

(Back) Across the Great Divide

International school graduates leave Shanghai for universities abroad and discover their cultural experiences are very different from their home-grown peers.

By Kristi Lanier

When Vicci Henderson's son went off to college he seemed like an average American kid on the outside. But on the inside was something different. He'd spent more of his life in Asia than America, spoke Chinese, and didn't even have a driver's license (unthinkable for any teenager stateside). When his parents first put him behind the wheel he attacked the roads like a Shanghaiese taxi driver. "That caught us off guard," Henderson says, laughing. "He was thinking as if he was in Asia. The context for his whole life has been Asia."

Adult expats have to work on reprogramming their minds to the ways of China. But for their kids – especially if

However, international school graduates have their own checklist of challenges unique to attending school abroad. It starts from day one with the question, "Where are you from?" says Henderson, a guidance counselor at Concordia International School. A question that can form the basis for initial friendships – "Oh, you're from New York? I'm from New York, too!" – can confound international school graduates and immediately set them apart. "Well, I live in China but I spend summers in New York."

Transitional hiccups tend to catch students returning to their home countries the most off guard, says school counselor Cathy Curtis. These students make the

assumption that because they've spent holidays in their home country they know the culture. In reality, they don't. "All of a sudden, the popular culture things they think they know they realize they don't. They're just a half step behind," she says.

Heidi Katherman's daughter Sarah, who has been in Asia since fourth grade, felt the pop culture disconnect keenly – especially over clothes. As international students, "they learn very quickly everybody's different. They learn how not to care so much about fashions," Katherman says.

"Here she'd go to Xiangyang and buy something wacky, copy shoes, she didn't care." When she got to university, however, "she didn't feel she was wearing the right kind of clothes. That was huge for her."

they've lived abroad many years – it's the other way around. When they return to their country of citizenship for university, they have to re-program for "home."

Regardless of location, the transition from high school to university is a rite of passage. Whether a student has chosen a school around the block or across the world, leaving home for college signifies the end of childhood and introduces a new set of challenges. In many ways, international school graduates are hyper-prepared for the change both academically and socially. International school curriculums are generally very rigorous with many students completing Advanced Placement (AP) or International Baccalaureate (IB) programs. And due to the transient nature of expat life, students adjust to new situations and make new friends easily.

Certainly, struggling to connect with peers over music, movies and clothes can complicate the transition. But more foundational is how international school graduates identify themselves. Once back home they find they're not sure where they belong. The longer they've been away, the more magnified the confusion. Katherman explains that the peer group plays a huge role in any adolescent's developing sense of identity. When they return home for college they've never been around this peer group but they're supposed to relate to them, she says. When they don't, they feel adrift.

Vicci Henderson, guidance counselor at Concordia School, meets with students.



photo: Anais Barclay

Henderson has been through the process not only with her students but with all three of her children. “It was hard for them to figure out who they were in their home country,” she says. “Inside their minds and hearts they’re not from there anymore.”

Complicating the re-integration is the international school graduates’ global perspective, one often not shared in the same way by their local peers. Sarah has had to come to terms with the fact that her university peers aren’t really interested in her experiences. “She says, ‘Mom, I just don’t talk about it,’” Katherman says. “Half of them don’t even know where Shanghai is. I brought her

Expat kids have to re-program for ‘home’

a bunch of mooncakes and she shared with her friends. They tried them and said ‘it’s okay’ but her roommate refused [to try]. She was angry about that.”

But that flexibility they learn as international students ultimately propels them past the initial disappointments. Henderson remembers her own daughter feeling frustrated by her peers’ lack of interest in worldwide events. “What they were interested in seemed trivial to her,” she says. But just as quickly her daughter decided, “You have to make up your mind that you’re going to do it.” And that was that.

If left unchecked, however, international school graduates can isolate themselves. International students become skilled at making new friends but they are just as skilled at erecting barriers because people move in and out of their lives so frequently. If they feel displaced they may respond by tossing up barriers. In international school it doesn’t matter so much because someone new will be along next semester. Not so in college, making perseverance paramount.



Cathy Curtis, guidance counselor.

“If they decide they don’t have anything in common they close themselves off,” Henderson says. She suggests they should start from the very beginning with the attitude, “I’m going to make this work.”

International school graduates who go from China to another foreign country for university are less shocked by the change. A Korean student graduating in Shanghai and going to university in the U.K., for example, will be steeled for another foreign experience. But a British student going to the same school can be taken by surprise. It seems as though it should be easy because they’re “home,” but, Henderson says, “They forget this is new.”

Katherman says parents can help preserve a home country connection by getting kids involved in team and group activities when they’re back for holidays. “When you go back in the summer, get them involved so they can see that they’re not so different,” she says.

Being aware that it will feel awkward at first is paramount to success for students. Second is getting involved in university life. Henderson advises students to immediately start looking for clubs and activities that interest them. Curtis adds to that, saying freshmen should live in the dorm their first year and attend freshman orientation if a university offers it (orientation customs differ from country to country).

For all the surprises university life may hold for international school graduates, one aspect they handle easily is academics. Overall, they are well-prepared for university coursework. Henderson says students come back every year and tell her the academics weren’t nearly as difficult as they expected.

And any struggles graduates may have in connecting usually pass by the end of the first semester. “They have to go through it; there are no shortcuts,” Curtis says. “Continue to look at the positive, ask ‘What am I enjoying?’ The ones who do the best are the ones who are involved.”

Ultimately, regardless of where they come from, university is about letting go for parents and finding their adult footing for students. For the international school graduates, they do stabilize themselves as they always have. “They become more invested in their university life,” Henderson says. “They begin to come back less and go forward.” ❏