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HAPPY HELL OR LONELY HEAVEN:
THE BRAIN DRAIN PROBLEM

Objective: To personalize the dilemma facing international students trying to decide whether or not to return home after studying abroad.

TIME REQUIRED At least an hour

RISK LEVEL Low

PARTICIPANTS NEEDED A group where at least half the members are international students, plus one facilitator

PROCEDURE Please take the following steps:

1. Distribute the case examples in Exhibit 3.1 describing problems experienced by international students who have returned home after study abroad.
2. Ask the participants to identify a case example they could role-play effectively.
3. Ask each participant in turn to study the case example and then stand before the other participants role-playing the returnee in that particular case. The other participants will provide advice and suggestions to the person role-playing the returnee for about 10 minutes.
4. After 10 minutes in role, have the returnee go out of role and give feedback about the suggestions and advice he or she was given.

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Case Study 1: Research Facilities

The returnee is an associate professor in engineering. He finished his PhD in the United States, took a temporary teaching job there for several years, and is now back in Taiwan. Although his home university department has been supportive of his research and very encouraging, he is frustrated by the lack of research equipment. The promised computer facilities have not yet been installed, and there are not enough books and research materials in the library on recent developments. Also, there is no support or facilities for organizing an international research conference he would like to do. This situation makes it very difficult for him to do even basic research in his specialized field. He has been thinking about returning to the United States. His wife has a sister in New York and would like to live in the United States permanently. He is thinking of applying for a position to teach in the United States. After graduation his academic advisor had suggested that he remain and they work on a research grant together. He is certain that this opportunity is still available. However, he likes living in Taiwan, enjoys being with his friends and family, and feels that the interpersonal relationships in Taiwan are closer and more satisfying than in the United States. Also, he feels loyal to his home university and does not want to leave so soon after starting his new job.

Case Study 2: Promotion

The returnee is a manager in a small company in Taiwan. Although he enjoys his work and gets along well with the other engineers on his team, he feels that the system of promotion and salary allocation is unfair. The pay scale is based solely on seniority and does not consider the employee's ability. This seems especially unfair to the returning students who have been abroad and are highly trained. The returnee has little chance of promotion, because so many of his colleagues have worked there longer than he has. These policies seem like a waste of human resources, and he wonders what can be done about it. The other managers do not seem to mind, but they have all been there longer than the returnee and have not been abroad for their studies.

Case Study 3: Work Relationships

The returnee has just returned from a U.S. university to Taiwan, where he is now an industrial engineer in the import-export field. In his new position, he finds that some of his colleagues are uncomfortable around him. Some of them seem to distrust him and envy him because he studied abroad. It was especially difficult at first, because his boss respected his opinion a great deal, and some of his colleagues resented this. Although they respect his training and his advanced degree, they have difficulty relating to him. His boss is planning to promote him to an administrative position that has nothing to do with his area of training, and he is frustrated at not being able to use his skills and training.

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DEBRIEFING

In debriefing this experience, the instructor will need to make sure that the other participants know that this is a role-play and not a self-disclosure by the role-playing volunteer. Discussion questions may include the following:

1. Why should an international student return home after graduation?
2. Why should an international student remain in the United States after graduation?
3. Was it difficult to role-play the returnee?
4. Which suggestions by the other participants seemed most helpful?
5. What would you expect the returnee to do in the future, and why?

INSIGHT

The reentry decision is a difficult choice for international student graduates, and the final choice may not always be what others from the home or host culture expect.

Case Study 4: Government

The returnee has been in Taiwan for several months after spending 5 years in graduate school in the United States. Although he was happy to return to Taiwan, he wishes that the political environment were a bit more liberal. He feels that the Taiwan government lacks flexibility. The Taiwan government does not respect the opinions of the people, in his opinion. He feels that the government should become more liberal so that people have the right to discuss their positions and argue for their viewpoints. Although he realizes that it is difficult to change a political system, he wishes there were more tolerance for individual viewpoints and individual rights. He believes that Taiwan would be a stronger country if this were the case. The returnee does not want to appear dissatisfied, so he does not express his opinions about this matter to others. It would be easier to leave than to try and change things.

Case Study 5: Family

The graduate returned to Taiwan recently after spending 5 years at a U.S. graduate school. When she first arrived in the United States, it was difficult to take care of herself because she was used to sharing responsibilities with her family. Soon she came to like and even prefer taking care of herself as an individual. When she returned to Taiwan, she was reminded that, as an individual, she is not very important. What is important is her responsibility to the family. In her extended family, she is an only child and lives with her parents. She realizes that it will take some time to readjust to her family system, but sometimes she feels torn between family responsibility and her own individual plans for the future.

