

PREPARING FOR AN INTERNATIONAL INTERNSHIP EXPERIENCE

Compiled by University Career Services for students at The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

THINGS TO CONSIDER:

- **Be sure that you have the proper visas and work permits required for the country you are visiting.**
- Make a copy of your passport and any visas and keep them in a separate place from the actual documents
- Review information and advice on traveling abroad prepared by the US Department of State (<http://travel.state.gov/>) and information about the country or countries that you are visiting prepared by the US Department of State (http://travel.state.gov/travel/cis_pa_tw/cis/cis_1765.html), including any Travel warnings (http://travel.state.gov/travel/cis_pa_tw/tw/tw_1764.html) or Public Announcements (http://travel.state.gov/travel/cis_pa_tw/pa/pa_1766.html).
- Look up the address and phone number of the US Embassy of the country you will be visiting and carry it with you
- Review information and advice about health issues while traveling abroad prepared by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (<http://www.cdc.gov/travel/>); check on required and recommended immunizations. (You may wish to visit Student Health's International Travel Clinic.)
- Check with your health insurance carrier to ensure that you are covered in the country you are visiting.
- If possible, exchange some money ahead of your visit, so you will have some local currency with you when you arrive
- Alert your credit card company ahead of time that you will be traveling
- Consider getting a Eurail pass if you will be traveling in Europe. (www.Eurail.com)
- Consider purchasing a SIM card for international phone calling (http://www.planetomni.com/FAQ_sim.shtml)
- If possible, get city and subway/mass transportation maps before you go. Have a plan for your first night's stay (at least) and know how you will be getting here from the airport.
- If you will be earning wages while abroad, in most cases you will need to pay taxes (including in-country taxes). Check the IRS website (www.irs.gov) for details.
- You might check Craig's list for housing options. Another housing resource for London is Acorn (<http://www.acorn-london.co.uk/>)
- BUNAC (BUNAC.com) is an excellent resource for those seeking jobs and work permits in the UK and other countries
- Carry emergency contact information with you, so if you are injured, etc, someone will be able to contact your parents or whomever you list.

- If possible, obtain the name of a contact (friend, relative, UNC alum, etc) in the country that you will be visiting in case of major problems
- Possible sources of funding:
 - UCS' Non-Profit/Arts/ International Internship Stipend (http://careers.unc.edu/aboutucs/internship_stipend.html)
 - Class of 1938 Summer Study Abroad Fellowships (http://oisss.unc.edu/services_programs/1938/index.html)
 - C.V. Starr International Scholarships(<http://gi.unc.edu/funding/cv-starr-ugrad.html>)
 - Frances L. Phillips Travel Scholarship (http://www.unc.edu/depts/travel/fpts_intro.html)
 - Center for Global Initiatives (<http://gi.unc.edu/>)
 - Carolina Undergraduate Health Fellowships (<http://gi.unc.edu/funding/health-fellowship.html>)
 - The Center for Global Initiatives International Internship Awards (<http://gi.unc.edu/funding/internship-award-ugrad.html>)
 - The Mahatma Gandhi Fellowship(<http://mgf.uncsangam.org/home.html>)
 - Student Affairs Travel Fellowship Fund (http://studentaffairs.unc.edu/what_we_do/travel.html)
 - UNC Entrepreneurial Public Service Fellowships (<http://www.unc.edu/cps/fellowships/epsfellowships/>)
 - Phillips Ambassador Program(Asia) (<http://studyabroad.unc.edu/phillips/index.cfm>)
- If you will be working for an employer, construct a fairly brief email with all of your questions; do not keep sending multiple emails to the employer before hand. Be sure to check with your employer before you go regarding dress code, working hours, salary or stipend (if provided), housing (if provided), advance preparation required, duties of the job, and other expectations of the employer
- Campus resources:
 - Students Working Internationally to Nurture Growth- SWING (<http://studentorgs.unc.edu/swing/>)
 - UNC Libraries Study Abroad Tutorials – very helpful for country information (<http://www.lib.unc.edu/instruct/studyabroad/>)
- Read about the customs and culture of the country you will be working in. Be sure that you are dressed appropriately and modestly.
- Do not overpack!

