All About Culture (and Culture Shock)

If you think back to your first year of high school or university (if you’ve already attended one back home), you might remember both apprehension and anticipation. You were quickly hit with what you did not know—how to find your classes, how to navigate the cafeteria, the necessity of having your I.D. card on you at all times, where to buy books, how to succeed in a new kind of study…the list goes on. What you were going through was a process of cultural adjustment. You were learning the rules of a very new game; it took time, patience, and a willingness to watch, listen and learn. What you are about to experience abroad in the U.S. is roughly comparable in character to the transitions you’ve been through before, but it will be far more intense, challenging and rewarding. It’s the next step. Congratulations on choosing it.

How long will you be at HWS? About four to nine months if you’re an exchange student or four years if you are here for your degree. One semester is really not all that much time to fit in what many returned students would call the most significant and amazing experience of their college careers (if not their lives). Although many students experience homesickness and/or culture shock and have good days and bad days, you want to try to maximize what little time you have abroad. This section will help you understand what intercultural adjustment is all about, what you should expect to experience, and how you can actively work to make this process a vibrant learning experience. Four-year students will experience exactly the same things as the semester-long visiting students but you have the advantage of a longer time period to enjoy yourself once you’ve made the transition successfully.

You are about to encounter a culture that is typically much different from that with which you are familiar. The rules of the game will not be the same. Researchers of cross-cultural communication use several models to describe various aspects of the study abroad experience; this packet will guide you through them. You may not think you need this information now, but many students who have crossed cultures—and come back again—say that they are glad they knew about these ideas beforehand. Review this document before you go but…our bet is that at some point in your time abroad, you’ll pick it up again.

EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

Much of the value of your study abroad program lies in the experiences of day-to-day living, the encounters and relationships you build with the people of your host country, in this case the U.S. The experiential learning model depicted to the left contains several key ideas that, if you keep them in mind, can help you get the most from your time abroad.

The experience of living amidst a totally new culture can be at turns exhilarating and frustrating. These frustrations can add up as you run into more and more differences between the culture you carry around with you and the host culture.

One of the benefits of study abroad is this realization—that you actually carry your own country and culture around with you. It’s your comfort zone, a set of values, ideas, and manners, a language and a
set of products. You’ve got to step out of this comfort zone if you want to truly have a great experience.

There’s no way around this: If you want to really learn, you’ll have to go outside of your comfort zone. And going outside of your comfort zone means taking a social risk.

A good rule of thumb for students abroad; if you’re not feeling uncomfortable, you’re not in much of a position to learn anything. You haven’t felt confident enough in your language to talk to the newspaper seller you pass every day, even though he looks like a character. You’ve felt too shy to go into that corner café downtown. You’re lost—but rather than ask someone for directions, you fumble with a map. You pass the football field and people are yelling and dancing around calling chants and cheers—what’s the occasion? Your roommate’s family invites you to a family gathering—but your fellow international friends have planned a weekend away in New York City. You’re in class all day with U.S. students and many of them look very interesting but they haven’t introduced themselves to you. Nor do they introduce themselves on your floor or in the dining hall.

Stepping up to these challenges involves social risk and possible feelings of discomfort. But they all offer opportunity as well. There’s much to gain, so take a chance!

TOURISM VS. STUDY ABROAD
Most cities have their tourist attractions and these are great things to take in during your time abroad. But remember that most local people don’t frequent these places. And remember too that the spaces where the local people live aren’t frequented by tourists. There is a name for this: tourist infrastructure. Tourism is the largest economy on the planet. This infrastructure (with multi-lingual tour guides, menus in 12 languages, museums and historic sites and boutiques) is designed to do three things: make you feel comfortable, show you what most tourists want to see and separate you from your money.

If you understand the experiential foundation of study abroad, then you realize that this is not the optimal space for students studying abroad to spend their time. Tourist infrastructures in fact insulate the traveler from the daily life of the country (and the citizens that don’t speak the tourist’s language) and this is exactly what you should want to experience while abroad. So, as a student abroad and not a tourist, take delight in the simple pleasures of daily existence and really get to know your neighborhood and your city. Find a local hangout on campus and downtown. Become a regular. Go to restaurants that you’ve never tried even if nobody you know has tried them either. Get to know the merchants, waiters, and neighbors you bump into every day. Play basketball or football (soccer to us) with the local kids. These experiences often have as much (or maybe more) to say than every city’s “tall thing to climb” or sanitized “attractions”.

