

# CULTURAL IMMERSION

The study abroad programs at Pitzer College and most other programs we recommend, provide ample opportunities for cultural immersion. They require adaptation. Wherever you go, we hope you will engage the local lifestyle, language, and culture as fully as possible, and begin to understand your hosts. Most programs provide experienced cross-cultural guidance as well as structured activities that facilitate interaction. Pitzer asks that you make the commitment to take those opportunities and follow that guidance when you participate in a study abroad program. Notice the word *commitment*. Immersion does not happen automatically. It takes a certain commitment over the course of the program— a mindfulness of why you came in the first place and faithfulness to that.

We expect you to move beyond passive observation to actual participation in the life of the host community. We ask you to meet the culture on its own terms and share the common experiences that make up the everyday lives of typical community members. We expect you to limit your daily living options to those available to typical members of the host community. This is hard work and requires a strong commitment on your part. We provide the structure and encouragement for cultural immersion, but you must choose between engaging the culture on its own terms and retreating to more convenient and familiar options.

It will be helpful for you to think about ways you can participate more fully in the life of your host family, university, and community. To get you started, here are some ideas that past students have come up with. Reflect on these and add your own. Refer to this during your program to make sure you are taking full advantage of the many opportunities for cultural immersion learning on your program.



## CULTURE LEARNING WORKSHOP

Log in to your study abroad portal to complete the on-line **What's Up with Culture: On-line Culture Learning Workshop** (time requirement - approximately 3-5 hours) prior to your departure for study abroad. Instructions for the on-line version of the Culture Learning Workshop

You are expected to work through Module 1 – from Section 1.1 through Section 1.7 of the on-line workshop at <http://www2.pacific.edu/sis/culture/>. You will get the most out of this workshop if you complete each of the exercises and read the explanations for your answers. Reading the Cultural Encounter and Critical Incident sections that are sprinkled throughout will provide additional insights. While there may not be an example from the country where you will study, you should be able to extract the concepts needed to develop useful skills for understanding your host culture. Once you have completed the full Module, please respond thoughtfully to the four essay questions, and submit them through your study abroad portal.

## STRATEGIES TO DEEPEN CULTURAL IMMERSION:

Ways to participate fully in the life of my host family:	Ways to participate fully in the local community where I am living:
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<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Help around the house</li> <li>• Run errands with your family</li> <li>• Play with the kids</li> <li>• Go out with host brothers or sisters, help with homework, read to them, go to school, share daily activities and ask about host family's life,</li> <li>• Shop for a meal, prepare and cook food, eat, and clean up together</li> <li>• Go to clinics or hospitals or local healers with host family</li> </ul> <p>Other strategies:</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Volunteer in social work agencies</li> <li>• "Just get out"</li> <li>• Visit local markets</li> <li>• Check out community theater groups</li> <li>• Get involved in sports</li> <li>• Take local transportation</li> <li>• Eat in restaurants frequented by locals</li> <li>• Go to church/temple/mosque</li> <li>• Participate in community activities</li> <li>• Go to local hangouts (park, restaurants, cafes), frequent the same path so you can get to know locals</li> </ul> <p>Other strategies:</p>
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## CULTURAL APPROPRIATENESS

To participate fully in a foreign lifestyle and culture you must learn to interact, communicate, and behave in ways that respect the cultural values of your hosts. This may require you to dress differently, eat new foods, or new quantities of food. You may need to change certain concepts of time, personal space, and privacy. You will certainly need to develop a new set of non-verbal behaviors. Most importantly, you will need to develop toleration and respect for many other things that you may not understand or cannot accept.

Committing oneself to cultural appropriateness is hard work but the rewards are considerable, and they last for a lifetime. The depth of your immersion experience and the character of the relationships you develop are dependent on your ability to make a serious attempt to understand and respect others. We believe that the quality of your learning experience is directly related to these efforts. We understand that some students have a greater natural capacity than others do. What matters is how well you can demonstrate your willingness to move further along a path towards cultivating culturally appropriate behavior.

These educational goals are reflected in the grading criteria of many programs. We believe that successful and appropriate participation in the local culture is just as much a demonstration of learning as a well-written paper or a top mark on an exam. If you want to do well, you need to understand and accept the cross-cultural challenges and responsibilities of participation in a study abroad experience.

