. So share the decisions when you can, encourage participation and growth, explain to us why we're doing what we're doing, and involve us in the process so we feel ownership of decisions that affect us. But when the bus breaks down on a deserted highway at midnight, take charge.

The above paradox applies to physical travel as well: We need you to provide direction and convey that you know where you're leading us, but it's also important to bring up the rear: Always have us board public transportation and go through points of no return, like security and immigration checkpoints, ahead of you. You don't want to already be in your seat when one of us discovers we've lost a passport and security personnel won't let us on the plane.

The U.S. orientation toward time is unique, too, and this orientation is reflected in our language. We spend it, we invest it, we manage it, we buy it, we borrow it, we save it; in fact, we treat time like a commodity. One of the worst ways to offend someone from the United States is to make us feel that our time is being wasted. Another way to quickly lose our good will is to tell us we're going to have free time and then take it away from us. Exploring this issue

when it arises can provide great cultural learning opportunities, but unless you seize this teachable moment, we might never realize that the whole world wouldn't have the same reaction, and we're more likely to simply label you or the program "unorganized."

You're not going crazy.

Culture Shock Solutions

What the literature calls "culture shock"—that feeling of being out of control and having the props knocked out from underneath us—hits us all in different ways at different times, sometimes weeks or months after we arrive abroad. Even if we've lived abroad before! And even if we're in an English-speaking country! And especially when we are convinced that what we're experiencing is *not* culture shock. That's because we hardly ever recognize culture shock when it's happening to us and the last thing we want anyone to tell us is that we're just going through culture shock because that sounds demeaning.

When we get together to complain about the culture or about the program, our professors, our housing, the length of our daily commutes, or the like, it's a pretty safe bet that we're going through culture shock. The best way to inoculate us against this is to discuss this very phenomenon (i.e., what the signs of culture shock are and how we won't usually recognize it in ourselves and that everyone will need a little support from time to time) during the earliest moments of orien-

tation, while it's all still hypothetical and not yet personalized. Then be there for us to help us recognize it when it happens to us. If you don't, as soon as the complaints become real—and especially when they are about the organization of the program or other things in which you have more ego invested—you will have lost the battle.

Making Sense of It All

Debrief, debrief, debrief! Discussion time is important throughout the program. A final meeting (or two or three) to identify what we've learned, how our attitudes or understandings have changed, and what we're going to do with it all when we go back home, is absolutely essential.

We may not recognize a lot of what you've done for us until it's too late to thank you, but don't think it's not worth it. And, okay, maybe you were going just a little crazy there in the middle, but in our hearts we know you were doing it for us. But it's all good, right?! **IE**

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Editor's note: This article, while cast in the voice of students, was written by an experienced study abroad program director.

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