

## What is an independent study?

The independent study process allows students to extend their opportunities abroad beyond traditional study abroad programs. These activities may include (but are not limited to) service learning programs, research projects, internships and volunteer abroad.

Does your intended activity abroad match independent study criteria? In order to answer this you need to know if an accredited institution (in the U.S. or abroad) will issue a transcript for academic credit earned through the program (contact Padnos International Center for further instructions). If the answer to this is yes, then do not pursue the independent study abroad process. However, if you will not be issued a transcript from the host institution/organization, then you should carefully follow the guidelines below.

Students who choose to follow our independent study process and wish to gain credit for participating and have access to their financial aid award to help pay for independent study costs need to do the following:

- 1. Identify a faculty supervisor:**

Students will need to identify a faculty supervisor within the department through which they wish to earn credit. The faculty member should agree to supervise your work during the time you are overseas, as well as formulate a method of assessment for the work you complete abroad.

- 2. Schedule an appointment with Elena Selezneva:**

After meeting with a faculty supervisor, students should schedule a meeting with Elena Selezneva [seleznee@gvsu.edu](mailto:seleznee@gvsu.edu). Students should bring all information about the program, a signed faculty supervisory form, and a course syllabus.

- 3. Complete an OASIS independent study application:**

The student's independent study application will be reviewed. Acceptance is not guaranteed.

With your decision to embark upon an independent study, you have chosen an option which provides you with an individually customized choice of geographic location and/or work-study opportunity. Although this option can provide significant benefits to your education and personal development, it is imperative to be aware of the extra challenges inherent in this choice, as well as the high level of self-motivation required for an independent study. As you are accepted for participation in your chosen internship, it is extremely vital to adhere to **all** deadlines in the process before your departure. These deadlines not only include all the necessary forms and documentation, but also the meetings with your faculty advisor and Padnos International Center (PIC) staff. While doing an independent study, versus a GVSU faculty-led or GVSU partner internship, it is essential that you keep yourself well-informed of the current events of your selected country.

It is the intent of this guide to assist independent study students with pre-departure questions and concerns and to offer guidance where possible. Use the navigation bars at the left to view important information about safety, travel, packing, and traveling abroad.

## CONGRATULATIONS!

You have made the decision to study abroad and are now in the midst of preparing for a journey of personal and intellectual discovery. First and foremost, we want to commend you for making the decision to take on this exciting opportunity. There is no better way to learn about the world and people who share it than by first-hand experience. Understanding more about others is, perhaps, one of the greatest contributions one can make towards a more peaceful world.

It is safe to say that it would be nearly impossible for us to prepare you for every single situation that you may confront while you are abroad. Experienced travelers will agree that unexpected situations will arise and that you will have to learn to handle them with confidence and savvy. Our goal is to ensure that you have the tools and resources to be a well-informed traveler and that you have taken into consideration the necessary steps in planning for your sojourn abroad.

Unknown variables have a tendency to make things very exciting for some and may create anxiety for others. Just remember, you are not alone! There are over 191,000 US students studying abroad each year. Of those, nearly 800 are from GVSU.

While you may not have control over what happens to you, you do have control over how you react to any given situation. Consider putting the following into practice:

- Keep a positive attitude
- Maintain flexibility
- Be open to new experiences, ideas, and ways of living
- Avoid making judgments
- Be respectful and conscientious
- Learn tolerance
- Be patient
- Be prepared
- Be aware
- HAVE FUN!

### Pre-Departure Timeline

NEXT STEPS:	Summer deadlines	Fall deadlines	Winter deadlines
<input type="checkbox"/> <b>Apply for a passport if you have not already done so.</b> Passport applications are available at the Padnos International Center, major post offices, and online at: <a href="http://travel.state.gov/">http://travel.state.gov/</a> . Passports take many weeks to process, so apply now. If you already have a passport, make sure that it is valid for at least 6 months <b>beyond</b> your return to the U.S. <i>If you are not a U.S. citizen, please apply for a passport through the embassy of your country of citizenship.</i>	<b>IMMEDIATELY</b>	<b>IMMEDIATELY</b>	<b>IMMEDIATELY</b>
<input type="checkbox"/> <b>Begin making arrangements for a GVSU professor to supervise your independent study and issue credits.</b> Either your current academic adviser and/or department head is a good place to start making inquiries. After arrangements have been made, you may register for the appropriate independent study course. The GVSU supervisor will usually ask to see our independent study description and information on your placement site. Arrange to meet earlier so that you can discuss your plans, arrange for coursework and credits, or find another supervisor if necessary.	<b>PRIOR TO MARCH 15</b>	<b>SPRING SEMESTER</b>	<b>OCTOBER</b>
<input type="checkbox"/> <b>Schedule an appointment with Elena Selezneva</b> <a href="mailto:seleznee@gvsu.edu">seleznee@gvsu.edu</a> . Make sure that you bring all information about your independent study to this meeting. Also remember to bring faculty form(s) signed by your advisor(s), as well as a course syllabus. This meeting is required and serves to ensure the validity of your chosen program, as well as verify proper documentation for GVSU approval of your course of study. Link to the form:	<b>IMMEDIATELY</b>	<b>IMMEDIATELY</b>	<b>IMMEDIATELY</b>

