IMPROVING SUPPORT FOR RETURNING EXCHANGE STUDENTS

by

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FOR RETURNING EXCHANGE STUDENTS

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This qualitative research study examines returnees (sojourners who have gone to live in another country and then have returned to their home countries) and their experiences before, during, and after their time abroad. Specifically, it aims to determine what support sojourners returning to their home countries would perceive as most useful in helping them deal with reentry shock.

Returnees’ perceptions were gathered through an online survey. Returnees were notified of the opportunity to participate in the research through links to the survey posted on various websites for returnees, as well as a notice sent out to returnees affiliated with a local chapter of an exchange student organization. Volunteer participants answered a survey consisting primarily of open-ended questions pertaining to their experiences and the support they received in relationship to their sojourn. Results showed that the best forms of support for returnees included social support and opportunities to talk about their experiences with others.
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CHAPTER ONE
INTRODUCTION

People have traveled abroad and experienced other cultures for thousands of years. They have gone abroad for trade, war, and religious purposes. Recently, however, more and more young people have been going abroad for academic and cultural enrichment purposes (AFS Intercultural Programs, 2008; Youth for Understanding USA, 2007). During the past hundred years, organizations such as American Field Service, Rotary International, Youth for Understanding, the United States Peace Corps, and many universities have implemented programs which allow people to spend time living, working, or studying in another country (AFS Intercultural Programs, 2008; Rotary International, 2008; United States Peace Corps, 2008; Youth for Understanding USA, 2007).

The goals of sojourning, or the process of living in a foreign country for the purpose of work or school, have changed dramatically in the history of sponsored sojourning. For many years, people viewed studying abroad as something done primarily while a person was attending university and for the sole purpose of gaining technical knowledge (Shank, 1961). During World War I, organizations such as AFS were founded to increase cross cultural understanding and service opportunities (AFS Intercultural Programs, 2008). Rather than targeting college and graduate students, these programs began recruiting adolescent students in their final years of high school or the beginning years of their university career; the most common time
to study abroad, or sojourn, is from 15 to 20 years old (AFS Intercultural Programs, 2008; Rotary International, 2008; Youth for Understanding USA, 2007).

Programs targeting high school students were deemed to be especially crucial for promoting the aforementioned goals because the program founders felt that adolescents were still especially adaptable and malleable when placed in new situations, thus leading to a greater possibility for increased cultural understanding (AFS Intercultural Programs, 2008; Rotary International, 2008; Youth for Understanding USA, 2007). In fact, most sojourns take place during a formative time in sojourners’ development. As such, they often change the course of the sojourners’ lives (Hansel & Chen, 2008). During adolescence, young people are involved in developing autonomy and clarifying their own values and worldview (Gaw, 1995; Hansel, 2005; Inhelder & Piaget, 1958; Maier, 1969; Thompson & Christofi, 2006; Walling, Eriksson, Meese, Ciovica, Gorton, & Foy, 2006).

Studying abroad is a challenging time in sojourners’ lives. All sojourners have unique experiences, but there is a general path these experiences take. Organizations and psychologists who work with sojourners notice that there is a common path these experiences follow, and they call this path cultural adjustment or culture shock (NAFSA, 2002). The process of adapting to the host culture or foreign culture is well understood and documented (Church, 1982; Guanpia, 1998; NAFSA, 2002; United States Peace Corps, nd).
During their time abroad, sojourners frequently receive support and trainings in the form of meetings, seminars, one-on-one contact, or camps. The trainings are meant to help facilitate a positive sojourn experience and to help sojourners navigate through their initial culture shock experiences. Sojourners may receive pre-departure training which is defined as training and support received before sojourners leave their country of origin, or home country.

In this study, sojourners discussed support received upon arrival into their host countries and support they received during their stay. Sojourners also discussed the end-of-stay support they received. This study defines end-of-stay support as support or trainings sojourners received before they left their host countries for their home countries.

There is one important aspect of the study abroad experience which is relatively unexplored. As such, there are few trainings and support systems available to sojourners experiencing this phase of their journey. Culture shock has been widely studied, but reentry shock is only just beginning to draw attention (Gaw, 1995; La Brack, 1985; Sussman, 2002; Thompson & Christofi, 2006). Reentry shock is the process of reassimilating and readjusting to the sojourner’s own culture, or home culture after living in a different culture for a period of time (Thompson & Christofi, 2006).

The reentry process seems to affect almost all who travel abroad, regardless of age, home culture, socioeconomic status, profession, or time in history (LaBrack,
Returnees, or those who have completed their sojourn, often report that the reentry process causes a considerable amount of anxiety. Gaw, 1995; LaBrack, 1985; Sussman, 2002; Thompson & Christofi, 2006; Walling et al., 2006). Many sojourners feel like they are stuck between two cultures, and they are unsure how to integrate both aspects of themselves into their new life (Hansel and Chen, 2008; Thompson & Christofi, 2006).

Studying abroad has many benefits for sojourners. After studying abroad, sojourners are more confident in themselves and more independent, and they have a unique skill set that will help them in their careers and social lives. Because a growing number of adolescents are embarking on sojourns, it is increasingly important to gain a clear insight into reentry shock and the most effective ways to support returnees as they navigate this process. The purpose of this study is to examine returnees’ experiences before, during, and after their time abroad. Specifically, it aims to determine what support sojourners returning to their home countries perceived as most useful in helping them deal with reentry shock.
CHAPTER TWO
LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

Today, more young people than ever are sojourning abroad in over 50 countries (AFS Intercultural Programs, 2008). These young people may be studying in universities or high schools, living with host families, working, or volunteering (AFS Intercultural Programs, 2008; Shank, 1961). Sojourners go abroad for a variety of reasons, including increasing their intercultural understanding, learning a language, and expanding their future job possibilities (Teichler & Steube, 1991). There are countless organizations and universities offering experiences abroad, ranging from a month to two years (United States United States Peace Corps, nd; Youth for Understanding USA, 2007). Many of organizations seek to promote understanding between cultures by sending young people to experience these cultures first hand (AFS Intercultural Programs, 2008; Rotary International, 2008; Youth for Understanding USA, 2007).

Spending time abroad does have an impact on sojourners’ lives after their time abroad. Typical sojourners are motivated and intelligent but vary little from their peers before departure (Gaw, 1995; Hansel & Chen, 2008). However, when they return from their time abroad, sojourners show marked improvements in their self confidence, abilities to handle stressful situations, and ease in interacting with others (Drews & Meyer, 1996; Gaw, 1995; Walling, et al, 2006).
Returned sojourners are also more open minded in dealing with people whose backgrounds and experiences differ from their own which makes them less likely to stereotype cultures and people (Drews & Meyer, 1996; H. Res. 122, 2005; 1990; S. Res. 28, 2005; Teichler & Steube, 1991).

Sojourners typically begin their journey when they are 15 to 20 years old (AFS Intercultural Programs, 2008; Rotary International, 2008; Youth for Understanding USA, 2007). This is a time filled with growth and identity formation; adolescents are deeply involved in the process of becoming independent adults (Inhelder & Piaget, 1958; Maier, 1969). During this time of personal questioning, sojourners also experience aspects of other cultures which may cause them to question and adjust their views of themselves and their world. As adolescents, sojourners are especially receptive to new ideas and points of view (Campbell, 1976; Inhelder & Piaget, 1958; Maier, 1969).

During their time abroad, sojourners experience highs and lows in their process of adjusting to their new culture (NAFSA, 2002; United States Peace Corps, nd). There are four generally accepted stages to this adjustment, and each stage builds on sojourners’ understanding of their host culture (NAFSA, 2002). At first, sojourners experience a sense of wonder and euphoria about their host culture; everything is wonderful, and the people are friendly (NAFSA, 2002; United States Peace Corps, nd). Gradually, sojourners become disillusioned with their host culture, the language, and the people (Church, 1982; United States Peace Corps, nd). After time, sojourners begin to accept their host culture and the aspects
of life they previously found difficult or confusing (Guanpia, 1998). Finally, sojourners begin to develop a meaningful understanding of their host culture and truly become a part of it (Church, 1982; NAFSA, 2002). Sojourners who reach this stage of cultural adjustment find that their worldviews have changed to reflect both those of their host culture and their home culture: they see themselves as bicultural (Guanipa, 1998).

When sojourners return to their home countries, they are often surprised to find that they experience a similar, yet unexpected readjustment process (Thompson & Christofí, 2006). This process is known as reentry shock, and it can range from mild adjustment to being home to a severe depression and dissatisfaction with sojourners’ home country and culture (LaBrack, 2003; Walling et al., 2006). This can be compounded by the fact that sojourners’ friends and families do not fully understand how sojourners have changed, and the sojourners themselves are often in the process of discovering these changes (Gaw, 1995; Thompson & Christofí, 2006).

Little research has been done on reentry shock, and there is no precise way to predict its severity for sojourners (LaBrack, 2003; Sussman, 2002). This literature review seeks to examine different dimensions of studying abroad. It explores the history of studying abroad, and the ways in which sojourners react to both their time abroad and their return home. It also investigates the psychosocial development of young people and its connection to their experience of the sojourn. It seeks to analyze the difficulties many sojourners have upon their return to their home countries.
History and Overview of Study Abroad Programs

People have traveled and experienced other cultures for thousands of years. Throughout time, humans have visited other cultural groups for trade, religious missions, and war. For many years, people viewed studying abroad as something done primarily while a person was attending university and for the sole purpose of gaining technical knowledge (Shank, 1961). Many people, including Thomas Jefferson, had negative views towards studying abroad. Jefferson wrote, “Let us view the disadvantages of sending a youth to Europe. To enumerate them all would require a volume… [the youth will] lose in his knowledge, his morals, his health, in his habits, and in his happiness” (Jefferson, 1829). This did not mean that university students refrained from spending time abroad; if students studied medicine or science, they would most likely spend time in Europe studying with experts (Shank, 1961).

Over time, however, the focus of studying abroad changed from acquiring knowledge to increasing cross cultural understanding (AFS Intercultural Programs, 2008; Youth for Understanding USA, 2007). The University of Delaware claims to have started the one of first university level study abroad program in 1923, with its first group studying in Paris (University of Delaware, 2008). At that time, the United States’ foreign policy and attitude were isolationist in nature (Nash, Jeffrey, Howe, Frederick, Davis, & Winkler, 2006). The United States was on the brink of involvement in several international conflicts, and citizens were reluctant to include the United States in international affairs (Nash et al., 2006). As a result of the
conflicts in the end of the 1800s and the beginning of the 1900s, people from other cultures were irrationally disliked and feared to the extent that in 1918 a mob who lynched a young German-American was acquitted on the grounds that their actions constituted “a patriotic murder” (Nash et al., p. 650).

A University of Delaware professor came back from World War I with the first hand knowledge of the results of disagreements between nations (University of Delaware, 2008). However, he had met and befriended several French people during his service and enjoyed the time he spent with them (Kochanek, 1998). Thus, he saw first hand the benefits of a program whose main goal was to promote cross cultural understanding. The program was a success, and since that time, many other universities and private organizations have started study abroad programs for adolescents and college students (Kochanek, 1998).

World War I was the impetus for the founding of another exchange program: American Field Service (AFS Intercultural Programs, 2008). AFS was founded by American and French ambulance drivers whose mission was to help wounded soldiers receive care in Paris hospitals (AFS Intercultural Programs, 2008). In 1919, AFS created AFS Fellowships which helped send university students both to and from France and the United States (AFS Intercultural Programs, 2008). During World War II the same group of ambulance drivers gained more support and saw more clearly the need for cultural understanding and service (AFS Intercultural Programs, 2008) When the war ended, over 250 volunteers pledged to continue their support of the AFS Fellowships (AFS Intercultural Programs, 2008). Japan and
Germany, some of the first countries involved in AFS’ study abroad programs, were considered by the United States to be enemy nations (AFS Intercultural Programs, 2008). By the early 1960s, AFS had high school exchange programs established with Japan, Germany, Czechoslovakia, England, France, Greece, the Netherlands, Norway, and Syria, and by 1964, AFS worked with over 60 countries (AFS Intercultural Programs, 2008). Since the 1960s, over 350,000 students and host families have participated in exchanges, and the volunteer network has grown to over 100,000 people (AFS Intercultural Programs, 2008).

