



No Pain, No Gain

► **Mark Schaub**, executive director, Padnos International Center, Grand Valley State University

As higher education professionals in the United States, we work in a particular culture of student service, often driven by our nation's litigious and competitive environment, and often driven by the values and priorities of our particular institutions. At my university, for example, we pride ourselves on constructing policies and procedures that “do the right thing” for our students: their health, their happiness, their degree progress, and their very comfort. The plush housing units sprouting on our campus, bountiful student buffet of custom-prepared cuisine, and recreational facilities that would make many resort owners envious are all evidence of these services. At the same time, we embrace the principles of liberal education, with our commitment highlighted in our mission statement and values, and as evidenced by our substantial general education curriculum. These two values—student comfort and liberal education—also stand, at times, in opposition. In order to foster the critical thinking and global awareness we aim for in our graduates, we must make them somehow *uncomfortable*. One cannot overcome racism without emotionally painful conversations or thought. One cannot expand one's horizons without leaving the familiarity of one's own home.

Each semester in my role as the chief international officer at my institution, I attend an event at which students share stories of alienation and dismay, of frustration and irritation. The

students are all returning study abroad participants—most of them coming back to the Michigan campus after a full semester in faraway lands. Each shared story is unique, yet not surprising. There's usually a student or two who laments the fact that her close friends from before spending a semester abroad are no longer close friends: “They seem somehow shallow now, worried about clothes and shopping and TV or things that don't matter,” the report often goes. There's the commonly shared story about general disdain for “the way things are,” here in rural Michigan in particular and in the United States in general. That story often starts with something like: “Back here, it seems everyone spends his or her entire life in the car or in front of the TV,” or “Americans often don't have a clue about what it's like in the rest of the world.” Yes.

It's not unusual that some students, in telling of their own woes—or in listening to those of others—begin to cry. There is genuine pain. Stories about close friendships with individuals from host cultures. Stories about frustration at the provincial nature of one's own U.S. family and friends. You would think I'd dread these evening functions where emotional trauma is on center stage. Yet every semester this event is the highlight of my term, and I enjoy the experience. I take “pleasure” in their pain. The students are sharing their stories of study abroad discomfort: culture shock, adjustment to that culture, the reverse culture

shock of returning to the United States and to our idyllic campus.

This confession of *schadenfreude* does not come easily, especially for someone who strongly supports our institutional value on making things go smoothly, and comfortably, for our students (they are, after all, the focus of my work!). German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer wrote of this oft-borrowed word from his native language: “To feel envy is human but to enjoy Schadenfreude is devilish.”

My devilish self is not some masochistic version of the student affairs professional run amok. This *schadenfreude* is, I believe, my academic affairs side—that philosophy major side of me—that is deeply committed to the liberal education goals of our institution. That part of me sees not pain, but growth. Sees not emotional anguish, but an acknowledgement of having changed through experience. The study abroad experience is indeed a high-impact educational experience, so of course we can expect that these experiences will have an intense emotional impact. When my colleagues and I see the transformations in students, we see past the emotional trauma and recall the students we knew before they left the United States. They were bright and eager students. But they didn't seem to be quite this confident, focused, articulate, or as interesting to talk to. In these students returning from a semester or year abroad, we see and hear the world becoming smaller and becoming a better, more peaceful place. ■