<input type="checkbox"/> <b>Login to</b> <a href="https://secure.gvsu.edu/oasis/">https://secure.gvsu.edu/oasis/</a> to complete the application. On the left side of your screen you will see the list of “Required Forms,” to complete. Also, please bring photocopies of these documents to the Padnos International Center, 130 LOH <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Photocopy of your health insurance card</li> <li>• Photocopy of your passport (picture page)</li> <li>• Photocopy of your ISIC CARD</li> </ul>	<b>IMMEDIATELY</b>	<b>IMMEDIATELY</b>	<b>IMMEDIATELY</b>
<input type="checkbox"/> <b>Apply for your visa (if you need one)</b> , to be allowed entry into your host country. Check with the embassy of your host country to verify the timeline for visa applications.	<b>MARCH</b>	<b>JUNE - JULY</b>	<b>OCTOBER</b>
<input type="checkbox"/> <b>Review Financial Aid Information:</b> You <b>MUST</b> complete the summer application for financial aid if you wish to be considered for aid. This is available through the Financial Aid Office’s website. You must also have filed a FAFSA. Students must be enrolled for at least 6 credits during Spring/Summer to be eligible for Financial Aid. If your program’s course is only 3 credits, you will need to register for another course during that period to be eligible for the maximum financial aid award. If you enroll for six, but drop three, your award will be readjusted. If you only register for three, alternative loans may be available to you. For further inquiries regarding your Financial Aid, email Bonnie Visser at <a href="mailto:visserb@gvsu.edu">visserb@gvsu.edu</a>	<b>PRIOR TO MARCH 15</b>	<b>PRIOR TO MARCH 15</b>	<b>OCTOBER</b>
<input type="checkbox"/> <b>Attend pre-departure meetings organized by the Padnos International Center.</b> *These meetings are required and cannot be re-scheduled.	<b>ONGOING</b>	<b>ONGOING</b>	<b>ONGOING</b>
<input type="checkbox"/> <b>Take these documents with you to your destination country:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Information on passing through Customs</li> <li>• Handbook</li> <li>• Passport</li> <li>• Visa (if necessary)</li> <li>• Health insurance documentation</li> </ul>			

## 6 - 12 MONTHS PRIOR TO DEPARTING FOR YOUR INDEPENDENT STUDY

1. Set up a meeting with GVSU faculty member(s) who will supervise your independent study. The faculty member(s) will need to complete a form for you. (LINK)
2. Set up an appointment with Elena Selezneva: [seleznee@gvsu.edu](mailto:seleznee@gvsu.edu)
3. Apply for independent study abroad through GVSU. Check online at [www.gvsu.edu/studyabroad](http://www.gvsu.edu/studyabroad) for application deadlines. Link for the application process: <https://secure.gvsu.edu/oasis/>
4. Apply for a passport.
5. Research entry requirements (visa) for the host country. You will not need to apply until 90-120 days prior to departure, but it is good for you to read what the requirements are for entry into the host country and to become familiar with the visa application instructions. For a link to entry requirements visit the website of the Embassy or Consulate that has jurisdiction over your place of permanent residence. For countries that require an FBI background check, please note that this process could take 8-12 weeks.

6. Complete your Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) for the year you plan to be abroad. FAFSA's priority application deadline is March 1. For additional information, contact the Financial Aid Office at (616) 331-3234 or visit their website at [www.gvsu.edu/financialaid](http://www.gvsu.edu/financialaid).

\*Summer study abroad students must also complete the Spring/Summer Application for Financial Aid which will be available after March 22.

