Dear Education Abroad Alumni,

Welcome back! All of us at UW-Platteville Education Abroad hope that your education abroad experience was transformative, challenging, exciting, and one of the best experiences of your college career to date. While returning home may seem like the end of an era, we can assure you that it is not. The re-entry period, much like the first few weeks of your education abroad experience, is a challenging one, forcing you to reorient yourself and adjust to this new phase of your life.

As such, we have provided some resources to help you adjust to life back in the United States post-study abroad. In this packet, you will find information on:

- The Top Ten Challenges for Study Abroad Returnees
- Common Challenges Encountered by Education Abroad Returnees and Strategies to Help Deal with Them
- Advice on Coming Home and Dealing with Re-Entry
- 5 Things NOT to Do After Returning From Abroad

In addition, we encourage you to seek out opportunities across campus to help keep your education abroad experience alive including: joining internationally-themed student organizations, seeking international career advice from Career Services, and volunteering with the Education Abroad Office.

We, again, welcome you home and encourage you to stop by our office, give us a call, or share a few stories or photos with us via e-mail. Please know that the UW-Platteville Education Abroad staff is here to support you in your re-entry transition, and please do not hesitate to contact us.

All the best,

UW-Platteville Education Abroad
Top Ten Challenges for Study Abroad Returnees
Adapted from a list originally created by Dr. Bruce La Brack

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.

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.
### Common Challenges Encountered by Education Abroad Returnees and Strategies to Help Deal with Them

*Adapted from Kappler and Nokken*

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<tr>
<th>Challenges of re-entry</th>
<th>Strategies to help students deal with re-entry</th>
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<tr>
<td>Friends and family at home do not seem interested in hearing about aspects of your experience that you feel are important.</td>
<td>Realize they may be adjusting to changes in you. Give some time for this adjustment.</td>
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<td>Plan a special time for you to share photos or food from your experience.</td>
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<td>Don’t assume the opportunity for meaningful conversations will happen, make room for it to take place.</td>
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<td>Without a comparable experience, they may have difficulty understanding the depth of your stories. Be patient with them.</td>
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<td>Write down your thoughts and feelings. It helps you to be able to process them even if you can’t talk about them.</td>
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<td>Seek others with similar experiences.</td>
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<td>Give a presentation to community organizations. Write an article for your local or school newspaper. Be active!</td>
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<td>Friends and family may treat you as the same person you were before leaving. You want your relationship to change as a result of your changes.</td>
<td>They may be feeling uncertain about how you have changed or grown. Discuss your feelings about yourself and others with them.</td>
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<td>Encourage positive changes in old relationships. Don’t expect your friends to suggest seeing a new international film – especially if they never did before. Take the initiative and invite them.</td>
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<td>Seek out relationships with people who are compatible with the new you.</td>
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| You may be anxious or apprehensive about your academic situation because the subjects you enjoyed studying abroad, including language, appear to have little relevance at home. You might also be confused about your educational future and career plans in light of new or uncertain goals and priorities. | Take advantage of the wide range of educational opportunities and alternatives available to you by finding informal and non-academic ways to continue the study of your favorite subjects.  
Take time to consider educational and career plans that include your new areas of interest.  
Seek out the advice of your counselors and mentors. |
| --- | --- |
| If you find that your attitudes and opinions have changed considerably during your stay abroad and are not widely shared in your home community, you may feel highly critical of your home country because you have new perspectives on it. Others might be critical of your “negative attitude.” | Try to keep perspective on your feelings. Remember that your opinions and ideas may initially be greatly influenced by the host culture and may not represent your final balanced viewpoint.  
Share your feelings with others but carefully choose situations in which to bring up controversial issues.  
Continue to foster your ability to look at the world critically by reading and seeking out a diverse range of information, rather than fall into the trap of just thinking of things (politics in particular) negatively. |
| You may become frustrated because people at home are uninterested in other peoples and cultures. Faced with this lack of concern, you might feel there aren’t ways for you to take an active role in helping solve the problems of the world community. | Attempt to generate local interests in other peoples and their concerns.  
Use your special status as an intercultural traveler to educate others through private conversations or by public speeches and presentations.  
Look at problems in your own community now that you have a new perspective. Become a change agent. |
## Advice on Coming Home and Dealing with Re-Entry

