

4-1-2013

# Meeting the Predeparture and Reentry Needs of ONU Spanish Study Abroad Students

Rachel M. Groters

Olivet Nazarene University, [rmwheeler17@gmail.com](mailto:rmwheeler17@gmail.com)

Follow this and additional works at: [https://digitalcommons.olivet.edu/honr\\_proj](https://digitalcommons.olivet.edu/honr_proj)

 Part of the [Community Psychology Commons](#), [Curriculum and Social Inquiry Commons](#), [Educational Assessment, Evaluation, and Research Commons](#), [Educational Methods Commons](#), [Educational Psychology Commons](#), [Higher Education and Teaching Commons](#), [International and Comparative Education Commons](#), [Latin American Studies Commons](#), [Multicultural Psychology Commons](#), and the [Other International and Area Studies Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Groters, Rachel M., "Meeting the Predeparture and Reentry Needs of ONU Spanish Study Abroad Students" (2013). *Honors Program Projects*. 37.

[https://digitalcommons.olivet.edu/honr\\_proj/37](https://digitalcommons.olivet.edu/honr_proj/37)

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Honors Program at Digital Commons @ Olivet. It has been accepted for inclusion in Honors Program Projects by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Olivet. For more information, please contact [digitalcommons@olivet.edu](mailto:digitalcommons@olivet.edu).

Running head: MEETING THE PREDEPARTURE AND REENTRY NEEDS

MEETING THE PREDEPARTURE AND REENTRY NEEDS OF  
ONU SPANISH STUDY ABROAD STUDENTS

By

Rachel M. Groters

Honors Scholarship Project

Submitted to the Faculty of

Olivet Nazarene University

for partial fulfillment of the requirements for

GRADUATION WITH UNIVERSITY HONORS

March, 2013

BACHELOR OF SCIENCE

in

Communication Studies, Business Administration, & Spanish

<u>Nancy Bonilla</u>	<u>Nancy Bonilla</u>	<u>3/14/13</u>
Scholarship Project Advisor (printed)	Signature	Date

<u>CHARLES W. PARRISH</u>	<u>Charles W. Parrish</u>	<u>4/26/13</u>
Honors Council Chair (printed)	Signature	Date

<u>Mark A. Frisius</u>	<u>Mark A. Frisius</u>	<u>4/19/13</u>
Honors Council Member (printed)	Signature	Date

To Jenny, Katie, Kelsey, Kristina, McKenzie, and Sarah.

Could anyone ask for better friends?

### **Acknowledgements**

I would like to express my sincerest thanks to Professor Nancy Bonilla, who, though extremely busy herself, agreed to be my faculty mentor for the Predeparture and Reentry Needs capstone project. She has been a wonderful guide and friend throughout this two-year process. Thank you, Profe, for assuaging my doubts about my ability to complete this project, taking such an interest in my work, encouraging me for every step of the process completed (no matter how small), and being so understanding about my last-minute frenzies. You are wonderful.

I would also like to thank Olivet Nazarene University's Honors Program for giving me the opportunity and the funds to complete this project. The process has been painful at times, but I am quite pleased with the result.

Fellow ONU Spanish students, I deeply appreciate your willingness to participate in my project. Your openness in interviews and engagement in programs exceeded my expectations. It was an absolute pleasure working with you.

## Table of Contents

Dedication .....	ii
Acknowledgements .....	iii
List of Figures .....	vii
Abstract .....	viii
Chapter	
I. Introduction .....	1
II. Review of Literature .....	2
Reentry Defined .....	2
Reentry Response .....	3
Predeparture and Reentry Programs .....	4
Necessity of linkage .....	5
Predeparture orientation .....	6
Reentry program .....	7
Program structure .....	7
III. Methods .....	9
Participants .....	9
Phase 1 .....	9
Phase 2 .....	9
Measures .....	10
Phase 1 .....	10
Phase 2 .....	10
Procedures .....	10

Phase 1 .....	10
Phase 2 .....	11
IV. Results.....	12
Phase 1 .....	12
Phase 2 .....	18
Phase 2.1 .....	18
Phase 2.2 .....	19
V. Discussion .....	20
Rationale for Program Content and Format.....	20
Program format .....	20
Reentry program content.....	20
Predeparture program content.....	23
Limitations and Methodological Challenges .....	23
Sampling issues.....	23
Interview timing.....	24
Bias and subjectivity .....	24
Program effectiveness.....	24
VI. Conclusions.....	25
Implications.....	25
Future Study.....	26
References.....	27
Appendices	
A. Interview Questions .....	31

B. Program Evaluation Survey .....32

C. Reentry Handbook.....33

D. Predeparture Handbook.....45

**List of Figures**

## Figure

1. Ratio of males to females among Phase 1 participants.....	29
2. Host countries of Phase 1 participants .....	29
3. Study abroad periods of Phase 1 participants .....	29
4. Difficulty of reentry for Phase 1 participants .....	30
5. Sources of information for Phase 1 participants about the possibility of reverse culture shock .....	30

### Abstract

The purpose of the Predeparture and Reentry Needs project was to examine the reentry adjustment of Olivet Nazarene University (ONU) Spanish students who had already returned home from required study abroad experiences in order to craft predeparture and reentry programs based on findings. In Phase 1, the researcher recorded qualitative interviews in March and April of 2012 with 22 ONU undergraduate students who studied abroad in Spanish-speaking countries before the spring 2012 semester. Then the researcher listened to each interview again, taking notes on each and transcribing quotes. The researcher found that all students experienced some level and kind of dissonance upon reentering the United States. Most students indicated that a reentry program would be beneficial. In Phase 2, the researcher used interview findings and secondary research to create reentry and predeparture handbooks and facilitated reentry and predeparture programs on October 11, 2012 and December 7, 2012, respectively. Program participants filled out evaluation surveys immediately after each program. The survey responses were very positive overall, especially those for the reentry program, indicating that such programs should be continued in the future.

*Keywords:* study abroad, reverse culture shock, reacculturation, reentry, predeparture, transition

### Meeting the Predeparture and Reentry Needs of ONU Spanish Study Abroad Students

In the summer of 2011, I spent two months in Ecuador immersed in the Spanish language and Latin American culture. I learned the language and cultural nuances from Ecuadorians and traveled extensively with my compatriots, other undergraduate students also completing their required study abroad experiences for their Spanish majors or minors. When my time abroad came to a close in the middle of July, I remember my mind being at war with itself. Two months was not enough time—it was ending too soon! At the same time, I was very ready to be home. But when I got home, I missed the people I became close with in Ecuador. It was hard to wrap my mind around the fact that my family could not speak Spanish. I saw the world around me through different eyes. In conversations I had over the next few months with the people with whom I had studied abroad and other ONU students I knew who had also studied abroad, I realized I was not alone—they also experienced (or were still experiencing) dissonance upon reentering the United States.

There is a name for what we experienced: reverse culture shock. Most people who are at all familiar with international travel know the concept of culture shock—that difficulty in adjusting to a new culture, way of life, or set of attitudes, often experienced upon entering a country markedly different from one's own. Reverse culture shock, also called reacculturation, reentry shock, reentry adjustment, or simply the process of reentry, is a similar but less well-known experience.

The purpose of the Predeparture and Reentry Needs project was to examine the reentry adjustment of ONU Spanish students who had already returned home from studying abroad in order to craft predeparture and reentry programs based on findings. These programs would ease the reentry process and help students come full circle in their experiences, turning the concepts

they learn before they leave the country into reality through living abroad and reflecting in-depth on the experience afterwards. It became evident through my conversations with other students who had studied abroad that the need for such programs offered by the home institution—in this case, ONU—is great. ONU Spanish students study abroad in many different countries through many different programs; some of these programs prepare their participants well for reentry, and others do not. In offering predeparture and reentry programs, the host institution can ensure that students receive at least some preparation for and aid in the reentry process.

I embarked on two phases of study to fulfill this project's purpose; before beginning either phase I received approval to work with human subjects from ONU's Institutional Review Board. In Phase 1, I recorded qualitative interviews with ONU students who had already studied abroad in Spanish-speaking countries to discover the issues they dealt with upon returning home. In Phase 2, I created and implemented a reentry program (Phase 2.1) and a predeparture program (Phase 2.2) based on Phase 1 results and secondary research.

## **Review of Literature**

### **Reentry Defined**

Wang (1997) broadly defined reverse culture shock as “losing the signs and symbols of social intercourse during the transition into one's home culture after living and working in another culture” (p. 115). Thebodo and Marx (2005) provided a definition more geared toward the student sojourner: return culture shock is “the sometimes difficult and often unexpected transition process through which students progress when they return to the home culture after an education abroad experience” (p. 305).

Whatever the definition, the literature reveals several basic elements that characterize reverse culture shock. First, it is a very subjective process. It starts at different times for different

individuals and can last for weeks, months, or even a lifetime. Returnees can experience only mild dissonance or more substantial feelings of disorientation and isolation. The difficulty experienced depends on characteristics of the sojourner, host environment, and home environment (La Brack, 1993; Martin & Harrell, 2004; Raschio, 1987; Steen, 2007; Wang, 1997). Second, as mentioned in Thebodo and Marx's definition of reentry, reverse culture shock is generally unexpected. Wang (1997) wrote that "returnees nearly always report feeling out of place, as if they were not at home but in a foreign country that is something like home" (p. 117). A third defining characteristic is that the process of reentry is not good or bad in and of itself; as detailed below, it can be facilitative or debilitating.