## **DUE IMMEDIATELY AFTER YOU RECEIVE GVSU ACCEPTANCE IN OASIS**

1. Read your GVSU acceptance letter (this will be emailed to you via OASIS).
2. Apply to your host university/organization, if applicable. Most students will first apply to GVSU and will then be invited to apply to their host university for final approval.
3. Check your OASIS Message Center often. PIC will be posting important information through OASIS on a regular basis.
4. Complete the "post-acceptance" Study Abroad Expense Form available in OASIS.
5. Submit separate faculty forms, if you are registering for classes with multiple GVSU professors.
6. Make arrangements for someone back at home to assist you with issues that arise while you are abroad. We recommend that you consider completing a Power of Attorney form in order to give someone the right to act on your behalf while you are gone. You can obtain a copy of the Power of Attorney form by logging into your OASIS account and visiting the Post Acceptance section. This form does need to be notarized. PIC offers Notary Public Services.
7. Research your host country. Below are a few recommended links to help you familiarize yourself with the countries that you plan to visit:
  - o The Nations Online Project is a portal of gateways to the countries, cultures and nations in the world, a reference directory and a destination guide. It was created "to improve cross-cultural understanding and global awareness through information." In addition to country-specific physical, demographic, and cultural information, you can view current news from international newspapers, as well as local information from various regions abroad: <http://www.nationsonline.org/>
  - o The World Factbook from the CIA provides information on the history, people, government, economy, geography, communications, transportation, military, and transnational issues for 267 world entities. The ability to compare multiple demographic and statistical figures between several countries is an additional feature of this site: <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/index.html>
  - o The BBC offers full profiles that provide an instant guide to history, politics and economic background of countries and territories, as well as information on key institutions. Also included are audio and video clips from the BBC archives: [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/country\\_profiles/default.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/country_profiles/default.stm)
  - o The Library of Congress website provides country profiles, as well as useful links to current information and news: <http://www.loc.gov/law/help/guide/nations.php>

- GVSU subscribes to CultureGrams, which can be found at the following link <http://www.gvsu.edu/library/databases.htm>. Click on the “CultureGrams” database, then on “World Edition,” and then locate the country of your choice on the map.

## **DUE 60 - 90 DAYS PRIOR TO DEPARTURE**

1. Apply for a visa (if necessary). Visa application procedures vary by country. PIC recommends you look at the application instructions from the Consulate of the host country you will study in at least 3 months prior to your departure so you can inform yourself of what paperwork is required and how long it may take to apply for a visa to be processed.
2. Attend a required Pre-Departure Study Abroad Orientation Meeting through PIC. You will receive information in OASIS on the orientation dates and times available.
3. Register online for your classes.
4. Complete the GVSU Health Information Form in OASIS under the Post Acceptance section.
5. Provide PIC with a copy of your Passport Information Page. If your host country requires a visa for entry, PIC will also need a copy of your visa.
6. Purchase the International Student Identity Card (ISIC). Cards are available through GVSU’s Record’s Office or online at [www.isic.org](http://www.isic.org). (OPTIONAL)
7. Verify receipt of financial aid checks - Spring/Summer participants: Please check your Program Start Date in OASIS if you are expecting to receive aid from GVSU.
  - If your Program Start Date in OASIS is before May 23, you will automatically receive your financial aid refund check on or around April 22.
  - If your departure date in OASIS is after May 23, you will receive your financial aid on or around May 20.

### Early Financial Aid Checks - Fall/Winter Participants:

- If your Program Start Date in OASIS is on or before August 5 for Fall/Winter – see a Financial Aid Counselor for special arrangements.
  - If your Program Start Date in OASIS is between August 6 – August 31– your financial aid refund check will automatically be issued to you on or around August 1.
  - If your Program Start Date in OASIS is September 1 – September 15– your financial aid refund check will automatically be issued to you on or around August 26.
  - If your Program Start Date in OASIS is after September 15 – your financial aid refund check will be available on or around September 9.
8. Make arrangements to get immunization shots. For information on recommended immunizations for the country you will be studying in, visit the Center for Disease Control at [www.cdc.gov](http://www.cdc.gov). If you have questions about the immunizations you should be getting, please contact your primary care physician or visit the County Health Department.
    - Ottawa County: <http://www.co.ottawa.mi.us/healthcomm/health/Imms.htm>
    - Kent County: <http://www.accesskent.com/Health/HealthDepartment/Immunizations/immun.htm>

- o State of Michigan: [http://www.michigan.gov/mdch/0,1607,7-132-2942\\_4911\\_4914---.00.html](http://www.michigan.gov/mdch/0,1607,7-132-2942_4911_4914---.00.html)

### **DUE 30 - 60 DAYS PRIOR TO DEPARTURE**

1. Pay all charges posted to your GVSU student account. This includes any parking fees, library fines, tuition, program fees, or other university charges. If you fail to pay the balance due, you may be dropped from your classes.
2. Enter your flight details into your OASIS account. Do not secure your airfare until your independent study plans are firm AND after you have confirmed travel dates.
3. Develop your packing list of items you will need to take abroad.
4. Make arrangements for an absentee ballot, if you will be abroad during an election cycle and you wish you to vote. For additional information, contact your local County Board of Elections or County Clerk's Office.
5. Review the U.S. State Department website for important travel, health and safety information: <http://travel.state.gov>.