In 1927, shortly after AFS began sending students abroad, Rotary, an international service organization, began facilitating exchanges between European students (Rotary International, 2008). Between 1939 and 1972, Rotary’s exchange program grew as they added the United States and Latin America (Rotary International, 2008). Currently, over 8,000 students a year participate in exchange programs through Rotary (Rotary International, 2008).

Since that time, the number of students choosing to study abroad and the programs sending these students have increased (AFS Intercultural Programs, 2008). The Youth for Understanding exchange program (YFU) began after World War II and was formed to start exchanges between the United States and Germany “in an effort to heal the wounds of World War II. [its founders hoped the youth would] break out of the cycle of bitterness, hopelessness, and despair” left over from the war (Youth for Understanding USA, 2007, ¶3) Just as AFS started small and grew, YFU found that their mission of spreading cultural understanding did not stop with a
small, temporary exchange program (Youth for Understanding USA, 2007). Since it started in 1951, YFU has grown to include programs in Europe, Asia, and South America (Youth for Understanding USA, 2007).

Programs targeting high school students were deemed to be especially crucial because their founders felt that students were still especially adaptable and malleable when placed in new situations, thus leading to a greater possibility for increased cultural understanding (AFS Intercultural Programs, 2008; Rotary International, 2008; Youth for Understanding USA, 2007). College and university exchange programs also experienced growth in the early part of the 20th century, and that growth continues today (Kochanek, 1998). A quick web search will reveal that most universities offer a study abroad program with the option of studying from one month to several years. While these programs are often focused on academics, universities still do focus on the cultural and life experiences exchanges can provide. Semester at Sea is one of the many study abroad experiences available to college students (Semester at Sea, 2008). Semester at Sea was founded in 1926 and allowed students participating in its program to spend seven and a half months at sea, learning not only about their traditional materials but also about the cultures they experienced while in their ports of call (Semester at Sea, 2008).

Study abroad programs aimed at college students and at high school students share the same basic goals. These goals include providing young people with opportunities to experience cultures other than their own, deepening participants’ understanding of their own culture, developing leadership skills, and bringing about
peace through understanding (AFS Intercultural Programs, 2008; Rotary International, 2008; Youth for Understanding USA, 2007). Founders of study abroad programs felt that students in college would be especially valuable participants in their programs because these students were still adaptable when placed in new situations (AFS Intercultural Programs, 2008; Rotary International, 2008; Youth for Understanding USA, 2007).

Beginning in the 1950s, United States politicians and leaders showed an interest in sending young people abroad for intercultural exchanges, summarized in the quote from President Eisenhower: “I have long believed, as have many before me, that peaceful relations between nations requires understanding and mutual respect between individuals” (People to People International, 2008). President Eisenhower established People to People in 1956 with the goal of sending individuals abroad to enhance understanding of cultures, ideas, and people (People to People International, 2008). President Kennedy expanded on President Eisenhower’s idea when he established the United States Peace Corps in 1960 (United States Peace Corps, 2008). The United States Peace Corps’ goal was not only to provide aid to developing countries but also to provide young Americans with the opportunity to expand their horizons by living in another country for two years (United States Peace Corps, 2008).

Since then, the number of students who study abroad has increased dramatically (Institute of International Education, 2006). Almost 240,000 students spent time studying abroad during 2007, and the number of students increased by
almost 10% every year (Institute of International Education, 2006). Students are spending time in countries all over the world, with an increasing number choosing to spend time in developing countries (Institute of International Education, 2006). These students come from a variety of backgrounds and socioeconomic statuses but share common traits and goals (Institute of International Education, 2006).

Reasons students choose to study abroad.

Students who study abroad are typically open to new ideas and motivated to succeed (AFS Intercultural Programs, 2009; Hansel, 2005; Hansel & Chen, 2008; Rotary International, 2008; Youth for Understanding USA, 2007). While some students have had previous travel experiences, many may have had very limited travel experience in their lives, and studying abroad gives them the opportunity to experience other cultures for the first time in their lives (Teichler & Steube, 1991). Curious, motivated students share the goals of increasing cross cultural understanding as a result of their exchange, as well as the goals of increasing language ability, expanding job skills, and enjoying the experience of living abroad (AFS Intercultural Programs, 2008; Rotary International, 2008; Teichler & Steube, 1991; Youth for Understanding USA, 2007)

Students who study abroad often do so for academic reasons (Teichler & Steube, 1991). For students who come from the United States, one of the main benefits of studying abroad is learning another language; three times as many students from the United States than students from Europe list this as their top academic goal (Teichler & Steube, 1991). Generally, those who study abroad expect
that the experience will increase their future career opportunities (Teichler & Steube, 1991). This expectation is generally well founded: culturally literate young people who speak a foreign language have increased job opportunities when they graduate from college (Marcos, 1998; U.S. Department of Defense, 2005). Other goals for a study abroad experience include expanded social and cultural horizons and travel experiences (Teichler & Steube, 1991).

Benefits of studying abroad.

Students who study abroad generally achieve the goals and objectives they set out to achieve, as well as make important changes which impact their future (Hansel & Chen, 2008). Studying abroad is self-reported to be one of the most worthwhile, formative experiences in most sojourners’ lives (NAFSA, 2002; Shank, 1961). Sojourners, educators, and parents agree that there are many benefits to studying abroad, both academically and socially (Bellamy & Weinberg, 2006; Hadis, 2005).

Returnees have higher levels of autonomy and a better sense of self than their counterparts who remained at home (Gaw, 1995; Hansel & Chen, 2008). This sense of self efficacy results in increased flexibility, achievement, and independence than their counterparts who stayed at home (Gaw, 1995). They report a higher sense of self-efficacy (Gaw, 1995; Hansel & Chen, 2008). Students who study abroad learn to rely upon themselves in new and different ways through facing their own anxieties and limitations (Hansel & Chen, 2008).
Returnees report that their time abroad challenged them to evaluate their social behavior in different situations (Walling et al., 2006). Prior to departure, most sojourners are much the same as their peers in terms of their anxiety level about meeting people from other cultures or being in unfamiliar situations (Gaw, 1995). However upon return, sojourners report being more comfortable around new people and experiences than their peers (Gaw, 1995). They experience lower levels of anxiety, irritation, or nervousness when they are confronted with a new culture or idea (Gaw, 1995). Because of this, returnees are more likely to be open to trying new and difficult things later in life, and their tolerance for frustrations, differences of opinions, and uncertainty are markedly increased in comparison to their non sojourning peers (Hansel & Chen, 2008). When sojourners are compared with the same group of peers 20 to 25 years after their travels, the differences are still strong (Hansel & Chen, 2008).

Sojourners become more aware of their role in a global society (Bellany & Weinberg, 2006). Studying abroad allows students to learn intercultural skills, as well as learn to see the world from another point of view; students begin to find commonalities between their culture and their host culture (Bellany & Weinberg; 2006, Hopkins, 1999). While non-sojourners often think of the world in black and white terms, returnees are more likely to think of other nationalities in terms of individuals rather than in terms of a generalized group identity (food, events, geography), which suggests that one important effect of study abroad is a more personalized, in depth view of other cultures (Drews & Meyer, 1996; Teichler &
Steube, 1991). These more complex viewpoints make stereotyping of other cultures less likely (H. Res. 122, 2005; S. Res. 28, 2005) and imply the kind of cognitive complexity associated with better decision-making in some settings (Drews & Meyer, 1996).

Returnees speak more languages than their peers (Hansel and Chen, 2008; Nash, 1976), and this is one reason for their enhanced career opportunities upon return to their home country (Teichler & Steube, 1991). Studying abroad leads sojourners to think about careers involving travel, language, and service, as their social networks are more international than their counterparts (Hansel, 2005; Hansel & Chen, 2008). In fact, returnees are more likely to value working and living with people of other cultures. Almost twice as many returnees lived or worked abroad for at least one year after high school than their peers did (Hansel & Chen, 2008).

Studying abroad often occurs at a formative time in sojourners’ development, and as such it often changes the course of their lives (Hansel & Chen, 2008). The most common time to study abroad is between the ages of 15 and 20 years old (AFS Intercultural Programs, 2008; Rotary International, 2008; Youth for Understanding USA, 2007). During this time in their lives, young people are involved in developing autonomy and clarifying their own values and worldview (Gaw, 1995; Hansel, 2005; Inhelder & Piaget, 1958; Maier, 1969; Thompson & Christofi, 2006; Walling et al., 2006).
Adolescent Psychosocial Development

Most sojourners begin their time abroad during adolescence (AFS Intercultural Programs, 2008; Rotary International, 2008; Youth for Understanding USA, 2007). The theories of developmental psychologists such as Jean Piaget (Inhelder & Piaget, 1958) and Erik Erikson (1968) illustrate what various study abroad programs have noted: adolescence is a time of profound change and development in humans, and living abroad at this time will result in changes in an adolescents’ worldview (AFS Intercultural Programs, 2008; Inhelder & Piaget, 1958; Maier, 1969; Rotary International, 2008; Youth for Understanding USA, 2007).

Prior to adolescence, young children’s worlds are occupied primarily with concrete, observable experiences (Campbell, 1976; Inhelder & Piaget, 1958; Maier, 1969; Piaget, 1977). As children mature into adolescence, their thinking becomes more sophisticated, and they are able to view the world around them from many different points of view (Inhelder & Piaget, 1958). They are able to think deeply about social issues, to think abstractly, and to wonder about their place in life (Maier, 1969). The transition between their childhood roles into their adult roles in society fuels adolescents’ search to find their role in life and in society. Piaget (Inhelder & Piaget, 1958) views adolescence as a transition between childhood and adolescence, and he claims that adolescents are in as a state of disequilibrium while their worldviews change and expand. This sense of disequilibrium results in adolescents viewing the world and their role in the world in vastly more complex ways (Inhelder & Piaget, 1958).
It is often challenging for people to have to change the way they are accustomed to looking at the world. Both Piaget (1977) and Erickson (Maier, 1969) believe that this challenge is the basis for the challenges and subsequent growth during adolescence. While not all new experiences cause disequilibrium, those that do usually cause growth once adolescents devise a way to fit their new knowledge into their already existing schemes (Piaget, 1977). Disequilibrium, and the resulting new equilibrium, is “an indispensible process in the development” of humans (Piaget, 1977, p. 17).

Adolescents are in the unique position of existing between the worlds of adulthood and childhood (Maier, 1969). They are in the process of taking what they have learned and observed in childhood and either accepting or rejecting that information as they go about forming their own unique identity (Maier, 1969). Adolescents begin to make adult decisions about their lifestyle, beliefs, habits, and career (Maier, 1969). Rather than simply accepting what they learn at face value, adolescents begin to question new information and examine it through various political, religious, or philosophical lenses (Campbell, 1976).

A large part of identity formation for adolescents is experimentation with different identities; adolescence is a time for young people to safely experiment with social or ideological groups in their search for one cohesive self image (Maier, 1969). This experimentation is often viewed as extreme by adults, but it is critical for growth. In fact, Erickson (1968) argued that the search for identity is the most important task in an adolescent’s development. James Marcia proposed that identity
can only be formed through examining many, meaningful identity choices and then committing to one, specific identity (Santrock, 2008). The extent of the exploration adolescents engage in will, in large part, determine how satisfied they will be with their eventual adult identity (Marcia, 1980).