### **Reentry Response**

Though not exhaustive, the following list provides a good summary of what the literature reveals to be the issues students deal with upon reentry after studying abroad: change in perspectives and values (Casteen, 2006; Wang, 1997); skepticism regarding the home culture (Wielkiewicz & Turkowski, 2010; Thebodo & Marx, 2005); change in self-concept, including increased independence and feelings of uniqueness (Martin & Harrell, 2004; Raschio, 1987; Wang, 1997); personal adjustment issues related to a sense of loss and feelings of loneliness and depression (Casteen, 2006; Wang, 1997); change in field of study (La Brack, 1993; Martin & Harrell, 2004); and fear of "losing" the international experience (Thebodo & Marx, 2005).

Another major reentry issue that deserves special attention is that of disconfirmed expectations (Wang, 1997; Raschio, 1987). Returning sojourners often idealize reentry as a return to normalcy. They expect things to be as they were when they left. They also expect their families and friends to be able and willing to listen to the meaningful and life-changing experiences they have undergone. It is easy for these sojourners to become disenchanted by the

lack of change and interest in those around them or to feel out of the loop with what has happened in the home country during their time away.

Change in relationships is an additional issue that most students wrestle with upon reentry. Wang (1997) wrote that the reentry process tends to strengthen family relationships and puts a strain on relationships with friends, but romantic relationships rarely survive it. In contrast, Wielkiewicz and Turkowski (2010) found that studying abroad “does not seem to affect the relationship with a significant other in a negative way” (p. 661). They point toward the availability of electronic means of communication as a possible explanation for this. Concerning relationships with friends, Raschio (1987) found that “most returning students altered their circle of friends to include those with similar travel experiences” (p. 158). Whatever the relational change, it is clear that the reentry process does have an effect on relationships and others areas in a returnee’s life.

### **Predeparture and Reentry Programs**

Students need not face the reentry process alone. In fact, when they do, it often leads to less than satisfactory results. La Brack (1993) and Wilson (1988) both noted that left to themselves, student sojourners will often compartmentalize their time abroad, pushing it to the back of their minds in the face of more immediate daily living. These students are able to reenter in some functional manner, but without the proper guidance they miss out on the integration that can take place between their academic and overseas experiences. According to Edwards (2009), we cannot assume that sojourners will know how to apply capabilities and perspectives they have acquired abroad and continue the development of these things on their own. Also, returnees who experience reverse culture shock alone often do not recognize it as such. Without the

“opportunity to process their experiences in a positive way,” these people “commonly continue to exhibit symptoms of reverse culture shock” (Wang, 1997, p. 114).

Thebodo and Marx (2005) offered a solution: “well-designed predeparture and reentry programs assist students in the development of adjustment skills and intercultural competencies and therefore may make the difference between the success and failure of a sojourner’s education abroad experience” (p. 293). Predeparture orientations can introduce students to the concept of reverse culture shock, informing them about what to expect upon reentry. These programs provide “a framework through which [sojourners] can understand the intrapersonal dynamics of the transitions of the overseas experience” (Martin & Harrell, 2004, p. 323). Reentry programs ease the effects of reverse culture shock and provide arenas in which study abroad returnees can validate new perceptions and connect them with their ongoing coursework and personal lives (Casteen, 2006; La Brack, 1993; Raschio, 1987).

**Necessity of linkage.** La Brack (1993) argued that it is of the utmost importance for predeparture and reentry programs to be linked in structure and content. Students have the tendency, perhaps unconsciously, of viewing the study abroad experience as something with a beginning and an end that can be checked off the list upon completion. But it can be so much more than this: according to Wilson (1988), “reentry can be a continuation of the personal growth process that started with the preparation for the cross-cultural experience” (p. 197). La Brack (1993) described how to facilitate this growth process. He suggested presenting the material in predeparture orientations in a “more cognitive, abstract manner as ‘concepts’ because there is rarely an experiential base to refer to. By the time the students reach the reentry course these same topics, which were once largely conceptual, are now quite real” (p. 251). The goal of a reentry program that is linked to a predeparture orientation is to “invoke the prior mindset,

which allows the student to view the overseas experience as a continuum of events and an accumulation of ideas and behaviors” (p. 254). When predeparture and reentry programs are linked, students will be less likely to compartmentalize their study abroad experiences.

**Predeparture orientation.** Besides preparing students for reentry, Martin (1989) described three additional objectives for the predeparture course: (1) to give students a conceptual framework for understanding intercultural interactions, (2) to assist students in developing strategies for intercultural adjustment, and (3) to provide opportunities for students to learn about the host country. Study abroad administrators can also use orientation sessions to answer students’ questions, explain procedures, and replace potentially false expectations that students may have about living abroad with more realistic and positive ones (Martin & Harrell, 2004; Thebodo & Marx, 2005). To achieve these objectives, predeparture programs should cover the following four content areas in some way or another: logistics, health and safety in the host country, academic information, and cross-cultural issues (Thebodo & Marx, 2005). In order to avoid reinventing the wheel, home institutions should check to see if orientations are provided in the host countries and tailor their programs based on what they find.

La Brack (1993), Thebodo and Marx (2005), and Martin (1989) all advocated the use of international students who attend the home institution to enliven predeparture programs. These students can describe what it is like to be an international student and offer comparisons between the United States and their home countries in order to get future sojourners thinking about how their own perspectives might change. Former study abroad participants can be utilized as well. These students can give presentations of “what I wish I had known before studying abroad” and advice about effective intercultural interaction to assuage fears and raise excitement.

**Reentry program.** For Martin and Harrell (2004), reentry training for student sojourners is about helping them understand the personal growth they underwent abroad and feel more comfortable at home. Thebodo and Marx (2005) added to this: goals of on-campus reentry programs include “to facilitate opportunities for students to incorporate their international experiences into their lives at home, both academically and personally, and to help students identify ways they may use and market their international experience in the future” (p. 305).

The following essential elements should be discussed in a reentry program: awareness of change in the returnee’s home culture, knowledge of the host culture, thinking and behaving, and expectations of home culture individuals; cultural adaptation models, including general coping strategies for reverse culture shock; and the various support alternatives available to students experiencing a particularly difficult reentry (Thebodo & Marx, 2005; Raschio, 1987; Sussman, 1986). Wilson (1988) also suggested introducing students to activities they could participate in to facilitate their continued growth as international persons.

**Program structure.** Similar structures can be used for both predeparture and reentry programs. Some institutions utilize semester-length courses for credit (Edwards, 2009; Martin, 1989). Daylong workshops or weekly sessions of one and a half to two hours might be better options if available resources do not allow for such an endeavor. Concerning the latter option, Lerstrom (1995) noted a weakness he encountered in a four-session, once-a-week reentry program he conducted: “By the fourth session attendance had declined dramatically because most of the students were busy with traditional college activities. In the future I would schedule the reentry program in two compact sessions of 2 ½ hours each” (p. 5). This brings up the issue of whether or not attendance should be required in predeparture and reentry programs. Though none of the literature mentioned anything about required attendance for reentry programs,

Thebodo and Marx (2005) noted that “most seasoned professionals agree that it is a good idea to require that students attend the predeparture orientation sessions” (p.295).

Reentry programs are more suited than predeparture orientations to informal structures. Many returnees have cited informal groups as being helpful. However, Raschio (1987) contrarily wrote, “Most returnees considered periodic, informal meetings to be valuable. They also indicated that many returnees who would benefit from them may not attend” (p. 159). Nevertheless, informal structures such as peer support groups or social events for returnees may elicit more of a turnout than reentry programs billed as workshops.

Unique ideas for institutions wanting to aid returnees in reentry and spread the word about study abroad at the same time include a presentation of experiences program or study abroad photo contest (Casteen, 2006; Thebodo & Marx, 2005). At the very least, institutions can offer some sort of web-based predeparture orientation and reentry program that students can do on their own time or compile handbooks or websites of relevant information for students’ future reference (Thebodo & Marx, 2005).

The literature reveals the scope and nature of reverse culture shock. It describes the difficulties that student sojourners encounter when they return home from studying abroad and provides a variety of ways to address these difficulties so that students are not left alone in the reentry process. I undertook the present research in order to find out what strategies of those reviewed would most benefit ONU Spanish students based on their experiences with reverse culture shock.

## Methods

### Participants

**Phase 1.** Participants for Phase 1 were drawn from the group of 23 ONU undergraduate students who had already studied abroad in Spanish-speaking countries by the spring semester of 2012. I obtained these individuals' names from Nancy Bonilla, professor of Spanish and study abroad coordinator for ONU Spanish majors and minors. I first solicited these individuals by sending out a mass email requesting their participation and offering the incentive of a \$5 gift card to a local restaurant or coffee shop for those willing to participate. Individual follow-up emails were sent to those who did not respond within several days after initial contact was made. Of the 23 individuals solicited, 22 became part of the final sample; one individual never responded to emails. Participants for Phase 1 were juniors, seniors, and 5<sup>th</sup>-year seniors in college. For information on the male-female ratio of Phase 1 participants and where and when they studied abroad (see Figures 1, 2, and 3).

