

This handbook is designed to help you prepare for the transition back “home”. You may not realize it just yet, but coming home can be just as hard—or harder—than going abroad. Why? In part, because you expect an easy transition. After all, familiar is part of the definition of home. As opposed to perhaps every moment of being abroad, being at home should feel easy and natural. So it’s a great shock to many when being at home is anything but.

It’s not easy because while you were away, you’ve changed. Coming home just allows you to see those changes. This handbook is designed to help you make this transition successfully.

In addition, many students express frustration at how quickly their experiences abroad fade. For some, these experiences might all start to feel “like a dream”. But your experiences abroad should be of continuing relevance of you in your life. This handbook is designed to help you apply your experiences to, well, the rest of your life!

It is organized into three themes: *Closing the Circle* looks at a few things you can do in the final weeks of your study abroad experience to prepare for the next phase—and the next handbook theme: *Coming Home*. Lastly, *Opening New Doors* suggests ways you can keep your international experience alive and relevant, including information about some of the programs the CGE offers for returning students.

SECTION 1: CLOSING THE CIRCLE

Are you ready to leave this place? Have you wrapped up all your academic work? Think back to all the times over the last few months (or in those months of planning and anticipation) that you said “before I leave I’d really like to...”

Now’s the time to review this list and see if there’s any way to fit a few more of these things in before you go. We hope this will ignite a lifetime passion of travel and intercultural endeavor on your part, but although many students say they will return to their host country again, in reality most do not. So get out there while you can and have as few regrets as possible.

Think about all the photographs you’ve taken over the last few months. Did you really photograph everything that’s important to you? How about what you see on your walk to class every day? Or your host-family? Do you have a photograph of your favorite café or restaurant, or your host-country friends? Don’t end up with a thousand pictures of churches, temples or castles and none of the things that make up your day-to-day life, because it’s those commonplace details you’ll think and talk about most when you’re back.

An idea: do a “day in the life” photo-shoot. Photograph your whole day from morning till night, so you can visually answer the question “what was a typical day like?”

1.1 Packing Up

Remember the airline weight limits you worried about before you left? They still apply. Check with your airline if you don’t remember what they are. Now might also be a good time to pack up some things you wouldn’t have thought about bringing home otherwise. Think of the food you’ve (hopefully)

grown to love over the last couple of months. Is there anything you'd like to share with your family, or just have at home for a taste of your host-country on those days when you're missing it? (Remember you can only bring back dry or canned/jarred food, not fresh meat, agricultural products or cheese.) Are there any recipes you'd like to have? Now's the time to ask about them and write them down.

Other things you might want to pack up include memories. If you've been keeping a journal, the last few weeks are a great time to reflect on your experience. The times in peoples' lives that are characterized by change often have a crisper quality to them; every experience seems to be imbued with a deeper meaning. Try to capture this in your writing.

Ask yourself some questions:

- What did I accomplish while abroad?
- What did I learn about myself?
- What did I learn about this country?
- What friends did I make, and what did they teach me?
- What will I miss the most?
- What am I most looking forward to?
- What does this experience mean for my future? Will I live differently now?
- What did I learn about my own country and culture while abroad?
- Do I want to return to this place? What have I left undone?

You'll want to ask yourself these questions again after you've been home for a while, but thinking about them now can be rewarding and can help you put a little closure on your experience.

1.2 Coming Home

The first (and often most surprising) thing to know about coming home is that in many ways you will feel like you did when you arrived in your host country a few months ago: exhausted and excited. Probably it will feel as great to be home as it felt to be in your host country for the first few days, though for different reasons. You'll enjoy some home cooking, calls from old friends, and telling your family about your experiences.

But, just as your initial elation at being in a new and exciting place was tempered by a realization at how foreign and unfamiliar it felt, your honeymoon period at home may also start to not seem totally right. Things that you expected to be familiar may now seem quite alien:

- * Your ears might find it weird to hear English being spoken everywhere.
- * You might think your family throws too much away. You may balk at spending \$50 for a meal out when you know your host family lived off that much for a month.
- * The abundance in the supermarket may stop you in your tracks, as you have become used to getting by with less.
- * You may be dismayed at how fast-paced U.S. culture is, or frustrated at how little people actually want to hear about all your experiences (or look at all your pictures).