Adolescents’ quest to establish an adult identity begins at a time when they are incredibly idealistic and open to new ideas (Campbell, 1976; Inhelder & Piaget, 1958; Maier, 1969). They become interested in the idea of utopias or forming the best possible version of something, and they are able to consider many possibilities to achieve that goal (Maier, 1969; Woolfolk, 2008). Concepts such social justice, intellectual courage, and morality play a large role in many adolescents’ decision making processes (Maier, 1969). Adolescents’ morality and idealism lead them to consider identities or join groups which will help them change society in a positive way (Campbell, 1976; Maier, 1969). This heightened awareness of ideals and possibilities leads adolescents though “a phase in which [they attribute] an unlimited power to [their] own thoughts so that the dream of a glorious future or of transforming the world through ideas…seems to be not only fantasy but also an effective action which in itself modifies the empirical world” (Campbell, 1976, p. 67).

As they experiment with new identities and ideals, the role of their family changes in adolescents’ lives. Whereas young children look to their parents for acceptance and validation, adolescents begin to look outside their immediate circle of adults and role models for this acceptance (Maier, 1969). Peer and social groups
become increasingly powerful influences on behavior and beliefs as adolescents search for an identity with which they are comfortable (Maier, 1969). While interacting with these different peer groups and experimenting with different roles, adolescents are in the process of discovering for themselves which ones stand up, which are approved by social groups, and which are not working for them (Campbell, 1976; Maier, 1969).

Developing an identity is not a process that begins and ends during adolescence; it is a lifelong task filled with many challenges (Read, Fordham, & Adler, 1954). However, adolescence is an extremely critical period; adults with well developed sense of their own identity have good senses of their strengths, weaknesses, and unique talents because they have had the opportunity to test them (Learning Theories, 2008). The act of exploring, learning, and achieving goals sets the stage for future successes and development in the life of an adolescent (Maier, 1969). Jung said, “The achievement of personality means nothing less than the optimum development of the whole individual human being. It is impossible to foresee the endless variety of conditions that have to be fulfilled. A whole lifetime, in all its biological, social, and spiritual aspects is needed...” (Read, Fordham, & Adler, 1954, p. 171).

Jean Piaget, Erik Erikson, and James Marcia all proposed that the greatest development in adolescence occurs when there is an opportunity for them to challenge their views and test their identities. Piaget (1958) refers to this crisis as disequilibrium, while Erickson and Marcia refer to it as a conflict (Maier, 1969;
Adolescents form their identities through learning about, testing, and finally evaluating new ideas.

Sojourners are constantly faced with new ideas which shake their assumed values. At times, simply acknowledging that there are differences or previously unconsidered possibilities is enough to cause disequilibrium (Piaget, 1977). When met with these ideas and experiences, sojourners have the opportunity to reevaluate and test their beliefs, and strengthen or change their identity (Learning Theories, 2008). As adolescents, sojourners are fully immersed in the process of identity formation. They are more open than adults would be to taking on new identities during their time abroad, and these identities may be at odds with the values and expectations of their home country.

**In-Country Experience**

Studying abroad is a challenging time in sojourners’ lives. All sojourners have unique experiences, but there is a general path these experiences take. Organizations and psychologists who work with sojourners notice that there is a common path these experiences follow, and they call this path cultural adjustment or culture shock (NAFSA, 2002).

Before sojourners leave for their time abroad, they are often filled with anxiety (InterExchange, 2008). The pre-departure phase of the sojourn can be stressful (InterExchange, 2008)). The sojourners who are leaving are busy with the last minute preparations to leave their home country (InterExchange, 2008). They must pack, say goodbye to their natural family and friends, and attempt to anticipate
what the months ahead will bring (AFS Intercultural Programs, 2007; InterExchange, Inc., 2008). One sojourner said, “Now…with one month to my departure, the actual finality of what I am doing is crashing down upon me. I’m beginning to realize all I’m leaving behind and all the small things of home that I will miss” (Kurtimis, July 2008, ¶2).

Once sojourners arrive in their host country, they experience what is known as the honeymoon phase of cultural adjustment (NAFSA, 2002). During this time, sojourners view everything in the host culture as new and different. Sojourners going in to a new culture may be expecting their lives to be dramatically different, and they are generally in awe of these differences (United States Peace Corps, nd). The sojourners even view difficulties as novel and exciting. One exchange student described the first weeks in this way: “When we arrived, I was simply amazed. It was sooo German with Faukwerk houses, cobble stone roads, and for course a huge church, oh and a castle. Those two weeks were so amazingly fun, besides the classes…” (Kurtimus, September 2008, ¶4). Little is expected of sojourners during this time in their host country, and they are free to take in the new experiences (United States Peace Corps, nd).

As sojourners gain a broader base of experience with their host culture, they begin to look at it with a more realistic view. They begin to compare the two cultures and see how they differ which can cause them to feel uncomfortable with the host culture (NAFSA, 2008; United States Peace Corps, nd). Typically, sojourners see differences in four main aspects of life: how the host culture views
individuals, how individuals relate to society in general, how the culture views time, and how the culture thinks about its locus of control (whether events can be controlled by people’s actions, or whether fate has more to do with them) (United States Peace Corps, nd). Someone coming from an individualistic culture such as the United States might have a hard time adjusting to the fact that in many Asian cultures, the self is seen as a function of a role in a group (United States Peace Corps, nd).

At this point in their journey, many sojourners realize that their language abilities are insufficient which can lead to feelings of inadequacy and dependence on others (United States Peace Corps, nd). The language differences can also result in misunderstandings and confusion (Church, 1982; United States Peace Corps, nd). Even when language is not an issue for sojourners, the general cultural confusion and isolation can lead to feelings of alienation, depression, and homesickness (NAFSA, 2008; United States Peace Corps, nd). A sojourner from Germany who lived in the United States recalled her experiences during the Christmas holidays, stating:

People in America don’t really celebrate Christmas Eve. I had imagined it differently. The day after seems to be more important. I was so frustrated today! Charles, Gloria [her host family] and I went to a coffee shop where they didn’t even play Christmas music and we spent the time like always. In Germany, everybody goes to church and sings Christmas songs today. I couldn’t even call my parents from the coffee shop. When I was in the bathroom there, I cried. (Wolff, 2008, ¶8).
The differences sojourners experience do not have to be as major as spending a traditionally family oriented holiday alone; many sojourners in this phase of culture shock are critical of their host culture’s diet, hygiene, or climate (United States Peace Corps, nd). A United States Peace Corps volunteer said, “There comes a day when all this suddenly becomes apparent, all at once. Things are no longer picturesque; they are dirty. No longer quaint but furiously frustrating. And you want like crazy to just get out of there, to go home” (United States Peace Corps, nd, p. 203). However, sojourners who continue with their experience in the host culture often find new ways to look at their situation.

Gradually, sojourners change their negative outlook on their host culture and develop and interest in and sensitivity to it (NAFSA, 2002). Sojourners develop a sense of humor and are able to joke about new experiences and difficulties (Guanpia, 1998). They are better able to accomplish everyday tasks without stress and anxiety (United States Peace Corps, nd; Wolff, 2008). Social blunders which once would have been painful begin to be seen by sojourners as necessary for learning: “expect to feel embarrassed, foolish, and sometimes inadequate. It’s all part of the experience. These trying times are what we eloquently call ‘adjustment.’ They’re difficult, natural, and useful” (United States Peace Corps, nd, p. 198). Sojourners realize that they have learned to accept or work with the differences and oddities with which they were once uncomfortable or did not understand have become part of their everyday lives (AFS Intercultural Programs, 2007; United States Peace Corps, nd). One sojourner recalled,
Suddenly, the customs and interests I questioned or even joked about while still being a newcomer, became a part of my everyday life. It sneaks in on you. I recall how the local *banda* music my Mexican brothers were so fond of felt like physical torture the first few times I heard it. (AFS Intercultural Programs, 2007, p. 4).

Sojourners’ language abilities increase and they become involved in their host country’s daily life, whether this is through school, host family, a job, or a community organization (United States Peace Corps, nd). This involvement is crucial for successful adjustment and further process on the culture shock continuum. Sojourners begin to feel that they have an actual role in their culture, and they learn to pick up on cultural clues (NAFSA, 2002). When they are able to reconcile the host culture’s differences and difficulties with their expectations and experiences, sojourners are able to progress to an appreciation of the culture and its people, and they begin to see themselves as a part of their host culture (Church, 1982; NAFSA, 2002).

Towards the end of their stay in the host culture, sojourners begin to gain a meaningful understanding of the culture (Church, 1982; NAFSA, 2002). They realize that the challenges of reconciling the differences between home and host cultures is what makes them better able to understand themselves and the host culture (AFS Intercultural Programs, 2007; United States Peace Corps, nd). Sojourners stop viewing the host culture through their home culture’s eyes and begin viewing the host culture and people for what they are: not better or worse, just
different (NAFSA, 2008). By the end of their stay in the host culture, many sojourners realize that despite myriad differences between their home and host cultures, people around the world are fundamentally similar (AFS Intercultural Programs, 2007). The sojourners begin to make the transition between the two cultures’ value systems and ideals, and they begin to realize that both their home and host culture have good and bad aspects (Guanipa, 1998; InterExchange, 2008). When sojourners reach this point in their cultural adjustment, they begin to become bicultural, as they define themselves in light of two or more cultures (Guanipa, 1998).

As sojourners begin to make deep connections to their host culture, they become more attached to it. Sojourners begin to feel like they are a part of their host culture and that they have formed an identity in that culture (Church, 1982; AFS Intercultural Programs, 2007; AFS Intercultural Programs, 2007; Thompson & Christofi, 2006). Some sojourners take on the host culture’s identity so fully that they have a difficult time finding their way back to their home culture (Hansel, 2008). When it comes time to return to their home culture, sojourners often feel like they are leaving a new home culture, and the reentry process is a challenging one (Gaw, 1995; Thompson & Christofi, 2006). They often wonder how they can return home when they have gone through such monumental changes while they were abroad (Hansel, 2008).
Return Home

Studying abroad is a positive experience for most sojourners, and it helps them to grow into competent global citizens (Hansel & Chen, 2008; Nash, 1976; Teichler & Steube, 1999). However, there is one important aspect of the study abroad experience which is relatively unexplored. Culture shock has been widely studied, but reentry shock is only just beginning to draw attention (Gaw, 1995; La Brack, 1985; Sussman, 2002; Thompson & Christofi, 2006). This may be because those who remain in their home culture, wherever it may be, underestimate the difficulty of coming home after time abroad (Thompson & Christofi, 2006). When soldiers returned home from World War II in 1943, researchers in the United States began to identify return culture shock as a valid issue worthy of study (Gaw, 1995). However, the research about reentry shock is limited (Gaw, 1995; La Brack, 1985; Sussman, 2002; Thompson & Christofi, 2006).

Reentry shock is the process of reassimilating and readjusting to the sojourner’s own culture after living in a different culture for a period of time (Thompson & Christofi, 2006). The term reentry shock comes from the early days of the space program when a ship’s speeding reentry into the earth’s atmosphere caused its disintegration (Sussman, 2002). While returnees do not often disintegrate, their reentry process frequently causes them a considerable amount of anxiety (Gaw, 1995; La Brack, 1985; Sussman, 2002; Thompson & Christofi, 2006; Walling et al., 2006). Reentry shock seems to affect almost all who travel abroad, regardless of age, home culture, socioeconomic status, profession, or time in history (La Brack,
This is not to say that all people who travel and live abroad are affected in the same way or to the same degree: some sojourners experience reentry shock for a week, some for months, and others for years (Gaw, 1995).

