

our view

A CIEE Eye for the Study Abroad Guy...or Girl

*third in a series;
generating thoughts and
discussion in the
study abroad community*

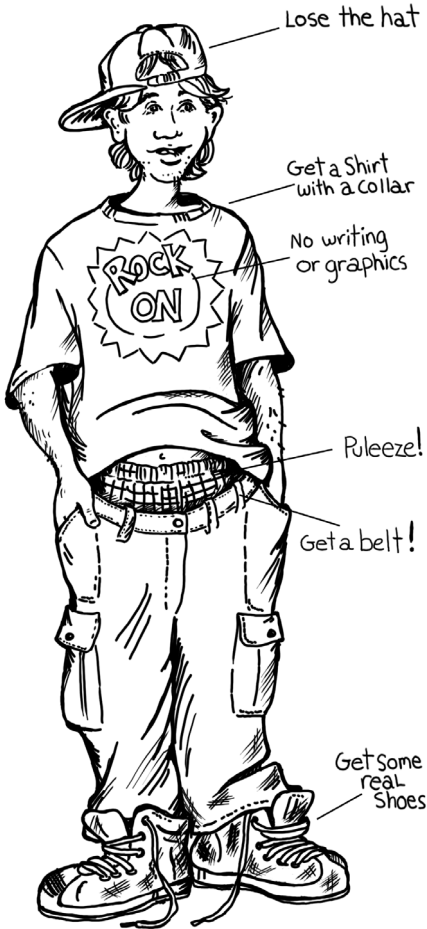
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This is the third in a series of **“food for thought”** pieces from CIEE. The themes vary but all deal with **study abroad for U.S. undergraduates**. We present our ideas not as the only viable ones but rather **to stimulate discourse** in furtherance of the study abroad enterprise. Previous topics include “How Are We Doing?”, which addresses student goals and awareness, and “Standards” in study abroad. We **welcome your comments and requests** for additional copies at any time to **editor@ciee.org**.

Reality shows are all the rage these days. From *The Apprentice*, with its distorted view of management and the world of work, to *Survivor* that takes the cake for bringing out the worst in people, America's interest in "reality" seems insatiable. One of the most popular species of the genre is the "makeover" show. These range from edifice to epidermis. On the one hand, a group of so called experts will rebuild or redecorate your house. On the other, a group of plastic surgeons, exercise physiologists, stylists, and others will rebuild your body and look, literally and figuratively. In between, there are several versions of the makeover, some featuring the makeover, some featuring the characters doing the makeover, and some a little bit of each.

Like us, we're sure you've had the experience of visiting a study abroad program somewhere in the world and wishing the makeover king or queen would come visit the students. There, in Spain or Senegal, Shanghai or Sydney, are U.S. college students looking a bit like creatures from another planet. Well, if not another planet, clearly another culture—and if we try to see our students through the eyes of host country teachers and students, often they seem to be from a vastly less civilized culture. Whether its the totally inappropriate t-shirts, the bare midriffs, ratty jeans or sneakers, or the baseball caps (turned backwards or sideways) students seem to totally miss how poorly they are dressed for the place where they are living, and how much their clothes, demeanor, and often attitudes mark them not just as Americans but more importantly as louts or klutzes. Worse yet, a student's dress or behavior may put them at risk in some situations. As professionals surely part of our job is to address these issues and to help students present themselves in ways that will make them more respectable in the host environment and will therefore enhance their experiences abroad.

Let's go back to the goals of study abroad. Although we are not interested in making U.S. students into something they are not—true members of a foreign culture—we *are* interested in helping them fit in better and learn to function more effectively in other cultures. Cultural engagement does not require that



students wear local dress. The “gapping” of the world makes us far more globally similar in dress than ever before. What we want is for students to be able to engage in local activities, organized and informal, so that they have a culturally rich experience. To the extent that clothes, attitudes, food habits, and other “typically American” behavior impede this engagement, it behooves us to see what we can do to reduce these obstacles.

There are a number of areas in which students could do things a bit differently and, as a result, have a better experience when they are overseas. Let's look at what we as study abroad professionals (or, if you will, makeover artists) might do to make things work more effectively. Although many issues could be included under this heading, we will address primarily dress, behavior, and attitudes.