### **DUE 1 - 2 WEEKS PRIOR TO DEPARTURE**

1. Register your trip with the US State Department by visiting the web at <http://travel.state.gov>.
2. Secure confirmation on your in-country contact information (i.e. address, phone number, onsite contact person). Note: some Embassies/Consulates require proof of housing much earlier in the process. If you need a visa and need to show proof of housing, you may need to prepare this information much earlier.
3. Notify your credit card company and bank to inform them of your planned travel overseas. Where credit cards are accepted, Visa and Mastercard are accepted universally; and American Express is accepted in fewer situations. Keep in mind that credit cards may not be accepted in developing countries or in countries with transitioning economies. Also, even in highly developed countries, credit cards may not be as widely accepted as they are in the U.S. You may also have difficulty using a credit card outside of major cities or in small shops. It is very important that you research your destination for information on the availability of these services. In some cases, when an international transaction takes place, the credit card company immediately responds to get verification that purchases are being made by the card owner. There have been cases where credit card companies have blocked the card for purchase transactions until verification has been made. In order to avoid any inconveniences, contact the company in advance.
4. Photocopy all of your important documents and cards that you will be taking with you (i.e. copy of your passport, copy of all credit/debit cards you will take, copy of your visa (if you have one), copy of your ISIC or health insurance information, copy of your flight itinerary, in-country contact person, etc.). Prepare a folder for the person at home who will serve as your main contact in the event that your information is lost or stolen.
5. Discuss an emergency plan with your family. If there is a natural disaster or some other critical incident that takes place in your host country or city, please discuss what the plan will be to get information back home regarding your health and safety. Please keep in mind that during emergencies, most phone lines are overloaded. We recommend you look at alternative communication methods such as an email back home. If you have access to a cell phone, you may consider using this as a back-up if phone lines are accessible.

**\*Note:** PIC also recommends that at least one of your emergency contacts have a valid passport in the event of an emergency.

6. Discuss a plan for when you will call home after you arrive in your host country. Your contacts at home will want to hear from you right away. If you do not establish a plan or you do not follow that plan, it does create stress for those back home. It is possible that you may not have easy access to a phone within the first 24-48 hours. We have also heard from students that their calling cards did not work and they needed to find calling cards in their host country. Please inform your family that the phone systems will be different and you may not have immediate access or it may take a day or two to figure out how to use the system. Many programs will make sure that students can contact home within the first day, but this is not always possible. Please give your family your in-country contact information so they can call you directly once you have arrived in your host country.

## Preparing for Departure

*"Don't go to the fishpond without a net." - Japanese proverb*

### "Perfect Strangers": Being a Good Guest

Regardless of how you personally identify yourself, it is important to understand that you are an ambassador of the United States and GVSU when you are abroad. Individuals from the host culture may use you as a basis for making judgments about the U.S. culture. It is important to be respectful and well-behaved at all times.

How can you make a good impression? Here are a few tips:

- Be respectful, courteous, and mindful that you are a member of a group, a guest in someone else's home, school or country, and a representative of a school, state, and nation.
- Be a good student. Attend all classes, do your homework carefully and diligently, and show respect to your professors.
- Show a genuine interest in the host country. Learn as much as you can before your departure about the country to which you are going, and continue to ask questions after your arrival.
- Avoid expressing negative opinions or generalizations about the host country. Seek to understand without judging.
- If you are studying in a non-English-speaking country, try to learn as much of the language as possible.
- If you are studying in an English-speaking country, be sensitive to differences in dialect.

**Be well informed about the current events happening in the U.S., Michigan, and even your hometown. As you meet new friends and make acquaintances, you will be asked about a variety of issues related to U.S. culture, politics, history, geography, and social environments. Being versed in a variety of areas will enhance your experience in building connections.**

## HEALTH CARE

1. Be sure to know who to contact in the event of an emergency while abroad and remember to pack the GVSU Emergency Assistance information.
2. Thoroughly review the information from the Center for Disease Control: <http://wwwnc.cdc.gov/travel/> and the Consular Information Sheet(s): [http://travel.state.gov/travel/cis\\_pa\\_tw/cis\\_pa\\_tw\\_1168.html](http://travel.state.gov/travel/cis_pa_tw/cis_pa_tw_1168.html) for the countries that you will be visiting.