Upon reentry to their home cultures, many sojourners feel like they are without a country or that they are stuck between two cultures. They are no longer a part of their host culture and may feel nostalgic for that culture (Gaw, 1995; Hansel, 2008). Sojourners have changed and do not feel comfortable in their home culture; they are unsure how to integrate both aspects of themselves into their new life (Hansel, 2008; Thompson & Christofi, 2006). Returnees report new vocabulary, new cadences, new accents in their home languages, new ways of greeting friends and family members, and new facial expressions or hand gestures (Hansel, 2005). One said, “I hardly recognize myself! I realize that I am a different person, grown up, more mature” (Hansel, 2005, p. 42).

The unexpected nature of reentry shock.

The main difference between culture shock and reentry shock is the expectation of the sojourners and their families (Gaw, 1995; LaBrack, 2003). All parties involved expect sojourners to return to an unchanged home as unchanged individuals (LaBrack, 2003). It is difficult for sojourners and their families to accept that returnees have a difficult time simply picking up where they left off (Seiter & Waddell, 1989). Many sojourners report that reentry shock is more difficult to deal with than their initial culture shock in the host culture (Gaw, 1995; Thompson & Christofi, 2006; Walling et al., 2006). They were prepared for the differences they
would experience in a new culture but not the difficulties they would find in readapting to their own culture (Gaw, 1995; Thompson & Christofi, 2006). After all, home is not a new culture. Sojourners are often shocked to see their home through a cultural lens tinted with their experiences in the host culture (Gaw, 1995; Thompson & Christofi, 2006). One sojourner said, “I was looking forward to coming [back]…but the adjustment takes a lot out of you” (Thompson & Christofi, 2006, p. 31). The difficulty of reentry is often surprising to those who anticipate happy reunions with family and friends and the ease and comfort of being at home again where everything is familiar (LaBrack, 2003; Walling et al., 2006).

Sojourners’ behaviors may be viewed as strange or abnormal by members of the home culture who do not understand why the sojourners are having difficulties adjusting to their home culture (La Brack, 1985). They often find that the values and beliefs they came to accept while in the host culture are at odds with those of their home culture (Seiter & Waddell, 1989). Unlike going to a new country where family and friends expect sojourners to take time adjusting, returnees are likely to feel pressure to conform quickly to their home culture. Returnees may be more irritable, feel lonely or depressed, and report strong desires to return to the host culture (LaBrack, 2003). The conflicting viewpoints sojourners experience upon arrival coupled with the strong sense of host culture identity can lead to a sense of dissatisfaction with the sojourner’s home culture (Walling, et al., 2006).

A feeling of anger and dissatisfaction towards the sojourners’ home culture is common upon return, and returnees may find themselves withdrawing from their
friends and families (LaBrack, 2003; Walling, et al., 2006). This feeling of dissatisfaction with the home culture is reported more highly in students who spent time abroad than in their counterparts who stayed home (Thompson & Christofi, 2006). College students from the United States who spend time abroad and come to value their host culture’s lifestyle may return to their home country and view it as too materialistic, fast paced, and closed (Walling et al., 2006). This sense of dissatisfaction may lead to feelings of anger and frustration in returnees as they are “forced to grapple with the realization that they and those they love are part of a culture they feel negatively about” (Walling et al., 2006. p. 161).

While it is true that reentry shock affects almost all sojourners, it is also true that it affects each individual differently. There is no precise formula for determining the depth of reentry shock a sojourner will experience, but there are a few variables which impact sojourners’ readjustment to their home culture, most based on connections to the home and host culture (La Brack, 2003; Sussman, 2002). When sojourners experienced an intense bond with the host culture and community, it was much harder for them to reassimilate into their home culture (La Brack, 2003; Sussman, 2002). The less sojourners felt that their home culture defined them, the higher their distress level would be in relationship to reentry shock (Sussman, 2002). Conversely, if sojourners felt that the experience abroad turned them into a global citizen, and if they accepted their new citizenship, the reassimilation process was much less traumatic and often viewed as positive (Sussman, 2002).
Sojourners typically fall into one of four categories when dealing with reentry shock (Thompson & Christofi, 2006). Each of these categories represents a way in which sojourners attempt to make sense of their time abroad and subsequent arrival into their home culture. Returnees fall into a continuum of behaviors and attitudes which can make their adjustment process successful or difficult (Thompson & Christofi, 2006). Returnees can be either optimistic or pessimistic and active or passive (Thompson & Christofi, 2006). The way in which returnees deal with reentry shock will affect the way they view their experience abroad in the future (Seiter & Waddell, 1989; Thompson & Christofi, 2006; ). When discussing the experiences of a student who had a successful year abroad, AFS researchers noted , “Jennifer’s struggles with accepting her own culture…may ultimately lead her to an even more advanced place, but AFS might have been able to do more to help her with the specific [reentry] issues she faced” (Hansel, 2005, p. 23).

If returnees are optimistic and active, they are able to make something positive out of their difficulties (Thompson & Christofi, 2006). People who react to reentry shock in this style are able to see the uniqueness of being multicultural and bilingual (Thompson & Christofi, 2006). They strive to use their new cross cultural skills to their advantage and are excited about learning and using new ideas. Returnees can also be optimistic and passive when dealing with their reentry shock (Thompson & Christofi, 2006). They still view the reentry process as positive but do not work as hard to make the most of their experience (Thompson & Christofi, 2006). Passive returnees tend to let reentry shock happen to them, and then they
come to terms with the changes; they typically experience adjustment passively rather than actively changing their lives as a result of the experience (Thompson & Christofi, 2006). When returnees are passive and feel that they have little to no control over their situations, their reentry will be more painful (LaBrack, 2003).

Some returnees deal with their reentry shock negatively, and this makes reentry more difficult (Thompson & Christofi, 2006). Sojourners who react to their reentry in a pessimistic, passive manner tend to feel alienated upon their return and seek external validation for their experiences abroad (Thompson & Christofi, 2006). Returnees can also react to their experiences in a pessimistic, active way (Thompson & Christofi, 2006). This means that returnees rebel against their home culture and act aggressively towards it.

Returnees reported that the more prepared they felt to return to their home culture, the less likely they were to have negative experiences during the reentry process (Sussman, 2002). Pre-departure orientations in the form of orientations for sojourners while they are still in their host cultures are helpful to sojourners (Thompson & Christofi, 2006). Orientations and workshops both before leaving the host country and after returning to the home country provide opportunities for sojourners and returnees to share expectations of the reentry experience (Thompson & Christofi, 2006). They also provide opportunities for returnees to create social networks for support once they are in their home countries (Thompson & Christofi, 2006).
Conclusion

Studying abroad has many benefits for sojourners. After studying abroad, sojourners are more confident in themselves and more independent, and they have a unique skill set that will help them in their careers and social lives. However, the reentry process is difficult for the majority of sojourners, regardless of age or nationality. Because little is known about how to support returnees in the process of reentry once they are in their home cultures, more research on easing this process would be helpful. The experiences sojourners have while they are abroad are fundamental in shaping their goals and actions as an adult. Therefore, it is critical to give sojourners support in understanding the changes they are experiencing. To that end, the focus of this thesis is to answer the question: What types of support would exchange students perceive as helpful in assisting them to deal with reentry shock upon their return to their home country?
CHAPTER THREE
METHODOLOGY

Introduction

The process of living abroad then returning to the home culture can be difficult for many sojourners and may have far reaching consequences on their lives. This chapter outlines the development of an online, mixed methods questionnaire used to determine how sojourners felt about their time abroad and what support they received while in their host country, as well as their experiences readjusting to life in their home culture. Next it describes the participants in the study and how they were recruited. Finally, this chapter explains how the results were organized and analyzed.

Development of Research Instrument

Based on my research question and culture shock and reentry shock themes from a review of the literature, I compiled an online questionnaire to seek answers to questions about sojourners’ experiences abroad, the support they received both at home and abroad, and their experiences readjusting to their home culture. In order to gain a more accurate perception of sojourner experiences, I wanted to talk to returnees from all over the world. This led me to post the questionnaire online, rather than conduct face to face interviews.

Initially, I opened participation to returnees of all ages. However, because this would potentially involve working with minors, I limited the age of the respondents to 18 years of age or older. When formatting the questionnaire, I used a
combination of Likert scales, yes or no questions, and open ended responses. If a question called for an open ended response, participants had unlimited space to write their answers. Questions on the survey covered aspects of participants’ experiences abroad from before their departure until after their return to their home country. In this study, the research question and questionnaire items provided the starting point for identifying the following themes: participants’ overall view of their experience, support received before departing for their host country, support received while they were abroad, support received before departing for their home country, support received upon arrival in their home country, and their reactions to their reentry. (See Appendix A for the content of the questionnaire.)

After finalizing the questionnaire, I created an account on SurveyMonkey and input my questionnaire into their online survey creation program. After attempting to take the survey, two participants informed me that there was a problem with the Likert scale portion. There were many questions in one section, and I chose the option that participants could only choose each response (agree, disagree, etc.) one time for the entire set of questions. Thus, a person could only strongly agree with something one time, regardless of their actual opinion for other questions. This was also problematic because respondents were unable to respond to all the questions in the section. I went back to the SurveyMonkey program to fix the error. I changed the response option and let those who were concerned know via email. I offered these people the chance to redo the survey.
Three weeks after sending out the initial request for participants, I sent out a reminder email asking people to participate in the survey and send it on to returnees they knew. This generated 2 new responses.

Over the course of five weeks, 35 people responded to the survey. I had to disregard one participant’s response because he was not 18 years old at the time he took the survey. For various reasons, several participants did not respond to the open ended questions on the survey.

Participants

During the course of a month, 34 volunteer adult returnees completed an online questionnaire. I published a link to this questionnaire on websites with groups for returnees. These websites included Facebook and MySpace. Staff of the local AFS Chapter forwarded the survey on to several returnees with whom they are in contact. I also used the snowball method to recruit participants by asking several adult returnees to complete the questionnaire and pass the link on to other adult returnees they knew who would be interested in participating in this study.

Participants I contacted directly were returnees who lived with my family, friends who participated in sojourns during high school, and returnees with whom who I have worked as a mentor.

After respondents completed the questionnaire and clicked on the submit button, the results were saved in the SurveyMonkey database. I did not meet with any of the respondents in person for this study, nor did I contact them via telephone.
If participants had questions about the survey, they emailed me, and we resolved the problem through email.

Participants were fully informed of the purpose and voluntary nature of the study. They were able to look at the questionnaire before completing it, and they did not have to answer any questions they did not wish to answer. Participants provided their consent by reading the research study overview and informed consent page on the website, as they were informed that the completion and submission of their responses constituted giving their informed consent to participate in this study. I let participants know that all responses were confidential in that I collected no identifying information about them.

Personal benefits for participation included the opportunity to share their experiences from their time abroad. Information participants provided could also have the potential to influence the support future sojourners receive upon reentry to their home culture. There were no foreseeable risks to participating in this survey, and participants were aware that they could end their participation at any time, should they choose to do so. I was interested in participants’ experiences and their perceptions; therefore, there were no right or wrong answers.

Procedure

Before reading and coding the responses, I assessed my potential biases. I am a returnee with personal experiences of culture shock and reentry shock. This meant that I had expectations of the sojourners’ experiences beyond those I learned
about while reviewing the literature. In order to address these biases, I created a survey for participants. The survey ensured that I would not read anything in to participants’ responses.

