

SSA Reentry Position Paper Building a Platform for Meaningful Reentry

Goal:

To be able to provide comprehensive reentry support for students who participate on SIT Study Abroad programs in the areas of academic reintegration, professional development, civic engagement as well as the psycho/emotional aspect of the reentry process.

Objectives:

- To identify areas, strategies and resources to aid students' emotional, psychological, and academic reintegration to their sending schools and communities.
- To identify areas, strategies and resources for students to maximize their intercultural knowledge and skills by providing professional development training and support.
- To identify areas, strategies and resources for students to maximize on their experience by helping them become civically engaged in their sending schools and home communities.
- To identify strategies and resources that will provide training to the Academic Directors to address all areas of reentry support with their students.
- To identify and maintain minimal standards guidelines for reentry support implementation.

Assumptions:

In order to inform the SSA Reentry Platform, three theoretical perspectives have been considered. The SIT/WL Mission and Vision, the Experiential Education model, and Transformative Education paradigm are used to triangulate and provide a foundation from which the Platform can be built. Three driving forces will move the platform forward: 1) SSA Reentry Working Group, 2) Academic Directors, and 3) teams such as the Alumni Office, SSA and other partners will work together to provide meaningful reentry support.

Premise 1: Reentry and Ideological Foundations

The ongoing mission of the School for International Training is to “prepare students to be interculturally effective leaders, professionals, and citizens.” While this training often begins during our study abroad programs, a semester with SIT is only one step in a larger lifelong journey. Unfortunately, all too often, the passion and commitment that students possess during their overseas programs, falters on their return to the United States. Students find themselves with no clear avenues to ‘bring home’ their experiences; these missed opportunities are our loss. If we hope to achieve SIT’s mission, we need to help our students to reengage their energy in creative and sustainable ways.

World Learning is in the process of redefining its future vision and goals. While our core mission remains unchanged, a renewed investment is being made into holistically deepening SIT’s impact on students, sending schools, host communities and the larger educational community. By capitalizing on this ‘bigger picture,’ SIT gains access to new tools and new ways of engaging our students. Priority initiatives include: deepening partnerships with local community organizations, involving expatriate communities within the U.S., encouraging civic engagement among our alumni, and creating forums for students to share experiences. Overall, ‘Reentry’ presents us with the ideal vehicle for advocating long-term application of the lessons learned during our semester programs.

Premise 2: Reentry and Experiential Education

Considering that the very nature of study abroad provides a healthy dose of experiential learning (Hopkins, 1999), SIT Study Abroad/World Learning is perfectly poised to correlate reentry transition with the experiential learning cycle and thus modeling the importance of study abroad organizations to provide systematic and thoughtful reentry support

Effective reentry support is an opportunity for students to come full circle through the experiential learning cycle. It provides chance for the study abroad alumni to process the tremendous amount of data that study abroad experiences can generate, and explore what they can do with this experience upon returning home. James McCaffery (1993) posits, “Most frequently, the generalization and application stages (of the experiential learning cycle) are simply left out; as a result, the power of experiential learning is significantly diminished or is neglected all together.”

The following points show this cycle and its applicability to study abroad:

- Experience: is the concrete experience of study abroad
- Reflection: is obtaining a greater knowledge about the study abroad experience by reviewing and revisiting it.
- Expansion or generalization: provides the opportunity to continue the cross-cultural learning process by linking the study abroad experience to more abstract ideas and principles of cultural observation, adaptation, and communication.
- Application: allows students to look at what they can do to further and continue their cross-cultural learning in their home culture, for example. How can they apply what they have learned, and how can it be integrated into their academic or professional life?

Again, an effective reentry support program can help students reflect upon their learning; ease transitions between cultures; give students skills to articulate their personal and academic development from the experience; help students understand their own cultural adjustment; and finally, it can also help students to create closure for the experience (Hanratty, 2001).

Considering that SIT Study Abroad programs are designed on this particular educational model, by default we carry with that the responsibility to provide proper and effective reentry support to our participants.

Premise 3: Reentry and Transformative Education

The SSA Reentry Platform and objectives are founded in part from the premises underlying a postmodern paradigm of transformative education that redefines the relationship between education and civic engagement. Different from the role of education found in the former premises of modernity where education served to bring individuals towards collective and pre-defined social goals, this postmodernist concept of education asserts a belief by which transformative education is valued for itself (Finger, Mathias, 1989). SIT Study Abroad’s emphasis on transformative experiences parallel the supposition that the goal of study abroad should be to support and even facilitate a process of personal transformation that may subsequently influence and alter the social, cultural, and political reality. The assumption is that transformations happen to people, and therefore, transforming the way an individual perceives and interprets the world becomes one of the principal goals and criteria by which students’ learning is recognized and valued (Finger, 1989). Therefore, the purpose of providing reentry support is based in part, on the underlying postmodernist premises of transformative education that strives to re-define and re-establish the connection between the individual and the greater society (1989).