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Adapted from the Study Abroad Guide for UNC Students

Crossing Cultures

Introduction

You are about to embark on a most wonderful adventure abroad, during which you will be exposed to new ideas and immersed into new cultures. As you begin to prepare for your trip, you are taking the first steps along a path that will lead you through personal challenges, excitement, reflection, frustration, success, and ultimately into a new world!

What is culture?

Before going any further in this discussion of crossing cultures, we must first consider the term “**culture**” itself.

The Merriam Webster Dictionary defines culture as:

1. The integrated pattern of human knowledge, belief, and behavior that depends upon man's capacity for learning and transmitting knowledge to succeeding generations.
2. The customary beliefs, social forms, and material traits of a racial, religious, or social group.

Who am I? Where am I from?

Now, that you understand the definition of culture, reflect thoroughly on your own culture, your native culture. What values, beliefs, and customs do you hold that are intrinsic of this culture. What are some characteristics a person abroad might think of when you tell them that you are from the United States? Are these accurate? Where might these stereotypes have originated?

Who are they? Where am I going?

Now that you have considered your own cultural traits and the stereotypes that might also be associated with you, let's shift gears and think about where you are going. What ideas have you already formed about the country, people, and culture where you will be working?

One of the best ways to prepare for your experience is to research the country and culture of your study abroad. Guidebooks, international newspapers and magazines, travel websites, novels, poetry, and the Study Abroad Office resource library are all good places to begin your research. Talk with international students and experienced travelers who have been to the country.

Thinking ahead...

By reflecting on and researching the cultural traits and stereotypes of your own home country, and those of the country which you will be visiting, you may now be able to anticipate some of the cultural differences that you will encounter during your time abroad. Remember however, that no matter how prepared and culturally knowledgeable you become, your pre-conceived cultural differences may, or may not, be as anticipated, and you will likely still encounter situations that will challenge, disturb, surprise, frustrate, or even anger you.

Why me?

When faced with a situation abroad that challenges you, take a moment to recognize that **YOUR REACTION IS NORMAL AND TO BE EXPECTED.**

In a book titled *Crossing Cultures*, by Craig Storti, we are told:

"Deep down, we assume that under normal circumstances we all think about and perceive the world in basically the same way. This is our subconscious conditioning. We do not choose to think this way, and we may even try to prevent ourselves from thinking this way, but the force of our conditioning leaves us with no alternatives."

Simply put, this quote means that since birth you have spent your entire life surrounded by elements of your own culture that influence every aspect of who you are and how you relate to the world - this is all you know. When immersed in a different culture you are exposed to a stream of stimuli that may challenge your cultural norms and previously held beliefs. In time, this begins to wear on the "newness" and perfection of your experience and you may begin to feel varying degrees of depression, confusion, frustration, or anxiety.

But I just want to have fun...

Now that you know to expect some degree of discomfort as you begin to adjust and settle into your new culture, what can you do to relieve these feelings and start fully enjoying your study abroad experience again?

1. Simply preparing for cultural adjustment, and understanding it as a NORMAL human reaction to change, can help tremendously.
2. Focus on your sense of purpose. Have a clear idea of what you want to accomplish (your personal goals) by going abroad.
3. Talk with other international students, who may be having similar feelings. They may share techniques of their own to help in dealing with cultural adjustment.
4. Get involved; don't retreat. Often when people feel down they want to be alone, or stay in their room, however this often only worsens the situation.
5. Allow yourself time to adjust - do not make judgments immediately.
6. Maintain your sense of humor.
7. Relax, and take it easy. Remember that this too shall pass.

What if I really have trouble adjusting?

While many of the below symptoms are a natural reaction to cultural adjustment, they might possibly reach a more extreme stage called "Culture Shock."

Symptoms of culture shock:

Homesickness
Boredom
Loneliness
Irritability
Hostility towards others
Irrational anger
Lethargy
Excessive sleeping
Withdrawal

If this is happening to you, understand what is going on and seek counseling assistance.

Adapted from the Purdue University Study Abroad website:

International Student Identity Card: Don't leave home without it! With an ISIC, you can receive reduced airfare, get basic insurance coverage and access to an emergency helpline, and obtain hotels, museums, and restaurants discounts all over the world. Find out how and where you can obtain your ISIC at <http://www.istc.org/sisp/index.htm>

Only some differences are immediately apparent

There are many different models for describing culture. One is that of an iceberg, because icebergs float, but much of their mass stays underwater. The part that is easy to see is not the whole thing. The same applies to culture.