## HIGHER CULTURAL SENSITIVITY

Sensitivity to another culture requires more than mastering rules of etiquette. These are important, but they cannot be learned in isolation from actual experience. The best way to prepare for upcoming cross-cultural encounters is to imagine the type of person you will attempt to be during the program. Pitzer expects a sustained commitment to developing and maintaining a higher level of cultural sensitivity. What does that mean? Consider the following three characterizations:

**The tourist level** – represented by the sentiment: "I am oblivious to the effects my actions have on locals, and never stop long enough to even question my behavior."

**The sojourner level** – represented by the attitude: "How can I continue to live my life, interact and behave the way I always have without offending my hosts?"

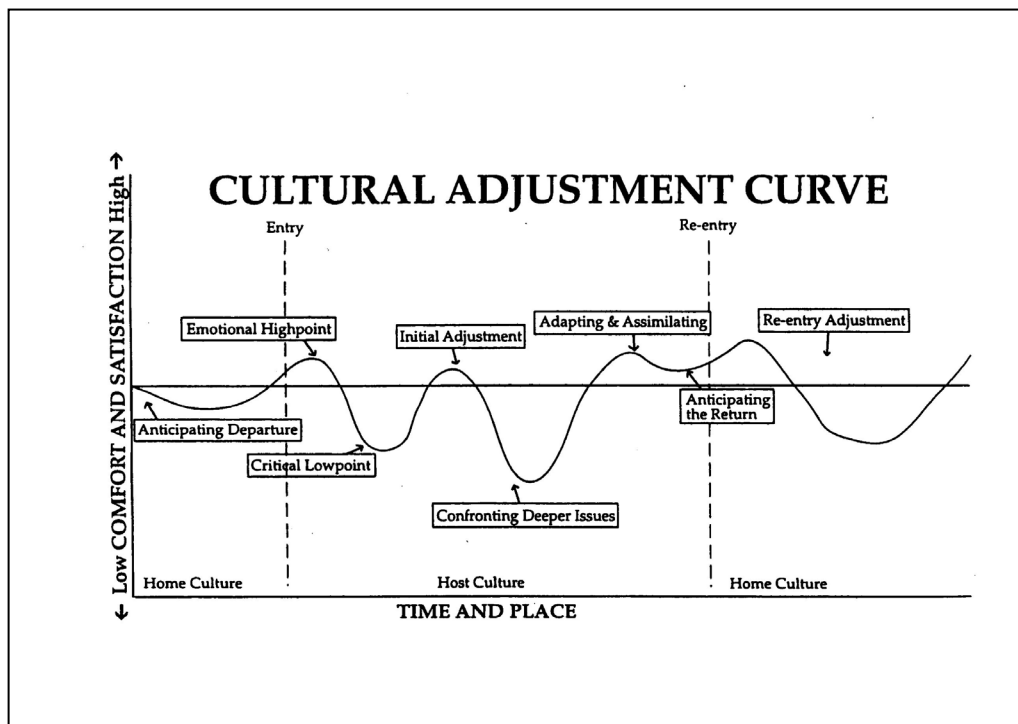
**A higher level** – represented by the question: “What must I change in order to show I respect the host culture’s values, facilitate meaningful relationships, and have a deeper more meaningful learning experience?”

When you are committed to being at the third level of awareness, it shows. If you do make an honest mistake, people will notice your respect for their culture and help you to learn from your cross-cultural blunders. Negotiating the always incomplete and ever-changing rules of etiquette becomes easier and more enjoyable when you bring to every encounter the recognition that there will be uncomfortable moments of miscommunication and misunderstanding. Humility and the willingness to change are the hallmarks of a higher level of cultural sensitivity.

Sustaining that sensitivity will result in a more mature awareness of your own values, and a stronger sense of self. Your willingness to change should lead you to sort through your own values. Respect for another culture will force you to struggle with your own. Persistent conscientious effort will enable you to eventually define a comfortable cultural boundary for yourself that neither compromises you nor hurts those with whom you live and learn. It is vitally important to realize that you do not need to discard your own core values to appreciate, and tolerate, the existence of opposing values in others. You will need to examine your values from a new perspective and be open to modifying them if the cross-cultural experience raises questions and concerns you had not previously considered, but Pitzer does not believe you should ever abandon who you really are. Our programs are journeys of self-discovery as much if not more than they are journeys into the lives and experiences of others.

