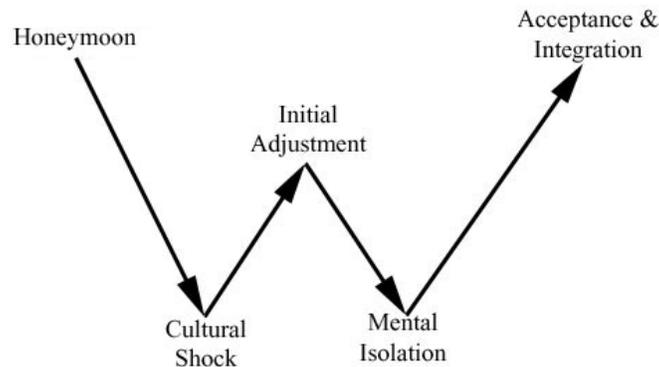


The W-Curve and the First Year of College

The W-Curve is a predictable pattern of stages that occurs when a person experiences culture shock. This is based upon research done with students studying abroad. Zeller and Mosier (1993) found that the W-Curve could also be applied to first-year college students and the phases they go through in adapting to a new culture. It's normal to have the ups and downs of the W-Curve, and knowing about this may help make the transition easier. At the first signs of culture shock, some first-year students may think this means they have made a mistake about going to college or that they have chosen the wrong school. If they see that this is just part of a journey that everyone goes through, they may be better able to take it all in stride.



The Honeymoon: The Honeymoon starts before students first arrive on campus. It usually begins once a student has chosen and been accepted to a college and builds as students attend Orientation programs, get their housing assignments, and begin planning for school to start. Although they may also experience some nervousness, the overall feeling is generally one of excitement and positive anticipation. According to Zeller and Mosier, "As students arrive on campus, there generally is a strong sense of welcoming from the campus community. Other new students quickly become friends, returning students become mentors, and staff and faculty are available to assist them through a variety of first-week programs. The initial sense of freedom new students feel often is exhilarating. For traditional-aged students, moving away from parental oversight and taking responsibility for one's own lifestyle creates a strong positive feeling." It is common for students to begin to have some feelings of homesickness mixed in with all of the fun and energy of a new beginning.

Culture Shock: As the newness of the college culture begins to wear off, first-year students begin to deal with the reality of the many adjustments they are experiencing. In the residence halls, students are adapting to having roommates, sharing a room, shared bathrooms, and lots of neighbors. Elsewhere on campus, they are growing accustomed to eating in a cafeteria, and the diversity that comes with meeting people from different backgrounds and cultures. The process of making new friends is fun, but can also be draining. On the academic side of college life, Zeller and Mosier argue, "the unfamiliar territory of the college classroom also creates dissonance. Large lecture classes, unclear guidelines for note taking and studying, and unfamiliar...faculty work together to produce potential adjustment difficulties." Outside of the classroom, students may struggle with things that seemed simple at home. "Routine tasks that were taken for granted become problematic chores. Where to go shopping, get a haircut, or receive medial attention can create feelings of frustration" (Zeller and Mosier).

Homesickness may increase and some students may try to deal with this by maintaining strong ties to their home community, often going home on weekends and staying in constant contact with friends from home, and possibly even continuing a romantic relationship. They may have a lot of pictures and other memorabilia in their rooms.

Developmental life cycle tasks are also continuing such as becoming self-sufficient, establishing identity, and accepting responsibility for their actions. "In summary, the college freshman has many personal issues to deal with in addition to focusing on the critical issue of academics: reworking relationships with parents, establishing interdependence with peers, dealing with separation and its resultant anxiety and dealing with conflicting values. Attempting to synthesize these personal challenges into some formal structure requires a great investment of energy. It is important to understand that this is a period of great potentially positive change, but it is also a period of more intense personal conflict and anxiety" (Zeller and Mosier).

Initial Adjustment: As initial adjustments are made, first-year students experience an upswing as they have successfully managed many of the issues that have come their way. Simply overcoming the culture shock stage brings about a sense of well-being. They fall into a routine as they gain confidence in their ability to handle the academic and social environment of college. They feel they have regained some sense of control and normalcy in their lives. Conflicts and challenges may still continue to come and go, but students are now feeling more in the swing of things.

Mental Isolation: According to Zeller and Mosier, “Although the physical environment has become more familiar, new students will relapse into a sense of isolation as they make comparisons between their new culture and their more familiar home culture.” This may arise after students go home for an extended break between semesters. “Strong feelings of homesickness begin to surface, as first year students move through a second culture shock in adjusting the new environment.” This is a time of feeling caught between two worlds. The new college environment is still not as comfortable as home used to be, and home is now not as familiar as it once was. Students may have a sense of not completely belonging in either place. With all of the activity occurring when first coming to college, students may not realize how much they miss home until they have been away for quite awhile. And even then, going home to visit can still leave them feeling homesick for a home environment that no longer seems to exist. It can be shocking to find that changes have happened at home, too, and not having been in on these changes on a day-to-day basis can be upsetting. “The initial euphoria of the entrance into the university dissolves as the realities of campus life surface. Not all professors are friendly and helpful, not all living-group peers are potential friends, and everything is not as great as publicity brochures and admissions staff may have indicated. Questions of doubt regarding the decision to attend the institution may surface. Questions regarding major career and academic potential may surface as the realities of first year grades and test scores take over. As the tension and stress mount, first year students may retreat to a safer, more secure home culture environment. They may feel their beliefs and values systems being challenged, and they may not be able to adapt or integrate the new values of the university cultures. The historical base remaining from the home culture continues to be alluring, as does a desire to strengthen connections with high school friends. First year students must seek resolution to this second cultural shock, move from their feelings of isolation, and join their new university cultures. This requires integrating the values and beliefs of their home culture with their new university environment” (Zeller and Mosier).

Acceptance, Integration, and Connectedness: As students become more involved in campus opportunities, gain some history with new friends and get to know some faculty and staff members, they begin to feel a true connection to the campus community. They begin to have a more balanced and realistic view of the University, seeing and integrating the good experiences with the challenges. “They begin to think that, generally, it’s a pretty good place to be. The university becomes the students’ home. The original home culture becomes somewhat foreign. There is less dependence on parents and former peers “ (Zeller and Mosier). It may be shocking for a parent to hear their college son or daughter refer to college as “home.” A true sense of acceptance, integration, and connectedness occurs when a student has successfully adapted to their new world.

Source: Journal of College and University Student Housing, Volume 23, No. 2, 1993. Culture Shock and The First-Year Experience by William J. Zeller and Robert Mosier

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