



exchange

What determines someone’s initial perceptions of you, your country, and your culture? At the core, it’s their attitudes toward the political, economic, social, and cultural systems of your homeland. This perspective on your home country is a big part of what you’ll gain by studying abroad. You’ll see first-hand that the world is asymmetrical, full of people and nations with divergent views—and yet that we are more interdependent than ever. Your time abroad will ready you to live in that world.

Be prepared, though. Recent events have altered the United States’ image abroad. Most people are still very welcoming, but it helps to be ready to discuss current events in a considered, respectful manner. In a way, during your time abroad, you’ll be something of an informal ambassador for the U.S., introducing others to a real-life, representative U.S. citizen. Consider your actions in that context, and get ready for the kind of international exchange that transforms all who participate—and, slowly, even their communities and nations.

<< go forth, exchange, and represent

enhancing exchanges

- get up to speed on local and international history and current events
- think about what kind of political, social, and economic discussions might arise; think through appropriate responses
- consider new points of view and re-evaluate your own beliefs
- be respectful when expressing yourself
- if things get heated, agree to disagree
- once home, put your intercultural exchange into perspective by sharing what you observed abroad with friends and family

ambassadorship in an age of global conflict



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the image of the u.s. abroad

When people of other nations think about the U.S., what do they think of? A land of freedom that provides a safe environment for its residents. A society that offers wealth, upward mobility, and other opportunities that may not be available in their homeland. People with a can-do mentality that has led them to many prominent achievements. Many aspects of U.S. life are admired, but there are questions, too. How can such a wealthy society have such poor health and emergency care for the less fortunate? Why does the Iraq War, unpopular in many places around the globe, continue? Questions like these have led to a tough examination of U.S. leadership.

In this world of CNN and the Internet, what ends up in the news becomes part of the process of instant, constant communication and commentary that we all participate in—and influences people’s thinking worldwide. For example, the way Hurricane Katrina was handled injured America’s image as a land of plenty where problems get fixed, as a society that works even in the face of natural disaster. Events like these have led to a deterioration of the U.S.’s image abroad. Polls conducted in many countries say that the proportion of people with positive opinions of the U.S. has fallen. Even in Europe and Latin America—traditionally regions full of strong U.S. supporters—America has become less popular. At times, these sentiments can even manifest themselves as a kind of anti-Americanism: when the U.S. is disliked for its views or actions, American citizens abroad can bear the consequences.

Now, most people you’ll meet will be able to separate your behavior and intentions from that of your political leaders—and if they dislike the viewpoints of your President or Congress, they won’t automatically dislike you. Most locals abroad are welcoming, curious about your beliefs, and understanding of your views even if you don’t agree on every issue. Few think that the foreign policy of any sovereign nation should be conducted according to world opinion polls. People do evaluate U.S. cultural values and norms, though, whether consciously or unconsciously. And because we elect our political leaders, we can sometimes be perceived as responsible for their actions, and their unpopularity can become ours. In those cases, you could end up on the receiving end of negative feelings that arise when those in your host country are unhappy with American government and manage-

ment. Of course, the attitudes you encounter will differ depending on where you study and who you meet, and attitudes change over time. Students who lived abroad during the Vietnam War remember being questioned (and even yelled at) about America’s intentions and behavior in Southeast Asia. Strong reactions to volatile situations are natural, but as time passes, both situations and inclinations change. Much anti-American feeling, when it exists, is related to specific military, social, or foreign policies that are unpopular in one or more countries abroad. Even in times of dissent, though, the U.S. collectively, and its citizens individually, will be welcomed around the world.

ambassadorship in a global world

While you’re abroad, you’ll learn to cohabitate with people in your new host culture. How will you interact with locals to make friends? How will you promote the exchange of ideas across borders? Your ability to think for yourself, support a particular political or social agenda, and act as you see appropriate is part of your national heritage—and vital to real, person-to-person international exchange. If you think about it, while you’re abroad, you’re representing the U.S. as a kind of informal diplomat. When you have a conversation with someone, no matter how brief, you’ll become part of his most recent and personal encounter with American behaviors and attitudes. You’ll be part of what she thinks of when she thinks of the U.S. Think, consider, and discuss difficult issues respectfully. Here are some ways you can prepare:

before you go

You know perfectly well that not everyone shares your opinions, and you’ll probably meet people abroad who disagree with your point of view on certain subjects or find U.S. society less than perfect. Some may be intelligent, well-educated, and polite; some may be misinformed, rude, or even radical. No matter who you encounter, it’ll help if you spend time in advance thinking about what situations might arise and considering appropriate responses. You could also read up on current U.S. and international events. You’ll notice that many people abroad study U.S. history extensively and follow U.S. news closely. More information at your fingertips will help you

bring more to the discussion and express what you’re thinking and feeling more clearly. With a little awareness and preparedness, you’ll be very ready to interact positively with people who may see the world differently than you do.

while you’re there

You’ll find that many people abroad enjoy discussing social and political issues, and you’ll have plenty of chances for fascinating conversations with people who espouse different points of view. Some may be on lighthearted subjects like your personal interests and local or U.S. pop culture; others might involve weightier topics like the role of government in society, the gap between the haves and the have-nots, human rights, access to government services, support for those who have not been able to support themselves, the extent to which a nation’s values should be exported elsewhere, and how military might should be exercised. Just recognize that these debates are not about determining black from white, good from evil, right from wrong, red state from blue state. They are about understanding different points of view and evaluating your own ideas in the context of new ones. Be prepared to reconsider your own views, or better understand why you think what you do.

Go into any exchange remembering that you are, though informally, representing the U.S. This doesn’t mean you have to represent U.S. interests as a nation, just that you want to represent what you think it means to be an American like you. It’s a chance to confront stereotypes with truth. Are you a straight-A chemistry major who is a first-generation college student and grew up with a single parent? Or are you an economics major who loves playing ultimate Frisbee and writing your politically-themed blog? By being yourself—and representing various dimensions of our society like gender, race, socioeconomic background, hobbies, academic interests, and personal views—you can widen the very definition of what it means to be an American.

Always be respectful when expressing yourself, even if you’re confronted with hostility. If things get heated, you can always agree to disagree. The plus side of all of this conscious thinking about the exchanges you’ll have is that it really helps with your cross-cultural learning. Even if you’re only overseas for a few weeks, you’ll get a clearer understanding of how you as a person—and the U.S. as a nation—fit into the larger world.

once you’re home

Part of the circle of going abroad and coming home again involves assimilating what you learned into your life going forward. Telling tales of your experiences—because that always involves reflecting on events and drawing conclusions—is extremely valuable in putting your time abroad into perspective. Also, what you encountered while abroad might be different from what friends and family know and understand, so you can help widen their worlds by explaining the different views you encountered in your host country. Prepare to tell your story to family, friends, and maybe even groups you’re involved with at your host university through photos, essays, and videos. The process of storytelling will help you think critically about your own views, the feelings of others you encountered, and our human responsibility as individuals and societies to address issues that inspire dissent. Conscious reflection and communication with others will not only help you get everything you can out of your time abroad—it will equip us all to be better citizens of the U.S. and the world.

