Chapter 10

The Sojourner’s Return: Risks and Challenges of the Study Abroad Experience on Re-Entry

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ABSTRACT

Thousands of students are participating in study abroad programs, which is a major decision that could alter the life of a student and shape his/her future. It is important, therefore, to carefully weigh the options that come with being an international student. This chapter explores the history of study abroad, students’ study abroad experiences, and the benefits of these programs. Study abroad benefits include personal growth, intercultural development, and career attainment. Educators consistently assert that a significant part of the studying abroad experience is training future global leaders to be more effective and efficient, respecting the diversities of people and cultures, including political and economic systems, and the willingness to take a stand for the world’s welfare. Following this, the re-entry experiences of students who return to their home countries at the end of their studies are examined with respect to the physical, social, and psychological risks that student returnees are faced with.

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INTRODUCTION

Study abroad in the simplest sense can be described as a process whereby a student travels from their country of origin to another country typically for broader educational purposes. To quote Murphy, Sahakyan, Yong-Yi, and Magnan (2014), it is ‘a primary vehicle for building student’s global competence’ (p. 1). Typically, study abroad experiences for most students in the Western-developed world involves a brief stay (less than a year) in another country. The Institute of International Education’s (2016) report on length of study abroad experiences for American students has shown that between 2004-2015, the length of time that American students have spent studying at international destinations has steadily declined.

Similarly, a 2016 report from the Australian Government’s Department of Education, Training and Employment (DETE) revealed that as many as 15,000 Australian students engage in short-term study abroad experiences compared to 1,500 in semester to year-long study abroad experiences in the year 2015. For most students from developing countries, however, study abroad experiences can last several years. Returnees from both short-term and long-term study abroad visits are reported to have positive changes in various domains due to their cultural experiences in the host nation. Hadis (2005) reported a heightened interest in global issues; increased recognition of diversity; increased academic and personal motivation, as some of the positive changes observed in student returnees.

Benefits notwithstanding, the experiences of culture shock and acculturation difficulties that are characteristic of cross-cultural education have been researched extensively with the conclusion that international students often experience challenges in their transition and acculturation process. Similarly, student returnees who complete their education in a host country after several years of studying abroad are also reported to undergo transitional stress as they re-adjust to their home countries (Rogers & Ward, 1993; Sussman, 2001, 2002). According to Christofi and Thompson (2007), even though international students study abroad in huge numbers, only about one-half of them return to their home countries of origin.

Returning home, no matter how brief the stay in a host country is, requires reintegration into one’s culture of origin. Pritchard (2011) used the term re-entry trauma to describe the reintegration process of returnees from a host country to their home country. This process is likened to reverse culture shock, and may comprise a process of re-acculturation, feelings of grief and loss, changes in worldview and cosmic orientation, and a lack of preparedness for conditions in their country of origin (Pritchard, 2011). There is also another group of international students, who study abroad and return home temporarily for research or data collection purposes. For this group, they are exposed to two phases of culture shock and reverse culture shock during the tenure of their time abroad.
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