

LIVING ACROSS CULTURES

(slightly modified from the Dalhousie University International Student Handbook)

Now that you have left your home, family, friends and country, you will face many exciting and sometimes difficult challenges. This will be a time when you will encounter a new culture, meet people from many other countries, eat different foods, and cope with a different climate, to mention just a few of them. As you are about to engage in a cultural adventure, ask yourself how you can be prepared. If you have never been abroad before, or have never been to the host country you are about to visit, your first few days will most likely be very exhilarating and exciting, and may be a bit overwhelming too! This final section is intended to help introduce the concept of living across cultures – particularly for those who have never visited a “western” country before – and to provide steps for having a happy and successful summer at Dalhousie.

STAGES OF ADJUSTMENT

People typically go through a series of different stages when adjusting to a new culture:

- < *Honeymoon Period:* You will probably be fascinated and excited by everything new in your surroundings. International students are usually elated at being in a new culture at first.
- < *Culture Shock:* You are immersed in new problems: accommodation, transportation, food, language barriers, new friends. Fatigue may result from continuously trying to comprehend and use a new language. You may ask yourself, “Why did I come here?”
- < *Initial Adjustment:* You find problems such as accommodation and settling into classes are now manageable. Although you may not be perfectly fluent in the new language, basic ideas and feelings can be expressed.
- < *Mental Isolation:* After you have been away from your family and friends for a long period you may begin to feel lonely. Many international students still feel they cannot express themselves as well as they can in their native language. Frustrations and sometimes a loss of self-confidence result. Some international students are unable to move beyond this stage.
- < *Acceptance and Integration:* You have established a routine (i.e., classes, study, social life). You have a good level of comfort with the habits, customs, food and behaviour of people in the new culture. You feel comfortable with friends, colleagues and the new language.
- < *Return Anxiety, Re-entry Shock, Reintegration:* After having adjusted to and lived in the new culture for a long period of time, you must prepare to return home. This requires more adaptation and adjustment. Re-entry shock can be more difficult than the initial culture shock you experienced upon first arriving in the new culture.

(Adapted from resource material provided by the International Services Office, George Washington University, Washington, DC)

CROSS-CULTURAL SURVIVAL TIPS

Explore

Get a sense for the physical environment by exploring the campus and surrounding area. The evening walking tour scheduled for the first week, is an excellent way of doing this. If you chose to be linked with a local “host”, maybe you can explore further afield and get a sense of life beyond the campus.

Get a sense for the norms of behaviour

Observe people’s behaviour -- it can be fun to keep a record. How do they greet each other? How do they queue for a bus, or seat themselves on it? How do people behave in offices? How do people behave walking on the street? **BE SLOW TO JUDGE!**

Observe first and then find a “cultural informant” (someone who knows the culture) and then ask LOTS of questions. One of your best sources of cultural informants is the staff at the International Student and Exchange Services Office. They will be glad to answer ANY question you may have about anything. Talk to your host(s), or the Course Co-ordinator.

Go to Events Where You Can Meet People

The Course Co-ordinator will tell you about a range of activities and events which you can take part in over the summer. You may also want to explore events put on through various student organizations on campus and in the local community. **TALK TO THE PEOPLE YOU MEET!**

Read!

Reading local newspapers and books about Canadian culture is a great way of learning more about the country. The Reading Room of the Killam Library has a good selection of papers, and more than enough books to keep you going for two months!

CULTURE SHOCK TOOLBOX

Use these tools to help as you adjust to your new surroundings:

- Be a good listener. Be an active listener; look for non-verbal and verbal cues. Be patient and talk at a normal tone.
- Be clear and precise when asking and answering questions. Talk slowly and take your time, use simple terminology. Be patient.
- Smile when talking to people! It puts them at ease.
- Take some time to learn unusual phrases and expressions in the new language.
- Be aware and sensitive to the behaviour and feelings of those around you.
- Think about how people respond to you and take the time to think about how you respond to others.
- Observe and learn appropriate methods for meeting and greeting people in your new surroundings.
- Adopt local time observances. Be aware of class schedules and be on time!
- Be aware of personal safety issues, including emergency numbers, traffic flow patterns, travelling

- alone.
Observe/Ask/Respond.

Enjoy your new experiences!