## CULTURAL ADJUSTMENT

What we are trying to describe is often referred to as cultural adjustment, or acculturation. One recognized model of the process is the U-curve developed by Lysgaard in 1955.



The curve depicts your emotional state as you adjust to contact with another culture. You feel uneasy leaving friends and family, and a little anxious about stepping forward into the unknown. Once you arrive, and become familiar with your new surroundings, anxiety gives way to a euphoric feeling of excitement supported by a natural fascination with the exotic and different. This is an accomplishment within reach of any earnest tourist. You, however, are more than a tourist, and must go deeper into the culture. Here is where your difficulties really begin.

The very differences that excited and attracted you slowly begin to confuse and frustrate your attempts to function in the new culture. You begin to experience what is often referred to as “culture shock”: a characterization that became popular in the 1960’s and is still used today to refer to periods of emotional discomfort that are depicted as low points on Lysgaard’s U-graph. The use of the word “shock” is a bit misleading since it lends itself to the suggestion that these feelings are provoked by incidents that would not be so shocking with proper preparation. Consider the following hypothetical description taken from Craig Storti’s *The Art of Crossing Cultures* (While the stereotypes in the following passage are problematic, it does represent the kinds of frustrating incidents that many of our students, especially women, often experience in the host culture):

*Let’s conjure up a typical morning in the life of an expatriate development worker in Tunisia, and, to load the equation, let’s make her a woman. She enjoys a quiet breakfast in the sanctity of her home and then begins the drive to work. The streets are thronged with pedestrians, choked with donkey carts, and full of aggressive Tunisian drivers who take regular and prolonged solace in their car horns. She is alternately immobilized by all the confusion and driven to fits of frightening recklessness. She stops briefly at the post office, long enough to be intimidated by the throng of men pressed around the stamp seller’s window, and leaves without mailing her letters. At ten o’clock she reports for an appointment at the Ministry of Health and sits down to wait for the man she has come to see, assured by his secretary that he is due any minute. After forty-five minutes and several more assurances from the secretary, she leaves (and learns later that the man was out of town for the day and, further, knew that he would be when she pressed for the appointment). On her way back to her office, she stops to buy the International Herald Tribune and have a cup of coffee. The paper isn’t available, though the vendor assured her the day before it would be (God’s will, he shrugs), and she is harassed by several male customers as she tries to relax with her coffee.*

From the safe and comfortable confines of wherever you are reading this handbook, you are probably thinking that these kinds of incidents will not bother you. You are ready. However, imagine waking up to the expectation of similar incidents every day, you are abroad. Imagine facing these daily disappointments while suffering from the frequent intestinal and respiratory illnesses that often attend extended stays in foreign lands. Imagine not understanding most of the verbal and non-verbal communication attending these incidents, and the treatment of your illnesses. Imagine experiencing all these things alone, without the emotional support of family and friends. Are you ready? Can you be? Can anyone?

Culture shock is natural, it happens just as frequently to students in London and Sydney as it does for students in more exotic locales. It is a common experience for anyone making a serious attempt to adjust to another culture. Overt manifestations can range from mild irritability to deep psychological panic and crisis. It is often associated with feelings of resentment, estrangement, anger, hostility, indecision, frustration, sadness, loneliness, homesickness, and even physical illness. The person undergoing culture shock often vacillates between feeling angry with others for their lack of understanding and being filled with self-pity. It is much more than the simple shock of being confronted with unexpected behaviors.

Though it may seem like a liability, culture shock is beneficial. It presents an opportunity for one of the most meaningful types of learning. When you find yourself on the low point of the Lysgaard curve, your instinctive fight-or-flight response will lead you to three well-documented coping strategies. You may withdraw from the host culture, seek out the company of other expatriates, or project your discomfort onto members of the host culture, and see them as the source of your pain and suffering. All these responses end in failure. The way to overcome culture shock is both simple and challenging. You need to continue to participate in the host culture. Without continued participation your learning experience stops at the low point, and you fall off the curve altogether. Simple persistence will get you through to the next peak where you will be able to see your experiences differently. Over time the curve should flatten out, the emotional roller coaster should subside, and at the end of the journey, you will find a remarkably more mature person.