**Phase 2.** The participants for Phase 2-1 (reentry program) were drawn from the group of undergraduate students who studied abroad in the spring or summer of 2012. Phase 2-2 (predeparture program) participants were drawn from the group of students planning to study abroad in the spring or summer of 2013. I also obtained these individuals' names from Nancy Bonilla. I invited both groups via email to attend either a reentry or predeparture program and sent individual follow-up emails to students who did not respond to the initial email sent to their group. Twelve individuals were solicited to participate in Phase 2-1 and offered the incentive of a free meal to be provided at the reentry program. All 12 responded to emails, but only seven were able to participate. These seven were all female and either juniors and seniors in college. I

solicited five individuals to participate in Phase 2-2. The four individuals who responded to emails—all female and juniors in college—were able to participate.

### **Measures**

**Phase 1.** I utilized a structured face-to-face interview (see Appendix A for interview questions) in Phase 1. Its purpose was to discover the types and intensities of reverse culture shock that ONU Spanish students experience (questions 1-6), find out the things they wish they had known before studying abroad (question 7), and ascertain their interest in participating in some kind of reentry program (questions 8-9). Question 10 allowed participants to say anything on their minds that may not have fit into their answers for other questions. The lists in parenthesis after questions 4 and 5 were used to prompt participants in order to obtain a wider range of responses. At first glance question 4 may seem somewhat purposeless for the present research as it has to do with the study abroad itself rather than predeparture or reentry. I included it because the changes wrought by study abroad are the root causes of many reentry issues (e.g., a student who grows spiritually while studying abroad may be frustrated with the spiritual superficiality of her friends upon returning).

**Phase 2.** I utilized an anonymous program evaluation survey (see Appendix B) in both stages of Phase 2. Its purpose was to gauge the effectiveness of the predeparture and reentry programs and discover areas of improvement for future programs.

### **Procedures**

**Phase 1.** The individuals solicited for Phase 1 attended one of two informed consent sessions at which I explained the purpose and process of the study. I told them that their interviews would be recorded with an audio device, last no more than half an hour, and remain confidential. I met with those who were not able to attend either informed consent session on an

individual basis. After getting informed consent and additional contact information from Phase 1 participants, I conducted interviews in March and April of 2012, contacting each participant via email or cell phone to set up interview times. Each interview was conducted in the following manner in a library study room or an empty room at College Church of the Nazarene next to ONU's campus: I would give the participant a copy of the interview questions sans prompts, state the participant's name, note when and where he or she studied abroad, and then begin the interview. For questions 4 and 5, I would only prompt participants after listening to their initial responses to each question.

I listened to each interview again in August and September of 2012, taking extensive notes on each and transcribing quotes that seemed likely to be useful in crafting reentry and predeparture programs. Then I edited the interview data for anonymity and ease of reading, removing identifiers and filler words such as "like," "kind of," etc. I organized the interview data by location of participants' study abroad programs. Also, responses from males were designated by red text. In analyzing the data, I pulled out common themes and took note of interrelations.

**Phase 2.** Using the results from Phase 1 interviews as well as secondary research, I crafted a reentry handbook (see Appendix C) and a predeparture handbook (see Appendix D). Reentry and predeparture programs were scheduled on October 11, 2012 from 6 to 8 p.m. and December 7, 2012 from 10 to 10:50 a.m., respectively. Both programs were held in classrooms on the fourth floor of ONU's Burke Administration building. I solicited participants through email and also sent additional reminder emails. Immediately following each program—in which I worked through each program's respective handbook with participants—participants provided their informed consent and took the program evaluation survey. Upon completing the evaluation

survey, each participant placed it in a manila envelope I had set out in order to maintain survey anonymity.

## **Results**

### **Phase 1**

Several themes emerged from participants' responses to the question of whether and in what ways they had experienced reverse culture shock. Those who had traveled abroad previously tended to experience less reverse culture shock than those who had not. Interviewee 4 said she had been to other South American countries before, so she knew what the "whole American guilt thing" felt like. Interviewee 12 noted that he did not experience much reverse culture shock after studying abroad but had upon returning from a previous year-long stay in a different Latin American country.

One-third of participants mentioned noticing negative aspects of North American culture upon returning from studying abroad. They recalled being frustrated by how busy everyone seemed to be, general rudeness, and the wastefulness they saw. Interviewee 20 recalled being offended by the radio and television always being on because she was used to having actual conversations with people. A notable exception was Interviewee 9, one of two participants who studied abroad in Spain. She said it was nice to be among Americans again because they were nicer than the people in her host country.

Participants' responses to the question asking them to rate the difficulty of their reentry experience on a scale from one to ten revealed the subjective nature of the reentry process (see Figure 4). Many participants struggled to choose a number; as Interviewee 15 put it, "This is kind of hard because it's been a while, to remember the emotions." The passage of time since participants studied abroad could also explain why over one-third of participants were unable to

choose one rating, choosing instead a range such as 3 to 4 or 6 to 7. These ranges are reflected in Figure 4 as the average between the two ratings.

Participants who rated the difficulty of their reentry experiences on the low side often gave reasons for their ratings such as liking change or being good at transitions. Just over forty percent of participants cited missing friends made in the host country (both natives and fellow study abroad students) as a factor in their difficulty ratings. Interviewee 4 said, “And then just not having that community all of a sudden” was the most difficult thing for her. Several participants mentioned that they had prepared themselves for leaving the host country weeks in advance by distancing themselves from host country friends.

Responses to the question about whether participants knew about the possibility of reverse culture shock before returning to the U.S. revealed that everyone was aware of the possibility. Participants had heard about this possibility from a number of different sources (see Figure 5). Just under a third of participants said that even though they had heard about it before reentering, they did not know much about it or did not expect to experience it as they did. Interviewee 18 said, “I knew a little bit, but obviously I didn’t know enough to know that it could get you even if you were prepared.”

Many strong themes emerged when participants were asked about changes that came about in their lives as a result of studying abroad. Just over one-third of participants cited improvement in Spanish-speaking ability and increased comfortableness and confidence in speaking as a change they experienced. The same number pointed to changed or reinforced life plans as another change they underwent. These individuals said they wanted to live abroad, travel abroad more, do missions work abroad, work with Hispanics, or simply use their Spanish more in the future as a result of studying abroad. Just under half of participants said they

experienced spiritual changes. They learned how to trust and rely on God as a result of living in unfamiliar territory, or their perception of who God is expanded as a result of seeing him worshipped internationally.

Half of participants gained a new perspective on what is important in life as a result of studying abroad. Specifically, studying abroad made them value relationships more. Several participants said they valued their families more after studying abroad. Interviewee 18 was unable to pinpoint exactly why, saying, “I don’t know if that’s just being in a culture that values family so much or if it’s because I just really missed them.” Interviewee 19 noticed the downsides of technologies such as video games upon reentering the U.S., saying they “kind of became distractions and sometimes I kind of have a disdain for them now, like I really want to be more relationally based.” A final major theme that emerged in participants’ responses to this question was that studying abroad caused them to be more open to differing beliefs, viewpoints, value systems, and traditions. They felt they had gained cultural sophistication, perspective-taking ability, and expanded worldviews as a result of studying abroad. Half of participants cited changes along these lines.

The range of responses to the question about the difficulty participants experienced in coming back to ONU after studying abroad is similar to the wide range of results displayed in Figure 4. Participants responded by saying it was easier, not easy but not too hard, a little harder, harder, really hard, about the same, and not harder or easier, just different. Interviewee 7 noted that returning to ONU was like a second reverse culture shock because it has its own particular subculture that is distinct from the wider American culture. Half of participants qualified their responses by saying that coming back to ONU was academically harder. These participants missed the teachers, teaching styles, and educational environments in their host countries and

found it hard to handle workloads that were bigger than they were used to handling while studying abroad. Several students also cited lack of motivation as a factor in the difficulty they experienced in returning to ONU. Interviewee 13 said, “It’s harder to be focused on something when you’re passionate about something else.”

Five participants remembered feeling excited about coming back to ONU after spending several weeks or months at home in order to see friends with whom they had studied abroad. Interviewee 4 said, “It might have made me more excited to come back to that community again which I kind of missed after [studying abroad].” Interviewee 1 said, “If I didn’t have somebody else that had kind of undergone changes as well...it would have been a lot more difficult because you feel like you’re just nagging people.”

When asked what it was like being on ONU’s campus for the first time after returning from studying abroad, participants’ responses typically fell into one of five categories: alienation, disdain, frustration, bewilderment, or nervousness. Interviewee 15 expressed her feelings of alienation when she said, “I kind of felt like an outsider even though I knew I wasn’t.” Interviewee 16 echoed these words when he said he felt like a stranger. Interviewee 2’s alienation revealed itself in a comment she made about ONU’s Centennial Chapel: “The grandiosity of the chapel, and it’s a beautiful building, but is that really necessary?”

An example of a participant who expressed disdain is Interviewee 4, who said, “I kept walking around campus and just being like, ‘Oh, they just had a really boring semester last semester, they didn’t do anything.’” Other participants expressed feelings of frustration. Interviewee 20 said, “I was really annoyed with the shallow conversations I was overhearing.” Interviewee 9 felt angry, saying “I think I was kind of angry that I had to come back because I had just had this awesome experience and I just needed time to think about it and reconnect with

my family and everything.” Several participants also expressed feeling frustrated that others seemed unwilling to listen to them talk about their experiences.

