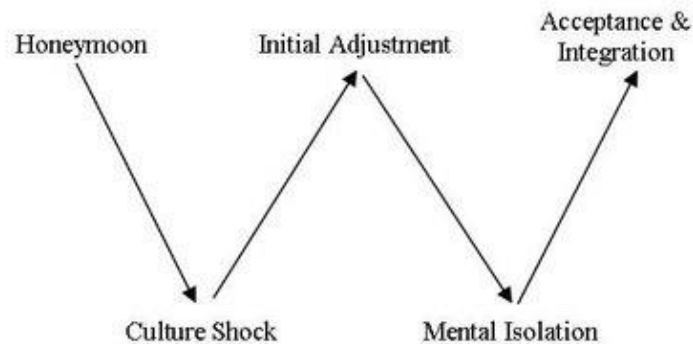


Parent and Family Program

The W-Curve and the First Year of College

The W-Curve is a predictable pattern of stages, which occur when a person experiences culture shock. This model 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 college life. As students

The W-Curve is made of five unique stages: 1) Honeymoon 2) Culture Shock 3) Initial Adjustment 4) Mental Isolation 5) Acceptance & Integration.



Honeymoon: This stage often starts before students arrive on campus. It typically begins once they have chosen and been accepted to college, and continues to build as students attend orientation and transition programs, choose their roommate and residence hall, and as they continue through their process of getting ready for college. **Emotions and experiences during this stage may include:**

- Enthusiasm and desire to meet new people
- Wanting to get away from home and start out on their own
- Orientation and transitional programming
- Homesickness missed in with all the fun and energy of their new experience

Culture Shock: Students begin to feel a dissonance between their perceptions of what college should be and the reality of their transition. The newness of college life begins to wear off and students begin to deal with the reality of the many adjustments they are experiencing. **Emotions and experiences during this stage may include:**

- Difficulty finding their way around and feel lost
- Excitement about living with a roommate and on their own wears off
- Adjustment to new surroundings and expectations are hard to adjust to
- Academic expectations are harder than anticipated
- Homesickness may become stronger. Some students may try to deal with this by maintaining strong ties to their home and going home often

Initial Adjustment: Students begin to feel an upswing as they begin to successfully manage many of the issues they faced during Culture Shock. It is during this stage that students feel more “at home” on campus. Extroverts often reach this stage quicker than introverts. **Emotions and experiences during this stage may include:**

- Minor roommate irritations begin to diminish
- Students begin to make friends outside of their initial connections
- Fall into a routine and gain confidence in their ability to handle academic and social environments of college

Mental Isolation: Commonly, this phase arises after students go home for an extended period of time. Strong feelings of homesickness begin to arise or re-arise for students and they often feel as though they are caught between two worlds. College life is still not as comfortable as home used to be and home is now not as familiar as it once was. **Emotions and experiences during this stage may include:**

- Shock over finding changes that have happened at home and not having been a part of them
- Feeling of homesickness for a home environment that no longer seems to exist
- Doubts regarding choice in college, major, career and other decisions begin to surface
- Beliefs and values begin to be challenged and they may not be able to adapt to the ideas and values of the university culture
- Larger roommate issues surface and students tend to sit alone in their room or find outlets to escape their housing situation
- Cliques may form and students may feel that getting to know others is harder than before

Acceptance & Integration: Connections to campus become stronger in this stage due to students becoming more involved in campus activities, developing stronger friendships, and connecting with faculty and staff. Students develop a more balanced view of the university, their academic pursuits and their future. A true feeling of acceptance, integration and connectedness occurs when a student has successfully adapted to their new world. **Emotions and experiences during this stage may include:**

- Students begin to refer to college as their “home”
- They feel as though they are part of their new environment/community
- Roommate issues are likely resolved or overcome and new friends are made on and off-campus
- Home values are reconciled with university values
- Dependence on parents and former peers begins to lessen

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