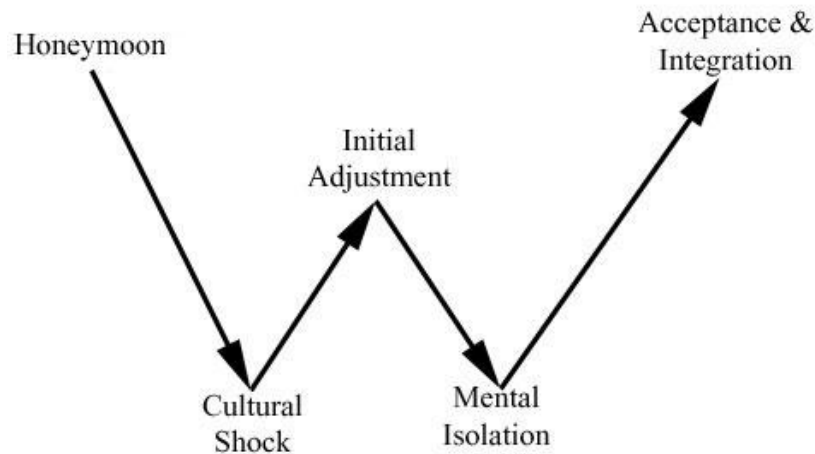


The W-Curve and the First Year of College



The W-Curve is a predictable pattern of stages which 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

- Honeymoon starts before students first arrive on campus (i.e., school packets, housing assignments, orientation, moving away from parental oversight).
- Overall feeling is generally one of excitement and positive anticipation.
- It's 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

- The newness of the college culture begins to wear off.
- Begin to deal with the reality of all the adjustments (i.e., roommates, eating in a cafeteria, and the diversity that comes with meeting people from different backgrounds and cultures).
- Academic adjustments (i.e., unfamiliar territory of the college classroom, large lecture classes, unclear guidelines for note taking and studying, and unfamiliar and somewhat distant faculty).
- Routine tasks become problematic chores (i.e., where to shop, get a haircut, or find medical attention).
- Homesickness may increase (i.e., maintaining strong ties to their home community, going home on weekends, staying in constant contact with friends from home, and continuing a romantic relationship).
- This is a period of positive change, and a period of intense personal conflict and anxiety.

Initial Adjustment

- First-year students experience an upswing as they have successfully managed many of the issues that have come their way.
- Overcoming the culture shock stage brings about a sense of well-being.
- Fall into a routine as they gain confidence in their ability to handle the academic and social environment of college.
- Regain 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

- First-year students will relapse into a sense of isolation as they compare new culture and home culture. (i.e., especially after students go home for an extended break between semesters).
- Strong feelings of homesickness begin to surface.
- Feeling caught between two worlds and not totally belonging in either place. The new college environment is still not as comfortable as home, and home is now not as familiar as it once was.
- The initial euphoria of the entrance into the university dissolves as the realities of campus life surface (i.e., 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).
- 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.
- First-year students must seek resolution to this second cultural shock, move from feelings of isolation, and join new university cultures. This requires integrating values and beliefs of their home culture with their new university environment.

Acceptance, Integration and Connectedness

- As students become more involved in campus opportunities, gain some history with new friends, get to know some faculty and staff members, they begin to feel a true connection to the campus community.
- There's a balance and realistic view of the university, seeing and integrating the good experiences with the challenges.
- The original home culture becomes somewhat foreign. There is less dependence on parents and former peers.
- A true sense of acceptance, integration, and connectedness occurs when a student has successfully adapted to their new world.

Zeller, W. J. and Mosier, R. (1993). Culture shock and the first-year experience. *Journal of College and University Student Housing*. 23 (2).