What the above symptoms indicate is that your values might have shifted while you were abroad. This is totally normal—but it also can be disquieting.

This isn't all that's tough about coming home, however...

TEN TOP IMMEDIATE REENTRY CHALLENGES

as rated by university students

There are lots of reasons to look forward to going home, but there are also a number of psychological, social, and cultural aspects which can prove difficult — often because they are unanticipated. The following list was generated by interviewing students like you who have been through the experience and survived nicely. However, they say you should take the process seriously by being realistic and thinking about it and your possible reactions. They offer the following thoughts on reentry for your consideration in the hope they will make your return both more enjoyable and more productive.

1. BOREDOM After all the newness and stimulation of your time abroad, a return to family, friends, and old routines (however nice and comforting) can seem very dull. It is natural to miss the excitement and challenges which characterize study in a foreign country, but it is up to you to find ways to overcome such negative reactions — remember a bored person is also boring.

2. “NO ONE WANTS TO HEAR” One thing you can count on upon your return: no one will be as interested in hearing about your adventures and triumphs as you will be in sharing those experiences. This is not a rejection of you or your achievements, but simply the fact that once they have heard the highlights, any further interest on your 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 to relay them coherently. It is very difficult to convey this kind of experience to people who do not have similar frames of reference or travel backgrounds, no matter how sympathetic they are as listeners. You can tell people about your trip, but you may fail to make them understand exactly how or why you felt a particular way. It's okay.

4. REVERSE “HOMESICKNESS” Just as you probably missed home for a time after arriving overseas, it is just as natural to experience some reverse homesickness for the people, places, and things that you grew accustomed to as a student overseas. To an extent it can be reduced by writing letters, telephoning, and generally keeping in contact, but feelings of loss are an integral part of international sojourns and must be anticipated and accepted as a natural result of study abroad.

5. RELATIONSHIPS HAVE CHANGED It is inevitable that when you return you will notice that some relationships with friends and family will have changed. Just as you have altered some of your ideas and attitudes while abroad, the people at home are likely to have experienced some changes. These changes may be positive or negative, but expecting that no change will have occurred is unrealistic. The best preparation is flexibility, openness, minimal preconceptions, and tempered optimism.

6. PEOPLE SEE “WRONG” CHANGES Sometimes people may concentrate on small alterations in your behavior or ideas and seem threatened or upset by them. Others may ascribe “bad” traits to the

influence of your time abroad. These incidents may be motivated by jealousy, fear, or feelings of superiority or inferiority. To avoid or minimize them it is necessary to monitor yourself and be aware of the reactions of those around you, especially in the first few weeks following your return. This phase normally passes quickly if you do nothing to confirm their stereotypes.

7. PEOPLE MISUNDERSTAND A few people will misinterpret your words or actions in such a way that communication is difficult. For example, what you may have come to think of as humor (particularly sarcasm, banter, etc.) and ways to show affection or establish conversation may not be seen as wit, but aggression or “showing off.” Conversely, a silence that was seen as simply polite overseas might be interpreted at home, incorrectly, as signaling agreement or opposition. New clothing styles or mannerisms may be viewed as provocative, inappropriate, or as an affectation. Continually using references to foreign places or sprinkling foreign language expressions or words into an English conversation is often considered boasting. Be aware of how you may look to others and how your behavior is likely to be interpreted.

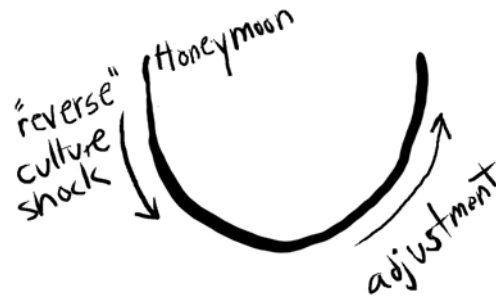
8. FEELINGS OF ALIENATION Sometimes the reality of being back “home” is not as natural or enjoyable as the place you had constructed as your mental image. When real daily life is less enjoyable or more demanding than you remembered, it is natural to feel some alienation. Many returnees develop “critical eyes”, a tendency to see faults in the society you never noticed before. Some even become quite critical of everyone and everything for a time. This is no different than when you first left home. Mental comparisons are fine, but keep them to yourself until you regain both your cultural balance and a balanced perspective.

