

REENTRY GUIDE FOR NPU STUDY ABROAD STUDENTS

Welcome back!

We hope your time abroad has been a positive, successful, and growing experience for you. While you might be able to answer that with a clear yes or no, at this time of transition back into your home culture you're probably too full of emotions and too low on energy to really articulate if you're glad to be home or not. This juxtaposition of happy or sad to leave, and happy or sad to be back, is a common dilemma for students returning home after studying abroad...oftentimes because it's all four options!

This is a process called "reentry." The dictionary says reentry is the "return from outer space into the earth's atmosphere of an earth-orbiting satellite, spacecraft, rocket, or the like," but study abroad offices and groups have adopted this phrase for a student's return to their home country from abroad because it is kind of like the dictionary's definition! It's a major transition between two worlds that affects you on multiple levels: personally, emotionally, relationally, socially, spiritually, academically, and even professionally.



This short guide has been put together to help you through this transition. For some people, coming home is no problem. They glide from one culture to the other, with no major emotional experiences. For most people though, it can take anywhere from weeks to months before they feel balanced and settled again. This isn't to say that you'll eventually settle back into the person you were before studying abroad. No, the experience has probably changed you in such a way that you don't think you could be/don't want to be that person anymore. You've grown and changed while abroad. By the end of this reentry process you won't have lost those changes or areas of growth; rather you'll hopefully have found a way to integrate them into your life here at home so that they are part of your new "normal."

In the pages that follow, we hope you will find some information to help you eventually get to that place of the new "normal" you.

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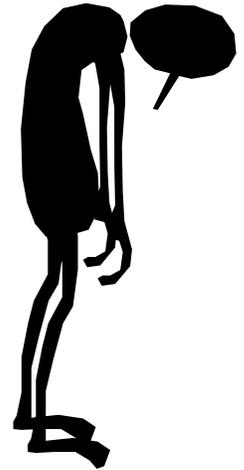
Reentry: What is it?

A mind that has been stretched by new experiences can never go back to its old dimensions. –Oliver Wendell Holmes

You probably knew coming home would be a transition, but now that you're in the midst of that transition, you might be surprised at how difficult it is or how things have popped up that you didn't anticipate being an issue. This is probably a result of the fact that you have grown in many ways and developed new skills, but family and friends at home have not; they're still living like they were when you left. This gap can be stressful. It makes it hard to step back into your routine of home when you have changed but the home routine hasn't. Know that this is a legitimate experience. The majority of study abroad students experience this. It looks different for everyone and the timing is different for everyone, but it is very common to struggle with this gap and those differences when coming home.

Common reentry experiences include:

- Feeling like you can't fully explain your experience or really capture its significance in a way others will understand
- Feeling like others aren't interested in hearing about your time abroad
- Feeling like you identify more with your host culture than you do with your home culture right now, making you "out of place" in your own home
- Feeling bored
- Being homesick for your host country, culture, and friends
- Seeing that relationships with family and friends at home are different now that you've been away
- Feeling like people don't "get" you or understand how you're feeling
- Feeling judgmental or overly critical of your home country
- Feeling cut off from your time abroad, like it's an inaccessible piece of you now
- Experiencing "reverse culture shock" (Just as you felt out of place when arriving in your host country, you may now feel out of place upon return to your home country.)
- Wanting to be alone or wanting to be around people all the time
- General feelings of depression, confusion, or restlessness



Some people identify with some or all of these feelings and experiences, but others may not conceptualize their return in the same way. Others prefer to think of the return experience as happening in "phases." If you prefer to think of the transition in this way, here are some common phases. They may or may not happen in this order for you, and you may even skip a phase. Remember: It's different for everyone!

Detachment

Pulling away from your host surroundings in order to prepare yourself for leaving them.

Excitement

Feeling eager to be back with your family and friends, and to share your experiences with them.

Alienation

Feeling as if you don't really belong in your "old" home. Feeling as if people don't fully understand the significance of your time abroad.

Readjustment

Getting used to life back in the U.S., the different pace of doing things, and the overwhelming nature of being back.

Reentry: How to Cope?

There is nothing like returning to a place that remains unchanged to find the ways in which you yourself have altered.
–Nelson Mandela

We've gone over what reentry is and how hard it can be. Now we need to delve into how to cope! How do you handle these feelings and experiences so that you still retain the importance and significance of your time abroad **and** feel at home again in your own country?

Be patient with family, friends, and yourself. Keep in mind that it's been weird for your family and friends to have you away and it's a transition for them, too, to have you back. Keep in mind that they didn't go abroad with you so your experience just isn't as important to them as it is to you; be graceful. And be patient with yourself, allowing yourself time to cope through this transition. Don't get mad that you're different or that everything around you is different; give yourself the time to adjust and balance. You may want to recommend that family members read *A Readjustment Manual for Parents*, published by the School for International Training. Although North Park does not work directly with SIT Study Abroad Programs, it has some good general information for helping others understand what you're going through and suggests ways to help. This resource is available online:

http://www.sit.edu/SSA_Other_documents/parent_reentry_handbook.pdf.