Case Study 6: Professional Competence

The graduate returned to Taiwan 3 months ago after studying in the United States. She considered remaining in the United States because she had been offered a postdoctoral position to stay on and continue her research. However, she felt she should return home out of duty. She is now an assistant professor in Taiwan and is finding it difficult to continue her research. Her teaching load is demanding, and it is taking a lot of time just to get used to her new job. Also, she spends a lot of time training new research assistants. There is a high turnover of assistants because their pay is very low. She may eventually have the opportunity to go abroad again to do research through a university exchange program, but this probably won't be possible for at least 5 years. She is worried about falling behind in her field and not staying competitive. She would like to return to the United States and take a postdoctoral position that is still available.

Case Study 7: Inconvenience

The graduate returned to Taiwan after living in the United States for 8 years. She is now living in Taiwan and is surprised to find that there are aspects of living there that seem inconvenient. It seems that the traffic jams, the noise, the crowding, and especially the pollution have all gotten much worse than they were before she left. It also bothers her that people do not seem to care about the environment. There is no administrative or government incentive to change things. People seem very selfish in establishing new laws for their own profit that damage the environment. They do not consider the possible consequences to the whole society. The problems of bureaucracy seem overwhelming. She feels that the Taiwan she left behind to study abroad is gone forever.

Case Study 8: Education

The graduate returned to Taiwan after receiving a doctorate with honors in the United States. He has been teaching at a university in Taiwan and thinks that there are some problems with the educational system in Taiwan. There seems to be a great deal of pressure on students to achieve. The best students, therefore, seem to leave Taiwan to study abroad and often do not return, leaving the universities and corporations with a shortage of human resources and administrative instability. The returnee would like the educational system to be more like education in the United States, where the demands are more realistic, which would give incentives for students to stay in Taiwan rather than go abroad to study. None of the returnee's colleagues have been to the United States, and they are unacquainted with the U.S. educational system. They resent the returnee's criticism of education in Taiwan.

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Case Study 9: Job Satisfaction

The graduate returned to Taiwan after completing a PhD in computer science. When she returned she obtained a position as administrator in a public hospital. Although her work is related to computer science, it does not allow her to use her computer knowledge as much as she hoped it would. Her salary is less than it would be if she were working in a corporation, where her parents prefer that she work. She believes that she can make a better contribution in the public hospital, even though she is dissatisfied there. She enjoys the administrative aspects of her job, but she wishes that she could use more of her specialized training. She fears that she will fall behind in her profession if she has no opportunities to use her skills.

Case Study 10: Personal Matters

The returnee has been in Taiwan for several months after completing graduate work in the United States. He is discovering that he has difficulties sometimes with his family and friends. For one thing, they seem to ask him very personal questions about his private life and personal affairs. Also, his friends drop in to see him without calling first. This is particularly bothersome when he is trying to work at home. His friends seem extremely insensitive to his need for privacy. He realizes that since living in the United States, he has become used to having more privacy. He feels really inconvenienced now because he wants to establish his own style of living, independent of his family and others. He doesn't see how he can succeed in his profession unless he can live his own life as he chooses.

Case Study 11: Practical Training

The graduate is completing her practical training in a major public library in the United States. She received her master's degree in library science from a U.S. university as a sponsored student and has lived in the United States for almost 4 years. While she was applying for a practical training visa, her employer in her home country suggested that she return home or lose her old position in Taiwan. The graduate consulted her academic advisor, who encouraged her to expand her professional goals. She decided to stay in the United States and accept the new assignment. Her previous employer in Taiwan wrote her to say she must return home after completing her practical training for a new assignment in testing and measurement, where she will supervise a staff who have built that division in the past 5 years. She does not feel competent in the testing and measurement area. The returnee is confused and worried and feels helpless. She is 32 years old and single, which is no problem in the United States but a big problem back in Taiwan. She has learned to like suburban living, but back in Taiwan she will live in a city of more than six million people. She likes the freedom of having her own car, but in Taiwan she will have to live with relatives and use public transportation.

Case Study 12: Marriage

The graduate completed her master's degree in the United States as a sponsored student after 3 years of study. Last year she married an American student who is Catholic, which shocked her family back home. None of her family came for the wedding, and most of her close friends from Taiwan who were in the United States also did not attend the wedding. Her family is traditionally Confucian. Her 2-year scholarship has expired, and she supports herself as a graduate assistant. She is delaying the completion of her doctorate so that her husband can graduate first. He has applied for several positions in the United States and has been promised an internship at a major corporation with good pay but no benefits. The graduate just discovered she is pregnant. Her health insurance applies only as long as she is a student. Her employer back in Taiwan has called and asked her to complete her degree and return home as soon as possible to begin fulfilling the 2-year requirement to work in Taiwan after graduation. If she returns to Taiwan, she will lose medical benefits, and her husband will lose the internship.

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