3. Make certain that you understand that the availability of some prescription medications may be limited in other countries. In these cases it is best to bring an ample supply of medications that you are currently taking to last for the duration of time that you will be abroad. Also make sure that you check with your host country's Embassy for information on any restrictions that may apply regarding bringing prescription medications into the country. It is a good idea to schedule appointment with your regular physician(s) and dentist before leaving. This is especially true if you will be away for an extended period of time.  
IMPORTANT: Always pack medications in your carry-on luggage. DO NOT put prescription medication in your checked luggage.
4. Be sure to have a copy of your prescription(s), in case you do run out of medication while abroad, (including information on the generic equivalent) and a letter from your physician describing the medication you will be carrying (including how much you should have and what it is for).
5. Be aware of the recommended immunizations for all of the countries in which you will be traveling. If there are immunizations that are required, it is extremely important to plan several months in advance for these, as some vaccinations are given in stages over the course of several weeks. All vaccinations should be recorded in the International Certificate of Vaccination (which is a booklet distributed by the World Health Organization and available from most physicians and county health departments). Several countries do require proof of immunizations prior to entry, in which case you will need to present the International Certificate of Vaccination.
6. Check your records to ensure that you have, along with regional diseases such as malaria, already received all routine immunizations for tetanus, diphtheria, measles, mumps, rubella, and polio, and that these immunizations are up-to-date.
7. Make arrangements to meet with a health care professional to discuss any questions or concerns that you may have relating to required or recommended immunizations.
8. Review your health insurance policy carefully and understand what levels of coverage you do have in the event of illness or injury overseas. Also explore the limitations that may apply to this policy and consider supplemental plans that are available as options to your current plan.

## LEGALITIES AND CUSTOMS

1. Understand that you are subject to the laws of all the countries in which you will be visiting.
2. Understand that you are subject to the laws and customs with regard to alcohol and drug use in all countries that you will be visiting.
3. Be aware that the sexual mores and legal and illegal practices may be different in the countries that you will be visiting than there are in the U.S.
4. Understand that, as an American citizen, if you are caught engaging in illegal activity while abroad, there is little that GVSU or the US Government can do to assist you.
5. Review cultural information for the region in order to familiarize myself with significant differences and aspects that I may encounter while abroad.

## DIET

1. Know what kinds of foods are typical of the region(s) you plan to visit.

2. Be aware of the quality of the drinking water in the region and plan to take necessary precautions for disinfecting contaminated water, if necessary.
3. Understand that, at times, a strict vegetarian or other diet may be difficult to accommodate and plan accordingly for this possible difficulty.

## PACKING SUGGESTIONS

### Carry-on luggage:

- Passport/travel documents
- Airline ticket
- Money (in a money belt or neck wallet)
- Address book/phone numbers
- A change of clothes
- Toiletries (toothbrush, toothpaste, soap, shampoo, comb/brush, sunscreen, moisturizers, deodorant, tissues, tampons, razor, etc.)
- Medication and copies of the original prescription
- First-aid kit (aspirin, Imodium AD, bandages)
- Eyeglasses/sunglasses/contact lens and cleaning/saline solution
- Luggage lock and tags
- Umbrella
- Food for snack
- Camera

### Checked luggage:

- Comfortable walking shoes!!!
- Flip-flops or “shower shoes”
- Clothes: the ideal clothing for travel can be hand-washed, layered, “dressed up” or “dressed down”
- Pocket calculator
- Books, guides, maps, and travel journal
- Battery-operated alarm clock
- Contraceptives
- Adapter and/or voltage converter
- Gifts

**Be aware of the current restrictions surrounding airline travel. All airlines have strict weight and baggage limits, and fees can be very expensive if you have additional and/or heavy luggage. Also take note that items placed in your carry-on are particularly restricted. For weight and bag restrictions contact your airline, and for current information about prohibited items see: <http://www.tsa.gov/travelers/airtravel/prohibited/permitted-prohibited-items.shtm>**

## JET LAG

Jet lag is a common ailment travelers experience when changing time zones rapidly. You may find that you will want to go to bed during the late afternoon or early evening hours and you will want to be awake during the middle of the night. It will likely take a couple of days to fully adjust to the time at your study abroad destination. It is in your best interest to try to adjust as quickly as possible. Here are some tips:

- Try to adjust to your destination time-zone as soon as possible, even at the moment you board the plane
- Try to get a good night sleep the night before you are due to leave and sleep on the airplane.