Bewilderment was a common feeling that participants remembered having. Interviewee 1 recalled thinking, “It’s already done? I really did that much and it’s already done?” According to Interviewee 17, “It was almost like an out-of-body experience, like I’m physically walking around but I don’t know what I’m thinking and I don’t know what I’m feeling.” Interviewee 6 said, “I just really didn’t know what to do with myself for a while. I just kind of stuck with my close friends. It was kind of scary actually.” Lastly, some participants said they remembered feeling nervous about being on campus for the first time after returning from studying abroad. Interviewee 11 said, “I was kind of nervous, because I hadn’t seen anyone in a while, and you don’t know who’s still going to be your friend or what’s happened.”

Participants’ responses to the question about what they wish they had known before studying abroad were quite varied. Many pointed to aspects of learning and speaking Spanish as things they wish they had known, such as knowing that “You kind of lose your identity when you have to speak a different language because you can’t express yourself as much” (Interviewee 10). Participants wished they had known more logistical information about the programs through which they were studying abroad, such as schedules, accommodations, and travel plans within the host country. They also wished they had had a better idea of what to pack. Four participants said they wish ONU had been more helpful in preparing them for their study abroad experiences logistically or culturally. Other participants did not feel this way, saying, “I feel like if I had known everything, then what’s the point of going?” (Interviewee 5). Two participants either prepared by sitting down with someone who had already studied abroad or said they wish they had done so before leaving.

When asked if they would have been interested in attending a reentry program upon returning from studying abroad, the majority of participants replied affirmatively. Some qualified their answers; they said they would be interested, but only if it was not just another PowerPoint, too extensive or theoretical, or offered too late after their return from studying abroad. Several participants did not think a reentry program would be beneficial for them because of previous reentry experiences or because they did not think the length of time they were abroad necessitated such a program.

In terms of reentry program content, participants would have liked to talk about how to use what they learned abroad back in the U.S. As Interviewee 13 put it, “How do you take what your experience was and still live in light of the fact that you’re not there anymore?” However, the more general sentiment among many participants was that it would have been beneficial to have a safe place to talk about their study abroad experiences with people who had had similar experiences and would not take any one person’s sharing as showing off. Interviewees 16 and 18 described such a forum as a support group of sorts.

The next question participants were asked had to do with reentry program structure. The majority of participants said they would prefer an informal structure of some sort. Interviewee 10 said, “If it’s like a formalized thing, I don’t think people would come.” Most participants thought that a program consisting of sessions that were weekly, every other week, or monthly would be beneficial. Though many did not specify the length of time such sessions should run, those who did said from anytime between two weeks and two months. Opinions for when such sessions should begin were varied; some participants said immediately after returning from studying abroad while others said a little later because students need time to decompress.

Lastly, participants were asked if they had anything else they wanted to add. Not all students responded to this question, but the major theme that emerged from the responses of those who did answer echoed a theme from the question about what participants wish they had known before studying abroad. Participants thought that more preparation needs to be offered to students on the front end of their study abroad experiences, especially in terms of learning about culture shock.

## **Phase 2**

**Phase 2.1.** The reentry program evaluation survey revealed that one piece of information participants found helpful was that reentry is a lifelong process. One participant wrote, “Learning that reentry is an eternal ongoing process was really helpful and gives me relief knowing I still struggle with it sometimes.” Participants also found it helpful to learn strategies for how to share their experiences with others when asked about them. Two participants point to the “What Have I Gained from My Experiences” checklist as being helpful. All participants either noted that they could not think of anything or simply did not provide an answer to the question about what was least helpful of the information they learned.

Only two participants provided answers to the question about whether there was anything they wished had been covered that was not. One participant wished we had talked about “ways that we can get over reverse culture shock.” The other suggested that we “add the importance of finding a person that you can debrief completely with (or a journal).” In responding to the question about what could be done to improve the program, three participants wrote that it would be more beneficial sooner after reentry. One participant wrote, “I think it would’ve helped immediately upon arrival. But for me at this point, I’ve already gone through reverse culture shock.” Other suggestions for improvement included lengthening the program (we were unable

to get through all of the discussion questions due to time constraints), addressing the issue of reentry in light of study abroad experiences that may not have been so great, and finding a way for minority voices (i.e., those who did not study abroad where everybody else studied abroad) to be heard.

Most participants expressed their appreciation for the program when asked if there was anything else they would like to add. One said, “I thought this was so great! It helped any closure I felt was lacking. All Olivet study abroad students should do this!” Another said, “I have to say I wasn’t looking forward to coming just because I don’t like super touchy-feely things, but the program was not like that at all. The conversation was great.” One participant, however, noted that the program “would be awesome for people who hadn’t been out of the country previously! Or previously experienced a culture shock training.”

**Phase 2.2.** The predeparture program evaluation survey revealed that three participants found the advice from past student sojourners to be the most helpful. The fourth participant wrote, “It was very helpful to learn about reverse cultural shock in general, because that’s something I hadn’t even thought about.” All participants but one responded to the question about what information was least helpful. One said that the some of the things talked about made her feel more nervous about going because they were ideas she had not thought about before. Another did not find the definition of reverse culture shock to be helpful, and a third said that certain program-specific information covered was not helpful because it did not apply to her program.

No participant responded to the question about whether there was anything they wished had been covered that was not. Suggestions for program improvement included talking about ways to overcome culture shock in the host country and inviting one or two other people who

have already studied abroad to the program in order to gain insight from them. No participant had anything else to add in response to the last question.

## **Discussion**

### **Rationale for Program Content and Format**

The ultimate goal of the Predeparture and Reentry Needs project was to craft and implement reentry and predeparture programs based on Phase 1 findings and secondary research. To accomplish this goal, I created a one-time, two-hour reentry program that was informal and discussion-based and a one-time, one-hour, informal predeparture program. As much as possible, I tried to link these programs in structure and content as suggested by La Brack (1993).

**Program format.** Most Phase 1 participants suggested that a reentry program consist of weekly, bimonthly, or monthly sessions that could run anywhere from two weeks to two months. I chose to create a one-time program, however, because of Lerstrom's (1995) experience with declining attendance when he facilitated his own four-session, once-a-week reentry program. I chose to make the program two hours long because I thought it would be a sufficient amount of time to work through the material and I wanted to be sensitive to students' busy schedules. The reentry program was created to be informal and discussion-based because the majority of Phase 1 participants expressed their preference for such a program. In creating the predeparture program I sought to mirror the reentry program's informality. I planned it to be short and one-time because ONU Spanish students are asked to attend other preparatory meetings throughout the semester before they study abroad; the predeparture program I created focused on a specific area of predeparture preparation: exposing students to reverse culture shock.

**Reentry program content.** Many Phase 1 participants expressed the desire throughout their interviews for more opportunities to talk about their experiences abroad. For this reason and

in order to set the tone for my discussion-oriented reentry program, I decided to start by asking participants to share something crazy, funny, or especially meaningful that happened during their study abroad experiences. After hearing from every participant, we worked through the reentry handbook I created for the program.

The first section of the reentry handbook provides an extended definition of reverse culture shock. Though all of Phase 1 participants had heard about reverse culture shock before returning to the U.S. after studying abroad, at least one-third of them still did not know much about it. Wang (1997) wrote that returnees who do not recognize their reverse culture shock—something that could easily happen to students who do not know much about it—often continue to exhibit reverse culture shock symptoms for longer periods of time. I included the definition of reverse culture shock so program participants would be able to put a name to what they were experiencing and gain a more accurate picture of it.

The next section included in the reentry handbook is entitled “So Why a Reentry Program?” I included this section mostly for the benefit of students who do not see the point in attending a reentry program. Several Phase 1 participants did not think a reentry program would be beneficial for them, but the research shows that such a program can assist students in feeling more comfortable, understanding changes in their cultural identity, incorporating their international experiences into their lives at home, and continuing the process of personal growth that was begun abroad (Wilson, 1988; Martin & Harrell, 2004; Thebodo & Marx, 2005).

I chose to include the “Reentry Challenges” document as adapted from Dr. Bruce La Brack’s ‘What’s Up With Culture?’ resource website for several reasons. First, as a cultural anthropologist who has published extensively on the reentry process, Dr. La Brack is a highly credible source of information on this topic. The ten reentry challenges and corresponding

coping strategies described in the document are based on interviews he conducted with university students. In his response to an email I sent him, Dr. La Brack also noted that “The entire ‘What’s Up With Culture?’ project was funded by a FIPSE (Foundation for the Improvement of Post Secondary Education) grant through the Department of Education. As such, the web site is considered public domain and we encourage folks to use it in whatever ways they think would benefit their students” (B. La Brack, personal communication, February 20, 2013).

I also chose to utilize the “Reentry Challenges” document as part of the handbook because as I studied the interview data from Phase 1, I noticed that ONU students’ responses about the issues they confronted upon reentry seemed to fit well with the reentry challenges described in the document. In creating the section of the handbook entitled “Reentry Challenges: What Olivet Students Have to Say,” I was able to pull quotes from Phase 1 participants’ responses to questions 1, 2, 5, 6, and 7 and organize them under the same reentry challenge categories outlined by Dr. La Brack. I chose to include the section on what Olivet students have to say because the literature describes feelings of isolation as one characteristic of the reentry process (Raschio, 1987; Wang, 1997). My hope was that knowing that past ONU students have felt the same things they are feeling would help study abroad returnees to not feel so isolated.