After five weeks, I received 35 questionnaires and closed my survey. I printed the surveys and organized them into two sections; one organized by respondent and one organized by survey sections and questions. The first section consisted of completed surveys which were left intact. The second section consisted of surveys which were disaggregated in order to organize them by response to each section. This resulted in subsections about sojourners’ experiences before departure, upon arrival, during the sojourn, before leaving for their home country, and after their arrival to their home country. To interpret the data, I reviewed each questionnaire for themes and patterns. Thematic results were apparent in each section of the survey as respondents discussed their experiences.

Narrative and quantitative data were sorted into various themes based on the survey questions. By comparing the data across participants, I found that core ideas emerged which captured participants’ perspectives about their experiences before, during, and after their sojourn.

Core ideas in the themes emerged into broader categories for further analysis: participants’ satisfaction with their support and their perceptions of the support’s effectiveness in helping them navigate their reentry into their home cultures. These categories were responses to the major theme of the study: What types of support do
sojourners perceive as being most helpful to their readjustment into their home cultures?
CHAPTER FOUR

RESULTS

Introduction

This chapter provides an overview of participant demographics as well as a description of participants’ responses to each of the following topics: support received before departing for their host country, while they were abroad, before departing for their home country, and upon arrival in their home country as well as their reactions to reentry to their home country. Because this survey was completed on-line, participants were more likely to use informal language and make spelling and grammar errors. For some participants, English was their second language which also resulted in grammatical and spelling errors. I decided to fix all such errors in a manner consistent with the intended meaning of the participants so that the errors did not detract from the readers’ comprehension and reading fluency.

Participant Demographics

Thirty five adults from ages 18 to 63 years old participated in this survey, with a mean age of 31 years old. It appears that this sample had a wide variety of ages, nationalities, and motivations for sojourning.

Seventy percent of participants identified their home country as the United States, 6% identified their home country as Brazil, and the rest of the participants were from Austria, Cambodia, France, Germany, Indonesia, Italy, and Spain. Three percent of participants did not specify a country of origin. Participants sojourned to
a variety of countries, and some participants listed more than one sojourn. Twenty
one percent sojourned to the United States, 17% in France, 6% in the Netherlands,
6% in Bulgaria, and 3% of participants went to each of the following countries:
Australia, Brazil, Canada, China, Czech Republic, Ecuador, Germany, Greece,
Hungary, Iceland, New Zealand, Norway, Switzerland, Taiwan, The Netherlands,
and the United Kingdom. Two participants did not specify where they took their
sojourn.

Participants reflected on their experiences of sojourns from 1964 to 2009,
with the majority reflecting on sojourns completed from 2000 to 2009. Six percent
of participants reported going on their sojourn between the ages of 15 and 17; 33%
of participants went on their sojourn between the ages of 17 and 18; 15% of
participants went while they were 18 to 19 years old, and 30% of participants were
20 years old or older at the time of their sojourn.

During their sojourn, 68% of participants lived with host families, 12% lived
in dormitories, and the remainder had other housing arrangements. Eighty five
percent of participants attended school while on their sojourn, 33% at the university
level and 53% in high school. Thirty-three percent of the participants worked during
their time abroad. Over 90% of participants reported making friends easily and
adapting well to their host culture.
Themes Revealed in the Data

The data in the following section are divided into generalized themes of support and training received by participants at different points in their sojourn: support received before departing for their host country, while they were abroad (both on arrival and during their stay in the host country), before departing for their home country, and upon arrival in their home country, as well as participants’ reactions to reentry into their home country.

Pre-departure support.

The survey included a section for participants to reflect on support they received before departing to their host countries: “Did you receive training or support before you left for your time abroad?” Participants could choose yes or no, and then elaborate on their answer in a text box. This section offers an overview of participants’ pre-departure training and support. Seventy-seven percent of participants responded to this question.

Of those, 82% of the participants reported receiving some sort of training before they departed for their host country, and 18% of the participants reported receiving no support before leaving for their host country. Of those who did not receive support or training before departure, 60% would have liked to receive training. Most participants reported positive experiences when talking about the training they received before departing. While participants often reported that “some [of the information received in pre departure training] was helpful and some was
not,” 14% reported that their training was completely unhelpful. Participants’ training fell into three broad categories: linguistic, cultural understanding, and culture shock awareness.

Fourteen percent of participants reported receiving linguistic training of varying intensities. A participant who sojourned in Ecuador had “ten weeks of language…training,” while a participant who went to France reported taking “French classes for five years before going abroad.” Presumably, these classes were not a part of training received from her program and were completed on her own.

Nine percent of participants received training related to understanding culture shock. A participant from Brazil said that the majority of her training consisted of learning about “exchange students’ lives and problems.” Other participants reported learning about culture shock and ways to deal with it.

Sixty-eight percent of participants reported that they received training about their host country’s culture. Some cultural trainings were brief, such as that of a sojourner to Germany who reported that “the teacher told us what to expect and a few rules and customs.” A sojourner to Australia reported that her group “watched videos and learned about Australia.” Other sojourners reported receiving “one afternoon covering respect of local cultures,” general “cultural training,” or “a few question and answer sessions.”

Trainings for other participants were more in depth, and these participants reported their trainings as being helpful. A participant from France reported
receiving “a weekend to check if we fit the profile to go to the chosen country and then another weekend before we left to explain lots of things with simulation of situations. [It was] very helpful.” A participant from Spain reported attending a three day training before departure, and a participant from East Java said, “I had more than a week of orientation and it was so useful to know about the culture of the country in which we were placed and the situations we might experience.” This sentiment was echoed by others. A participant from the United States said, “I was taught appropriate sayings and basic local customs all of which were very useful because this information helped me to adjust and be accepted.”

Nineteen percent of participants reported receiving cultural training from either a returnee or a member of the host culture. A participant from the United States said, “I received informal training through a Dutch friend that I had prior to going over there. The things she shared with me put me at ease before going and helped me feel less nervous. She also taught me some things about Dutch culture.” Information received from “previous fellows abroad” and “ex-exchange students” at camps, seminars, and informal gatherings was reported to be helpful.

Of the participants who did not receive support before departure to their host country, 40% felt that they did not need training because they were familiar with their host culture or with the expectations of the program. The 60% of participants who would have liked pre-departure support requested several topics of training. Twenty percent would have appreciated registrar coaching “in anticipation of
fulfilling needs for graduation.” Sixty percent of participants echoed the theme of this participant from the United States when she said, “I would have liked more support with cultural expectations and norms in order to be more accepted and integrated.” These participants would have valued information “specifically from someone who had just come home” in order to have a better idea of what to expect from their particular host culture. One participant from the United States reported that it “would have been useful to understand various kinds of reactions exchange students typically experience and concrete ways in which they effectively dealt with the transition to their host country.”

Arrival support.

Another survey section asked participants to reflect on support they received upon arrival to host countries: “Did you receive training or support upon your arrival in your host country?” Participants could choose yes or no, and then elaborate on their answer in a text box. Eighty percent of participants responded to this question. Of those participants, 79% reported receiving training and support upon arrival, and of those who responded to the question, 9% reported the training was unhelpful.

Several participants reported receiving training in the form of multiple day camps. A participant who sojourned in Brazil reported, “We had a one week language intensive outside of Rio. They did some cultural training as well.” Participants who sojourned to New Zealand, the United States, and France reported attending camps for sojourners upon their arrival into the host country. Whether the
training was in a camp or a seminar format, participants reported that the most helpful training addressed linguistic and cultural concerns, and facilitated the meeting of sojourners with host country nationals. Thirty-seven percent of participants reported participating in trainings which addressed multiple concerns.

Fifty percent of the participants in this survey reported participating in training which offered “cultural guidance” and prepared them to deal with the culture shock associated with entering into their specific culture. The trainings taught participants “more specific things about the country,” helped them learn to “navigate the city and [learn] about local culture,” and taught them “lessons about Dutch [or host country national] people.” Participants reported that the cultural trainings helped them know “what life was going to be like,” and this was nice to “familiarize with American [or host] culture,” and to “to navigate the culture shock when we got” to the host families.

A drawback to cultural trainings so close to the participants’ arrival into their host culture was that this training happened before participants were able to experience the culture themselves and formulate their own questions. A participant who sojourned to Ecuador reported that her training “wasn’t that helpful because we were so new in the country. We really didn’t retain all they told us.”

While most participants were not specific about the type of language training they received, 32% reported receiving some sort of support in learning the language. A participant who sojourned to the Netherlands reported that the linguistic training
was helpful because their teacher “taught us basics of the language so that we could at least integrate in some ways (even though it wasn’t necessary to speak Dutch).” Sojourners participated in these language camps before meeting their host families and integrating into the host culture.

In addition to gaining linguistic and cultural competency, the camps and orientations assisted sojourners in “meeting people from all countries” and helped them to bond with their fellow sojourners. While the language trainings were generally seen as helpful, a participant who sojourned to Brazil viewed it as “one more transition (i.e., home to New York to Rio to Nova Friburgo) prior to getting to my family. The AFSers [sojourners] bonded at the language camp, and many of us found it difficult to let go of one another when it came time to meet our new families!”

Participants reported that a helpful aspect of their arrival support was learning “specific” things about the culture of their new country. Often, the specifics were taught by a host country national. A participant who sojourned to the Czech Republic recalls that “we were all assigned Czech students…I was assigned to live in an apartment with a Czech student, which helped with integration.” A participant who sojourned to the Netherlands said that her “Dutch culture teacher” provided her with knowledge she used during the rest of her stay. A participant who sojourned in China reported that “host professors from the university offered direction in how to
approach different cultural situations. They also were available to explain local conditions/attitudes/values and answer questions.”

Twenty-seven percent of participants reported receiving no training upon arrival to their host country. Of these, 33% would have liked to receive more support and “guidance in the various job types” available to them, or to participate in meetings to facilitate host family/sojourner relationship building.” Participants who neither received nor wanted support felt that it was not needed because the “host family supplied all additional information about country and culture” or because “for the length of stay and type of program we were sufficiently briefed.”

*In country support.*

The next survey section asked participants to reflect on support they received while in their host countries: “Did you receive training or support during your stay?” Participants could choose yes or no, and then elaborate on their answer in a text box. Eighty two percent of participants responded to this question. Of those participants, 89% reported receiving training and support during their stay. Of those who responded to the question, 100% reported that the support was in place if it was needed and that the support they received was helpful. In general, sojourners received support from one or more of the following: the sponsoring organization (52%), specific adult mentors assigned by the sponsoring organization (32%), host families and roommates (32%), and their schools (12%).
Participants who received support from their organizations during their time in the host country reported that the opportunity to meet with other sojourners was one of the most helpful aspects. Sixty-three percent of the participants who received support during their stay received it in the form of multiple meetings and events throughout the year. A participant who sojourned in New Zealand said, “It was helpful because we got to hear about other exchange students’ experiences and compare them with our own.” Other participants said the training and organization sponsored meetings were helpful because sojourners were able to discuss “their problems and experiences so far” and “it was very good to share experiences with lots of other AFS students.”

Sponsoring organizations also provided sojourners with mentors and specific contact people during the time of their sojourn. Some sojourners did not rely heavily on their mentor; the mentor was simply someone to contact “if we had any trouble at all.” Other sojourners saw their mentor as someone more integral to their success. A participant who sojourned in the United States recalled her mentors as a “personal AFS volunteer and ‘aunt/uncle’ family.” Another participant who sojourned in the United States talked about a woman “who I called aunt even though she hasn’t to do anything with my host family & she kept in touch with me all the year taking care nothing bad happened.” Other participants who sojourned to the Unites States worked with counselors who they “could talk to if [they] needed any help.” A
participant who sojourned to Italy “had both a young local affiliate who helped me as well as an adult sponsor who looked out for me through AFS.”

