

## Re-entry tips for OCS students when home

March 31, 2020 at 1:13 p.m. PST

---

First, I wanted to let you know that Whitman OCS staff (Barbara Hoffman, Laura Cummings and I) are working remotely from home now, as are nearly all Whitman staff. But we are all still on the job full time and ready to provide you with support as needed.

Some of you have been back in the US for a month already, and others have just returned in the past few days. Regardless of your situation, we know that returning back to the US (or your home country) after studying abroad or studying away elsewhere in the US always involves some degree of "re-entry transition" even under normal conditions.

We have attached a list of *Top 10 Immediate Re-entry Challenges for Study Abroad Students* by Bruce LaBrack, Professor Emeritus and expert in cross-cultural learning at the University of the Pacific. Please take a few minutes to read it as a frame of reference for understanding the typical challenges students face when adjusting back home. Most students won't experience all of these challenges, but some of the items and recommendations will likely resonate for you and help you navigate your interpersonal connections after off-campus study.

Of course, for spring 2020 OCS students, your departure from your program was unique and potentially traumatic due to the rapid spread of COVID-10 and abrupt closure of OCS programs. We recognize that having your program end suddenly may have resulted in a wide range of emotions including shock, disappointment and fear, not to mention the difficulties some of you encountered with travel disruptions on the journey home.

For that reason, we suggest that you check out the COVID-19 mental health resources available on the Counseling Center's website for additional support:

<https://www.whitman.edu/counseling-center>

Take care of yourself, and please let us know if we can assist as you make your transition back home.

### **Susan Holme**

Director, Off-Campus Studies  
Whitman College  
Memorial Building 205  
345 Boyer Avenue  
Walla Walla, WA 99362 USA  
1.509.527.4992 (Main office tel)  
1.509.240.7762 (Cell/Mobile)  
[holmeSL@whitman.edu](mailto:holmeSL@whitman.edu)

# Top 10 Immediate Reentry Challenges for Students

By Bruce  
LaBrack

**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 which 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.

**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 audiences’ 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 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 student overseas. To an extent it can be reduced by writing letters, telephoning, and generally keeping in contact, 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. 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 “Wrong” Changes** Sometimes people may concentrate on small alterations in your behavior or ideas and seem threatened or upset by them. Others may ascribe “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 them, 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 is difficult. For example, what you may have come to think of as humor (particularly sarcasm, banter, etc.) and ways to show affection or establish conversation may not be seen as wit, but 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. Feelings of Alienation** Sometimes the reality of being back “home” is not as natural or enjoyable as the place you had constructed as your mental image. When real 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. Some even become quite critical of everyone and everything for a time. This is no different than when you first left home. 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, technical, 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 the cross-cultural adjustment skills you acquired abroad to assist your own reentry.

**10. Loss or Compartmentalization of Experience (or “Shoeboxing”)** Being home, coupled with the pressure of job, family and friends, often combine to make returnees worried that somehow they will “lose” the experience. Many fear that it will somehow 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, and continue language learning. Remember and honor both your hard work and the fun you had while abroad.

Bruce Labrack is the director of Pacific Institute for Cross-Cultural Training at the University of the Pacific’s School of International Studies. This “Top 10” list as well as other materials are available on the “What’s Up With Culture?” Web site (<http://www3.uop.edu/sis/culture/index.htm>), which is funded through the U.S. Department of Education.