In looking at people from other countries, you can easily see some things about them, such as what they eat, how they speak, and how they dress. You can learn all of those things from books or TV or movies.

But to learn the deeper things about another culture, you need to spend time living in it. It is only through immersion that you will come to understand how other people think about their work, spirituality, money, or politics.

The rewards...

There are numerous rewards to be had from being immersed in another culture:

- Increased self-reliance
- Better language skills
- Discovery of priorities and interests that you never knew you had
- Greater insight into world events
- A more complete understanding of America's role in the world
- Desirability in hiring

...and the challenges

But of course, anything worthwhile is also challenging. While abroad, you will come to understand that the country you are visiting has its own way of handling...

...meeting people and fitting in. A frequent criticism of Americans is that we are superficial – overly friendly when first meeting people, but then not very good at building or maintaining lasting friendships. Until you understand local ways, it is wise to be slightly more formal and restrained than usual in dealing with people.

...space and contact. All cultures have different notions about physical contact or space, for instance how far away to stand or sit when conversing, or how to discipline children, or how to greet people (a handshake? a bow? a kiss on the cheek?)

...beliefs about safety. Different cultures have their own ideas about what is a “normal” rate of crime. People elsewhere think of the US as being dangerous because the rate of violent crime is much higher than that in other Western, industrialized countries. While your family may caution you to “watch out for the pickpockets in Rome”, Italian parents (for example) are telling their children to “watch out for the murderers in Chicago.”

...sexuality issues. If you are gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgendered, you should do some reading on your destination. The countries you visit may be more, or less, tolerant than the US.

...intimate interactions.

You cannot assume that the same rules apply abroad as here. If there is any chance that you will date local people while you are abroad, you should talk to people who understand both cultures' viewpoints in this area in order to have good experiences & stay safe.

Casual dating. Two people going out alone for dinner or drinks with no further expectations is a very American idea, and this does not happen in many other parts of the world. (People who feel “casual” about each other in other countries usually go out in large groups.)

Women, especially, must make an effort to learn the rules about what is and is NOT safe to do as early as possible. Ask females who have visited the country for tips. Behaviors that are not significant in America –

such as smiling at a stranger, making polite conversation at a bus stop, allowing someone to buy you a drink – can result in totally unexpected reactions from men overseas.

Each program site has multiple cultural influences

Expect to encounter many different points of view and ways of doing things.

Rural/urban differences

Just as in the US, small town people abroad are very different from their cousins in the city. The people of Sydney, for example, have a very different outlook from that of Australians living on isolated farms.

Be aware that there may be an extra facet to becoming comfortable with your study abroad site if you come from a small town but are studying in a city (or vice-versa). For example, if you are from Crawfordsville and study in Shanghai, you will need to get used to Chinese culture, but also to urban population density, using public transportation, etc.

Some former students from small towns say that living in a big city for the first time while abroad was an unexpected bonus to their abroad experience.

Socio-economic differences

Most Americans find it unsettling to consider issues of socio-economic class. It is a fundamental American belief that most of us are part of the same “middle” class, with equal rights, the same chances of success, and similar life priorities.

Americans sometimes assume that countries that adopt American fashions, teach English in their schools and do business with the US are also in the process of becoming societies without overt class differences. In fact, such a model is common in only a handful of countries (most with populations built largely from waves of immigrants from many different places) such as the US, Canada and Australia. Most other countries consider class differences to be a natural part of society, acknowledge them openly, and sometimes observe them meticulously.

You may be surprised to see the people of your visiting country openly acknowledging class differences, for example, in the way that junior and senior members of the same organization speak to each other, or in the ways that young people of different backgrounds talk about their career or educational aspirations, or in many other ways.

You may come to know other American program participants whose levels of wealth, education or privilege are substantially different from yours. Use this diversity to gain a better understanding of America, in addition to learning about the country you are visiting.

Majority/minority populations

Most countries that you are likely to visit have majority and minority populations, just like the US. For example:

- Pakistanis, Indians, and Caribbean people in the UK
- North Africans in France and Spain
- Turks in Germany
- Gypsies (*roma*) in most European countries
- Haitians in the Dominican Republic
- Laplanders (*saami*) in the Scandinavian countries
- Koreans in Japan
- Native people in most Latin American countries
- Aboriginal people and Asians in Australia
- Indians and Lebanese in many African countries
- Maori people in New Zealand

Just as in the US, ethnic diversity in other countries sometimes make relations complicated and it also adds variety and richness to the society as a whole.