BREAKING AWAY
If you’re abroad for a language immersion experience, hanging out all the time with others from your country will keep you from advancing your language skills. So too will missing out on activities because you have to wait around for your boyfriend/girlfriend to call for the second time that week. And: did you really travel halfway around the world to spend all your time with people you already know or talking to people at home? So take advantage of invitations from your professors and their families, your language partner, or a foreign classmate. Go off exploring on your own or with one good friend.
It’s okay to explore with a buddy from home, but beware of the pack! Large groups of foreigners (along with being immediately recognizable and off-putting) will keep you from really getting to know the local culture and people.

Going abroad is about breaking away from what you know, so make sure you actually do that and don’t live abroad in “Island China” (or Japan or Germany, etc). There are two other related things that will keep you from actually experiencing what is going on around you: one is the easy accessibility of internet, and the other is cell phones. Technology allows us to be connected with people far away with great ease, but remember that is often at the expense of connections with those immediately around us (not to mention actual monetary expense!)

“OH YEAH, YOU BLEND”
It’s a famous line from the film My Cousin Vinny, a film about culture clash right here in the U.S. But blending is what the characters try to do, and it’s what you should do. Why should you try to blend? First and foremost, it’s a great way to learn about the culture. To blend in first requires you to actually look at the people around you. You must become an ardent and keen observer of people’s behavior, language, etiquette, dress and, in more general terms, the way people carry themselves and treat each other. Local people will appreciate your efforts to understand and adopt some of these behaviors. It will show them that you respect and want to understand their customs and values. And therefore they’ll trust you more, share more with you, and feel more of an immediate bond of commonality with you. You’ll learn even more. Another reason you should try to blend in is safety. The reality is that foreigners are often the targets of petty crime or unwanted attention from the wrong kinds of people. Not sticking out in the crowd will keep you safer, and that bond of commonality will mean that local people will be more likely to look out for you.

ADJUSTING TO A NEW CULTURE

Just as you did when you entered high school or university, you will go through a process of cultural adjustment abroad where you will learn to operate in a different cultural system, with different signals, rules, meanings, values and ideas. Your experience living in this host culture will change over time. Once the immediate sensations of excitement subside (the honeymoon phase), the experience of adjustment will likely be characterized by feelings of anxiety, stress, sadness, and fatigue, as things begin to seem very...foreign. This process of intercultural adjustment is often represented by the “u-curve”, plotted below:
If you’ve not studied in an all-English environment before, your language skills will be quickly tested to their limit. You might not understand the local accent or will find the pace of speaking daunting. You might not be able to communicate with the bus driver. Your roommate’s family’s behavior may confuse you. You may feel fatigued at having to use the language so much, and finding it so difficult. This is normal and to be expected.

Many students who are already completely fluent English-speakers and grew up on a steady diet of Hollywood movies come to the States with the mistaken belief that they will have no cultural adjustment to make. Beware! Don’t mistake the superficial similarities of language for sameness. While the differences may seem subtle at first glance, closer examination often reveals very different attitudes, values and “norms”. Unfamiliar social customs (etiquette), and colloquial expressions (“subway” for tube or metro, “buddy or friend” for mate “truck” for lorry) are just a few of the possible differences between countries that share the “same” language!

The truth is living in a culture different from your own is challenging and exhausting, especially early on in the process where almost everything is a mystery. What is happening is simple: you are realizing how different this new culture really is! And you are realizing that what you knew from before, what was familiar and comfortable to you, may not help you at all now. Some people call this “culture shock”.

You may react to “culture shock” in a number of ways: you may find yourself favoring time alone, preferring contact with friends or family at home over contact with Americans or fellow students, and perhaps as a sense of rejection of the host culture (hopefully, for your sake, temporarily!). Don’t let this phase of adjustment forfeit an amazing opportunity to learn and grow! It is important to bear in mind that the initial difficulties do wear off, and get much easier with active immersion in the culture that surrounds you. As shown on the U-curve, the initial low subsides as you become accustomed to the norms and custom of your host-country. This is called adjustment. Another note of good news: there are concrete strategies you can use to minimize emotional and social difficulties:

* **Take time to re-energize with your friends.** Don’t feel guilty about hanging out and comparing experiences…you can do a lot of processing in these sessions. Just don’t isolate yourself from the culture in that group.

