

THE FOUR PEARLS OF SUCCESSFUL UNIVERSITY TRANSITION

By Tina L. Quick, author of “The Global Nomad’s Guide to University Transition”

Tammy spent eight years in Africa where she attended an international school before returning to her home country for college. “I had a really difficult time at college. I didn’t really enjoy it at all. Everyone told me it would be the best years of my life, but I couldn’t wait for it to be over.” She recalled that she immediately sensed a “disconnect” between herself and her domestic peers. “It became more and more uncomfortable to try to relate to them. I finally decided there must be something wrong with me.” Tammy ended up spending most of her time alone. The isolation eventually spiraled into a deep depression.

Tammy’s sense of feeling like a misfit in her own country and the subsequent isolation and depression is not uncommon in students like her. There is a name for children who grow up outside their home countries - third culture kids (TCKs) or global nomads. While their globally mobile lifestyle has given them tremendous gifts and opportunities, they face unique challenges when returning to a place they have called "home" but don’t know as well as they think.

Students who have been raised outside their passport countries need to be prepared for this major life transition because theirs is a double adjustment. They must not only adjust to a new life stage as an independent adult but to a new culture as well, for even their home country culture will be foreign to them in many respects. Things are surprisingly not as familiar as they had expected and the illusion that they know their home country well can be shattered. What often results is the feeling of cultural imbalance, not fitting in, inability to connect with their peers. They may feel like “fish out of water” even back ‘home.’ They can end up feeling very alone, misunderstood and isolated.

The good news is that it doesn’t have to be this way. Research by the Interchange Institute has shown that internationally mobile persons who undergo cross-cultural training before or shortly after their relocation have a much smoother adjustment. There are four things I believe that if students were aware of before their transition to college or university, particularly back to their home country, they would have a much smoother adjustment. I like to call them, ‘The Four Pearls.’

Pearl #1 – TCK Identity Development

Dr. Barbara Schaetti, who has done extensive work with TCK identity development, found that global nomads will typically undergo an encounter experience – a time when they realize that they are different from their domestic peers. This often takes place upon repatriation or transition for college or university when they are suddenly surrounded mostly by those who have never ventured away from their home country or culture. Understanding that it is their international experiences that make them different helps them integrate those experiences. Those TCKs who never quite figure that out suffer from what Dr. Schaetti refers to as “terminal uniqueness syndrome.” An important insight Dr. Schaetti discovered while doing her research was that those children who were

familiar with the terms “TCKs” or “global nomads” before repatriation had milder encounter experiences than those who had never heard the terms before.

Pearl #2 – Unresolved Grief

The high mobility that TCKs experience during their childhoods results in a great deal of loss. They lose people, places, pets, possessions that they love or value. And there are hidden or intangible losses such as lifestyle, roles, responsibilities, status and more. Loss equates to grief. TCK grief is multiple, simultaneous (everything is lost at once), intense, unresolved and lonely (no one to share the sadness with except perhaps the parents). If grief isn't dealt with properly – acknowledged, given a name (I lost my best friend), mourned over and brought to closure - it can resurface later in life in dysfunctional forms of grief such as anger, denial, rebellion or depression. Journaling, writing poetry, dancing, and painting are some examples of ways to spend time with the grief and can lead the way to acceptance and closure.

Pearl #3 – The Transition Cycle

David Pollock, co-author of “Third Culture Kids: Growing Up Among Worlds” uses the five stage transition cycle to depict the changes one encounters in any type of adjustment, particularly a cross cultural one. Each of the five stages and the range of emotions associated with each stage, however uncomfortable, are (1) completely normal and (2) to be expected. Knowing these stages are temporary and unique helps students manage the adjustment. In brief synopsis the five stages are:

- **Involvement** is where you are before the transition. A place of belonging, affirmation and security.
- **Leaving** begins the moment you are aware of an upcoming change. This stage is characterized by conflicted emotions, denial, separating and distancing, surrendering roles and responsibilities. There is both celebration and excitement about the upcoming transition as well as sadness about leaving.
- **Transition** is characterized by chaos and ambiguity. It begins the moment you land in your new environment. The shock of things not being as familiar as once thought is unnerving. This is where the term ‘reverse culture shock’ comes in. The student may find him or herself making cultural mistakes, missing home, feeling full of self-doubt. There is ambivalence about being there or having made the right choice in schools. There is a tendency for students in this stage to think about transferring out or leaving.
- **Entering** begins the moment you decide, whether consciously or unconsciously that you want to settle in and become a part of this new place. Your emotions are still in flux and you are still feeling vulnerable, uncertain and marginal, but the dust of transition has settled down and you are ready to connect and settle in to your new surroundings.
- **Re-involvement** is when you wake up one day or come back from a long school break and realize this place feels more like home. You have new roles, responsibilities, friends and status. Once again there is a sense of belonging, affirmation and security.

Pearl #4 – TCK Relationships

The most prominent concern of repatriating TCKs is the inability to fit in and connect with their home-country peers. This happens for several reasons:

- They feel different. That's because they are different. Their international life experiences are very different from those they are surrounded by on their college or university campuses.
- They grow up abroad answering the "Where are you from" question by stating the country written on the cover of their passport. But when they go back there, they feel like anything but that nationality and they flounder for an explanation.
- The home-country peer who has typically experienced a more traditional, non-mobile childhood has no point of reference for someone who has lived a globally nomadic life and vice versa.
- There can be a real arrogance on the part of the TCK for being impatient with peers who have a more narrow world view. The TCK may feel they are more worldly or more intelligent than their domestic peers. There can also be a perceived arrogance by others. TCKs may appear to be boastful and arrogant by simply sharing their life stories. Others don't realize these seemingly exotic travels are the only tales the TCK has to tell.
- Global nomads have different ways of making friends and building relationships than their domestic peers. Unfortunately, their methods, which work well in the highly mobile third culture they have just come from, may have the opposite effect in an environment where people have historically had the time to cultivate their relationships. Global nomads quickly get into deeper levels of conversation than those who come from a more traditional, less mobile setting. TCKs put things out there right away to see if the other person will share something back in return so they can determine if there may be a connection and possible friendship. This may be perceived as over sharing by their domestic peers and the TCK comes off as being too intense or just plain 'weird.' The inability to connect with their peers can make them feel like social misfits and lead to self-isolation.
- There is a lack of a sense of belonging. Belonging is not in a geographic location. Global nomads find belonging with others of shared experience – other TCKs. They need to find others of like experience on their college campus. They will sometimes fit in better with international students because, like them, they are also undergoing a cultural transition.

In summary, while transition is never easy, the globally nomadic lifestyle has meant becoming familiar with change. TCKs often fare better in the university transition experience than their less-mobile, domestic peers who may never have left home before. Becoming familiar with these four simple truths can help students to not only survive, but to thrive in the experience.