PREPARING FOR ARRIVAL

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GENERAL DEPARTURE TIPS
(Adapted from the “Maximizing Study Abroad” guide)

Know Before You Go

How much do you know about the United States, where you will be living and working for a while?

It’s a good idea to do a little research before you go. Understanding things like U.S. history, government and culture will assist you in living more comfortably abroad and in will build your confidence. Guidebooks and websites are great resources for this kind of information.

It is also good to become familiar with local news. The major local newspapers, such as the Star Tribune (www.startribune.com) and the Pioneer Press (www.twincities.com), are great resources for finding both U.S. and Minnesota news. When reading information, pay attention to cultural trends and hot topics, such as:

- What social issues are considered important to the people?
- What sports team does Minnesota have? What is their record?
- What artists or musicians are currently popular?

You should also refer to other orientation materials available on the “Perspective and New Scholars” ISSS website and, once on site, talk to an ISSS staff and other cultural informants (such as friends or colleagues) to learn about other perspectives.

Help Yourself

- Train yourself on how to use your English dictionary effectively
- Start a journal. It will be helpful to remember items to pack or fun to read years later.
- Set goals. Identify your current level or language proficiency. Write down your goals for where you want your language skills to be by the end of your time abroad. Put these goals on the front page of your journal or on the flap of your dictionary. If your English needs improvement, you probably have dreams of carrying on a conversation at a basis level and making friends. If you are an experienced language learner, you undoubtedly want to increase your comprehension and speak more "like a native."
- Make a list of things you would like to learn while abroad. Write these in your journal.
- Collect photos and/or postcards of your university, friends, family, home, favorite vacation spot, etc., to share with new friends and hosts while abroad.
- Define for yourself what “survival” skills you personally will need. For example:

  1. Do you have special dietary needs (kosher, halal, vegetarian, dairy- or wheat-free)? Do you know how to ask for these things in ways that are culturally appropriate?
  2. Do you have any critical health issues or medication needs? Do
you know how to explain them?

3. Will you be engaging in any hobbies that you will need to get equipment or supplied for while you are abroad (e.g., photography equipment, paints, batteries, etc.)?

Understand Cultural Norms

It is important to understand that while abroad, not only will the food and language be different, the cultural norms of your host country regarding gestures and body language will be too. For instance, Americans, maintain fairly direct eye contact when conversing with others. In some cultures, this is seen as a sign of disrespect. Or, the American gesture for OK might be the same as giving the middle finger in another country.

It's also important to be aware of appropriate clothing norms and forms of address. For example, many Americans like to dress informally and treat each other in a very informal way, even when there is a great difference in age or social standing. While some professors adhere to more traditional methods, others will come to class wearing jeans and sports shirts and insist that you call them by their first names. You may consider this informality to be too casual on one hand, or disrespectful on the other, but it is part of American culture. Although there are times when Americans are respectful of and sentimental about tradition, in general there is little concern for set social rules.

Gender roles may also be different in the United States. For instance, in your home country if disagreement occurs between spouses the man might have the last say when it comes to making decisions. This could be considered unacceptable in several American households where neither partner in the relationship dominates and the status quo is maintained if disagreement occurs.

Norms regarding romantic relationships in your home country may also be different from U.S. cultural norms. This can result in expectations that you were not intending to convey. For example, in contrast with some countries, if a woman goes home with a man, in the U.S. she is not consenting to sexual activity with him.

Learning these differences and choosing how to act in relation to them is an important part of the experience of living and working abroad.

The section about “Your Intercultural Journey” can provide you with some valuable information and culture learning strategies that will help you make the most of your experience abroad.