A sojourner to Brazil reported that the organization sponsored support person was actually more effective than the organization itself. “I had a counselor who was very helpful in working with me when my first family didn't work out. AFS itself was not helpful to me, but the counselor, an AFS returnee who was 15 years older than I and quite skilled, provided me with the support I needed when I went through what proved to be a difficult and painful transition from my first host family to my counselor's home and finally to the family with whom I lived for the majority of my time in Brazil.”

In addition to those individuals whose specific job it was to help sojourners, participants reported that they received support from host families, roommates, friends, and colleagues. A sojourner with several different sojourn experiences said, “Forty years have passed and many things have changed. I value the host family experiences I had in 3 countries and found them to be excellent support nets for being in an unfamiliar culture.” Another sojourner with multiple experiences had similar sentiments: “Host family support was excellent in both France and Norway. Individual families were great, and I was open to suggestion. Ages 18 to 21 are adventurous, but coaching is valuable.” Other participants reported that “my family was always behind me” and my “host family supplied all additional information I needed about country and culture.”
Outside of the immediate host family, friends and roommates provided useful support to sojourners. A participant who sojourned in the Netherlands said, “I think the biggest support after arriving and having the formal training was the informal opportunities to ask Dutch friends questions. I also got support from the other foreign students living in my dorm that had been there for a semester already. These people were able to help us understand things along the way.” A participant who attended university in the Czech Republic said that his Czech roommate “provided ongoing support, from language training to administrative support (like dealing with visas and other official documents.”

A participant who sojourned in Ecuador said that her biggest support came from others who were going through the same experience but had been there longer, someone who “taught me the ropes. It was very helpful; I always had someone to answer my questions.” A participant who sojourned in Taiwan said that her coworkers offered “minimal support…with cultural questions.”

Participants reported that their schools and universities provided some support in adapting to the culture. Some felt that it although it was “not terribly useful, it was obvious that they were trying.” The one area of support participants consistently requested more of was academic. Fifty percent of participants said that they would have liked more academic support during their sojourn. “I would have liked more training in interpreting the grading structure of Irish universities, both before and during my studies.” Others said, “academic support was poor…the
program was unresponsive and my University provided ho help.” A participant who sojourned in France said, “After five months, I finally felt like I understood French schools.”

Twenty-five percent of those participants who did not receive training reported wanting support in meeting other exchange students and generally adapting to the culture. A participant who sojourned in the United States reported that she would have wanted more support in the forms of “meetings, and some get togethers with other sojourners, and maybe someone who understands both the host family’s and exchange student’s experiences.”

*End of stay support.*

The next survey section asked participants to reflect on support they received at the end of their stay in the host country: “Did you receive support before departure to your home country?” Participants could choose yes or no, and then elaborate on their answer in a text box. Seventy five percent of participants responded to this question. Of those participants, 60% reported receiving support before leaving for their home country.

Similar to the support participants received upon their arrival in the host country, end of stay support and training sessions were typically multi-day seminars that often took place at camps. Out of the participants who addressed the content and structure of their end of stay support, 85% reported participating in a camp or multi-day seminar. A participant who sojourned in the United States reported that his
end of stay support consisted of “[s]ome days in Southern California living in another host family & saying good bye to everyone.” A participant who sojourned in Italy attended “AFS camps a couple of days before departure in Rome with all other exchange students from Italy.” In Brazil, sojourners “had a few days in Rio prior to departure for New York. The focus was on processing our experiences in Brazil.” A sojourner to France met with other sojourners and “stayed in Paris for a few days before returning home to discuss our experiences.” Another sojourner to the United States reported that her program provided “3 days of orientation in Washington D.C. and many orientations before we left our host state.”

Of the participants who gave specific information about the content of their support and training, 60% reported receiving information about the reentry process. Participants reported taking part in seminars in which they “discussed our year abroad and talked about dealing with culture shock when we arrive home.” The focus of these seminars was often “on processing our experiences in [the host country].” A participant who sojourned to the United States reported that her training was helpful because it helped her “know what we had to do for our departure and also prepared us for our feelings of leaving the host country.”

Twenty-six percent of respondents felt that the training and support they received at the end of their stay in the host country was ineffective. When asked if the training she received was helpful, a participant who sojourned to the United States said, “No, it did not work at all.” A participant who sojourned in Norway
reported that while the support she received from her host family was adequate, a fellow sojourner did not have the same support network in place. The sojourner recalled “the hurt long term [her friend] experienced.”

A participant who sojourned in the Czech Republic said he stayed in his host country after the program and had more time to prepare himself for reentry, but when he talked about the support he received from his program, he had a negative view of it. “The program was very bad at providing academic support for reintegration into my home campus. I was not able to review my grades with my Czech teachers. I received no help choosing classes for the next year. I was not able to adequately evaluate the program. I thought the ‘reverse culture shock’ trainings were stupid and based on the same cultural assumptions the Czech staff urged us to shed upon our arrival in Prague. I found it kind of insulting actually.”

A participant who sojourned to Brazil also had a negative experience with the support she received from her program. “I was told by the counselors that I had become too assimilated into Brazilian culture and thus was encouraged not to speak at these meetings. As a result, although I enjoyed the time in Rio, I didn't have any preparation for the enormity of leaving Brazil and of returning home. I needed practical understanding of what had happened to me in becoming so deeply assimilated into Brazil and concrete skills for understanding the experience and navigating the return to the States which was extremely difficult. I was blind-sided
by how difficult the transition was and would have benefitted from open knowledge of what I might confront and how I could deal effectively with it.”

Of the participants who did not receive support at the end of their stay, 45% felt that it was not needed, either based on the length of the program or because they had supportive families. One participant who did not receive training and would have liked to reported that “I did not receive support and my transition home was difficult, mostly because my relationships with friends back home had to be re-established, and some of them could not be.” Based on feelings like these, participants said that they would have liked training on “brainstorming next steps” and “the various kinds of reactions exchange students typically experience and concrete ways in which they effectively dealt with the transition to their home country.”

*Preparedness to return to home country.*

After asking about the support they received, the survey asked participants to evaluate whether or not they were prepared to go home. Eighty percent of the participants answered this question. Of those participants, 43% felt that they were well prepared to return to their home countries. Fifty percent of the participants felt that they were not prepared to return, and 7% felt that although they were ready, the difficulty of going home was not something with which they were prepared to deal. One participant said, “I think AFS did a good job in letting me know what was ahead for me; however, it didn't necessarily make leaving any easier.”
The participants who felt prepared to go home reported a variety of reasons for this. Participants felt that their readiness to go home was a result of a short stay in their host country, good training on the part of their organization, or because they were ready to go home. Eighteen percent of participants reported that they felt well prepared to go home because the amount of time they spent in their host countries was so short. One participant felt that “3 months is a short time, and Greece being a developed Western country, there was little acclimation [to the home country] required.” Thirty-six percent of participants reported that they felt satisfied with the experience and were “excited” and “ready to go home” to see family and friends. One of these participants said, “By the time my exchange year had finished, I felt I had done what I had to do and learned about different people and their cultures, but I continued being who I was, with just a few changes.” The 18% of participants who report strong positive training experiences from their organizations felt that they were well prepared because “AFS gave me so many orientations before we left [our] host state.” A Peace Corps volunteer said, “I credit most of the preparation I received for returning back to the U.S. to close-of-service training from my time as a Peace Corps Volunteer in Bulgaria.”

Participants who did not feel prepared to return to their home countries said that they did not anticipate how difficult it would be to reintegrate into their home countries. Several participants felt that “nothing will prepare you for the return, especially if you had a good experience abroad.” Sojourners from the United States
reported that they “felt out of place” upon returning, and that returning to their home countries “felt like moving to a different country.” One participant said, “It’s harder to place myself into my home country than to the country in which I did my exchange year.”

For many participants, a part of this difficulty was processing the experiences they had on their sojourn, and then juxtaposing these feelings with their previous life. A participant from the United States said, “I wasn't given any preparation for what I would confront and as a result was shocked at how difficult it was to transition back to my country and to leave Brazil behind me.” Another sojourner was not prepared for the fact that “I had to rebuild relationships and this was difficult and I felt super lonely and missed my experiences abroad.” A participant who has had several decades to reflect on her readjustment experience said, “18-21 years of age is a very special time of life when we are forming our own thoughts and making judgments as we haven't before then. To have that happen in a foreign culture as well gives that culture and experience more power...It took me two years to stop talking about that experience after I got home.”

Upon returning, sojourners experienced difficulties reintegrating themselves in to routine aspects of their pre-sojourn lives. A participant from Germany said, “It was hard to go back to school and play off the situation as normal after being away for an entire year. All the questions were overwhelming and way too much.” Another participant had difficulties placing herself back in her natural family: “It was very
difficult to go back to being a child in my house. I was used to a lot of independence while on exchange and this was difficult to deal with… I missed simple customs like eating together or greeting people…it was difficult to remember how to be an American.”

This feeling of being between two cultures instilled the desire to return to their host countries in many participants. They felt a strong sense of connection to their newfound friends, families, and cultures. A participant who sojourned in the United States said, “The only bad thing about coming back is the goodbyes and I don’t think any training can repair that.” Many participants reported that saying goodbye was difficult for them. “I was sad to say goodbye to my friends in the Czech Republic and I wanted very much to stay living abroad…I missed my friends and the lifestyle I was leading in Prague,” said one participant. Another participant said, “I enjoyed my time so much and the friends I made that I wanted to stay. I felt like I fit in really well and enjoyed my studies there better than my program of studies back home.” A participant who sojourned in the United States said, “I was not well prepared to return because I actually am very close to my American family. We got along very well, and separating myself from the affection and love that grew during the year was hard to deal with.”

*Support received upon arrival into home country.*

The final section of the survey dealt with participants’ experiences once they had returned to their home countries. The survey asked participants: “Did you
receive any support or training upon arrival into your home country?” Participants could choose yes or no, and then elaborate on their answer in a text box. Seventy-seven percent of participants responded to this question. Of those participants, 65% reported receiving no support upon arrival to their home country.

Forty-four percent of participants who did receive support and training for their readjustment reported that they attended reunions and meetings with fellow sojourners. These meetings were helpful in providing participants with knowledge and tools “to face culture shock upon returning home.” Participants reported that whether the meetings were organized by their programs or by the returnees themselves, an important factor in the support they received was talking with other returnees. Eighteen percent of participants reported that they created their own support networks by volunteering with their organization or setting up reunions and staying in contact with fellow returnees.

Of the participants who did not receive support upon arrival in their home country, 60% said that it was not needed either due to the length of their programs or due to the training they had already received. The remaining 40% reported that it “would have been great to have support once I returned home. I would have loved a support group of returnees who understood my experiences and could help me make the transition.” Others said that they would like to see “required support sessions for the first 3 months to help deal with readjustment and stop people from hiding out at home.”
Factors which influenced readjustment.

The survey asked participants if they experienced reentry shock, and whether their reentry was painful or painless. Seventy percent of participants reported experiencing reentry shock. Sixty-three percent of participants responded that their reentry process was either painless or relatively painless.

Participants rated several statements about their readjustment experiences on a Likert scale. Rather than reporting each category of the results (e.g. strongly agree, agree, etc.), I have collapsed the results to reflect positive and negative trends. Sixty-three percent of participants reported that they were not lonely when they returned to their home countries, 67% said that it was easy for them to get back to their old lives, and 60% said was easy for them to reintegrate with old friends. Ninety-five percent of participants reported that they changed during their time abroad, but only 62% of participants felt that their families understood the ways in which they had changed. Eighty-two percent of participants reported that they continued to feel more connected to their host culture than their home culture when they returned.

The survey then asked participants to rate the factors which influenced their readjustment to their home culture. Participants could choose one or more of the following options: friends, family, returnee groups, school, understanding mentors, sharing your experience with others, or new transitions in life. There was also a space for participants to include other thoughts or elaborate on their answers. Eighty
percent of participants answered this question. While several participants agreed with the idea that “the shock of returning to my country was part of the process,” or that “we had to go through the readjustment process and it just took time,” the three factors which had the greatest positive influence on participants’ readjustment were friends and family, sharing their experiences with others, and new transitions in life such as school and work.