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To start with dress, we all know that many other cultures dress more conservatively than ours and require students to change from what is acceptable at home to a slightly different look abroad. Failure to do so “marks” them as outsiders. While they are, the inappropriateness of their look makes it more difficult for them to make friends, blend in, and experience the country as locals experience it, and often makes them poor ambassadors for their own culture. Let's face it: Caucasians in China will always be outsiders. Clothes aren't going to change that, but appropriate clothes will minimize the extent to which these students are seen as “from Mars” and in many cases will prevent them from being seen as offensive and inappropriate in presentation.

Like dress, very often the behavior and attitudes of students abroad are inappropriate to the cultures in which they are studying. How many times have we observed a group of students being loud and obnoxious in a public place, behaving in ways completely outside of local norms and mores? Added together with sometimes foul language, too much to drink, and the wrong clothes, it doesn't make a pretty picture. When confronted with these issues,

students react in a wide variety of ways. While some are open and willing to adopt a serious approach to such issues, others don't grasp the importance of these matters, are insensitive to the cultural imperatives of their host country, or resist making the kinds of alterations in look and behavior that would facilitate their learning overseas. And, in many cases, the notion that they need to assume the role of ambassadors for their culture is an idea that is totally lost on them.

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To go a little deeper, we'll borrow some ideas from the business world—a more sophisticated segment of the business world than *The Apprentice*. Christopher Earley and Elaine Mosakowski, in a recent article in *Harvard Business Review*, define a skill they deem essential to success in international business—a skill that is directly related to what we are talking about here. “*Cultural Intelligence* or *CQ*,” they say, “is the ability to make sense of unfamiliar contexts and then blend in.” This concise definition—direct, to the point, and refreshingly devoid of jargon—captures exactly what our programs are attempting to instill. These authors believe that “anyone reasonably alert, motivated, and poised can attain an acceptable *CQ*.” The question for study abroad professionals is how do we assure that these three essential learning-readiness factors are present and applied to the task when a student goes overseas?

Alert We know that students in the undergraduate years are predominantly self-centered. They are alert, but often their awareness looks inward. What

do I like? What's important to me? How do I feel in this situation? The challenge is to develop a habit of looking around, paying attention to the facial expressions and body language of others, trying to decipher the code, and gain access to the cultural information that is only partially evident at first glance.

Motivated All the examples in the article quoted deal with people who are currently engaged in a business enterprise in a cross-cultural environment, and they all know that in order to succeed they need to develop some skills that they don't currently have. Unfortunately, our students do not characteristically perceive themselves to be in a comparable situation, although, in terms of their coursework, they may be. Worse, many students believe that it is the responsibility of the professors and the program to mitigate whatever differences may exist between the academic culture they are familiar with and the one they are experiencing abroad. How to turn this around is the challenge.

Poised? Maybe. Well, let's not exaggerate. Our sense is that there is an extremely wide range of backgrounds in the study abroad student population with respect to this last necessary condition. Some students bring all the poise they need to the table when they arrive as freshmen; others graduate and indeed seem to go through life without a clue. Our challenge is not to criticize, but to help each student develop the maximum poise that is achievable in his or her particular case.

Our experience indicates that most students are willing and able to respond to these issues given the opportunity. The real problem is that often very little happens prior to departure that truly prepares students for their study abroad experience, that on-site orientation is too late for some of these issues (they've already brought the wrong clothes), and that on-going management of cultural adaptation learning may take a back seat to other priorities. There are five phases in the cultural adaptation pro-

cess that we can facilitate through effectively managing the study abroad process—five good teaching moments when we can facilitate the “makeover” of participants: pre-departure, upon arrival, on-going throughout the session, just before students leave the site, and after they return to campus. Let’s explore each of these briefly.

Pre-departure materials are widely available to students. Many schools use peer counselors to conduct one hour to one-half day orientations for departing study abroad students. Most schools and study abroad providers provide copious materials and handbooks with detailed guidance. This is all well intended and often well done. But, we all struggle with the balance between a core dump of facts that students need to know and more abstract intercultural training material. Usually it’s the core facts that dominate these materials—handbooks are a poor medium for dealing with the more complex cultural adaptation issues. We need to break from the details and help students see the cultural context.

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On-site orientations are quite properly focused on facts that students really need to learn right away: health, safety, and security; registration, course additions and drops; housing rules and protocols; and a myriad of other facts and issues that must be addressed immediately. While most orientations attempt to deal with the cultural issues, they tend to get short shrift, given the time for these events and the need to deal with the hard facts. Once again, these “hard requirements” get in the way of some of the softer but equally important cultural material.

