

Parents, Family, and Friends

Your son or daughter is interested in or has already chosen to study abroad, and you would like to know what this experience entails. We hope that the following article will answer many of your questions.

Studying abroad will almost certainly be a defining period in your son or daughter's educational experience – a psychological journey that will transform him or her into a global thinker with international perspectives and put him or her a step ahead of the competition in the eyes of prospective employers. In spite of this, you — and your son or daughter – may have a wide range of feelings about the upcoming experience, from excitement at its potential to stress at the idea of being far apart.

By understanding each other's feelings and supporting decisions before, during, and after the period of overseas study, you can help maximize this opportunity. Here is some advice on what to expect.

Encourage, but don't push

Before your student leaves, offer your full support. Let him or her know that you will be there throughout the experience if needed, including that you can still be reached from overseas.

Time abroad sometimes begins with a honeymoon period, during which students are excited to finally be in the setting they've been anticipating. After facing realities such as unfamiliar university procedures, unexpected difficulty with the local language, commuting woes, and the absence of usual support groups, culture shock can set in. At the same time, the student is away from on-campus medical, psychological, and advisory services on which he or she may have come to rely (a major change in university life since we attended college is the degree to which students rely on these resources). Expect to hear some tales of frustration, though your child will likely experience many wonderful things as well, even if you are not the first to hear about them. In most cases he or she won't expect you to solve problems, as much as you may want to, and is just looking for an understanding ear.

Maintain a level of distance

By overcoming any difficulties he or she faces early on, your son or daughter will quickly rise to a new level of independence, so avoid the temptation to become too involved. Ultimately, this is his or her learning experience.

It's also important to remember that study abroad students are not on vacation. Attending class with him or her or taking your student out of class to sightsee will interrupt the educational process and immersion experience. If you want to visit, it's best to do so when the program has finished so you can travel together. And it's usually unwise to try to obtain permission for your student to return home early; the end of the semester is the most important part of his or her academic experience. Being present as the program begins can also interfere with your student's ability to adapt and relate to other participants on the program.

Prepare for the transformation

After living abroad for as long as study abroad students do, they can't help but be changed by the experience. This can take many forms, from new ways of dressing to cravings for different kinds of food to new political perspectives. Don't worry too much: negative feelings usually last for a very short time, while a realistic view of "home" and its place in the world remains with most students for life.

Be prepared for him or her to experience some degree of reverse culture shock: most do and will need some time to fully readjust to living at home again. In some cases, he or she may even experience a period of depression or longing to return abroad. Once again, your support, interest, and understanding will help your son or daughter during this life-altering experience.

Observing and discussing changes like these is an excellent way to share in your son or daughter's international experience, and you will probably want to hear more than most other people, which will be satisfying to your son or daughter. Most study abroad participants report years later that the time they spent overseas was the best part of their college years—and that it changed them for life.

Practical Preparations

It's a delicate balance, making sure your son or daughter is prepared for his or her time abroad and letting him or her take the lead at the beginning of this new experience. Here is a list of things that should be resolved before departure, and our suggestions for ways to do so:

Program Policies

Make sure your student understands what policies apply to him or her while abroad. Ask the Office of International Programs about credit, enrollment status, financial aid, study abroad-related fees and services the school will provide while abroad. Ask the Office of International Programs for the terms of participation, which covers issues such as course load, changes to academic programs, grade reporting, fees, and refunds.

Travel Documents

Check that your son or daughter's passport and any required visas are in order. You should also have a valid passport in case of emergency. Passports should be valid at least six months beyond end of stay.

Health

Before departure, your son or daughter should have a general physical and dental exam; women should also have a gynecological checkup. Make sure he or she packs a complete medical record and a typed copy of any prescriptions needed. Ask your doctor how best to handle routine prescription medications.

Finances

Decide with your son or daughter how to access money for both everyday financial needs and emergencies. Certain monetary instruments may be preferable in certain destinations, so ask The Office of International Programs for more specific recommendations.

Generally it is important to ask your bank how (or if) its ATM card will function abroad and what extra fees there might be. A personal credit card with cash advances could also make sense. Then, make arrangements to pay any monthly bills and, if necessary, to file your son or daughter's income taxes.

Insurance

Continue carrying your student as a dependent on your health insurance policy, even though he or she will have coverage while studying abroad through PC. Be aware that in many countries the cost of medical services must be paid in advance by the patient (and then reimbursed by the insurance company). Insure valuables your son or daughter will take on the trip, such as a laptop computer, camera, or video recorder.

Travel planning

Research travel costs and help book flights unless the student is traveling on a group flight. Learn regulations regarding the type and size of luggage that can be carried; then help your son or daughter pack lightly. Be aware of any restrictions the tickets you purchase may have (such as a change policy). A money belt can help keep valuables safe during the trip.

Contact planning

Make sure you have a telephone number where you can reach your student and know the times of day when he or she is most likely to be there. Minimize the cost of staying in touch by establishing methods in advance. Contact your phone service provider to arrange for a calling card, research internet phone options, or learn the most inexpensive way to call collect or wirelessly from the destination country. You may be able to select an international plan that has reduced calling rates to that particular country to minimize costs of calling from home. Given the cost of telephoning, it might be better to set up a regular schedule for e-mailing, instant messaging, or video chat with an application like Skype instead. Remember to take time difference into account.

Emergencies

Make sure you will be informed if your student runs into difficulty overseas. Since students are almost always adults (over 18 years of age), you will not receive that information unless you are designated as his or her emergency contact. In some cases, even that is not sufficient, so you may want to have him or her sign a release form as a precaution. Discuss how you will handle any family emergencies that may arise. It's best to have a written emergency communication plan listing the methods of communication to use and the order in which to use them. Give your student a copy of the plan, which should include: all family telephone numbers; access codes for messages on family answering machines; phone numbers for several out-of-state relatives; and several e-mail addresses, including a backup address at an overseas provider such as Yahoo! Australia.

Data file

Gather all of the information you and your student might need while he or she is away, including:

contact information for:

- your student (if housing has been assigned)
- on-site Resident Director
- home office of the program provider (ask if they have a 24-hour emergency number)
- study abroad office at the home school
- doctors who have treated your student in the past
- citizen assistance section of the embassy or consulate nearest your student's program
- U.S. State Dept. Office of Overseas Citizen Services
- insurance policy numbers and how to submit claims
- your student's credit card numbers
- your student's passport number
- duplicate lost passport kit (your student should take one abroad as well) containing two passport photos, an official copy of his or her birth certificate, a photocopy of the photo, signature, and visa pages of passport, and study abroad program calendar

Pre-departure

If you want to help your student prepare, make plans to take care of the following necessities together:

- understanding program policies
- travel documents
- health preparations
- financial preparations
- insurance
- travel planning
- how to get in touch while abroad
- what to do in case of emergency
- collecting a data file

Keep up-to-date stateside

You may have to help handle some things for your son or daughter while he or she is abroad, such as:

- renewing a driver's license
- registering to vote or requesting an absentee ballot
- filing income taxes
- paying monthly credit card bills
- preparing for the next semester at the home school (open mail from the college and remind your student)
- registering for classes
- selecting a housing option
- preparing forms to continue financial aid

Remember to remind your student to share as much information with you as possible throughout the process.