

Preparing Your Global Nomad for Transition to University

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

It’s the middle of the summer holidays and chances are your student is occupying himself with everything but preparing for his upcoming college/university matriculation. There are too many wonderful distractions this time of year to be concerned over sending those medical forms in or mulling over which meal plan to choose, courses to sign up for or housing preferences to dictate.

If this sounds like your son or daughter, you are likely feeling quite exasperated. As a parent, you can appreciate what it takes to make the major transition that stands looming before your child. In a few short weeks your student will be venturing off to live on his or her own, without parental influences, as an independent, young adult. This transition is magnified for expatriate children who are either returning to their home country or transitioning on to yet another host country for their studies. Not only must they adjust to their newly found independence, but to a whole new culture as well, for even their home country will be foreign to them in many respects. This comes as quite a shock to students who regularly returned “home” to visit family and friends and thought they knew their passport country well.

Third culture kids (TCKs) or global nomads, children who have spent a significant part of their developmental years outside their parents’ passport culture, have typically lived highly mobile lives, some moving as often as every two years or more. They have crossed cultures regularly even if it was just to go from host country to home and back again. This moving back and forth across cultures was taking place during those years when they were forming a sense of their own personal and cultural identity. What results is a cultural imbalance and rather than being in the mainstream of any of the cultures that have influenced them, they end up in the margins of each of those cultures. This international lifestyle creates unique challenges for TCKs that often are not realized until they step out of that highly mobile third culture – the expatriate culture.

What are some of the challenges global nomads face when returning home for university?

- One day they are woken up to the fact that they are different from others. This commonly takes place upon repatriation or transition for college or university when they are suddenly surrounded by those with whom there is no common or shared experience.
- While they know a lot about other places, peoples, customs and languages, they know very little about their own country and culture. They may feel estranged for not knowing pop culture, dating etiquette, and other social conventions everyone expects they should know. As a result, they often feel like misfits, unaccepted, misunderstood and alienated in the very place they call “home.”

- The transition itself is a major challenge for all first-year college students, but even more so for the global nomad who is doubly impacted by the cultural adjustment. They will experience quite an array of emotions that, while unsettling, are actually predictable and normal.

- Many TCKs arrive at university not owning the practical life skills they need to take care of themselves. On top of trying to settle in to their new surroundings, they are faced with learning simple activities of daily living such as banking, taking public transportation, doing laundry, using the postal services, driving and others.

- The inability to connect with their domestic peers is a major concern for TCKs. They may be looked upon as arrogant or privileged when simply trying to share their life stories. Home-country peers who cannot grasp the TCK's experiences may appear inept, immature or even insulting as they struggle for an appropriate response to someone whose lifestyle has been beyond the scope of their imagination. It becomes an uncomfortable situation for both sides.

How can parents help prepare their students for university transition?

- If students have not already heard the terms "third culture kid" or "global nomad," introduce them now. Having a name for the lifestyle they have lived helps them understand that it is not them, as people, that are different but their life experiences.

- The best advice anyone can give a repatriating student is to enter their home country the same way they would a foreign one. Buying a guide book to their homeland will help them approach it with a tourist mentality. Encourage global nomads to attend their school's international student orientation. They may find they have a lot in common with other internationals and may even meet up with other TCKs.

- Research has shown that people who receive training before making an international relocation have a much smoother adjustment. Understanding the stages of transition will help students anticipate and manage the change that goes with them. Look for resources that will prepare your student for the transition such as books or re-entry workshops.

- Teach your children the practical life skills they will need before they leave home. Many parents believe that because they know the ins and outs of life back in their home country, their children will automatically know it too, but they won't unless they have been intentionally instructed.

- Lay out your expectations ahead of time - expectations concerning academics, finances, communications and behavior will reduce the number of unwanted surprises later.

New Resource:

A new resource for global nomads making the transition to university has just been made available on Amazon. “The Global Nomad’s Guide to University Transition” is the first handbook written for this unique population of student. The challenges discussed here are covered in full detail along with many other practical issues. The tips, tools, strategies and stories of TCKs who have made the journey before them help students not only survive but thrive in their upcoming transition. Parents will appreciate the chapter dedicated to how they can come alongside their students to prepare and support them for the journey.