* **Get out and explore.** Don’t waste your time abroad by sticking with other foreigners! Strike off on your own, or pair up with a friend, be it another international student, your campus roommate, or a local acquaintance you’ve cultivated. It’s good to have someone to experience things with, bounce ideas off of, help out with language—but it’s also good to explore on your own and see what life throws your way.

* **Narrow your world**—focus your efforts on a neighborhood, street or even a single place, and try to get to know that, using it as a window onto the rest of the culture.

* **Widen your world**—wander around the city or take trips to places you’ve never really heard of. One advantage of living in a small town rather than a big city is that it provides opportunities to connect with nature. Visit a farm, go for a hike, swim under a waterfall! Be curious and open to the possibilities around you. View unfamiliar things as mysteries to be investigated.

* **If you have a hobby or interest you pursued at home, pursue it abroad.** If you sang in a choir or played soccer, do those things abroad, too. You’ll meet local people who share that interest! One student we know of brought her tennis racket to France; every other day she’d play tennis at the nearby university, and this social sport became her doorway into French culture, introducing her to many local people she would never otherwise have encountered.
* Keep a journal. Journals are powerful tools for becoming aware. You can focus on the changes going on within yourself, or you can focus your writing on what is going on around you, the weird and wonderful details of that culture, or both.

* Write letters. Letters can help you formulate your impressions and communicate your experience with others; just be careful, you could alarm family and friends unnecessarily if you write about your difficulties only and not your successes!

* Set small goals for yourself every day. “Today I’m going to buy a newspaper and conduct the transaction in the local language.” “This evening I’ll accompany my host parents to their relative’s home and see what happens.”

* Read…reading a book about the culture and civilization, be it a popular history or the musings of another traveler, can be relaxing and informative. It’s great when what you read sheds light on what you see or experience every day.

* Find a conversation partner. In non-English speaking countries, many local people are seeking to practice their English. Set up meetings and spend half the time conversing in English and the local language. In English-speaking countries, take advantage of the shared language to really engage people in dialogue about local history and contemporary issues.

* Be open to invitations! One student reported back to us that she never felt like she had successfully lived in a place unless she had had dinner in a family’s home and seen how normal people lived. In some countries inviting foreigners into one’s house is an honor—for both the guest and the hosts! Americans are VERY private about their homes and an invitation is not extended lightly so if you receive one, accept the compliment.

You may have your down moments, but if you persist in trying, eventually the daily victories—when you have successfully adapted to one or another aspect of the culture—will start to outweigh the setbacks and frustrations. Over time, as you gain confidence in your ability to navigate through a different cultural system, as your familiarity with local norms, values, and attitudes grows, and as you start to see things from different perspectives, your adjustment will enhance the exciting and happy time you originally anticipated your experience abroad to be.

One final note: everyone experiences cultural adjustment differently. This is just a general model to help you visualize the fact that you will go through a process of cultural adjustment, and that this process will include ups and downs, good days and bad, and moments of alternating homesickness and elation at the new culture that is all around you.

CULTURE LEARNING: CUSTOMS AND VALUES

Before you go abroad, it’s a good idea to start thinking about culture as being one part customs and one part values. As a person going abroad to immerse yourself in a different culture, you should be extremely flexible about your customs, that is, the little things that make up your daily routine, the way you do things, the level of service or quality of life you expect. You should, however, be more reserved about your values, that is, the core beliefs that are important to you. It won’t hurt you to eat a food you are not accustomed to (notice the word “accustomed”? but say, for example, your friend’s father makes a racist comment about the recent wave of Mexican immigrants. You shouldn’t feel like you have to agree with him just for the sake of fitting in. Be respectful, but be true to your values, too.

There’s a connection between customs and values, however; the values of a culture are often expressed in its customs. The informal nature of student-faculty relations in the U.S. suggests a certain value for comfortable social interaction, lack of hierarchy, and the idea that both students and
professors can learn from one another. So as you adopt new customs, take time to reflect on the values that underlie them, and examine your own values as well. Is there something in this culture worth taking back with you, making part of your own core values?

