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Fall 2024

Study Abroad Reflection

My semester abroad in Ecuador was a unique experience that challenged my global perspective, personal beliefs, and academic intellect. Being immersed in a different culture challenged my preconceived ideas and strengthened my understanding of the world. The daily struggle to navigate a new language and cultural norms forced me to step outside of my comfort zone and embrace the unfamiliar. The academic rigor and unconventional structure of my Spanish courses created an environment for intellectual growth. However, through these experiences, I gained valuable insights into myself and the world around me, ultimately shaping my future aspirations in community health.

Before I left to go abroad, I did research on the country in general and the city I was to live in. However, it is more difficult to prepare for the nuances of culture that cannot be found online or in books. One example of my adjustment to another culture occurred within the first week of living abroad. We were given a class schedule during orientation on our first day. I would usually look at it before class in order to have an idea of what we were going to be doing and when. However, after a few days, I noticed that much of what we did in class was different from the schedule, which was confusing regarding due dates for homework or when we would finish class. I was frustrated, and some of the other students mentioned talking to the professor about it. However, I had been told that the culture in Ecuador was indirect, so I was nervous to ask about the schedule in case it came across as accusatory. Eventually, the other students and I decided to ask the professor and other staff at the school if there would be any more changes to the schedule. They were very gracious in explaining the situation and told us the schedule had changed from previous semesters. They ended up making some adjustments for us so we would have more certainty about our assignments. I had assumed that the miscommunications were a cultural or even a personal issue, but I did not consider that it was a new routine for everyone. This experience shifted my perspective because I realized that people go through change while at home. I was very concerned with how I would handle moving to another country, but until that point I did not consider that those native to Ecuador also constantly experience changes even though they stay in the same place.

While studying abroad, I experienced growth and changes regarding my individual beliefs and values. Before I left the U.S., I reflected on some of my personal values, which include generosity and empathy. A lot of Ecuadorians I interacted with also hold these beliefs, so I was able to strengthen in these areas. Generosity is a common value in Ecuador, especially in rural areas where resources tend to be scarcer. I believe I grew in generosity while abroad since I experienced other people's generosity towards me. Additionally, I feel I am better able to extend empathy to others of a different culture in the US because I experienced some of the hardships of being a foreigner myself. In some ways, my identity shifted rather than just grew. For example, my self-confidence and independence changed the most regarding my identity. Before leaving, I tended to be very anxious in social settings. However, in Ecuador I had to get over that fear quickly, not only for speaking in English but Spanish as well. I benefited from the fact that people were kind and patient towards me because Spanish is my second language, so that decreased my anxiety of social situations both abroad and in the US. Overcoming this barrier changed my identity to be more expressive and learn more about my host country and my host families. I now better understand the value of connecting to others through conversation and asking questions.

In addition to exposing myself to a new language and culture, I was also able to grow academically while abroad. My study abroad semester was different from a regular semester in a lot of ways. Living in another country is the primary difference, but there were many smaller changes that I had not anticipated. Before leaving, I had heard that studying abroad is more relaxed than a regular term and I would have more free time. However, once I arrived in Quito, I found that this was not the case. Because the program offered six weeks for classes and six weeks for an internship, my peers and I had to take 3-4 classes in the span of six weeks, and they were entirely in Spanish. For the first few weeks, it was difficult to adjust to a new culture, meet other students, complete assignments in Spanish, and keep up with people back home. I learned flexibility and adaptability during this time by adapting to the fast-paced schedule and to the extra time and care it took to read, write, and present in Spanish. However, I am grateful to look back on this experience, as cultural adaptability is a critical skill that can be used in the workplace and beyond.

While abroad, I liked to remember a quote by Chimamanda Adichie: "The consequence of the single story is this: it robs people of dignity. It makes our recognition of our equal

humanity difficult. It emphasizes how we are different rather than how we are similar”. In many ways, both good and bad, my semester in Ecuador was not what I expected. It provided insight into a new culture, but at the same time increased appreciation of my own cultural identity. I am now able to better understand the Ecuadorian worldview and empathize with those who are a cultural minority in the United States. Finally, I am more confident in my ability to communicate and adapt to unexpected changes. I am extremely grateful to have had the opportunity to experience a culture that is as diverse and rich as the Andean culture in Ecuador.