9. INABILITY TO APPLY NEW KNOWLEDGE AND SKILLS Many returnees are frustrated by the lack of opportunity to apply newly gained social, technical, linguistic, and practical coping skills that appear to be unnecessary or irrelevant at home. To avoid ongoing annoyance: adjust to reality as necessary, change what is possible, be creative, be patient, and above all use the cross-cultural adjustment skills you acquired abroad to assist your own reentry.

10. LOSS/COMPARTMENTALIZATION OF EXPERIENCE (SHOEBOXING) Being home, coupled with the pressures of job, family, and friends, often combine to make returnees worried that somehow they will “lose” the experience. Many fear that it will somehow become compartmentalized like souvenirs or photo albums kept in a box and only occasionally taken out and looked at. You do not have to let that happen: maintain your contacts abroad; seek out and talk to people who have had experiences similar to yours; practice your cross-cultural skills; continue language learning. Remember and honor both your hard work and the fun you had while abroad.

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These challenges might seem daunting, but the most important thing to realize is that this is totally normal, and the ups and downs you’re experiencing constitute what is frequently called “reverse culture shock”. It actually often gets mapped just like the U-curve describing cultural adjustment in a foreign culture.



The best way to be ready for reverse culture shock is to expect it, and to realize that most of it is caused not by changes in home, but changes in you. You won't know how far you've come until you can reflect on the journey from the place you call(ed) home. This is actually a great time to not only learn about yourself and how you've grown while abroad, it's also a great time to learn about home from a far more objective perspective than you've ever had before. Lots of students come back saying that they never felt more American than when they were abroad, and never more foreign than when they were back in the U.S.

The first thing to do is relax. Like culture shock the first time around, you'll get through this, and end up stronger for the experience. You'll have your ups and downs, good days and bad. Some of the same coping skills you used to get yourself through the low points while abroad will serve you well here—reflect in your journals, keep active, rest and eat well, explore your surroundings with new eyes. Soon you will have adjusted, though we hope that you're never quite the same as you were before your experience abroad

Some Advice...

Suggestions on coming “home”, from University of the Pacific students (Stockton, CA)

- Talk with others who have come back from abroad and share your experiences, frustration, and joys. These are the people who can help you through it. Almost everyone agrees.
- Accept that you have changed and that things are not going to be the same as when you left and that that’s a good thing.
- Exercise. Endorphins kill reentry sadness.
- Read a lot about everything. It will get your brain working.
- Don’t isolate.
- Don’t brood. Self-pity is unattractive.
- Try new things. If you return to the same place a different person, redefine the place. Take up a new hobby, residence, sport, mode of transport.
- Don’t dwell on the past.
- Keep your memories alive - don’t store them away in a shoe box. It wasn’t a dream and it was important.
- Find local physical supports. Go to the World Market and get German chocolate if you miss Germany, Japanese tea if you miss Japan. And everything is available on the Internet.
- Use your cross-cultural study-abroad skills to observe your own culture.
- Stay spontaneous.
- Don’t let failures in your home culture be any less a learning experience than they would have been while you were abroad.
- Continue to reflect on what you learned abroad.
- Focus on how you are now better off from the experiences you have had.
- Look for the good in the present situation.
- Don’t be upset if people seem indifferent to your experience abroad.
- Recognize that things at home have changed while you were away and respect those changes. No one’s life went on hold just because you were gone, and their experiences are important to them.
- Don’t talk about what happened abroad unless your listener wants to hear it. But find a confidant if you can.
- Rekindle the spirit of adventure you had abroad. Explore home.
- Go out of your way to make new friends, just as you did abroad.
- Try to apply what you learned abroad to your life here. What can be saved? What is useful?
- You will need to “rebuild” relationships, not merely “resume” them.
- Don’t jump off a cliff: like culture shock, reentry shock passes in time

SECTION 2: OPENING NEW DOORS

While the last section dealt with things you needed to address while still abroad and with your immediate reentry concerns, this section examines your (new) life at home and back on campus. And while we encouraged you to put some closure on your experience abroad, now we're going to suggest you take the next step—figuring out what doors have opened to you as a result of your experiences.

