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Major(s)/Minor(s): Nursing (M), Spanish for Health Professionals (m), & Teaching English as a Foreign Language (certificate)

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## Critical Reflective Assignment

In August of 2015 I set out on a journey that opened my eyes to a different language, culture, and lifestyle in general. I was fortunate enough to participate in the only fall program that allows students to study in two different countries. The first part of the program was spent in Bagaces, Costa Rica while the second part was in Granada, Nicaragua. Throughout this extended period of time I lived with two different host families, and learned about two diversely different cultures.

Throughout the duration of the program I took a variety of coursework. This included two Spanish courses, Central American History, and Race, Ethnicity and Social Class. Throughout the study abroad program we were also granted opportunities to travel within the program, as well as on our own. Travelling on our own allowed us to further broaden our knowledge on the culture and customs of the area to which we were living in. Throughout this essay I will reflect on my experiences in Costa Rica and Nicaragua, as well as what I have experienced returning to the United States.

Traveling abroad allowed me to observe and partake in practices that would typically not be seen in the United States. One of the distinct differences I noticed immediately upon arrival to Costa Rica and Nicaragua was the change in lifestyle pace. In Costa Rica it is known as “Tico time.” This saying conveys slowing down, enjoying the little things, and moving with the flow of life. Instead of referring to the clock to structure life, such as in the United States, it was used as a tool to loosely guide the day. On “Tico time,” the concept of enjoying the experience of life is more important than finishing all necessary tasks in the day.

In Costa Rica there is a saying that has adapted into a way of life. The saying is *pura vida*, which literally translates to “pure life.” At first, it was nearly impossible to understand what natives meant when they responded “pura vida,” but as time went on, I began to understand pura vida. Pura vida is a way of life that has no exact definition, but if I had to define it I would say it means life is short and wonderful, so enjoy it with happiness.

Upon returning to the United States, I reflected largely on the values of the Central American countries I visited and how they differed from that of which I am used to. I found that as I analyzed things further, I realized that Costa Rica and Nicaragua truly appreciate life for the experiences. In the United States, it is nearly always expected that you are punctual, thorough in your work, and that you are able to upkeep a fast-paced lifestyle. I believe that the reason for this is largely because the United States is so industrialized; it must keep up with the business demands around the country and world.

As a student at University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire, I was fortunate enough to have taken an introduction to religion class my sophomore year. This laid a solid foundation for me to understand different beliefs while abroad. As I began my journey abroad, I questioned my first family about their religious background and their response was not what I thought it would have been. Prior to arriving, all research had indicated that the majority of Central America is religiously affiliated with Catholicism. My Costa Rican family was Catholic; however, they described their family’s experience with the church in a very negative light. After my host mother divorced her husband, she was nearly shunned from the church and her family. She

explained how she had only recently become accepted again. Due to the hostility, the church was not incorporated into family life on a regular basis from what I could see.

My Nicaraguan host family happened to be very strict Evangelical Christians, which allowed me the opportunity to observe a different sector of Christianity. I went to church with my family one time per week; however, they went a handful of times throughout the week. I was informed about the different holidays, and concepts that they believed in, and that they discouraged against.

Religion in Central America was one of the factors that dramatically shaped my experience. In Costa Rica it was shaped due to the fact that it altered the way my whole family was seen by the community, and in Nicaragua religion was the platform for my family's life. Reflecting on the way religion impacted my experience made many things come full circle. Globally, religion is one of the few topics that have just recently become acceptable to openly talk about.

In Central American History we were informed of many historical events we had not been previously exposed to in history classes. One of the topics we focused on was the Nicaraguan Revolution which occurred in the late 1970's. Before this time the Somoza regime had been in power, but when the Sandinistas took over (FSLN party) the United States became worried about communism. Due to this, the United States began funding a group which became known as Nicaraguan Contras to overthrow the Sandinista government.

Throughout the Nicaraguan Revolution, financial aid and military support were given to the contras. United States Congress had banned the aid, but the Reagan administration continued to give it under the table. Many problems arise while addressing what the contra was actually

doing in Nicaragua. Human rights violations were being made left and right. They were using terroristic tactics, kidnapping, torturing, and executing civilians, and there were even claims of women being raped.

The decision to continue funding the contras after human rights violations had been reported has impacted the trust between not only Nicaragua and the United States, but all Central America and the United States. Not only did it change the trust factor, but it lost many people their lives.

One of the first things we had been warned about before arriving in Granada was that there would be poor children on the streets, and that we would need to be mentally prepared for it. On the four hour bus ride I thought about meeting my new host family, what the new city would be like, and how I would react to seeing children begging for food and water. Truth is, there was no way to mentally prepare for what I was about to see.

The most disorienting experience occurred on the public bus on our way to El Pantanal. I was sitting in the window seat with a friend sitting next to me, when a child of maybe six years old came and began hitting his hand on my window. He held a bag up to his face, covering his mouth and nose, with a honey-like substance sitting at the bottom. I looked into his bloodshot eyes, and he laughed at my fright. I peered over my shoulder to ask our program-assistant, Caitlin, what just happened which was when she explained to me what sniffing glue is. Children who are not getting enough or any food have begun sniffing glue because it is cheap and it makes the feeling of hunger go away.

It took me the entire day to process what I had been told. It was one of the experiences that brought me to rock bottom and showed me what life could consist of. From that point on, I

feel like I lived in the moment and I gave my full attention to every person I spoke to. This experience has inspired me to pursue more volunteer work, particularly in poor and developing communities.

This study abroad experience has drastically changed my life. I am pursuing traveling, especially in developing countries and Spanish-speaking countries. I have become a much more laid back person. I learned how to just roll with the flow and take things as they come.

I feel very excited to come back and educate others around me about the countries of Central America, especially because there are many misconceptions. Central American History opened my eyes to so many different occurrences that I had never been aware of prior to taking this class, and I feel like I can benefit so many people by educating them about different topics.

Most of all, I came out of this experience with two of the greatest role models I could have ever asked for, my passionate program directors Phil and Marielos, as well as ten amazing lifelong friends. Prior to leaving, I had been solely a Nursing major; however, as of now I have taken on Spanish for health professionals minor as well as a Teaching English as a Foreign Language certification. I am so thankful for the opportunity to go on this adventure. I grew so much as a person, and I was able to watch so many others grow along with me. Nothing will compare to the four months I spent in Costa Rica and Nicaragua with my best friends.



This picture is a few of the students and teachers in the older group of students that we voluntarily taught English to. The teaching took place in a poor community of Granada called El Pantanal. These students taught us more about their lives than we could have ever taught them about the English language.



These friendships were by far the most important things that came from this experience. Every person brought something crucially different to the group dynamic, and we would not have made it through the adventure without one another's support.