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<th>Start planning your next trip!</th>
<th>Attempt to generate local interests in other peoples and their concerns.</th>
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<tr>
<td>Stay in touch with friends made abroad.</td>
<td>Use your special status as an intercultural traveler to educate others through private conversations or by public speeches and presentations.</td>
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<td>Talk with others who have come back from abroad and share your experiences, frustration, and joys. These are the people who can really help you through it. Accept that you have changed and that things are not going to be the same as when you left (and that it is a good thing!)</td>
<td>Look at problems in your own community now that you have a new perspective. Become a change agent.</td>
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<td>Keep ‘learning’ (learn to cook international meals, take salsa lessons, join a language group, etc.)</td>
<td>Try new things. If you return to the same place a different person, redefine the place. Take up a new hobby, sport, extracurricular activities…</td>
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<td>Check out local cultural events.</td>
<td>Join an internationally-themed student organization.</td>
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<td>Don’t isolate yourself and dwell on the past.</td>
<td>Find local physical supports: go to World Market for Belgian chocolate, Japanese tea…</td>
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<td>Reestablish your pre-study abroad routines.</td>
<td>Continue to reflect on what you learned abroad.</td>
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<td>Talk to someone about how you are feeling.</td>
<td>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 just as yours are to you.</td>
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<td>Feel sad (it’s okay to do once in a while!)</td>
<td>Go out of your way to make new friends, just as you did abroad.</td>
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<td>Share what you’ve learned with prospective students.</td>
<td>Like culture shock, reentry shock passes in time.</td>
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<td>Rekindle the spirit of adventure you had abroad: explore home and stay spontaneous</td>
<td>Remember, that “home” is within yourself!</td>
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<td>Keep your memories alive and don’t store them away in a shoe box. It wasn't a dream and it was Important, so reminisce a little and organize photos, videos, and blogs.</td>
<td>Adapt positive attitudes towards home and host culture.</td>
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YOU'VE BEEN ABROAD AND now you’re home. You’re more worldly, more cultured, and excited to share your experiences with your friends and family. You feel like a changed person, but the problem is, everyone else is exactly the same. And not only that, they expect you to be the same, too.

So how do you relate to them without coming across as braggy or snobby? Here are some suggestions from a kid who hasn’t been abroad yet, but who knows what it’s like to hear never-ending tales about Brazilian carnivals, Italian wine, and Australian rugby matches. This brings us to our first piece of advice:

1. Don’t go on and on and on and on.
   Your friends and family are interested in your abroad experience, but that doesn’t mean you have to start every sentence with, “When I was abroad… ” followed by an hour-long narrative. People only want to spend so much time hearing stories and looking at pictures. Remember, no matter how fascinating an experience was for you at the time, not all experiences make for interesting stories.

Think twice before you: Turn a discussion about what kind of pizza your friends should order into a half-hour ramble about Thai stir fry.

*Instead:* Keep your stories specific, rather than just vaguely commenting on how nice this museum was or how awesome that monument was. Consider inviting your friends to a slideshow, during which you can share all the highlights of your experience during an allotted amount of time. Or, let your friends learn about your experience in their own time by sharing pictures and stories online.

2. Don’t pretend to be from your host country.
   Yes, spending a semester in another country does help you get to know that country. Yes, you adopted new practices and tried new things. Still, let’s not lose perspective: You’re not actually from your host country. So while we encourage you to find ways to integrate your new knowledge into your life at home, remember that you can’t bring it all back with you.

Think twice before you: Greet your friends with two kisses on each cheek or send them off with a “ciao!”

*Instead:* Connect with people from your host country on campus or in your community if you’re feeling nostalgic. That way, you can continue learning about their culture and keep practicing some of those cultural customs that you miss.
3. Don’t act “holier-than-thou.”
One of the most exciting things about living abroad is being exposed to different tastes, perspectives, and practices. Sometimes this means reevaluating your own, whether that results in a newfound appreciation for quality coffee or newfound horror over the quantity of plastic bags that your compatriots use at the grocery store. Still, nobody wants to be lectured to, or hear you bash their tastes.

Think twice before you: Say something like, “I can’t believe you take 10-minute showers,” or, “I can’t believe I have to drink boxed wine again. We never drank that in Florence.”

Instead: Find positive ways to channel your newfound interests. Rather than lecture to your friends about water waste, take action by starting or joining a student group. If you want your friends to appreciate quality wine, take them to a nearby vineyard or a wine tasting. Trust us, they will have a lot more fun actively partaking in your interests than hearing you rant.

4. Don’t flaunt it.
It’s important to remember that it’s not possible for everyone to go abroad. There are factors that hold many people back, like financial restraints, academic requirements, or family matters. You’ve been afforded a great opportunity that isn’t necessarily available to everyone, even though it should be.

Think twice before you: Say something like, “Going to Denmark was the greatest experience of my life. You really need to get out of the country, Colin.”

Instead: Remember how lucky you are to have had this experience, and be sensitive when sharing stories with someone who hasn’t been abroad yet. You can also get involved in campus-level or national initiatives to expand study abroad so that more people can have the opportunity that you did.

5. Don’t hate on the United States.
Yes, it can be hard to settle back into your old American life. Maybe it seems boring and unexotic, or maybe new things suddenly bother you—the pace of life, the individualistic mentality, the mass consumption. But the fact is, there are many things that are wonderful about the United States, and they should not go unnoticed or unappreciated.

Think twice before you: Spend your weekend sulking in your dorm room or in your parents’ basement, complaining about the inferiority of your native country.

Instead: Walk through a new neighborhood, find a new restaurant, meet a new person. Go on a road trip with your friends, or take a cheap flight to somewhere you’ve never been. Sometimes we forget about how many cultural enclaves exist right here in our own country: Take time to explore them. Bring that eagerness to learn and explore home with you. And if you don’t always like what you find, use your newly expanded perspective to figure out how to make things better.