Seventy-four percent of participants said that friends and family were important in their readjustment process. Forty percent felt that sharing their experiences with others, including friends and family was helpful. Participants specifically stated that friends and family who had also sojourned were the most helpful when it came to receiving support during the readjustment process. A participant from the United States said, “My mother had traveled when she was younger, so she was happy to listen to all my stories and see my pictures.” Another participant from the United States said, “Although I missed my host country a lot, my three best friends from high school had gone on exchange the same year I did. This made the adjustment process easier because we could relate with each other on many of the reentry shock issues.” A participant from the United States said that being in groups of returned sojourners helped him deal with “with general reverse culture shock issued stemming from four years of living overseas.” Another participant from the United States said, “I found that my friends who had just come home from Ecuador just before me or right after me (mission friends) were the best
way to readjust. That way we could talk about Ecuador and I felt like there was someone here who got me and what I just went through.”

Participants who returned to their colleges and universities found that being with fellow returnees on their campuses helped them process their reentry shock. A participant from the United States said that her transition was smooth because she was surrounded by like-minded people at her school: “all students at my college were required to study and live abroad and there was a natural environment of support for understanding and processing the studying abroad experience.” Other participants who returned to their universities had similar experiences. One participant said she found mentors and “teachers who had studied and lived abroad and therefore understood many of the thoughts and experiences I was going through.”

Thirty-seven percent of participants said that quick transitions to school and work were important factors in their positive readjustment. Participants from the United States said they had “no time to even slow down” before starting school, and that their readjustments were often “easier because I left again shortly after my arrival [from the sojourn] for college.” A participant from the United States reported that “a quick reentry into senior year of college…getting ready for exams, resumes, interviews, and [deciding] where to live after college” helped lessen the severity of her reentry shock.
Twenty-two percent of these participants reported finding work or volunteer positions related to their sojourn and said that their jobs helped them navigate through the reentry process. One participant said, “The best thing about my return to the United States was finding a job so quickly…Had I not gotten a job so quickly, I would have had more time to dwell on reentry issues and my transition would have been much harder. Focusing on work and speaking with my colleagues (most of whom are Returned Peace Corps Volunteers) made my transition relatively painless.”

Advice and wishes.

The final section of the survey asked participants to reflect on any training or support they would have liked to receive upon returning to their home countries. There were also two open ended questions: one asking participants “What would be the most helpful piece of advice you could give to students who are about to return to their home country?” and one question asking them if there was anything else they would like to comment on about their readjustment to their life in their home countries.

Participants could choose one or more responses from the following four categories, or provide their own insight: trainings in host country, trainings in home country, knowledge of the reorientation process, or talking with returnees. Seventy-one percent of participants responded this question. Fifty-four percent of these participants said that talking with returnees would be helpful. One participant said,
“It would have been nice to get together with the other returnees in the area. Although I was close to the ones from my school, there were many others in my country who also went abroad.” Forty-two percent of participants said that knowledge of the reorientation process would be helpful. Twenty-nine percent of participants reported that trainings while they were still in their host countries would have been helpful, and 17% reported that trainings upon arrival into the home country would have been helpful.

Sixty-eight percent of participants offered advice to sojourners about to return to their home countries. These participants stressed the fact that sojourners about to return to their home countries should “be prepared to readjust.” One sojourner said, “It took me about two years to readjust to life in America and to not place that special time abroad as the most important time in my life.” A participant from Germany said she wished her “friends and family would have had more patience” with her as she went through the readjustment process. Participants’ answers often covered more than one category, but most stressed the need to stay busy, to connect with those who have had similar experiences, to be open minded towards both cultures, to understand the changes that occurred both in themselves and others, and to find appropriate arenas to share their experiences.

Nineteen percent of participants said that an important piece of advice for returning sojourners would be “to be aware of the lack of interest that people will have, or at least the short attention span that they will have towards your
experience…Share what you did and keep it to a length and intensity that people can appreciate.” One participant from the United States cautioned returning sojourners “Don’t expect everyone to understand how you felt because they weren’t there.” Another said, “Your friends and family will likely get bored with your stories of your time abroad. Don’t let this frustrate you!” A participant advised returning sojourners to “think critically about how you use this new information. Not everyone is going to be interested in hearing about your experience…So find constructive ways of sharing this information and putting it to use academically and professionally.”

Participants felt that it was important for returning sojourners to be open minded towards both their home and their host cultures; 19% of participants cautioned those about to return to “open your heart and your mind. Be ready to see your own world differently and be grateful for the opportunity to share it with others.” A participant from Brazil said that sojourners should “try to understand the differences between your two worlds and to distinguish between different and wrong” when mediating between their two cultures.

Twenty-two percent of participants emphasized the need for returning sojourners to recognize the changes that occurred both within themselves and within the people who remained at home during the sojourner’s time abroad. Returning sojourners should “be prepared for a new life in their home country. Things change and so do people.” One participant said, “You are going to change more than you
can ever imagine.” A participant from Indonesia advised returning sojourners that they will find that “they changed without realizing [it, and] everything in your home country has been changing in time…Be wise and patient” when interacting with those at home. Participants reported that the changes sojourners undergo are not always immediately apparent to their friends and families. Participants said, “Things will definitely be different; your mind will have changed because you’ll be grown up. Your parents, family, and friends may also seem different to you. But you are the one who spent a period of your life away from them, so you should make the effort to understand them…” One participant from Spain said, “When you arrive, just tell the people how you feel. Your friends don’t really know what’s going on and don’t realize you’ve changed. Talk to them.”

Fifteen percent of participants felt that staying busy upon their return to their home country was a positive way to deal with reentry shock; returning sojourners should “stay active – don’t hide!” A participant from the United States said, “Having a plan for when you get home helps to make the transition smoother.” Similarly, another participant advised, “Make plans with people from home before you get home…[to facilitate] a regular way of connecting…your experience abroad into your life.” Another participant said returning sojourners should, “stay busy, cultivate your interests intensively, [and] keep connections with the culture you visited.”
Thirty-three percent of participants advised sojourners to “connect with people who have been through the reentry process you are about to embark on.” These participants felt that connecting with those who have had similar experiences was a valuable tool for easing the shock of reentry. One participant said it was helpful to “have a network of others who have the experience you have – whether in a returned group or with others one on one who shared that experience with you.”

Participants also advised sharing the sojourn experience with others who may not have sojourned. A participant from the United States said, “Come back like a hero and be prepared to tell your tales proudly—even the scary ones will be good conversation once you are out of that area. Take advantage of social groups who wish to hear your tales (and that goes for both parts of the experience).” Participants said that “telling other people about my host culture helped me stay connected to it while also connecting with people in my home country.” A participant from the United States said it would be helpful for returning sojourners to “find outlets, such local alumni groups or your school’s study abroad office that will provide opportunities for you to speak and interact with others who have an interest in living overseas.”

Summary

The majority of participants were satisfied with the training they received before departing for their sojourn, and upon arrival in their host country. While in their host country, participants reported that the most effective support they received
came from specific individuals such as the host family or program-appointed counselors. Before leaving for their home countries, over half of the participants received training and support about reentry to their home country, but 43% of participants reported that they were not prepared to return to their home countries.

Upon returning to their home countries, the majority of participants received little to no formal support. They experienced difficulties reintegrating into their former lives and roles. Participants reported a strong desire to return to their host country and continue the lives they were leading there. In order to seek support during their readjustment process, participants sought out fellow sojourners, created spaces to share their experiences, and turned to new transitions and experiences in their lives. Based on their own experiences navigating reentry shock, participants offered advice to future sojourners about to return to their home countries.

Participant responses were varied, but common themes and experiences relating to their sojourn experiences emerged. The following chapter presents an analysis of the data.
CHAPTER FIVE

ANALYSIS

Introduction

The question that guided this study was: What types of support would exchange students perceive as helpful in assisting them to deal with reentry shock upon their return to their home country? The responses reveal that while sojourners believe that reentry shock is an important, expected part of the sojourn, it is often difficult and lonesome. Returnees said that the most helpful form of support for those returning to their home countries is social support. This can consist of providing a forum for returnees to share their experiences or providing a network of returnees with whom they can connect.

The following is an analysis of the data broken into four categories: participant responses participant experiences in their host countries, participant experiences after their return to their home countries, and an outline of suggestions for further support.

Participant Responses

Participants in this study completed their sojourns over several decades, and in many regions of the world. In spite of the differences across time, location, current age, many commonalities existed in their responses and attitudes towards sojourning, culture shock, and reentry shock.
Most participants in this study were adolescents during the time period of their sojourn. Almost all participants reported enjoying their time abroad and felt like they became part of the host culture. This seems consistent with the personal characteristics of those who self-select to live abroad and who are selected by committees to participate in such experiences. In general, those who sojourn are open, extroverted, and interested in learning about and understanding new cultures. They seek out opportunities to interact with different populations and have new experiences. These characteristics would predispose those going on a sojourn to be more likely to view their experience as successful or positive.

**Support given before and during the sojourn.**

Initial trainings for sojourners covered a wide variety of topics, but the most helpful aspects were the cultural training and the opportunity to meet fellow sojourners. After these trainings, most participants reported feeling well prepared to enter their host culture. Sojourners went in to their experience with an especially open attitude towards new cultures and ideals; they expected the initial discomfort as they adjusted to their host culture. Therefore, although the transition may have been difficult, it did not take the sojourners by surprise because they had tools and support for navigating it.

During their time abroad, sojourners kept busy with their new lives, families, and schools or jobs. The expectation of life abroad as something different and novel continued to be viewed positively. Sojourners reported making friends easily and
getting along with their host families if they had them. Again, this is in keeping with the personal characteristics of people who either self-select or are selected by others to participate in living abroad.

During their stay in the host country, participants enjoyed meeting with one another to discuss their experiences and problem solve together. This could have been because their fellow sojourners provided a sense of reassurance and normalcy to their experience. Whether sojourners were from the same home country or not, all sojourners at a given training or support meeting were going through roughly the same experiential highs and lows as each other. Being surrounded by a new culture and by other sojourners who were forming their own identities may have provided the impetus for these adolescents to adopt the identity of a sojourner: someone who is independent, flexible, culturally sensitive, outgoing, and open minded.

As adolescents deep in the process of identity formation, sojourners also looked for adult role models and support during their time abroad. Many sojourners found positive role models in the adult mentors and counselors provided by their organizations. During their sojourn, many adolescents experienced situations in which their values were questioned. For some, it was the first time they were faced with important decisions and ethical questions. Generally, the adults who work with sojourners understand the sojourn experience, and they are patient as the sojourners work through their concerns. The role of mentor falls outside the traditional authority figure of family, host family, or teacher. Therefore, the sojourners view
their mentors as important individuals to whom they can turn for advice and attention, perhaps in lieu of a parent, older sibling, or other adult to whom they would have confided at home.

By the end of their sojourn, most participants reported that they would have liked to continue with their life in the host country. While abroad, they made deep connections with host families, friends, and the culture itself. Sojourners formed their identities, ideals, and values around the new person they had become in the host country; their new culture became a part of their new identity. Leaving their newly accepted way of life behind created a sense of disequilibrium for the sojourners. In many cases, they were leaving their host country feeling unsure about how to reconcile their new ideals and identity with the identity from their previous lives in their home country. As adolescents, sojourners were deep in the process of forming their personal identities, and the sojourn may have been an opportunity to either refine or redefine their identities. They often experienced tremendous change in their identities during their time abroad due to their developmental stage, newly acquired independence, reliance on self, and realization that they could indeed navigate life and language in another country outside of the realm of their families and countries. The latter exerted an empowering influence on sojourners. However, the changes were called into question when they contemplated their return home.
Support given after the sojourn.

