

What to do Now That They're Back: Supporting Those Returning

Proper re-entry is a crucial part of anyone's abroad experience – "even when it's over, it's not over"

It's not uncommon for those who study abroad to think that life at "home" stopped and everything is the same as it was when they left. The same is true for those of us who stayed on campus and continued with life as is. We think that our friends will return and be the same as whom they were when they left for their abroad experience. Both are false assumptions to make. Keep in mind that your peers might have changed because of their time abroad – their worldview, their values, their faith, their routines, etc. As a student leader, you play a critical role in helping your peers adjust back to life at Messiah College! Below are a few helpful tips to keep in mind and to put into practice when helping someone transition back into their "home" culture.

Common Re-Entry Symptoms or Experiences

- Have little motivation for classes and/or other activities
- Experience restlessness – a desire to "get away" or return to the host country
- Not wanting the experience to be over, wishing it could continue, and desiring to re-live it
- Have feelings of sadness/grief, depression or frustration
- Go through reverse culture shock – critical attitude and disgust at materialism, self-absorption, lack of gratitude, waste, extravagance, apathy, superficiality, etc. in U.S.
- Be confused about biblical stewardship based on the physical, spiritual, or social needs they encountered, or have a critical attitude toward some aspect of the host culture's shortcomings
- Questioning God's sovereignty or other foundational issues
- Self-righteous/critical attitude toward U.S. culture/people – waste, extravagance, apathy, superficiality...; or toward the host culture for its shortcomings
- Inability to communicate what they experienced and lessons they learned
- Think that no one else cares about other cultures or global needs
- Feelings of loneliness or isolation – friends/family are busy or preoccupied
- Feeling that no one will listen – friends/family not interested in hearing details
- Feeling that no one understands their experience, even those willing to listen
- Confusion about what God is doing within them or with their future plans
- Seek God's will for their life with new intensity
- Feeling that they have changed, but friends/family treat them the same
- Excited about finding new ways to reach out and/or use newly discovered abilities
- Have regrets based on unmet expectations, their own conduct/shortcomings, or unresolved conflict
- Experience spiritual warfare or other spiritual discouragement
- New excitement for spiritual disciplines – prayer, Bible reading, new worship styles...
- Confusion about biblical stewardship due to physical, spiritual, or social needs encountered
- Searching for a Kingdom perspective and/or accurate theology of suffering
- Dealing with unresolved hurts and baggage or difficult circumstances here
- Questioning their relationships

Goals for Helping

1. Strive for them to feel heard, supported, cared for
2. Assist them in dealing with unresolved issues that need to be addressed
3. Help them begin to integrate the experience into life for the long haul
4. Allow yourself to be impacted through the experience of helping (by-product of serving the person)
5. Remember that different students will need different types of help

Questions NOT to Ask

Avoid yes/no, short answer, or very broad questions such as:

- How was your trip? (too broad)
- What did you do? (too broad)
- Did you have fun? (yes/no)
- Do you want to go back? (yes/no)
- Did you get along with your roommate(s)? (yes/no)
- Did you like the culture? (yes/no)

Questions to Ask

Ask specific, open ended questions that begins with words such as “describe” “in what ways” “explain” or “who/what/how/why”

- What was the most meaningful thing about your experience abroad? The hardest thing? The most fun/exciting thing?
- Describe three highlights of the trip.
- What are the most significant lessons God taught you? How did you learn them?
- How did your expectations match up with what happened? Was it good or bad and why?
- How did you spend your time when not in classes?
- Describe three people who had an impact on you and why.
- Explain how the host culture is different from ours.
- What did you learn from the host culture? What do you admire about the nationals?
- What is good about the host culture and/or U.S. culture that you can embrace?
- What is negative about the host culture and/or U.S. culture that you want to avoid?
- What did you learn in your classes?
- How would you describe your relationship with the Lord before and after your time abroad?
- In what ways did your faith grow or was challenged while being abroad?
- What has been the most difficult thing about returning home? Why?
- Who or what has disappointed you since being back? In what ways?
- What new values or priorities are you bringing home with you?
- What do you remember about the people or culture you left behind?
- What do you miss most from your experience and why? What are you glad to be leaving behind and why?
- How do you see God working around you or in you now that you’ve returned?
- Was there a difficult experience during this semester for which you are now thankful?
- What did you learn about your gifts, strengths, weaknesses, and passions while you were abroad? What are they?
- What was the best/most unique food you tasted?
- How would the host family describe you to their friends?

As student leaders, you do play an important role in helping your peers transition back to campus, but you’re not alone! Don’t be afraid to engage in the conversation of re-entry, show yourself grace if you don’t “get it”, and know that you always have a resource in the Intercultural Office.

For further information on this topic and other intercultural issues, please contact:

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