You may be hoping to avoid culture shock but if you do, you may not learn anything at all. Most experts believe that culture shock is a prerequisite for true cross-cultural effectiveness. Gary Weaver believes individuals who claim to have never experienced any form of culture shock probably did not have a genuine cross-cultural encounter. <sup>1</sup> Douglas Brown argues that failure here may affect language learning as well. His research suggests that adjustment through avoidance leads you through the low points with a psychology that weakens the drive for greater fluency. If you find a comfortable niche requiring minimal participation in the culture, the inevitable result is the acquisition of a stunted version of the language that meets minimal needs. Your speech remains grammatically fossilized and functionally inadequate. <sup>2</sup>

The low points are the most critical moments of your experience abroad. You must choose to remain involved in the new culture, to retreat into the expatriate, tourist, or foreign student community lifestyle. Learning how to recognize and check this impulse to retreat is essential. Program staff should be able to help. It is their responsibility to keep you in the game. They should create opportunities for interaction and pick you up when you fall. At the same time, however, they should insist you continue to confront your difficulties head on, and not lead you around them. Remember that you cannot overcome culture shock by thinking about how the other culture is different or even by reading about the other culture. The only way to successfully acculturate is by trial and error. You must make mistakes, misunderstand, and suffer embarrassment. Only then can you gradually learn to read the underlying cultural conditioning in yourself, and in others, which is the real source of all your troubles. Eventually, with effort, you will be able to interact successfully and appropriately.

## IMMERSION AND COMMUNITY INTEGRATION

### THE HOME STAY

Pitzer study abroad programs emphasize experiential learning through immersion into local cultures and communities, and an essential ingredient of this, wherever possible, is family stays. Family stays are much more than just a convenient solution to the room and board problem. They are an important dimension of the academic program designed to give you an opportunity to understand something of what it means to live in the host culture and deal with a range of issues important to the local community and the country.

In fact, family stays often become the focal point of our commitment to cultural immersion and appropriateness. They allow for fuller participation in community life and integration into the local culture on as many fronts as possible. Living with a family allows you to develop meaningful relationships with family members and neighbors who will vary in age, gender, ethnicity, and educational background. This compels you to give a human face to ideas and theories presented in the core course lectures and readings. Indeed, family stays allow you to feel the pulse of a community, to test and verify the assumptions offered by community agencies and governing bodies, and to explore issues from a variety of perspectives.

While family stays are one of the most effective tools for culture and language learning, they can also be a challenging dimension of a study abroad program (for both you and the people who host you). You are expected to make a commitment to building a relationship with your host family, to participate as fully as possible in their lives and to respect their habits, lifestyle, and values. This is hard work. It usually means making some significant changes in lifestyle and behavior for three to four months and forgoing much of the social life you may be accustomed to on your home campus. Nonetheless, most students who embrace this challenge realize that it results in an experience that would be

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<sup>1</sup> Weaver, Gary. R. 1993. "Understanding and Coping with Cross-Cultural Adjustment Stress." In R. Michael Page (ed.), *Education for the Intercultural Experience*. Yarmouth, ME: Intercultural Press.

<sup>2</sup> Brown, H. Douglas. 1991. *Principles of Language Learning and Teaching*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall.

impossible to have on campus (or even living alone, in an apartment in the community), and find it to be one of the most personally rewarding and academically valuable parts of the program.

## DORMITORY/APARTMENT STAYS

Most students on exchange will live in dormitories. Living spaces like dormitories are a wonderful opportunity to see firsthand how students in the host culture live. Use your observational skills to see how they use personal space, eat their meals, and approach their studies. As an intercultural learner, please remember that most learning will take place outside the classroom. Pay attention to those learning moments. Augment your observations by asking questions. It is smart to ask questions, it demonstrates your interest in culture and in your hosts. Read local news to hold your own conversations and agendas at the school. This will assist you in immersing yourself in the culture. To be able to maximize this learning environment you must be willing to suspend some of your beliefs and practices as you try to engage the “other”. It is not always easy but without it, there is no gain.

Pitzer College encourages you to engage in a sports club and/or any extracurricular activities that will help you integrate into a local community. Volunteer in a local school, in a retirement home or with another organization that allows you to meet people in the culture from different age groups, not just other students. Attend the local temple, church or mosque on a regular basis to connect with that aspect of your host culture. You are also encouraged to hang out more with locals and other international students rather than fellow Americans. This is because you desire to challenge your worldviews, think outside the box and truly approach the Pitzer educational objective of intercultural understanding.