Stereotypes

Work against your own stereotypes...

Many people, if not most, have one or more very strong (and usually negative) ideas, not always based on experience or knowledge, about people who belong to another culture. One of the goals of study abroad is to help students to challenge and overcome these ideas; in the era of global business, media and frequent international travel, stereotypes are more counterproductive and unnecessary than ever.

Before you travel, read about the culture of the country you will visit. While abroad, maintain an open mind about what you see. If something seems strange, try to understand it by discussing it with your program leader or someone else who understands both your culture and that of your host country.

...and those of others

Just as Americans have stereotypes about people elsewhere, they have stereotypes about us. For example, that we are loud, immature, wasteful, ignorant of other countries, judgmental and promiscuous.

We suggest that you act in a way that will convince your hosts that these stereotypes cannot be applied to all Americans, or at least not to yourself.

- Watch local people and model your public behavior on theirs, especially in the areas of how loudly one speaks and how one uses alcohol.
- Learn at least a little of the local language. Be able to begin vital inquiries with “Excuse me, do you speak English?”. Also be able to say “thank you”.

A word to “heritage students”

If you are an American going to a country where you have some ethnic heritage, do not expect that you will slip easily into Polish, African or Vietnamese culture, for example, because your grandparents are Polish, African, or Vietnamese. If you have grown up in America, you are primarily American, despite other influences. While you can gain rewarding insight into your heritage and family, be modest in your expectations about fitting in or having an instinctive understanding of your host country.

Cultural adjustment is a process

Many travelers go through different stages in relating to a new culture. One of the simpler models to describe this process:

- **The “excitement” stage.** Everything around you is new and exciting. An open air market appears picturesque, the vendors seem lively, the food for sale smells fragrant & tastes exotic.
- **The “disillusioned” stage.** You have the same experiences as before, but now you make a negative assessment, not a positive one. The same open air market now seems to have become run down and chaotic, the vendors seem aggressive or obnoxious, the food has become gross. “Culture shock” may be a factor at this stage.
- **The “balanced” stage.** With time, you realize that there is as much good, and as much bad, in the new culture as in your home culture – they are just arranged and presented differently. Your anger and disappointment fade, and you realize that you can function effectively outside your home culture. It’s clear that the open air market is different from the store where you buy food at home, but you see that both have their advantages. The vendors are different from the grocery clerks at home, but they all get the job done. The food is indeed different from food at home, and you’re glad you’ve tried so many new dishes.

But getting back to culture shock...

“Culture shock” is a name given to the collection of feelings that sometimes arise when travelers are overwhelmed by cultural differences. The symptoms can include feeling lonely, homesick, overwhelmed, fearful, angry, confused or judgmental.

Having culture shock does not imply any shortcoming on your part – it’s just an occupational hazard of living an international and intercultural life. Just as an athlete cannot get in shape without going through the uncomfortable conditioning stage, so you cannot fully appreciate new cultures without first going through the uncomfortable stages of psychological adjustment.

We can’t prevent you from experiencing culture shock, but we can reassure you that culture shock has been overcome by thousands of students before you.

Actually, many people experience culture shock in their own country, for example, by visiting a new region for the first time.

Smoothing your cultural adjustment process

As you approach the challenge of adapting to a new culture, remember that you have already done this at least once, on at least a modest scale, in leaving home for college. Until making that step, you lived in the “culture” of your high school and your parents’ home. Think of everything that you have learned since then and how different your life is now!

With a little advance preparation, some flexibility and persistence, you can adjust as successfully to your new surroundings.

Before going abroad:

- Follow world news
- Check the US State Dept website for information about travel advisories, immunizations, passports, and visas, etc

While abroad:

- Stay physically and psychologically well. Eat well, sleep enough and don’t drink too much.
- Deal with any dissatisfactions promptly & directly. If you have concerns about your housing or your work assignment, address these quickly so they don’t stew and get worse.

Be patient with yourself & others. Remember that cultural adjustment is a process and that everyone goes through it at a different pace.