- Avoid taking naps in the middle of the day. Try to stay awake until the local bedtime. This may mean that you will need to stay awake for an extended period of time.
- Spend time outdoors in order to adjust to the day cycle. Body rhythms are regulated by food and sunlight, and being outdoors will help with the transition.
- Drink plenty of water and avoid alcohol, coffee, or other dehydrating drinks on the plane.
- Walk and do stretching exercises on the plane
- Avoid eating between meals for the first week or so.

## WHEN YOU ARE ABROAD

1. Check your OASIS regularly. We may be sending you important announcements from time to time that you will not want to miss. If your contact information changes, please make sure we are notified or you may not receive important information.
2. We ask that you stay in contact with Elena Selezneva ([seleznee@gvsu.edu](mailto:seleznee@gvsu.edu)) at least once a week while you are abroad and alert us of any problems you might be having or highlights you would like to share!
3. If you are planning to be overseas during the Winter semester, it is important that you pay close attention to important deadlines that take place during this time. For example:
  - Priority consideration for filing the FAFSA is March 1st. If you plan to attend GVSU during the next academic year, you will not want to miss this deadline or you may jeopardize your ability to obtain Federal Financial Aid.
  - Tax Returns are due April 15th (check government websites for details and forms)
  - Applying for Graduation if you are in your last semester at GVSU.
  - Housing sign-up. If you are planning to live on-campus once you return from study abroad, you will not want to miss the priority deadline!
  - Class registration. Students are allowed to sign-up for classes for the following academic year in March. If you are planning to return to GVSU, you will want to register for your classes as soon as possible. If you need assistance with classes that require a permit, please contact our office and we will help you get connected to the correct person that can assist you with your request.
  - Graduate program applications. Most graduate programs seek applications between January – May. If you are graduating and interested in graduate school, research the deadlines well in advance.
  - Important tests (MCAT, LSAT, GRE). Most of these tests are offered around the globe, but they all require advanced registration. In order not to miss important testing dates, research this in advance!

## Culture Shock... what is it?

The anxiety, frustration, feelings of alienation and/or loss of control that occurs when one is placed into a culture that is different from the comfort and familiarity of one's own environment. Culture shock, in part, results from the perceived loss of the accustomed habits and symbols of social interaction of our respective homeland(s). This shock is then often intensified when the void created by the absence of routine habits and symbols of home is filled with divergent customs, behaviors, and traditions of the host country.

- Living in the midst of a new culture, especially if it is your first time, can be a very exciting and intellectually stimulating experience. However, it can also be extremely frustrating!
- Participation in a study or internship abroad program means that you will not be visiting your host country as merely a tourist. You will be involved in a rare opportunity to become acquainted with another culture from within.
- Although should not force yourself to cast away your own (American) identity, you do need to be prepared to adapt some of your thoughts and behavior to the customs and expectations of your host country. Much of this adaptation comes from being aware of some of the similarities and differences between your own cultural background and the cultural features of your host country.
- Remember to remain open to these differences, maintain respect of others' values and opinions, and refrain from pre-judgment of the various idiosyncrasies that you are sure to encounter.
- It is completely normal to undergo emotional extremes as you adapt to new surroundings and a culture that might be very different from your own.
- Upon arrival, you will probably experience an initial period of excitement or euphoria as you settle into your new surroundings. This can be followed by a sudden emotional "crash," where you might feel overwhelmed, confused or frustrated.
- Feelings of loss of control or intense homesickness may also occur, and these feelings can be intensified by the lingering effects of jetlag.
- Even if you believe you are fluent in your host country's language, the constant exposure to the language may prove to be a daunting experience for you, particularly if this is the first time you have been fully immersed within the language on a daily basis.
- Although some experience culture shock as a delayed reaction, and some do not feel it affects them significantly at all, culture shock is an inevitable part of moving from one country to another.
- As you try to adjust to your new environment, it is important to be aware of the role that your outlook and attitude will play in your time abroad. This is particularly true for your interactions with other people.
- Communication breakdowns, whether they are language or culturally based, can highlight and intensify feelings of culture shock. Your reaction and attitude towards such moments can influence

the extent to which you successfully adjust to your new environment, as well as shape how you will perceive others from your host country.