The discussion questions included in the reentry handbook fall into the categories considered by Thebodo and Marx (2005), Raschio (1987), Sussman (1986), and Wilson (1988) to be essential elements that should be discussed in a reentry program. The last section of the reentry handbook is a checklist called “What Have I Gained from my Experiences?” Lerstrom (1995) utilized this checklist in his reentry workshop, which is how I came across it. Upon completing it myself in light of my study abroad experience in Ecuador, I discovered that I had

changed as a result of studying abroad in ways that I had not even realized up until that point. I included it because I thought it would be enlightening for other students just as it was for me.

**Predeparture program content.** I included the definition of reverse culture shock and Dr. La Brack's "Reentry Challenges" so that program participants would not be so surprised upon returning home from studying abroad to find themselves and the world they were used to before leaving had changed. Taking away reverse culture shock's unexpectedness could help ease the reentry process. "Advice from Past Study Abroad Students" is the next section I included in the predeparture handbook. All pieces of advice were taken from Phase 1 interviews, in which all participants expressed at least one thing they wished they had known before studying abroad. I wanted my predeparture program participants to benefit from their wisdom.

The next section—"Things to Think About"—consists of the same discussion questions included in the reentry handbook. Though program participants were not able to answer these questions as they had not yet returned from studying abroad, my hope was that they would glance at them before leaving and perhaps think about them while abroad. In any case, these questions will be somewhat familiar to the students when they attend a reentry program after returning. This, along with the definition of reverse culture shock and the "Reentry Challenges" document that are included in both handbooks, helped preserve the linkage between the predeparture and reentry programs that La Brack (1993) said is so important.

### **Limitations and Methodological Challenges**

**Sampling issues.** The first sampling issue I faced was that only 32 percent of Phase 1 participants were male and there were no male participants in either stage of Phase 2. At this point, there is no way to tell if the predeparture or reentry programs I crafted would be beneficial for a male audience. The second sampling issue I faced had to do with where students studied

abroad and through what programs. Among Phase 1 participants, 68 percent studied abroad with the same program in the same country. All other programs combined—a total of five—made up the other 32 percent. Interview results, especially those drawn from interview questions 3 and 8, may have been skewed as a result.

**Interview timing.** Another methodological challenge that I confronted was the issue of timing when conducting interviews. Nine participants interviewed had just returned from studying abroad two to three months prior to their interviews; all other participants had been back in the U.S. from six months to two years. It is likely that these participants' perceptions of their experiences with reverse culture shock were either fuzzy or changed from when they originally experienced it.

**Bias and subjectivity.** Throughout the course of the Predeparture and Reentry Needs project I tried to remain as unbiased as possible. However, since I went through the predeparture and reentry processes myself when I studied abroad in 2011, the way I gathered, interpreted, and utilized data is probably less objective than it would have been had I not studied abroad. It is likely that my personal paradigms affected two aspects of my research. The first is the data I gathered from Phase 1 interviews. For example, I may have deemed less important information that did not correlate with my own experience and taken more notes on information that did. The second aspect is the information I chose to include in my predeparture and reentry handbooks. For example, I may have chosen to include information that only made sense for people who had wonderful times studying abroad because that was my own experience. Any bias or subjectivity that may have affected the results of this study was applied unknowingly and unintentionally.

**Program effectiveness.** Though the program evaluation survey results—especially those for the reentry program—were very positive overall, they only offered a glimpse into how

effective the programs actually were in easing the reentry process for participants. There are two reasons for this: (1) the surveys were a simple feedback mechanism not created to be statistically analyzed, and (2) the timeline I had to adhere to in completing the Predeparture and Reentry Needs project did not allow me to work through the predeparture and reentry processes with the same group of students. I was not able to offer a predeparture program to Phase 2.1 participants, and I was not able to measure the effect of the predeparture program or offer a reentry program to Phase 2.2 participants. More stringent measures involving series of more legitimate surveys administered among one group of students during predeparture and reentry must be taken in order to measure the true effectiveness of these programs.

### **Conclusions**

The Predeparture and Reentry Needs project addressed an existing need in ONU's Spanish department for predeparture and reentry programs to help students come full circle in their required study abroad experiences. Through an examination of the reentry adjustment undergone by ONU Spanish students who had already studied abroad, I was able to craft and facilitate programs to meet this need.

### **Implications**

Based on the results of this study, it would be highly beneficial for ONU's Spanish department to continue offering predeparture and reentry programs in future years. I would suggest that reentry facilitators make the reentry program longer to allow for more discussion, perhaps following Lerstrom's (1995) suggestion to have two sessions of 2 ½ hours each. I would also suggest that several students who studied abroad through different programs be invited to attend the predeparture program to provide varying perspectives for those preparing to study abroad.

To address the issue of measuring for program effectiveness, reentry facilitators can ask students to fill out two predeparture program evaluation surveys: one will measure the student's perception of the effectiveness of the program immediately after completing it, and the other will measure the returnee's perception of the effectiveness of the predeparture program in retrospect after having studied abroad. Reentry facilitators can ask study abroad returnees to complete a series of surveys at specific points in the reentry process after the reentry program has taken place to measure the continuing effectiveness of what they learned during the program.

### **Future Study**

In order to gain a more complete picture of the effectiveness of the predeparture and reentry programs, more stringent survey methods should be put in place and input from male student sojourners should be solicited. Future studies could also evaluate the use of international students who attend the home institution to enliven and inform predeparture programs as described by La Brack (1993), Thebodo and Marx (2005), and Martin (1989).

### References

- Casteen, L. D. (2006). *Immersion and reentry: The undergraduate experience of foreign study* (Doctoral dissertation). Available from ProQuest Dissertations and Theses database. (UMI No. 3218423)
- Cox, L. K. (2006). *Going home: Perceptions of international students on the efficacy of a reentry workshop* (Doctoral dissertation). Available from ProQuest Dissertations and Theses database. (UMI No. 3237190)
- Edwards, J. (2009). Study at home after study abroad. In M. Hellstén & A. Reid (Eds.), *Researching international pedagogies: Sustainable practice for teaching and learning in higher education* (pp. 115-128). New York, NY: Springer.
- La Brack, B. (1993). The missing linkage: The process of integrating orientation and reentry. In R. M. Paige (Ed.), *Education for the intercultural experience* (pp. 241-279). Yarmouth, MA: Intercultural Press, Inc.
- Lerstrom, A. C. (1995, November). *International study transitions: Creating and leading a reentry workshop*. Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Speech Communication Association, San Antonio, TX.
- Martin, J. N. (1989). Predeparture orientation: Preparing college sojourners for intercultural interaction. *Communication Education*, 38(3), 249-258.
- Martin, J. N., & Harrell, T. (2004). Intercultural reentry of students and professionals: Theory and practice. In D. Landis, J. M. Bennett, & M. J. Bennett (Eds.), *Handbook of intercultural training* (pp. 309–336). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Raschio, R. A. (1987). College students' perceptions of reverse culture shock and reentry adjustments. *Journal of College Student Personnel*, 28(2), 156-162.

- Steen, S. L. (2007). *The effects of disclosure on the reentry experience of United States college and university students returning from a semester abroad* (Doctoral dissertation). Available from ProQuest Dissertations and Theses database. (UMI No. 3289755)
- Sussman, N. M. (1986). Reentry research and training: Methods and implications. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 10(2), 235-254.
- Szkudlarek, B. (2010). Reentry—a review of the literature. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 34, 1-21. doi:10.1016/j.ijintrel.2009.06.00
- Thebodo, S. W. & Marx, L. E. (2005) Pre-departure orientation and reentry programming. In J. L. Brockington, W. W. Hoffa, & P. C. Martin (Eds.), *NAFSA's guide to education abroad for advisors and administrators* (3rd ed., pp. 293-312). Washington, DC: NAFSA, Association of International Educators.
- Wang, M. M. (1997). Reentry and reverse culture shock. In K. Cushner & R.W. Brislin (Eds.), *Improving intercultural interactions: Modules for cross-cultural training programs* (pp. 109-128). London: Sage.
- Wielkiewicz, R. M., & Turkowski, L. W. (2010). Reentry issues upon returning from study abroad programs. *Journal of College Student Development*, 51(6), 649-664.
- Wilson, A. H. (1988). Reentry: Toward becoming an international person. *Education and Urban Society*, 20(2), 197-210.

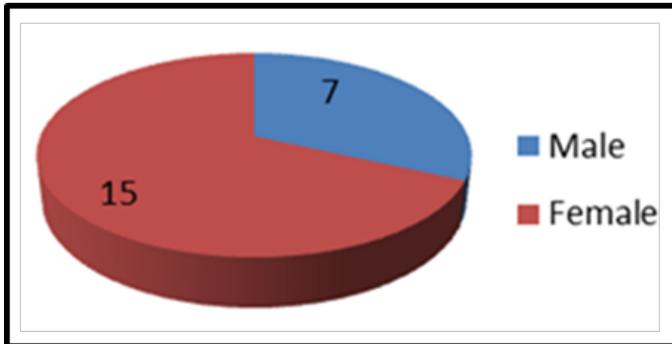


Figure 1. Ratio of males to females among Phase 1 participants.