Now's the time to think about what your experiences might mean for your future. Now's the time to think about how you've changed—while you were away, and since you've been back. Now's the time to reflect, reminisce, stay in touch with your friends from the program, organize your photographs, renew old friendships, start new ones. Your first semester back can be dynamic, difficult, exciting, depressing...a lot like your semester abroad!

This is what opening new doors is about. There might be possibilities open to you now that you never would have dreamed of before you went away. Most of all, now's the time to start applying your experience. Don't let it fade to the point where it seems like that whole episode in your life is a disconnected, surreal bubble. As one study abroad expert said, don't put your time away into a "shoe-box". Keep it real to you.

There's many ways to do this, and we've only space to cover a few. We've posed a series of questions below with some information as well as suggestions where you can find out more.

2.1 Questions and Opportunities

DO YOU WANT TO STAY INVOLVED WITH STUDY ABROAD?

Get involved. Talk about your semester abroad in your classes. Make a zine about it. Come to Away Café and tell a story that crosses borders. The students who continue their international experiences often go on to international careers, or exciting opportunities like Peace Corps or the Fulbright Program. To start with, consider becoming a *Global Ambassador*. Ambassadors help the CGE represent programs to prospective students at admissions events, general information sessions for study abroad programs, and general and program-specific orientations, as well as tabling, and talking to classes. Contact Doug Reilly at dreilly@hws.edu.

DO YOU WANT TO KNOW MORE ABOUT THE COUNTRY YOU STUDIED IN?

Talk to your advisor, the faculty director of the program or anyone at the CGE; we'll help you find courses that may build upon your experiences. You can also consider an independent study; talk to your academic advisor to find out more. Some students focus their honor's thesis on their country of study as well.

DO YOU WANT TO LEARN MORE ABOUT INTERNATIONAL CAREERS?

Maybe you think you'd like to make travel a part of the rest of your life. Maybe you'd like to spend a few years after graduation traveling or working abroad before settling down. Career Services and the Center for Global Education present an International Career Workshop every semester. In addition, please visit Career Services and the CGE and learn about some of the many options!

DO YOU WANT TO PUBLISH YOUR WRITING, ART OR PHOTOGRAPHY?

There are several opportunities available to you. There's a yearly photo contest, usually held in the Spring semester, and the CGE curates a gallery space on the third floor of Trinity Hall called the *Global Visions Gallery*. *GVG* hosts individual and group shows, with the goal of opening a new show each semester. If you have an idea for a show, see Doug Reilly. There's also *The Aleph: a journal of global perspectives*, published every Spring by the Center for Global

Education and an editorial board of students just like you. To submit your work to the Aleph or learn more about the editorial board, email Doug Reilly at the CGE at dreilly@hws.edu.

DO YOU WANT TO SHARE YOUR EXPERIENCES WITH FELLOW STUDENTS?

Learn about becoming a paid Programming Assistant (PA) with the CGE and help orient other students going abroad, help the CGE develop on-campus programs aimed at making HWS a more culturally-diverse place, and help us out with programs like the photo contest, *The Aleph*, and International Week.

DO YOU WANT TO MAKE A FILM ABOUT YOUR EXPERIENCE ABROAD?

Doug Reilly at The Center for Global Education has been regularly offering a Reader's College on digital storytelling. Students meet each week to eat, tell stories, learn about making films, and actually make their own three-minute digital story. This is a great way to both process your experience and also create a statement about it that you can share widely. Contact Doug Reilly at dreilly@hws.edu for more information.

DO YOU WANT TO TALK ABOUT YOUR REENTRY EXPERIENCE?

The staff of the CGE love to talk about study abroad. Most of us have studied abroad ourselves - that's why we do the work we do today. Make an appointment with one of us or just drop in - if we're available, we'd be more than happy to hear about your experiences. It helps us learn how students perceive our programs, and it gives you a chance to talk to someone who understands.

Our hope is that you'll take advantage of one or more of these opportunities. Like us, you might find that everything you do from this point on will be informed by your experience abroad.