



## **Parents to Make Study Abroad Successful**

*From the Winter 2008 University of Minnesota Parent Newsletter*

Family members go through a range of emotions when a student decides to study abroad, much like when a student first leaves for college—excitement, fear, distress at having the student so far away. Students, too, go through a mix of emotions.

Parents can help make study abroad more successful by understanding their own and their student's feelings throughout the experience.

### **Before departure**

Students need to know they have your support and can talk to you about the program. While considering the opportunities at the destination, also discuss any concerns you have and ask about your student's concerns.

Ask about your student's goals for the program. They should know how the program applies to their field of study, the cultural and social adjustments they can expect, and the language difficulties they may face.

Talk about ways to stay in touch, and make arrangements for phone calls. Many countries have affordable short-term international cell phone contracts. Your long-distance provider likely has a reduced plan for international rates and collect calls. Internet communication, such as Skype or Free World Dial-up, can be a cost-effective option. But keep in mind that some study abroad sites may not provide online access and your student would need to visit an Internet café.

Talk about how your student will handle everyday financial needs, as well as emergency funds. For international travel, a credit card with provisions for cash withdrawal is very helpful. Credit cards and bank cash cards provide access to local currency at the best exchange rates, and cash machines are available in nearly every community.

Buy maps of cities or areas where your student will be staying and traveling. You will feel more comfortable if you can connect your student with a specific location or neighborhood.

Ask your student to suggest articles or books about the area, and look for guidebooks on the host country or city. Get copies of the guidebooks your student plans to take along.

### **During study abroad**

During the first few weeks, your student may call or write about difficulties and frustrations. Something routine as buying groceries, counting change, catching a bus, or using the telephone will require effort. Keep in mind that you're not expected to solve problems; your student just needs to vent! And don't worry too much if all you hear are complaints. Your student is undoubtedly also having some remarkably good experiences.

As the weeks pass, the frustration level will decrease, and you may hear from your student less often. During the last few weeks of a program, students feel the pressure to complete their studies. They want to see and do all they can, so communication may dwindle.

Even if you have regular contact by phone or Internet, send mail. Students appreciate as much word from home as they can get. Ask your student to send postcards and letters describing outings and daily life.

Encourage your student to tell you about simple things, such as food, the route to class, or favorite shopkeepers. Ask your student to draw a floor plan or send a photo of his or living space. You'll feel better if you can picture your student in this new setting. If students are in a very different culture, it may be hard for them to describe things to you. Think of ways to suggest topics; e.g., "I was working in the garden today, and I was wondering what kinds of flowers and vegetables grow there."

For some students, adjusting to a new culture may be so severe that they refuse to participate in their new community. Be alert for signs that your student is excessively critical or spending too much time sending e-mail or calling home, rather than experiencing the trip. If you're concerned about your student's physical or mental health, safety, or well-being, contact UCSD's Programs Abroad Office ([www.pao.ucsd.edu](http://www.pao.ucsd.edu)).

### **Upon re-entry**

An international experience doesn't end when your student returns. He or she will be gaining perspective and understanding for about six months after coming home. Returning students make comparisons about nearly every aspect of American life—food, politics, sanitation, economics—and it can be difficult for friends and parents to understand the persistent questioning. If a student feels that listeners don't understand, he or she may fall silent or not respond to questions.

For the first few days after your student comes home, he or she may experience jet lag and be exhausted when you want to talk or exuberant when you're ready for bed. So, plan a special time to sit with your student to hear about the trip and look at souvenirs and mementos.

We have some tips to help you and your student understand and incorporate the study abroad experience into life at home:

- Encourage your student to contact Programs Abroad after the experience and continue the learning process with other returned students.
- In the week or two after your student returns, ask about the small details rather than overall impressions. During this period, students tend to talk most easily about the daily routines they established, the food they ate, and the people they met and are now missing.
- A few weeks after your student comes home, watch for symptoms of depression- low energy, problems with sleep and appetite, and difficulty concentrating. Some go through a period of depression after they return. At the same time, however, recognize that your student has undergone a major experience and is likely to be different than before.
- Bear with the two common phrases: "When I was in (Mexico, France, Ghana, Singapore)." And "It's too hard to explain." It can be difficult to keep listening when you can't easily envision the experience, but it's important for your student to talk.

Your student's experience can have a long-term effect on you. Your awareness of his or her host country will increase significantly, and you, too could be inspired to learn a new language or travel abroad.

<http://pao.ucsd.edu/pao/parents.htm>