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### What I Learned in my Study Abroad Experience

I studied abroad during the fall of 2015 in both Costa Rica and Nicaragua. This program appealed to me because of the opportunity to live in two different countries and also the Spanish aspect. I lived in a small town called Bagaces in Costa Rica with a nice family that got me out of my comfort zone. I came into this experience really shy and it was very hard for me to connect with my Costa Rican family, but we stuck through it together and it was a learning process for both of us. In Nicaragua I lived in a large colonial city called Granada. Granada was where I really grew as a person and my Spanish improved the most. I realized that I was too guarded and shy in Costa Rica and I knew I could not do that to myself a second time. I met my second family with my usual outgoing personality and it made all the difference in the world. My family and I in Nicaragua were very close and would take every twenty minute meal and turn it into a two hour conversation.

Before leaving I figured that the two cultures were probably very similar, but I soon found out I was wrong. Although they are close in proximity the two countries have many differences. Costa Rica was relaxing and laidback in everyday life, whereas Nicaragua was always buzzing with energy. One thing the two countries shared was their perception of time, or the lack of time. Time was anything but concrete in both cultures. Unfortunately my time I had abroad was concrete and my adventure had to come to an end, but I will always cherish the adventures, memories, people I met, and life lessons I learned abroad.

I lived in a very small community in Costa Rica where there was not much diversity besides the ten random American students living there. I took a sociology class about the different races, ethnicities, and social classes of Costa Rica, but it was hard to learn about these

things when I could not see it from where we were staying. I had the opportunity to take a four day field trip to the Caribbean side of the country to see the more diverse population of the country. We made a stop in the San José, the capital, on our way out to the Caribbean and in the small time spent there I had flashbacks of the United States. Costa Rica was just as much of a mixing pot as the United States.

Costa Rica reminded me of the United States, but it also has some of the same problems the United States has. We continued our travels to the Caribbean where the majority of the afro-descendants and indigenous people are forced to live. Race seemed to be just as much of a problem in Costa Rica as it is in the US. The minorities were forced into a geographical area that was not as arable or unusable as the rest of the country. They were treated unfairly and poorly and had little opportunity to move up in the world. This opened my eyes that the whole world has a long way to come to unite the thousands of unique cultures it has without having the stereotypical prejudices most people have. It made me more aware that race, ethnicity, and social class is more than a black-and-white issue. I learned that the world's diverse cultures are amazing things, but they need to be discovered and respected equally.

While I was abroad Costa Rica and Nicaragua had some immigration issues that the two governments handled differently. This impacted my knowledge about the two different government institutions and how every country can run things differently. The two countries neighbor each other, but had very different views on the immigrant situation that occurred. Over 2,000 Cuban immigrants were trying to make their way to the US. They managed to get through Colombia, Panama, and Costa Rica. Most of the countries and their governments do not bother with immigrants, knowing that they are just passing through on their way to the US.

The Cubans got to the border between Costa Rica and Nicaragua, but were not allowed into Nicaragua. The Nicaraguan government did not want to allow the 2,000 illegal immigrants to pass through to the next countries. Nicaragua has a strict government that does not waver much from the law. Whereas Costa Rica let the immigrants pass through the country without thinking about how Nicaragua would receive them. Nicaragua has yet to accept any of the immigrants and Costa Rica's government opened shelters and are housing a majority of them. I was able to learn a little more about the two governments and how some are stricter and some are more laidback and willing to lend a helping hand or stray from the law a little. It was an interesting experience to see the two governments interact with one another. I did not pay very much attention to different governments and how they react with one another or how one person's decision can effect another's, but I became more aware after this experience.

I learned a lot through the history class I took abroad about Central America and the United States impact on the area. The United States had made a lot of decisions in the 1900s that they thought were benefiting Central America, but were doing very little to help. The United States funded terrible government officials and military armies that reined terror on these helpless countries. These decisions ultimately caused thousands of casualties and even more dictatorship like governments. Although the United States thought they were combating communism that was happening in their "back yard," they knew ultimately that what had been done was wrong. The US covered most of the tracks it had left and the US population knows very little about the events that happened in Central America during the 1900s.

I have come to the realization that no government is perfect, every government is different, and they all have different goals. Those involved in politics need to be more aware of

their decisions though because they can have some terrible impacts on their people and other countries as well. I believe that a lot of the time politics is more of a personal game for those playing it more than a community game.

While living in Nicaragua we did a week long service learning project in an area of Granada called El Pantanal. El Pantanal is the poorest neighborhood in Granada. When I told my host family and host friends that we would be going there to work they gave me dirty looks and made comments about my safety. I did not think too much about it considering I got a safety talk before leaving my house every day, but it was until I was in El Pantanal that I realized their concerns.

El Pantanal was a disorienting experience because of the severe poverty that is apparent there. Although I never felt unsafe in the community and the people always treated me kindly, I heard stories from the locals of robberies, murders, and other violent acts that happened in El Pantanal. It took my off guard seeing the houses in the area because they were typically only four outer walls made from cardboard, plastic, or tin slabs. Never before did I see such poverty.

El Pantanal opened my eyes to the different ways you can help a community. While we worked in El Pantanal we build adobe houses that went to women in the community for their families. It was an important program to the community and it was crucial to the future of the community and its children. I can only imagine how many communities around the globe that are as bad as or worse than El Pantanal that need help and are lacking the resources and people to help. It inspires me to help as much as I can, especially on my future travels. I want to keep my eyes open and try to help the world where I can.

My study abroad experience largely changed what I plan to do in my future. In Nicaragua I volunteered at an English school in a poorer neighborhood. The program gave free English classes to children living in poverty. I enjoyed working with the kids and helping them with their English. This experience has influenced me to research programs I can join after my undergrad to teach English in Central America. My Nicaraguan mom was so happy to hear my plan and decided to research programs in Granada so I could stay with her.

I plan to continue with my business degree, but possibly start a business in Nicaragua in the future. I truly fell in love with Granada and anytime I think of my future I see myself there. I will defiantly be returning soon for a visit with my Nicaraguan family, but I will eventually, hopefully, be returning for good one day. I always knew I liked Spanish, but this experience made me realize I love it. I cannot picture my life without it. That being said, my future will heavily be dictated by Spanish. No matter what I want to be able to use it in a career and possibly my home life as well.

Before my time abroad I had a very concrete plan, a four year plan, and every minute planned out. Now my life is a crazy mess with multiple different career goals, a hundred different roads I want to travel, and no time limit. If there was anything I embraced and brought back with me from Costa Rica and Nicaragua it was the concept of time. Although my deadlines are important for classes and jobs, my life in general will not be dictated by a schedule or guidelines. I am going wherever my past, present, and future experiences lead me.



Above is a picture of The Cathedral in Granada, Nicaragua taken from La Merced. This picture captures one of the many historic churches and buildings in Granada, which represents a lot about what I learned on my adventure. I loved learning the history, seeing the old buildings, and going to museums and learning as much as I could about the amazing cultures I was living in.



Pictured above is the most amazing group of women I could have experienced so much with in Managua, Nicaragua. We were all strangers, but within a couple of weeks we were like family. We learned, laughed, and experienced so much together.