## EXPECTATIONS FOR STUDENTS

- Do not treat the living space as just a place to eat and sleep, engage with those around you
- Do not invite others into the space until you have received permission
- Respect your host’s values, lifestyle, and customs, such as mealtimes, quiet times, use of TV, taste in music, appropriate dress, coming home at a reasonable time, smoking restrictions, appropriate language, conversational topics, etc. (*The question a student should ask here is not, “Will my family or roommate accommodate my needs for my lifestyle and my preferences?” Or even, “What is the most I can get away with and still not offend them?” But rather, “What can I do to better fit in with my host family/roommate and respect their needs and their lifestyle so that I can have a deeper, more meaningful relationship with them?”*)
- Students in host stays note that time with your host family will be limited. Commit to sharing as many meals with your family as possible. Notify your family ahead of time if you will not be there for meals.
- Take responsibility as a full member of the household, building, or room (this might include, depending on what is culturally appropriate, yard work, farming chores, washing dishes, cooking, babysitting, cleaning, etc.)
- Observe scrupulously the laws of your host country and community and the values of your family or roommate. Do not do anything that would embarrass, endanger, or hurt your host family or roommate.
- Be patient. It takes time and energy to make this work but hundreds of Pitzer students have participated in communities throughout the world and almost always unanimously agree that the rewards of building a meaningful relationship with a roommate or host family are worth the effort. In addition, while we cannot promise that you will form a lifelong friendship, although many do, you will have learned much more about the culture and at a deeper level than you expected.
- If you have any concerns about your home stay or roommate, talk to your program director early on.

## CULTURAL APPROPRIATENESS

All of culture is contested and, in a process of change. It is easy in any culture to find exceptions to the norm. We expect you to respect the cultural practices of the situation you are in, even as you engage in a critical exploration of how, by whom, in what context and to what extent certain aspects of the culture are being contested. We certainly do not want to enter your host family, for instance, having made pre-judgments, perhaps from certain readings, that certain of their cultural practices are oppressive to women. Rather, we want you to enter in with an open and non-judgmental attitude. Learn about the cultural practices of your host family, allow their values and beliefs to inform your own behavior as a gesture of respect, and in this context, explore from the host country perspective whether and to what extent a certain practice is being contested or is seen as oppressive. These two approaches to culture learning (critical analysis and respectful participation) are not incompatible.

Since there is such a diversity of cultural practices out there, initially, it will be difficult for you to know if behavior you observe is on the fringe or typical for the community you are in. It takes a while to figure this out. Early on, you should proceed with caution and let program staff and host families serve as guides and role models for cultural appropriateness. Later in the semester, as you commit to the process of culture learning, you will be more and more able to figure this out on your own.

## CULTURAL APPROPRIATENESS AND YOUR OWN CORE VALUES

A common question that students often struggle with is this: *Will a serious commitment to cultural appropriateness require me to compromise my own core values?* The answer is no. **You do not need to give up your own core values to appreciate and respect the existence of contrasting values in others.** Cultural appropriateness does not require us to do this, but it does require that we learn about and respect a different set of values in the way we behave and interact if we are guests in the host culture.

Your role as a student on this program is not to judge the host culture, especially not to judge it based on your own values, but to understand it based on its own beliefs and values and to honor these host culture values in the way you interact and behave. Again, you can do this without compromising your own core values. Cultural appropriateness is not a process of giving up or diminishing who we are, but of adding on.

“When you commit to cultural appropriateness, that is, when you are willing to see the world through the eyes of the host culture and reflect that in the way you behave and interact, you do not become less of an American, you become more of a human being.” *Cap Miller SJ - Anthropologist in Nepal who has conducted research on Jhaankris and on Decision Making in Village Nepal.*

Humility and the willingness to change are the hallmarks of a higher level of cultural sensitivity. Respect for the host culture and your willingness to change should lead you to sort through your own values and struggle with better understanding your own culture. Persistent conscientious effort will enable you to eventually define a comfortable cultural boundary for yourself that neither compromises you or offends those with whom you live and learn. It is vitally important to realize that you do not need to discard your own core values to appreciate and tolerate the existence of opposing values in others. You will need to examine your values from a new perspective and be open to modifying your behavior to accommodate host culture values, but **Pitzer does not believe you should ever abandon who you really are.** Our programs are journeys of self-discovery as much if not more than they are journeys into the lives and experiences of others.