Focus on the positive. Think about the things you like best about your host culture and your home culture. Try to integrate all these positives into your normal routine to "capture the best of both worlds."

Try not to compare your home and host countries. This pairs well with the "focus on the positive" suggestion above. As you identify the positives of each place, don't let that turn into a comparison. Know that both places are valuable in their own ways, and each have positives and negatives. Don't try to convince yourself, or others, that one is better than the other. Recognize the value of both.



Talk with others who understand what you're going through. Did you know other exchange students in your host country with whom you can discuss the reentry process? Being able to process this transition with others who are experiencing the same thing can be a huge help. Also feel free to visit with the staff in the International Office. We would be happy to talk with you about any transitional issues you're facing or put you in touch with past exchange students with whom you can be in touch.

Keep in touch with people from your host country! Being back home doesn't mean you're cut off from the life and friendships you developed while abroad. Email and Skype with friends and host families. (A word of caution: don't do this *too* much. It's possible to use this as a strategy to "escape" being home and pretend you're still in your host country. Use communication as a tool to help you readjust being home, not to avoid dealing with the transition.)

Sleep enough and eat enough. While most people think of reentry primarily as an emotional challenge, it can also be physically difficult. While you adjust on the emotional side, keep up good, healthy habits that can help fuel you during your transition.

Keep being multicultural! You went abroad to learn and live in a culture different than your own. Now that you're home doesn't mean you have to only adhere to your home country's customs. You know your home culture and now you know a second culture as well; integrate both into your everyday life and into your personal identity. Read on for some suggestions and ideas on how to implement this idea of multiculturalism at home.



Reentry: Respond!

There are several ways to put into action everything you learned and experienced while abroad. Let's take a quick look at each option so you get an idea of how to channel your growth from abroad here at home!

Civic Engagement and Social Action

Get plugged in on campus and around the city. Look at what internationally-focused clubs we have at North Park that you can join. There are culture-specific clubs such as African Student Club, Black Student Club, East Asian Student Association, Latin American Student Association, Middle Eastern Student Association, and French Club that offer activities and conversation. There are concept and cause-related clubs such as International Justice Mission, Conversation Club, Friends of Refugees, and World Relief which you can join to interact with and help others in our community. And, you can always help the International Office with orientation for new international students and outgoing study abroad students. You are an invaluable resource to these populations, as you know first-hand what it's like to study in a new culture!



These connections can allow you to speak the language of your host country, interact with students or community members from those places, or relive some of those cultural experiences such as listening to music or eating some of those specialty dishes you might be missing from abroad!

Talk to the International Office, a faculty or staff member you know well, or University Ministries if there's a cause you learned about while abroad that you would like to see developed on our campus or in the city. You can even go so far as applying for a Fulbright scholarship or other international grant if you want to go abroad again after graduation to work on a cause you're passionate about.

Academic Reintegration

Take classes that relate to your international experiences. Think of Intercultural Communication or the Community and Culture Dialogue 3000 class. Take classes where you can express and process your experiences from abroad such as Storytelling, Non-Fiction Writing, Poetry or Screenwriting. Take classes under specific departments such as Korean Studies, Latino and Latin American Studies, Middle Eastern Studies, French, or Spanish.

In any class that requires a paper or presentation with personal insight, talk about and integrate your experiences from abroad. You have a unique perspective that no one else in the classroom has. Use this as an opportunity to process your experience abroad and share the value of it with your peers.



Professional Development

Your time abroad will serve you well in the long run, even after you graduate college. Your experience abroad is a great thing to highlight in a job interview, and it's an excellent detail to include on your resume; potential employers will see that you have initiative, ambition, drive, and a unique perspective that can benefit their company. See North Park's Career Development and Internships Office for advice on guidance on how to best capture that experience on your resume and in an interview. The biggest points are to be able to answer the tough questions: "Why did you study abroad?" "What were your successes, strengths, and weaknesses?" "How has studying abroad impacted your plans for your future?" "What courses or activities did you participate in that could help you in the 'real' world?"



Network, network, network! By studying abroad you have drastically expanded your range of contacts and connections. Use the people you met abroad as references for a job; they know a whole different side of you than anyone at home does. Connect with people here at home who can understand the importance of your time abroad and might be able to point you towards special opportunities to use that experience here (or abroad again!)

Helpful Reentry Resources

Austin, Clyde. *Cross-Cultural Re-entry: A Book of Readings*. Abilene, Texas: Abilene Christian University Press, 1983.

Blak, Stewart & Hal Gregersen. *So You're Coming Home: The Social Dynamics of Coming Home*. San Diego, CA: Global Business Publishers, 1999

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Storti, C. *The Art of Coming Home*. Yarmouth, ME: Intercultural Press, 1997.

