Dear Families of Returning Study Abroad Students,

As your daughter returns from studying abroad, she may face unexpected challenges in readjusting to life in the United States. Students expect to go through culture shock when they go abroad, but they aren’t as prepared to go through culture shock again when they come home. Often they don’t realize how much they have changed and grown through their experiences abroad. Also, many returnees are still processing their experience and having a hard time understanding the readjustment process or expressing their feelings. I am writing to let you know that there are many of us at Meredith who are here to help your daughter make the transition back to the U.S. and campus life.

Each student will receive tips to help her readjust to life back into the United States as well as Meredith College. Each semester, the Office of International Programs will invite returning students to meet with us to talk about what it was like to be abroad and what it is like to be back on campus. In these meetings, we will offer further suggestions for ways to extend their meaningful international experiences, both on campus and in the Raleigh area and in their future endeavors. We will also seek to connect recent returnees with Meredith study abroad alumnae who have been back for a while to provide support and readjustment tips.

In the meantime, before your student returns to Meredith, you as a family have an important role to play. She may need you to listen to stories and look at photos—more than once—even if these stories don’t mean much and the photos are blurred. It is essential that you allow her to talk about what has been a very important time in her life. Living abroad is one of the most educational and exciting experiences of a lifetime, and it does bring change and challenges, even after the return home. However, our experience has taught us these are wonderful changes—more independence and self-assurance, a new curiosity for the larger world, and a confidence to handle whatever life sends her way. The best thing we can do is offer support, as I am sure you have done while she was abroad. We have enclosed some helpful tips for welcoming your daughter home from Bruce LaBrack and Peggy Pusch, leaders in the study abroad field.

Just as we try to help students readjust to life in the States and on campus, we are also here to help if you have any questions. Please free to call or email our office anytime. In the meantime, enjoy your daughter’s return. We look forward to the new knowledge and insights she will bring back to Meredith, and expect that she will be an even more interesting member of your family too!

Sincerely,
Meredith College Office of International Programs
PREPARING FOR RETURNING HOME
12 TIPS FOR WELCOMING RETURNEES HOME

We have also offered some additional information here to help your student better adjust once she returns home from her summer abroad.

1. Understand that ‘reverse culture shock’ is a real possibility and to recognize its symptoms so you can offer appropriate support to the returnees.

2. Realize that returning home is often not a predictable process and can be more stressful than the returnees or you anticipate. Be prepared to offer support long-distance as they anticipate coming home and especially after their return.

3. Understand that most returnees are, in some ways, different than they were before they left home. They may initially seem to seem to be “strangers.” It is hard to know what their experiences have meant to them and how they have changed. It may be necessary “renegotiate” your relationship with returnees but your history together will provide a basis for this process.

4. Be aware of your own expectations of the returnee. You may wish that they would just ‘fit back in’ but it is more helpful if you avoid forcing the returnee into old roles and relationships. Allow them space and time to readjust and reconnect.

5. Be conscious of all those things that have changed at home. Help returnees to understand what has taken place both in the society and among friends and family. Even if they have heard about these events, the impact at home may not have been obvious. You have much to tell them and they can tell you how events at home looked from their overseas location.

6. Avoid criticism, sarcasm, or mockery for seemingly odd patterns of behavior, speech or new attitudes.

7. Create opportunities for the returnees to express their opinions, tell their stories, show their pictures. Listen carefully and try to understand the significance of their overseas experiences. Seek to know what is important to them.

8. Acknowledge that all returnees experience some sense of loss. Strange as it may seem to others, returnees often grieve for what they have left behind. They may be missing overseas friends, a stimulating environment, the feeling of being special, experiencing greater freedoms or responsibilities, or special privileges.

9. Encourage the returnee to maintain personal and professional contacts with friends and institutions in the former host country(s). They will regret if they do not.

10. Offer to mark and celebrate the reentry for the returnees and those who stayed at home. Discuss their preferences for how and when to do so. Be careful of ‘surprise’ parties.

11. Expect some critical comparisons of culture and lifestyle. Keep your responses neutral. It can increase your chances to learn something important about the returnee and how their world view has changed. Don’t take their comments personally.

12. Make contact with people who have successfully gone through the experience of returning home and refer the returnee to them – it may help both you and the returnee through a difficult period of readaptation.

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