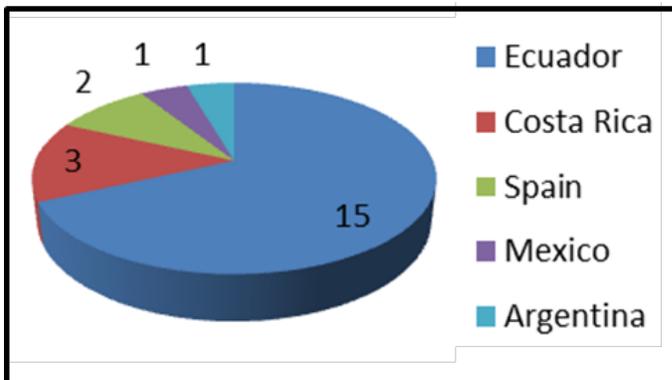


Figure 2. Host countries of Phase 1 participants.

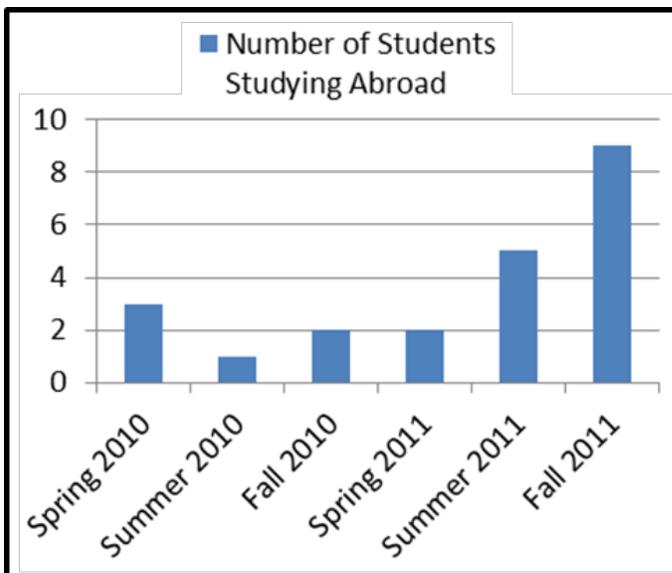


Figure 3. Study abroad periods of Phase 1 participants.

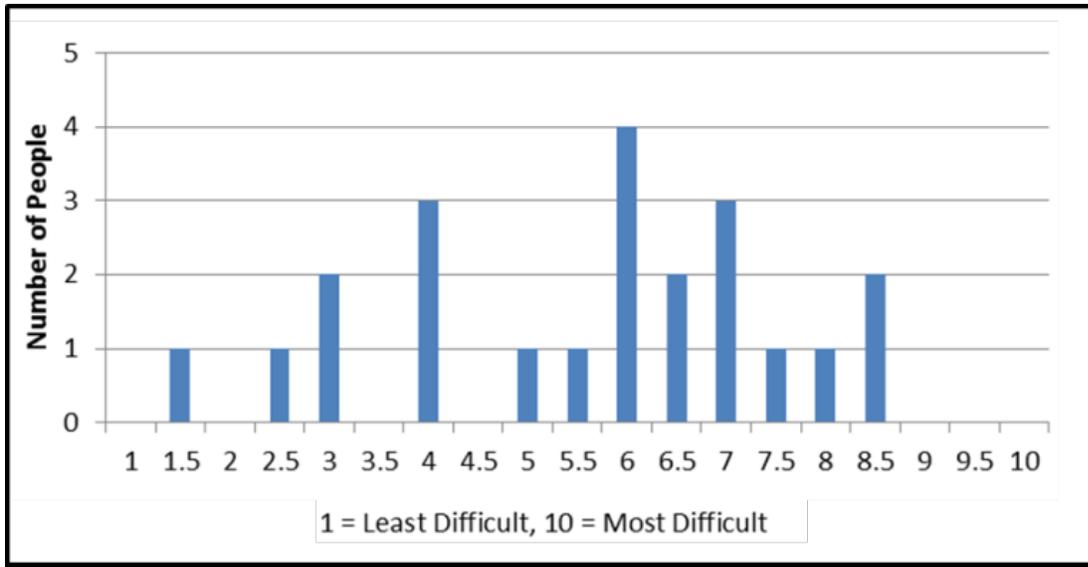


Figure 4. Difficulty of reentry for Phase 1 participants.

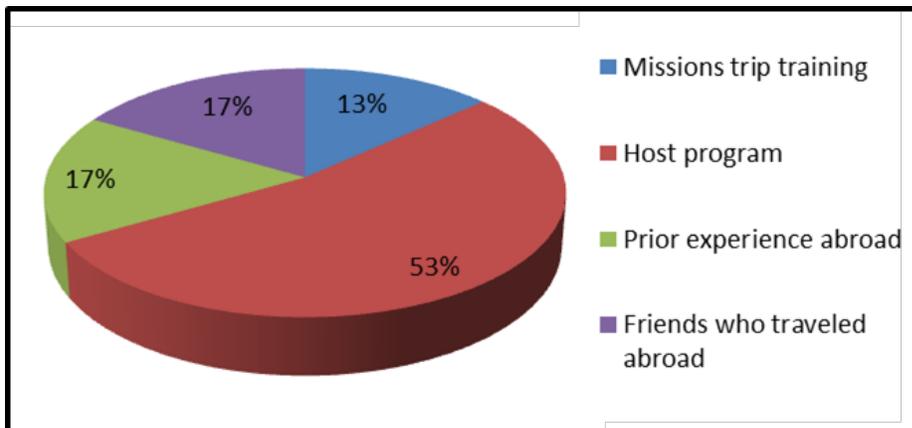


Figure 5. Sources of information for Phase 1 participants about the possibility of reverse culture shock.

## Appendix A

### Interview questions

1. Reverse culture shock is defined as “the sometimes difficult and often unexpected transition process through which students progress when they return to the home culture after an education abroad experience.” Would you say you’ve experienced this? In what ways?
2. On a scale of 1 to 10, 10 being the most difficult, rate the difficulty you experienced in reentering the United States after studying abroad. Explain your rating.
3. Did you know about the possibility of reverse culture shock before returning to the United States? How much did you know? Where did you hear about it?
4. What changes came about in your life as a result of studying abroad? (Think about change in values, change in perspective about the U.S., change in self-concept, academic changes, spiritual changes, relational changes, etc.)
5. Was it harder, easier, or about the same coming back to Olivet after your study abroad experience? Explain. (Think about relationships, schoolwork, the American way of life, etc.)
6. What was it like being on campus for the first time after returning?
7. Looking back, what would you have liked to know before leaving that you didn’t know?
8. Would you have been interested in attending a reentry program to assist you in adjusting back to life in the United States? If so, what would you have liked to see talked about?
9. In terms of reentry program structure, what would you have liked to see? More informal gatherings, a formalized workshop, weekly/monthly sessions, etc.?
10. Anything else you’d like to add?

**Appendix B**

Program evaluation survey

1. Of the information you learned, what was most helpful? Least helpful?
2. Is there anything we didn't cover that you wish we had?
3. What could be done to improve this program?
4. Anything else you'd like to add?

### Appendix C

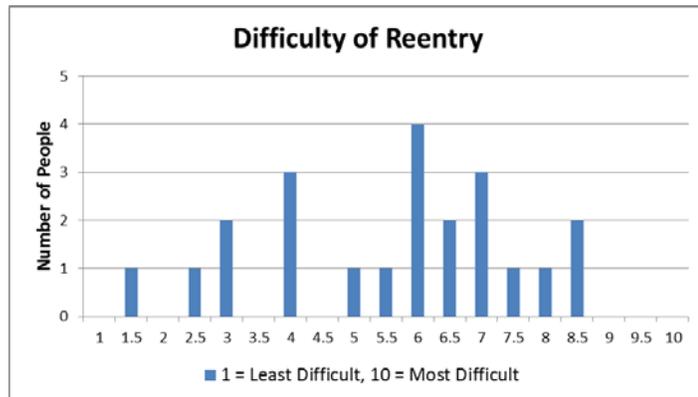
#### Reentry handbook

#### What is Reverse Culture Shock?

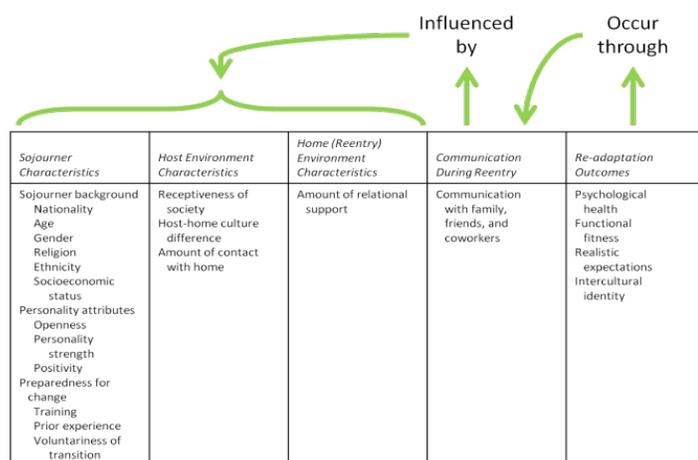
- Also called reacculturation, reentry shock, reentry adjustment, or simply the process of reentry.
- “The sometimes difficult and often unexpected transition process through which students progress when they return to the home culture after an education abroad experience” (Thebodo & Marx, 2005, p. 305).