If pre-departure and on-site orientations are often weaker than they might be in helping students come to grips with the opportunities and pitfalls of studying in a foreign culture, on-going management of this learning process and management of the return process are the poor sisters of this continuum. While this varies widely from school to school and program to program, our observation is that students are left more and more to their personal ability to synthesize the learning experience as a semester abroad proceeds.

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There are many issues involved in what should happen and why it should happen, and how to make it happen, over a wide range of programs and student pre-dispositions. These are tough issues to address. Our view is that we could significantly strengthen our programs and the outcomes by beefing up preparation and guidance at all five of these junctures.

We believe that pre-departure orientations could be significantly expanded through the use of internet technology and teleconferencing. We know that students don't always read. But, we also know they are skilled internet users and for the most part like to talk on the phone. Putting orientation materials online and combining with teleconferences offers an opportunity to use this technology to achieve what often isn't happening today. In addition, this procedure would be a way for resident directors to interact with students prior to departure rather than for the first time on arrival. And it would also take some of the responsibility out of the hands of peer counselors who, while very well intentioned, often

have singular views and lack the skills needed to do the job right.

The purpose of this type of session is not to focus on the myriad of issues that are already being covered, but rather totally on cultural issues that should be addressed pre-departure. Dress, expectations regarding the welcome students are likely to receive from the host culture (or hostility they are about to experience), and some local facts and issues they should know before hitting the ground can all be covered. On arrival, these messages can be reinforced in the way we organize orientations; for example, starting each day with a one hour discussion of cultural and social issues in the host country rather than by starting with the add/drop rules. The idea is to change the schedule and timing to send a strong message about culture and to grab students attention at a timely learning moment. During the semester, there are a variety of ways to enrich cultural understanding. Comparative anthropology and sociology offer lots of structure for thinking about these issues and building reflective time and sessions into the program provides a unique opportunity to enrich the experience for participants.

Similar opportunities for reflection and learning present themselves shortly before departure and upon return to campus. Armed with the right learning models and materials, we believe that students can achieve a good deal of this on their own, but we need to arm them properly. In short, to be effective, cultural learning, the *CQ*, needs to be built into the fabric of study abroad programs not just added on as an ornament. It takes time and resources to do this well, but institutions that make the investment will reap significant rewards in terms of outcomes.

By the time most study abroad programs end, faculty, students, and administration are very comfortable with one another. They have had a strong, shared experience. Just as we often take a few days at the beginning of a semester for orientation, so too should we build into programs a

disengagement process. At the very end, exams and differing schedules often make this difficult. But this process doesn't have to be delayed until the very end. Experience shows that this part of the learning process can be conducted a couple of weeks prior to departure, along with student evaluation and feedback processes, so as not to interfere with end of semester issues that crowd the days just before students leave. The focus at this point should be on what I learned, what it means to me, and how I can integrate this into my life on an ongoing basis. This process has to be totally student centered. Developing materials to aid skilled facilitators in this process would significantly aid in getting this sort of activity implemented in most programs.

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In the same sense, its time to admit that while resident directors are usually great face to face support people, and many are strong academics, not all of them have a good grounding in student development. A Ph.D. in art history doesn't prepare someone very well for the leadership skills required to engage students in the cultural learning portion of their programs. At some larger sites, hiring an adjunct with a student services background may fill this need. In all cases, on-going training of staff in student development skills will do much to improve our success in fulfilling these needs.

Our experience tells us that there are many opportunities to enhance and improve a student's behavior and learning from a study abroad experience. Some of the impact of this would be external; look and behavior...not so much a makeover as an adjust-

ment. But, some of this would be internal; attitudes and pre-dispositions towards engagement in everything from social interactions to menu selection. Physical appearance, as the reality shows ignore, is an inside out issue—how we feel impacts how we look and behave.

As study abroad professionals, we can impact what's going on inside and therefore impact the visible behaviors that also influence learning abroad. Better materials, new technology and new applications of older technology, more training for teaching personnel and staff, and more careful attention to these matters would be a step in the right direction. This certainly seems like a worthy goal.



info@ciee.org • www.ciee.org • 1.800.407.8839

CIEE: Council on International Educational Exchange
7 Custom House Street
3rd Floor
Portland, ME 04101

March 2005

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