The support given in country was reported as helpful to the sojourners in making their time abroad successful, but the support offered for sojourners making the transition back to their home countries was not as effective. It left many sojourners feeling like they were not prepared to return. Sojourners came home with a sense of accomplishment because they had just completed a major undertaking. Many of them came home with a broadened, global perspective of the world and their place in it, but experienced difficulties reintegrating themselves into the home communities they had left. This may be due to the fact that while they had experienced seismic shifts in identity, self-confidence, global awareness, and learning, they often returned to communities and families that had changed little or not at all. This created a conflict for the sojourners as they tried to fit themselves back into a life that may have felt several sizes too small.

While many participants in this study reported that their readjustment was relatively easy, the advice they gave those about to embark on sojourns was indicative of the difficulties they faced in the reentry process. While abroad, participants were accustomed to having their identity revolve around the fact that they were sojourners. At school, at work, and in social circles, sojourners were unique while they were abroad. When they reentered their home countries, sojourners were viewed as special for a short time. People wanted to hear their stories and learn about their experiences, but they soon lost interest in the sojourners’
stories. Whether this was because of a lack of understanding or time the part of their home country friends and families, returnees often felt frustrated that they were unable to talk about the changes they had undergone. In essence, sojourners went from having a position in the spotlight in their host country to being part of the audience once again when they returned to their home country. People around them may have wanted them to integrate themselves rapidly into their old life patterns. The sojourners may have chafed at having people fail to recognize and appreciate the enormity of their changes, at having to give up their privileged status as sojourners, and at attempting to occupy an old role that no longer fit who they were.

Participants’ inability to find support within their previous social circles led them to seek out opportunities to interact with fellow returnees and to share their experiences with those who were planning on sojourning. This contact allowed participants to continue to feel a connection with other returnees and to nurture their own personal identities as sojourners.
CHAPTER SIX

CONCLUSIONS

Sojourners returning to their home countries often experience difficulties readjusting to their previous life. This reentry shock can be difficult to deal with and often leads to feelings of isolation and frustration on the part of the returned sojourner. While trainings in the host country prove useful in dealing with the initial experience of culture shock, it seems more difficult to provide returnees with an effective training to help them navigate reentry shock and the challenges it poses. Although there were different recommendations for supporting returnees in their reentry, the most frequently occurring were having contact with fellow returnees; getting involved in an organization or job in which the returnees share their experiences; and staying busy with school, work, or other interests.

Limitations

This study had several limitations. Time was a considerable factor, as I recruited and surveyed participants during a one month period. Many participants contacted me after I had closed the survey, and thus they were not able to complete it. This study was conducted as a master’s thesis to complete a requirement for a Master of Arts in Education. A more thorough investigation of the literature would be needed for further study, and a broader study would be needed for a complete understanding of returnees’ needs upon arrival into their home countries.
An additional limitation of this study was the method of data collection. I recruited participants online through social networking groups and returnee groups, as well as through word of mouth. As a result, participants in this study were already interested in sharing their experiences from their sojourn. Because I used an online survey, participants were limited to those who had computer skills and who navigated the internet comfortably. Language was also a limiting factor in this study. Participants from many countries responded to the survey, but responses were all in English.

Finally, I am a returnee, and I work with groups of current and past sojourners, and this fact may have either encouraged or discouraged people from participating in the survey. Additionally, my personal experiences, feelings, and opinions on issues related to sojourning and reentry shock contributed to the structure of the study, the study’s primary research question, and the data analysis.

Suggestions for Future Reentry Training and Support

Adolescence is a powerful time to sojourn. When they return to their home countries, adolescents have created new identities based largely on their time spent abroad. The changes experienced while abroad are not immediately apparent to those in the home country, and it often proves difficult for returnees to readjust smoothly to their previous life. To that end, programs that send students abroad should examine the support they give sojourners and returnees. While in their host
countries, sojourners reported that the most helpful support they received was not orientation sessions, but one-on-one mentoring and the company of other sojourners.

*Implications for Future Research*

In the future, it would be helpful to translate this survey into several different languages in order to include a more diverse population of returnees. Future research with diverse groups of returnees might include pen and paper questionnaires, one-on-one interviews, or focus groups. These supplementary data collection methods would help achieve a potentially richer and deeper pool of data.

Sojourners returning to their host countries report that there are several aspects of their support which they have found lacking. Further research is needed to better understand the ways in which families and supporting organizations can support returnees dealing with reentry shock. Questions for future study include: How can sojourners returning to their home countries best be connected to fellow returnees? How can families of returnees be supported and trained to support returnees during the readjustment adjustment period? What would be the content of a training or support method that would better equip sojourners upon their return to their home countries? What is the impact of the differences or similarities between home and host culture sojourner’s readjustment to their home countries?

It may be useful to investigate the effectiveness of local support networks for returnees, to assist the returnees, their families, their friends, and others involved in
the sojourners’ readjustment. This network could be useful for returnees to share their experiences and support one another in their navigation of reentry shock.

Positive support for those experiencing reentry shock should consist of support which allows them to continue to refine their identity as a sojourner. Returnees should be provided with access to mentors who have successfully navigated the reentry process themselves. Organizations should give returnees many opportunities to share their experiences with others who have gone abroad, as well as those who would like to go abroad. Finally, returnees who have been in their home countries long enough to feel comfortable with their new identities should be encouraged to mentor present sojourners as well as those who are starting on the initial phases of reentry shock.
REFERENCES


APPENDIX A

ONLINE QUALITATIVE QUESTIONNAIRE

Informed Consent:

Dear Returned Exchange Students,

My name is Alyse Eckenrode, and I am doing research on the experiences of exchange students for my Master’s degree. I am interested in finding out about your experience abroad, as well as your experience adjusting to life back in your home country. Through this survey, I hope to find out what types of support you received and what you would have liked to receive.

This survey will take approximately 10 to 15 minutes to complete, and your answers could provide useful information when planning support for current and future exchange students. Completion of the survey is anonymous and completely voluntary. You can withdraw from finishing the survey at any time without penalty. Responses to the surveys will be complied, analyzed, and published in a master’s thesis that will be available at the Humboldt State University Library. If you have any questions about this research, you can contact me at ally_1017@yahoo.com or my committee chair, Dr. Ann Diver-Stamnes, at acd1@humboldt.edu.

Follow this link to reach the survey:
http://www.surveymonkey.com/s.aspx?sm=9SCJokaw3nAz_2fpLfon6AUg_3d_3d

Thank you for your participation!

Alyse Eckenrode
Exchange Student Questionnaire

PART I
1. Please provide the following information:
Sex: Female □ Male □
Age: __________
Country of residence: _______________________________________________________

2. When did you study abroad? From __________ to __________
   Month/year   Month/year
3. Where did you study abroad? ________________________________________________

4. How old were you when you studied abroad? ________________

5. Did you learn to speak another language? Yes □ No □
   What language? ___________________________________________________________

6. With what program did you study abroad? __________________________

PART II
1. Did you live with a host family? Yes □ No □
2. Did you live in a dormitory? Yes □ No □
3. Did you attend school? Yes □ No □
4. Did you work? Yes □ No □

5. Please mark how closely you agree with following statements, based upon your
   experiences while you were an exchange student: Do you agree with the following
   statements?
   I made friends easily while abroad.  Agree □ Somewhat Agree □
   Disagree □
   I fit in well with my host family.  Agree □ Somewhat Agree □
   Disagree □
   I adapted well to the host culture.  Agree □ Somewhat Agree □
   Disagree □
PART III
1. Did you receive support or training before you left? Yes □ No □
   a. If yes, what kinds of support or training did you receive, and was it helpful? Why or why /not?
   b. If no, would you have liked to receive support or training, and what kinds of support or training would have found helpful?

2. Did you receive support or training while you were abroad? Yes □ No □
   a. If yes, what kinds of support or training did you receive, and was it helpful? Why or why /not?
   b. If no, would you have liked to receive support or training, and what kinds of support or training would have found helpful?

3. Did you receive support or training upon arrival in your host country? Yes □ No □
   a. If yes, what kinds of support or training did you receive, and was it helpful? Why or why /not?
   b. If no, would you have liked to receive support or training, and what kinds of support or training would have found helpful?

b. Did you receive support during your stay? Yes □ No □
   a. If yes, what kinds of support or training did you receive, and was it helpful? Why or why /not?
   b. If no, would you have liked to receive support or training, and what kinds of support or training would have found helpful?

c. Did you receive support before your departure to your home country? Yes □ No □
   a. If yes, what kinds of support or training did you receive, and was it helpful? Why or why /not?
   b. If no, would you have liked to receive support or training, and what kinds of support or training would have found helpful?
3. Is there any training or types of support you wish you had received but did not? Please explain.

4. Do you feel you were well prepared to go back to your home country? Yes □ No □ Why or why not?

PART IV
1. Did you go to your family of origin’s home after your exchange? Yes □ No □ If no, where did you go?

2. Did you continue at your previous school after your exchange? Yes □ No □ If no, where did you go?

3. Did you receive any support or training upon arrival into your home country? Yes □ No □
   a. If yes, what kinds of support or training did you receive, and was it helpful? Why or why not?

   b. If no, would you have liked to receive support or training, and what kinds of support or training would have found helpful?

4. Are you a member of any groups for returnees? Yes □ No □ What groups?
PART V
1. Do you think you felt reentry shock (i.e., experienced difficulty in readjusting to your home country)?
   Yes ☐ No ☐

2. Indicate your level of agreement with the following statements:

   When I got home, it was easy for me to get back to my old life.
   Agree ☐ Somewhat Agree ☐ Somewhat Disagree ☐ Disagree ☐

   When I got home, it was easy to reintegrate with my friends.
   Agree ☐ Somewhat Agree ☐ Somewhat Disagree ☐ Disagree ☐

   When I got home, I felt my family understood me.
   Agree ☐ Somewhat Agree ☐ Somewhat Disagree ☐ Disagree ☐

   I changed during my time abroad.
   Agree ☐ Somewhat Agree ☐ Somewhat Disagree ☐ Disagree ☐

   My family appreciated the ways in which I changed.
   Agree ☐ Somewhat Agree ☐ Somewhat Disagree ☐ Disagree ☐

   I was lonely when I got home.
   Agree ☐ Somewhat Agree ☐ Somewhat Disagree ☐ Disagree ☐

   People wanted to hear my stories from my time abroad.
   Agree ☐ Somewhat Agree ☐ Somewhat Disagree ☐ Disagree ☐

   I continued to feel connected to my host culture when I returned home.
   Agree ☐ Somewhat Agree ☐ Somewhat Disagree ☐ Disagree ☐

   I felt more connected to my host culture than my home culture when I returned.
   Agree ☐ Somewhat Agree ☐ Somewhat Disagree ☐ Disagree ☐
3. How would you characterize your readjustment to your home culture?
   Painful □  Moderately Painful □  Moderately Painless □  Painless □

4. What factors influenced your readjustment? Choose all that apply.
   Family □
   Friends □
   Returnee groups □
   School □
   Understanding mentor(s) □
   Time □
   Sharing your experiences with others □
   New transitions in life (e.g., going away to college, pursuing new interests, etc.) □
   Other (please describe):
PART VI
1. What support would you have liked to receive to help you deal with your transition back to your home country? Choose all that apply.
   - Trainings in host country □
   - Trainings in home country □
   - Knowledge of reorientation process □
   - Talking with returned exchange students □
   - Other (please describe):

2. What would be the most helpful piece of advice you could give to students who are about to return to their home country?