- “Re-entry stress and shock is more severe than initial entry shock” (Sussman, 1986, p. 241).

- Reverse culture shock is a highly subjective experience. Just look at the range of scores provided by Olivet students for how difficult reentry was for them. These students (7 male, 15 female) studied abroad between spring 2010 and fall 2011 in a total of 5 countries.



- You might be wondering why the process of reentry is such a subjective experience. The



answer: reentry outcomes are affected by sojourner, home culture, and host culture characteristics as indicated in the figure (Martin & Harrell, 2004, p. 316).

- “Recovering from reentry often takes much longer than the sojourn itself. In some cases, reentry is really never complete, because some changes—particularly changes in values—will affect the whole course of the sojourner’s life. Reverse culture shock, then, may be considered a long-term process of coming to terms with oneself as a more complex, more multicultural individual in a changed but familiar setting” (Wang, 1997, p. 116).

### **So Why a Reentry Program?**

- “Reentry can be a continuation of the personal growth process that started with the preparation for the cross-cultural experience” (Wilson, 1988, p. 197).
- “The goal of reentry training for student sojourners is usually to assist them to understand their personal and intellectual growth and changes in their cultural identity, to feel more comfortable in their home environment, and to be able to function effectively in that environment” (Martin & Harrell, 2004, p. 321).
- Some additional goals of an on-campus reentry program are “to facilitate opportunities for students to incorporate their international experiences into their lives at home, both academically and personally, and to help students identify ways they may use and market their international experience in the future” (Thebodo & Marx, 2005, p. 305).

### **Reentry Challenges<sup>1</sup>**

#### **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 that characterize study in a foreign country, but it is up to you to find ways to overcome such negative reactions. Remember a bored

---

<sup>1</sup>Adapted from “Ten Top Challenges for Returnees at Home” from Dr. Bruce La Brack’s ‘What’s Up With Culture’ resource website.

person is also boring. Try new things, travel domestically, and continue cultural and linguistic studies.

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 audience's 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 trying 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 abroad. To an extent, writing letters, telephoning, emailing, and generally keeping in contact can reduce them, 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 that are very important to them. 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 the “wrong” changes

- Sometimes people may concentrate on small alterations in your behavior or ideas and seem threatened or upset by them. Others may ascribe any “bad” traits to the influence of your time abroad. These incidents may be motivated by jealousy, fear, or feelings of superiority or inferiority. To avoid or minimize discomfort, 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 becomes difficult. For example, what you may have come to think of as witty humor (particularly sarcasm, banter, etc.) and a way to show affection or establish a conversation may be considered 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. Feeling of alienation/seeing with “critical eyes”

- Sometimes the reality of being back “home” is not as natural or enjoyable as the place you had constructed as your mental image. When actual 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 (e.g., Americans are so wasteful, materialistic, fat, in a hurry, etc.). Some returnees become quite critical of everyone and everything for a time. This is no different than when you criticized the host culture while abroad. In both cases, being critical is closely related to discomfort during readjustment and mild “culture shock.” 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, 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 all the cross-cultural adjustment skills you acquired abroad to assist your own reentry.

#### 10. Loss/compartmentalization of experience

- Being home, combined with the pressures of job, school, family, and friends, often conspires to make returnees worried that they might somehow “lose” the experience.

Many fear that it will 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; continue language learning. Remember and honor both your hard work and the fun you had while abroad. To the extent possible, integrate your overseas experience into your ongoing life and activities.

### **Reentry Challenges: What Olivet Students Have to Say**

#### 1. Boredom

- Life wasn't as exciting for me when I got back.
- The campus seemed boring compared to [where I studied abroad].

#### 2. No one wants to hear

- I wanted to be heard a little more than what I was.
- If I didn't have somebody else that had kind of undergone changes as well...it would have been a lot more difficult because you feel like you're just nagging people.
- It's almost like when you do something really great and you want to tell people about it, but they're not necessarily going to want to listen to your whole story, they just want to hear, "Okay it was good, I'm glad it was okay, and I'm glad your back," and then "Let's move on."

#### 3. You can't explain

- It was hard to kind of capture four months into five minutes for some people.
- Trying to explain to people what the trip meant to me and all the experiences, and if they didn't go with me, then they aren't really going to understand.

4. Reverse “homesickness”

- How do I continue on with life here when I just want to be there?
- It’s harder to be focused on something when you’re passionate about something else.

5. Relationships have changed

- I was kind of nervous, because I hadn’t seen anyone in a while, and you don’t know who’s still going to be your friend or what’s happened.
- A lot of friendships that I had before that were really strong before are nonexistent now, and it’s not anything anyone did, it’s just not seeing each other for a whole semester.

6. People see the “wrong” changes

- I think my parents could tell...that I wasn’t my happy-go-lucky self all the time, and I think that kind of hurt them a little bit because they were expecting that I was going to be.

7. People misunderstand

- It was hard knowing what things are appropriate in this culture now.
- I wanted to connect with people like what I experienced, and some of them would just look at me really strange, and then, “Oh, yeah, that’s cool, anyways, so I went to the mall the other day...”

8. Feelings of alienation/seeing with “critical eyes”

- I had changed, and other people hadn’t.
- I kind of felt like an outsider even though I knew I wasn’t.
- I was ready to be out of Olivet when I came back, because I grew up more, really.

- I came back to the States and it was just really kind of sickening to see all the wastefulness, living in abundance and whatnot.
- I kept walking around campus and just being like, “Oh, they just had a really boring semester last semester, they didn’t do anything.”

9. Inability to apply new knowledge and skills

- Being out of the immersion, the Spanish immersion...I’ve noticed that my Spanish has gotten a lot worse since I haven’t been there, and that’s hard for me.

10. Loss/compartmentalization of experience

- No one really values an experience enough the first time through.
- What I wish I would have done would have been to take more time to think about it and kind of process the whole thing...It feels unresolved in some way.

### **Discussion Questions**

These discussion questions are meant to challenge you. Dig deep. Don’t give pat answers.

- What expectations did you have for what returning to the U.S. would be like? Were they met?
- What had changed at home and at school between the time you left to study abroad and the time you came back?
- Were you able to share your experiences (i.e., were others willing to listen)? Did you feel like the amount you were able to share was enough?
- How did you grow as a person as a result of studying abroad? How did it change your thinking and/or behavior?
- In what ways have you been able to integrate that growth into your daily living back in the U.S.?

- Think about how your cultural identity was affected by your study abroad experience. In what ways do you identify more with the host culture than American culture (and vice versa)?
- Outside of classes, in what ways have you been able to utilize your Spanish skills since being back in the U.S.?
- What coping strategies have you used thus far during your process of reentry?

### **What Have I Gained from My Experience?<sup>2</sup>**

How have I changed from having been abroad?

Place a check by each change that has occurred in you.

\_\_\_ I have improved my ability to speak a foreign language.

\_\_\_ I am more knowledgeable about another culture and lifestyle.

\_\_\_ I have a greater ability to empathize with others, that is, to put myself in their place when making judgments.

\_\_\_ I can accept failures and shortcomings in myself more easily.

\_\_\_ I understand more fully my own strengths and weaknesses.

\_\_\_ I am more confident and positive when meeting new people.

\_\_\_ I am more confident and assertive when facing new situations.

\_\_\_ I have a greater capacity to accept differences in others.

\_\_\_ I am more able to share my thoughts and feelings with others, and to be open when others wish to share theirs with me.

\_\_\_ I have more curiosity about and respect for new ideas.

\_\_\_ I have a clearer notion of what I will do with my life.

\_\_\_ I am more flexible and able to adjust to changes in others.

---

<sup>2</sup>From *Cross-Cultural Reentry: A Book of Readings* (p. 273-276), by C. N. Austin (Ed.), 1986, Abilene, TX: ACU Press.

\_\_\_ I am more tolerant of ambiguous situations, that is, of situations that are confusing and open to differing interpretations.

\_\_\_ I have more ability to see myself objectively, that is, to see my own day-to-day problems in a broader, more realistic context.

\_\_\_ I am more deeply committed to an idea, cause, or goal.

\_\_\_ I have increased my perseverance and self-discipline.

\_\_\_ I am more willing to strive and sacrifice in order to do well in my studies at school or in independent learning projects.

\_\_\_ I have a greater sense of responsibility for other people.

\_\_\_ I am more able to express deep emotions freely.

\_\_\_ I am more able to ask for and receive help from others.

\_\_\_ I have greater willingness to take on roles and tasks to which I am unaccustomed.

\_\_\_ I have increased my capacity to experiment and take risks.

\_\_\_ I am more able to accept as valid other values and lifestyles.

\_\_\_ I have a deeper understanding of (if not necessarily commitment to) the values and lifestyle of my native community.

\_\_\_ I am more aware of the opportunities in life that are open to me.

\_\_\_ I feel greater respect and appreciation for my natural family.

\_\_\_ I am more independent in my relations with family and friends.

\_\_\_ I feel that I need fewer friends but deeper (more intimate and more trusting) friendships.

\_\_\_ I am more aware of the way I use and structure time.

\_\_\_ I have greater capacity to profit by my mistakes.

\_\_\_ I am more interested in and capable of laying long range plans.

\_\_\_ I am more determined to fully develop my skills and talents.