LOCAL CUSTOMS

EATING AND DRINKING
Food is one of the most important parts of any culture. Although we may have pushed eating aside in the United States, trying to make it fast and unobtrusive on the real concerns of our lives, for many cultures across the world, eating and food are still of central importance to family and social life. Be aware that many countries frown upon eating on-the-go and it is considered rude to eat food while you’re walking across campus or down the street. This is generally not the case in the U.S. Follow the examples of the locals: if you never see anyone else eating food as they walk, you can assume it is not appropriate for that setting while in other cases, you can follow along. As a guest in another culture, you should be open to trying as many different new customs as you can, and this means kinds of food and modes of eating. If you are invited to someone’s home for a meal, it is considered polite to bring a dish of your own or a bottle of wine (if you are 21) or some flowers for the hostess. But be realistic: don’t expect yourself to eat beef if you’re a vegetarian or down tripe soup for the fourth time if you really hate it. If you’re a vegetarian, or do not eat pork (or anything else) for religious reasons, say so. But expect some compromises! Experiment with menu items you can’t necessarily identify. You never know what you’ll discover. Bon appetit!

While alcohol consumption varies in degree and social context from country to country, it is safe to say that, in general, few countries consider the kind of drinking prevalent on American college campuses to be socially acceptable. Many countries do not have strict drinking ages and therefore alcohol, not being illegal or taboo, isn’t considered novel, and binge drinking is relatively rare. Many other cultures appear to have a much healthier relationship to alcohol than does society in the U.S.. You will likely find the American university approach to alcohol very confusing. The official “legal” drinking age in New York State (and many others) is 21. However, many, many college students drink either by finding bars where the staff don’t ask many questions or by getting in with a fake ID. PLEASE NOTE: using or carrying a fake driver’s license or other modified document is a criminal offense and international students may face more dire consequences by breaking this law than U.S. citizens. Whatever you may decide about drinking, please be safe and keep the local laws in mind.

VISITING:
In the United States, everyone values privacy. In a residence hall, generally, if someone wishes to visit or is open to having you visit and be friendly, they leave the door to the room open. If they want to study, sleep or be alone, they lock it. So you should take an open (or ajar) door as an invitation but try not to intrude if the door is locked.

American students also are more likely than international students to visit in their individual room (bedroom) rather than in a common area if they only wish to visit with one or two people rather than have a larger party. You should not feel that an invitation into someone’s room is an invitation to his/her bedroom per se.

DATING AND SOCIAL ENGAGEMENTS:

Another area where international students tend to find confusion is in the local dating and mating culture. Alas, there are almost no “rules” or customs that one can count on. A man and a woman (or two people of the same sex in gay/bisexual/lesbian contexts) who spend some time together alone talking, seeing a movie, sharing a meal may or may not be pursuing a casual acquaintance, a
deeper but platonic friendship, or a romantic relationship. Normally, on college campuses, even if someone invites you to be their guest or join them in an activity, you still pay your own way. Occasionally, however, the person who invites will offer to pay for the guests. Again, this may be an expression of romantic or sexual interest – or it may simply be a gesture of friendship and generosity.

Some Americans are fairly formal in their style and form a handful of deep and lasting friendships. Others are extremely outgoing and have a large circle of more casual friendships along with a few closer friends. It’s not that unusual for someone to be consistently friendly and helpful and yet not show any real interest in getting to know you more deeply. As with everything else, figuring out U.S. friendships and courting rituals will take time and patience – and sometimes the ability to pull back and laugh at yourself and a situation. Just trust your instincts about people and situations and be persistent. If one friendship doesn’t work out, don’t be afraid to pursue the next. U.S. students can be very absorbed in their studies, their athletics, their jobs, and their families but when you finally meet those people who share similar interests and passions to your own, you’ll find that they can make very caring friends.

MONEY AND POLITICS

International students often comment on how open American students can be about matters that are considered very private at home – such as sex, intimate family relationships, personal habits. Therefore they are often surprised when topics that would be typical conversation subjects at home are seen as taboo here. Most Americans are extremely reticent about discussing money – how much things cost, how much their parents earn, what they paid for their car. So do not be surprised if they refuse to answer such questions or are offended by them. Similarly, while some Americans love to argue politics, most, unfortunately do not do so or at least are uncomfortable with debate when viewpoints among speakers are very different. This is because many Americans believe that conflict is impolite or sharing an opposing viewpoint might cause someone to dislike him/her. We encourage you to engage in political discussions with your peers but if you sense that they really wish to back off, let them do so and just find a different partner with whom to engage in debate!