

BY KELLY KAUFMAN

A Very Real Phenomenon:

Pitt Office of International Services Director Can Relate to Culture Shock

Anyone who has survived culture shock, whether it was a serious case or mild, is familiar with the stages.



David Bryan Clubb

“ [Experiencing culture shock] gave me an appreciation when I first got involved in this field for what international students go through. ... If I hadn’t done study abroad, I wouldn’t have that appreciation.”

There’s the honeymoon stage, when everything about a new environment is exciting; the more difficult and often frustrating transition stage, when one is trying to adapt; the evaluation stage, when one starts to gain understanding and compare the old with the new; the integration stage, when one may experience a sense of belonging and establish goals for living; and finally, the re-entry stage, when one returns to the place of origin only to find that things are not exactly as they were before.

David Bryan Clubb, director of the University of Pittsburgh Office of International Services (OIS), has experienced culture shock, although not in the traditional sense. He has introduced himself to just about every culture on the planet, and every new environment he’s encountered has brought him one step closer to his final destination.

The first time he left the small town of Kernersville, North Carolina, it was

to attend Elon University only 35 miles away. Not a far trip, but it was Clubb’s first exposure to culture shock, and it had career-changing implications.

“I was amazed at the whole college experience,” he said, “and that led to my staying in the college environment throughout my career.”

As an undergraduate at Elon, Clubb majored in religious studies and pursued classes in comparative religion. In 1992, he ventured much farther away from home, spending the entire summer studying in India. That trip, Clubb says, was one of the defining moments of his life.

“I saw things and experienced things that blew my mind—fascinating people, different cultures, poverty. It burst my bubble.”

From there, Clubb’s travels took him to Israel. He returned from that trip knowing he loved being around diverse cultures and people, and he thought he might want to pursue a career that involved studying different cultures. That led him to attend Columbia International University in South Carolina, where he earned a master’s degree in international studies.

It was at Columbia International that Clubb met someone who worked in international services for a university. Although he had tossed around the idea of attending law school, Clubb decided to do an internship in the International Student and Scholar Services Office at the University of Houston in Texas. There he got a glimpse of both the people-focused and pragmatic sides of working in international student services and realized he had discovered what he wanted to do with the rest of his life.

From Houston, Clubb moved to Baltimore, Md., where he worked for the Office of International Student, Faculty, and Staff Services for Johns Hopkins Medical Institutions, serving first as associate director and later as director of immigrant services. Then Clubb got an offer he couldn’t refuse—the chance to direct OIS at Pitt—which he accepted.

His first day on the job at Pitt was the first week of October 2001, less than a month after the September 11 terrorist attacks forever changed the face of international education. Clubb had little time to adjust to his new surroundings, much less deal with any culture shock.

“This was the right place for me at that time, and hopefully I was the right person for this place,” he said. “The events of 9/11 profoundly affected everybody. It really informed my leadership at the office in that it made me more aware of the big picture of what we’re trying to do. ... My vision has been enlarged in terms of how important our role is in making a difference.”

Since taking that first trip abroad to India, Clubb has traveled to 23 countries, including Brazil, China, Costa Rica, Djibouti, Egypt, Greece, Haiti, Jordan, and Kenya. With every new adventure, he appreciates getting to experience culture shock because it reminds him why he got into the international student services business.

“When I went to India, for the first time in my life I was a minority,” Clubb said. “Culture shock is a very real phenomenon. I struggled with the language, climate, everyday life. It gave me an appreciation when I first got involved in this field for what international students go through. ... If I hadn’t done study abroad, I wouldn’t have that appreciation. I wouldn’t have even gotten into this field.” ●