\_\_\_ I feel a greater need to have diverse experiences and friends.

\_\_\_ I am more balanced in my judgments, that is, less likely to judge things as “good” or “bad,” “right” or “wrong.”

\_\_\_ I am more likely to do things spontaneously, that is, to do things without undue concern about possible consequences.

\_\_\_ I am more capable of solving life’s day-to-day problems.

\_\_\_ I think more critically; I am more discriminating and skeptical.

\_\_\_ I have improved observation skills.

\_\_\_ I need more time to be alone.

\_\_\_ I am more confident about the decisions I make.

\_\_\_ I feel more surely that common bonds unite all human beings.

\_\_\_ I have a deeper understanding of the problems and issues that confront all human beings on this planet.

\_\_\_ I have greater awareness of political, economic, and social events occurring around the world.

Put an extra check by the two or three changes that are the most significant for you.

### **References**

Austin, C. N. (1986). *Cross-cultural reentry: A book of readings*. Abilene, TX: Abilene Christian University Press.

La Brack, B. (2003). Ten top challenges for returnees at home. Retrieved from <http://www2.pacific.edu/sis/culture/>

- Martin, J. N., & Harrell, T. (2004). Intercultural reentry of students and professionals: Theory and practice. In D. Landis, J. M. Bennett, & M. J. Bennett (Eds.), *Handbook of intercultural training* (pp. 309–336). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Sussman, N. M. (1986). Reentry research and training: Methods and implications. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, *10*(2), 235-254.
- Thebodo, S. W. & Marx, L. E. (2005) Pre-departure orientation and reentry programming. In J. L. Brockington, W. W. Hoffa, & P. C. Martin (Eds.), *NAFSA's guide to education abroad for advisors and administrators* (3rd ed., pp. 293-312). Washington, DC: NAFSA, Association of International Educators.
- Wang, M. M. (1997). Reentry and reverse culture shock. In K. Cushner & R.W. Brislin (Eds.), *Improving intercultural interactions: Modules for cross-cultural training programs* (pp. 109-128). London: Sage.
- Wilson, A. H. (1988). Reentry: Toward becoming an international person. *Education and Urban Society*, *20*(2), 197-210.

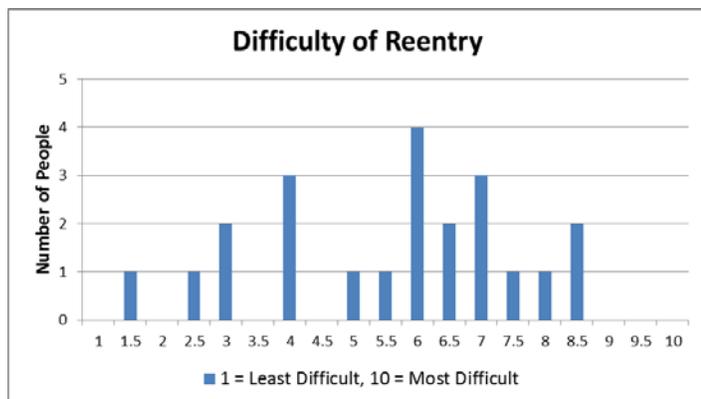
## Appendix D

### Predeparture handbook

#### What is Reverse Culture Shock?

- Also called reacculturation, reentry shock, reentry adjustment, or simply the process of reentry.
- “The sometimes difficult and often unexpected transition process through which students progress when they return to the home culture after an education abroad experience” (Thebodo & Marx, 2005, p. 305).
- “Re-entry stress and shock is more severe than initial entry shock” (Sussman, 1986, p. 241).

- Reverse culture shock is a highly subjective experience. Just look at the range of scores provided by Olivet students for how difficult reentry was for them. These students (7 male, 15 female)



studied abroad between spring 2010 and fall 2011 in a total of 5 countries.

- “Recovering from reentry often takes much longer than the sojourn itself. In some cases, reentry is really never complete, because some changes—particularly changes in values—will affect the whole course of the sojourner’s life. Reverse culture shock, then, may be considered a long-term process of coming to terms with oneself as a more complex, more multicultural individual in a changed but familiar setting” (Wang, 1997, p. 116)

## Reentry Challenges<sup>1</sup>

### 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 that 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. Try new things, travel domestically, and continue cultural and linguistic studies.

### 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 audience's 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 trying 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.

---

<sup>1</sup>Adapted from "Ten Top Challenges for Returnees at Home" from Dr. Bruce La Brack's 'What's Up With Culture' resource website.

#### 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 abroad. To an extent, writing letters, telephoning, emailing, and generally keeping in contact can reduce them, 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 that are very important to them. 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 the “wrong” changes

- Sometimes people may concentrate on small alterations in your behavior or ideas and seem threatened or upset by them. Others may ascribe any “bad” traits to the influence of your time abroad. These incidents may be motivated by jealousy, fear, or feelings of superiority or inferiority. To avoid or minimize discomfort, 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 becomes difficult. For example, what you may have come to think of as witty humor (particularly sarcasm, banter, etc.) and a way to show affection or establish a conversation may be considered 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. Feeling of alienation/seeing with “critical eyes”

- Sometimes the reality of being back “home” is not as natural or enjoyable as the place you had constructed as your mental image. When actual 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 (e.g., Americans are so wasteful, materialistic, fat, in a hurry, etc.). Some returnees become quite critical of everyone and everything for a time. This is no different than when you criticized the host culture while abroad. In both cases, being critical is closely related to discomfort during readjustment and mild “culture shock.” 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, 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 all the cross-cultural adjustment skills you acquired abroad to assist your own reentry.

### 10. Loss/compartmentalization of experience

- Being home, combined with the pressures of job, school, family, and friends, often conspires to make returnees worried that they might somehow “lose” the experience. Many fear that it will 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; continue language learning. Remember and honor both your hard work and the fun you had while abroad. To the extent possible, integrate your overseas experience into your ongoing life and activities.

### **Advice from Past Study Abroad Students**

- Leaving for Host Country
  - “I feel like if I had known everything, then what’s the point of going?”
  - “In a way it was good not knowing because everything was new, and a surprise, and fun.”
  - Have few and low expectations.
  - Expect the little things: motion sickness, stomach issues, etc.

- Make sure to research where you're going. You might think it's going to be really warm...but it might not be.
- American products in the host country are really expensive.
- It's best to be single when you go, but if you're not, have a discussion with your significant other and try to cut off the connection as much as possible.
- In Host Country
  - "The more uncomfortable you are while traveling, the better the trip tends to be."
  - Make the best and the most of your experience.
  - Be ready for the wide variety of cultural differences, from guards with machine guns at the supermarket to the passive nature of the culture.
  - The emotional adjustment might be difficult.
  - Get as involved as possible in the community where you live and work hard to develop friendships with your host country roommate or host family.
  - Be open about other ideas, but also stay strong in your values and principles.
  - If you get the chance, go on excursions that you plan yourself.
  - It's really hard not seeing your family and friends for so long, but it's important to avoid spending too much time communicating with them during your study abroad. Cut yourself off as much as possible.
- Speaking Spanish
  - "No matter what happens, speak Spanish."
  - "You kind of lose your identity when you have to speak a different language because you can't express yourself as much. So I think that would have been helpful to know."

- Dive into the language from the start, and make sure to find a Spanish-speaking partner in the first few weeks.
- There are days when you're Spanish will be awesome, and there are days when it will be awful.
- Returning from Host Country
  - “What I wish I would have done would have been to take more time to think about it and kind of process the whole thing. It feels unresolved in some way.”
  - Make sure to get good contact information from the people you grow to love in the host country before leaving it.
  - Keep in mind that things have happened in the lives of the people you're coming home to as well. Take time to listen to them.

### **Things to Think About**

- What expectations did you have for what returning to the U.S. would be like? Were they met?
- What had changed at home and at school between the time you left to study abroad and the time you came back?
- Were you able to share your experiences (i.e., were others willing to listen)? Did you feel like the amount you were able to share was enough?
- How did you grow as a person as a result of studying abroad? How did it change your thinking and/or behavior?
- In what ways have you been able to integrate that growth into your daily living back in the U.S.?

- Think about how your cultural identity was affected by your study abroad experience. In what ways do you identify more with the host culture than American culture (and vice versa)?
- Outside of classes, in what ways have you been able to utilize your Spanish skills since being back in the U.S.?
- What coping strategies have you used thus far during your process of reentry?

These questions may not mean much to you now, but they have to do with some of the issues you'll be confronted with when you return home. Keep them in mind, especially as the time for you to come back approaches.

### References

- La Brack, B. (2003). Ten top challenges for returnees at home. Retrieved from <http://www2.pacific.edu/sis/culture/>
- Sussman, N. M. (1986). Reentry research and training: Methods and implications. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 10(2), 235-254.
- Thebodo, S. W. & Marx, L. E. (2005) Pre-departure orientation and reentry programming. In J. L. Brockington, W. W. Hoffa, & P. C. Martin (Eds.), *NAFSA's guide to education abroad for advisors and administrators* (3rd ed., pp. 293-312). Washington, DC: NAFSA, Association of International Educators.
- Wang, M. M. (1997). Reentry and reverse culture shock. In K. Cushner & R.W. Brislin (Eds.), *Improving intercultural interactions: Modules for cross-cultural training programs* (pp. 109-128). London: Sage.