

Tech May Get In The Way Of Good Culture Shock While Studying Abroad

<https://www.npr.org/transcripts/385267279>

RACHEL MARTIN, HOST:

A record number of American college students are studying abroad - nearly 300,000 according to the most recent data. Educators say that's good - that international education promotes cross-cultural understanding. But many in the field also worry the influx of technology and social media may make it harder for American students to fully immerse themselves abroad. Vermont Public Radio's Nina Keck has more.

NINA KECK, BYLINE: It's late afternoon and Kris Roberts fixes a cup of tea, sets up her iPad and calls her daughter.

KRIS ROBERTS: Hi.

KATIE FUSCO: Hi, Mom. How are you?

ROBERTS: How are you, honey?

KECK: Roberts is in Vermont. Her 18-year-old daughter, Katie Fusco, is 4,000 miles away in Brazil. The two sit down for a video chat about once a week and text every few days. Fusco says she's been on social media as much, if not more, in Brazil. And while she likes being able to catch up with family and friends, she admits last month her phone broke and she was surprised to find the two weeks without it were the best of her trip.

FUSCO: Without my phone I would just stay downstairs and talk with my family. And it was, like - it was great. And now I have my phone back and I just kind of leave it in my room now because I don't like it anymore.

KECK: Technology was a hot topic at a recent study abroad fair at Middlebury College. Wairimu Ndirangu has directed St. Lawrence University's Kenya program for 15 years.

WAIRIMU NDIRANGU: We talk about it all the time. It's nice that students get connected and feel safe in that way, but then, on the other hand, we feel like we are losing quite a bit of the full student when they are plugged to the other side.

KECK: It's something Barbara Hofer, a psychology professor at Middlebury College, is researching. She says she was shocked at how intrusive social media had become while leading American students through Europe.

BARBARA HOFER: Before they ate a meal in a German pub having to take a picture of the big beer and the food before they actually ate it because they need to immediately post it on Facebook to let everybody back home know what they're doing.

KECK: Technology can certainly help students abroad, says Hofer, but she's found it definitely comes with a price. For example, she was part of a study abroad program in Kyoto, Japan, 10 years ago just as American students began to own cellphones. Hofer says the faculty felt those phones greatly hurt students' ability to learn Japanese and understand the culture.

HOFER: Prior to that time, when students lived in host families, they had to contact the host family via the landline in order to speak to the student who was living there in order to make plans. That required using a different form of the language and the way that you interact with your elders.

KECK: Historically, Hofer says students abroad have had to find their own solutions to problems that come up. But in her study she found that American students connected with their parents an average of 22.4 times a week, making those important lessons of autonomy and responsibility harder to learn. The Middlebury researcher says one of the most surprising findings from her study is that face-to-face connections, like Skype, make many students more homesick, not less. Zoe Kaslow, a senior at Middlebury who spent a semester in Indonesia, says it takes time to find the right balance.