- The key is keeping an open mind to cultural differences, and to remain flexible in your views of those who you encounter. This also means refraining from the tendency to judge someone or something that is different as merely inferior, and to cast aside stereotypes that you may already hold before your arrival.
- You will be much better prepared to deal with culture shock by researching your host country before your departure from the U.S. This will not only provide you with a better understanding of the customs and traits of your host country, but should also help you adapt to varying aspects such as etiquette, social behavior, and “unwritten rules” that govern daily life.
- The more you do prior research, the better prepared you will be to compare and evaluate the diverse perspectives that you are sure to come across. However, regardless of the time and effort that you do choose to put into pre-departure preparation, you will inevitably experience some level of culture shock.

### **Symptoms of culture shock:**

- Loneliness, sadness, or overt feelings of loss
- Lack of confidence, particularly in social settings
- Constant feelings of insecurity, and deep fears of the unknown
- Rapidly developing unfounded stereotypes about the host country and culture
- Marked changes in sleep patterns: either heightened insomnia or sleeping too much
- Excessive preoccupation with your own health
- Obsessive concerns about the cleanliness of everything that is different or strange
- Noticeable changes in temperament, feeling depressed or “trapped”
- Over idealization of your home country, or constant criticism of the new host country
- Excessive longing to be “back home,” to be with close friends or family
- Inability to solve simple everyday problems, feeling unproductive
- Feeling overwhelmed by the lack of the familiar, and feeling confined by everything new
- Overly questioning your own identity, feeling disoriented and lost
- Difficulty with comprehension of time, even after the effects of jet-lag are over
- Irritability, especially in social settings, leading to a desire to “hibernate” and close yourself off from social interactions
- Exaggerated anxiety or nervousness when meeting new people or going to a new place
- Lack of desire to learn about the host country and its people
- Irrational fears of being robbed, cheated, or physically harmed by people from the host country
- Extreme desire to associate only with people from your own culture, or spending excessive time with people back home via e-mail, telephone, or social networks

## Stages of culture shock:

- **Honeymoon phase:** For many, this stage can last for several weeks. During this stage you are likely to be fascinated by everything new, enjoy the culinary and cultural differences, and take great pleasure in meeting new people. Frequently, people view the host country and culture positively, sometimes even to the point of considering it superior to the home country. This is a time filled with constant observations and a period of discovery. Although you may experience some exhaustion from all the excitement, especially if you are also immersed in a new language, you will likely be optimistic in your day-to-day encounters.
- **Mediation phase:** during this period you are likely to quickly identify the social and cultural differences between your home country and your host country. The initial excitement that you experienced now gives way to increased feelings of frustration or even anger. You may experience increased irritability, and you may find yourself focusing too much on everything that appears odd or abnormal. Overall optimism can be replaced by unchecked pessimism in your daily encounters. You may become very impatient, quick to criticize, and feel claustrophobic. Homesickness and feelings of loneliness can set in, as well as an overwhelming desire for solitude in order to “escape” from the new culture. Social interaction can be perceived negatively during this period, particularly if there are language barriers. Many experience disorientation and lack of motivation and/or self-esteem during this phase, as they make attempts to negotiate the familiar with the new. It is important to maintain a high degree of self-awareness during this phase, as it is a period in which one can become bogged down with anxiety and lose a sense of purpose.
- **Adjustment phase:** depending upon your own outlook and the ways in which you choose to view your host culture, this stage is marked by the knowledge of what you have learned and experienced thus far. Things and circumstances that may have irritated or angered you in the prior stage may now suddenly humor you. You will now be more likely to recognize differences without instantly judging them as merely inferior. Day-to-day activities are now, hopefully, becoming routine, and you are likely to have developed new friends or acquaintances by this time. Feelings of being completely overwhelmed are gradually replaced with a sense of control, as you learn to accept things that you cannot change.
- **Acceptance stage:** by this point you focus much more attention on the time you have remaining in the host country. You learn not to spend too much time being preoccupied with the differences that you encounter, and you may even begin to embrace some cultural aspects that you formerly rejected. The experience of living in a foreign country is deemed as a unique experience, and your desire shifts toward making the most of your time there. Integration of cultural differences with aspects of your home culture becomes easier, as you recognize how your own identity fits within your host culture.

## Some tips to alleviate culture shock:

- Avoid expecting things to be as you have them at home. Instead, learn to appreciate the differences that you face each day.

