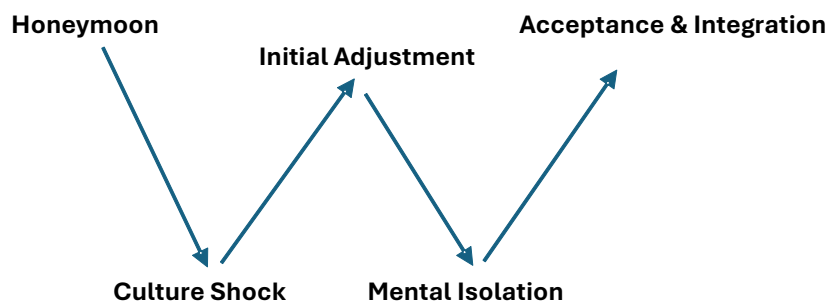




The W-Curve and the First Year of College

The W-Curve was first proposed in 1963 to explain adjustment to culture shock and later applied to first-year college students (Zeller and Mosier (1993)). It's a predictable pattern of stages students go through in adapting to the new college culture. While each college student's experience is distinctive, knowing about these typical and expected ups and downs can help make transition to college more manageable.



Rather than panicking at the first signs of culture shock, college students and parents need to realize this is a common part of the journey during that first year. This awareness may allow students and parents to take the challenges in stride and develop healthy strategies for managing major life transitions.

Five stages:

1. Honeymoon: The excitement stage

- Often begins before students arrive at college.
- Full of excitement, stimulation, and curiosity.
- Positive anticipation of meeting new people and exploring new opportunities.
- Overwhelming while also fun and stimulating.
- Excitement over independence tends to prevent homesickness the first few days/weeks of college.
- Lots of events and activities to keep their interest level high.

2. Culture shock: Reality sets in

- The newness begins to wear off and feelings of isolation and being overwhelmed can begin.
- Relationships may feel hard (roommate issues) and academic demands build (7wk grades).
- Comparison to other students who appear to be doing well.
- Students may feel they don't belong (imposter).

3. Initial Adjustment: Settling into the demands of college life

- First-year students experience an upswing as they have successfully managed many of the issues that have come their way.

- Overcoming the culture shock stage brings out a greater sense of effectiveness and well-being.
- Fall into a routine as they gain confidence in their ability to handle the academic and social environment of college.
- Regain some sense of control and normalcy in their lives.
- Conflicts and challenges may continue to come and go, but students are now feeling more in the swing of things.

4. Mental Isolation: Comparing home and college

- First-year students may relapse into a sense of isolation as they compare new culture and home culture, especially after being home for an extended break.
- Feeling caught between two worlds and not totally belonging in either place. The new college environment is still not as comfortable as home, and home is not as familiar as it once was.
- Peer conflicts may increase within their new relationships and those from high school.
- It's not unusual for students to decide to switch their major to something that fits their developing identity.

5. Acceptance, Integration and Connectedness: Finally, balance emerges

- As students become more involved in campus opportunities, develop stronger ties with fellow students, faculty, and staff, they begin to feel a true connection to the campus community.
- They have a more realistic and balanced perspective of their school experiences.
- They may begin referring to campus as “HOME” as they feel more a part of the culture, experiencing a sense of integration and connectedness.
- Dependence on parents and hometown connections begins to lessen.

MAYO CLINIC Health System, The W-Curve Model: Understanding a new college student's experience (August 24, 2023)

<https://www.mayoclinichealthsystem.org/hometown-health/speaking-of-health/the-w-curve-theory>

Zeller, W. J. and Mosier, R. (1993). Culture shock and the first-year experience *Journal of College and University Student Housing* 23(2).

OBU Resources:

- *Okbu.edu/parents (links to a variety of resources can be found here as well as a link to sign up for the monthly newsletter and a link to the Parent/Family Resource Guide which includes many helpful links)*
 - *Kemp Marriage and Family Therapy Clinic*
 - *Milburn Student Success Center*
 - *Residence Directors(RD)*
 - *Housing/Dining*