- Develop the practice of active listening and observing, versus simply seeing and hearing passively.
- Do not allow the variations in social differences to get on your nerves. Even if you are staying for a year, this is not long enough for these differences to upset the way you may end up reflecting upon the entire experience someday.
- Remember that you are indeed a guest, but avoid being only a tourist.
- Never judge an entire country by a prior negative experience you may have had.
- Seek advice from others who have already had a stay in your host country, but be suspicious of overt pessimism.
- Do not take everything so seriously that you forget how to laugh at the comedy that sometimes happens with life abroad.
- Maintain a spirit of humility, and develop a sincere desire to meet and talk with the local people.
- Avoid the constant “refuge” of associating exclusively with Americans, or American foods, activities, media, etc. Be brave enough to break away from what you already know and are accustomed to in order to discover new things.
- Be careful not to make promises to others, or yourself, that you cannot keep.
- Be aware of the different concepts of time and punctuality, social etiquette, clothing and appearance, and seek to adapt yourself to some degree rather than stubbornly standing out.
- It is fine to be grateful that you may be an American, but do not feel compelled to constantly broadcast this wherever you go. Also, NEVER feel that you are superior to someone else based solely on your citizenship.
- Learn to respect even the differences and social customs that you do not like. Find humor in them rather than exercise open criticism
- Do not spend your time constantly on the computer or telephone in order to maintain contact with people at home. Do this in moderation, because you did not plan a period abroad only to end up spending it “virtually” back in the U.S.
- Devote some time each day to reflect upon your experiences and interpersonal encounters. Ask yourself how you behaved and reacted, and do not be afraid to give yourself an honest look in the mirror. Keep track of your progress, note the situations that gave you pain or pleasure, avoid repressing your feelings completely, and reward yourself once in a while for your success in acclimation to a new country and culture.
- Find a mentor in your host country. This could be another American who successfully negotiated their way through the obstacles of cultural adjustment, or it could be a host national who already experienced a period of time living abroad.

### **The return home: “reverse culture shock”**

Particularly if you had a lengthy or difficult time acclimating yourself to your host country, it may come as a surprise to you that many people find the re-adjustment process to life in America to be even more difficult. You will naturally expect things to be as you left them, and it will often take considerable time for you to accept and adapt to changes that may have occurred while you were away. Friends or family members may have moved, a familiar store or restaurant may have closed, and social interactions might now appear bland when you compare them to your experiences abroad.

You are sure to encounter difficulties conveying the personal or emotional facets of your time abroad to those who were not there with you. You might find yourself impatient and frustrated in such situations, as

you perceive a lack of excitement in how others view your stories from abroad. Almost on a reverse scale, some of the same stages of cultural adjustment through which you moved while abroad, you now find yourself facing all over again. Accept this as normal, and realize that many people experience this after a time overseas.

It is important to acknowledge the fact that your view of the world has been changed by this experience. Often people and things that now appear different to you might simply be due to a change in your own perceptions. Remember to be patient with yourself and others as you readapt to life back in the U.S.

### **Tips:**

- Get involved with cultural and/or language groups on campus, and find avenues to talk about your overseas experience with other students.
- Volunteer your time to assist people who are new to the West Michigan area, whether these are international students on campus at GVSU, or off-campus in the larger community.
- Enroll in a foreign language course, or another class that builds upon aspects that you learned abroad.
- Participate in various international events on and off campus.
- Subscribe to a foreign newspaper, or keep track of current events in “your country” via online news sources.
- Seek out others who have shared in a similar experience abroad, and find out how they handled re-entry into American life.
- Join international organizations (Amnesty International, West Michigan World Affairs Council, Grand Rapids Sister Cities, African Community Center, Hispanic Center of Greater Grand Rapids, etc.
- Think back to how you adjusted to the cultural differences in your host country. Apply some of the strategies that were successful for you in becoming acclimated to the language and culture in a foreign country. Many of the strategies that worked for you abroad should now help with your return back to life in America.

### **UPON YOUR RETURN**

1. Bring in a CD of photos from your time abroad to PIC (optional).
2. Sign-up for PIC Corp to help future study abroad students during the pre-departure orientation. (optional). Email Elena Selezneva at [seleznee@gvsu.edu](mailto:seleznee@gvsu.edu) for details.
3. Sign-up to be a mentor to new international students. Contact Liz Smith at [smithliz@gvsu.edu](mailto:smithliz@gvsu.edu) for details (optional).
4. Padnos International Center has several Study Abroad Peer Advisor positions available each year. If you are interested in exploring work opportunities in our office, please contact Meaghann Myers for more information: [myersmea@gvsu.edu](mailto:myersmea@gvsu.edu)
5. Volunteer your time at a Padnos Study Abroad Fair. Each semester we host a Study Abroad Fair, which is a valuable opportunity for you to share your experience with other students who are interested in pursuing overseas study.