

LUniversity of Wisconsin-Eau Claire

Global Learning

A Critical Reflection

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Major: Nursing

Minor: Spanish for Healthcare Professions

Site of Experience: Bagaces, Costa Rica

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Introduction

This trip an eight week study abroad program through my university and is required for my minor, Spanish for the Healthcare Professions. I was lucky enough to get to travel to the beautiful Costa Rica and live among local host families to increase the immersion experience and learn about the unique culture here. While I was there I took two classes: Spanish 320 (Healthcare Terminology I) and Costa Rican Healthcare Studies. My healthcare class visited clinics in Costa Rica to help teach health education and study their universal healthcare system. It was an opportunity to compare the Costa Rican system to our own healthcare system in the United States. In between classes I was able to explore the city of Bagaces or Costa Rica in general while also taking a few trips that were planned into the program like travelling to Upala and San Jose. It was my goal that after eight weeks, I would increase my fluency of Spanish and of the Costa Rican culture.

Diversity and Understanding

Costa Rica is extremely different from the United States, especially on a cultural level. The United States is individualistic, meaning we all look out for ourselves and expect others to do the same, but in Costa Rica this is a foreign concept. Our teachers told us repeatedly that collectivism was engrained in every part of Costa Rican culture. This aspect of culture was noticeable when the host families would walk down the street because all of the people in the town knew each other. Also, if anyone ever needed assistance Costa Ricans considered it their duty to stop and help. Collectivism was also seen in the healthcare system for some of the same reasons; the doctors knew all of the patients and their families and they went above and beyond to help their patients.

While in Costa Rica, we were lucky enough to witness one of the cultural festivals called “El Tolpe”. “El Tolpe” is a horse festival where local farmers show off their horses in

a grand parade. This festival is important to Costa Ricans and they go out of their way to visit even larger ones like the one in Liberia which lasts a week. Showing their horses is also a source of pride for the farmers because in the larger festivals, horses are judged. I also had the opportunity to go to a fair and observe the differences between a Costa Rican fair and the Wisconsin state fair. Surprisingly, they were very similar, however, Costa Rican farmers also took the judging of the cows seriously. My host father spent an hour looking at all of the cows and making comments.

Finally, the most surprising aspect of diversity was in the Costa Rican language. I thought that Spanish could only differ in the type of accent across Latin America, but I was wrong. The Costa Rican language uses Spanish words in a whole different context than what I was taught in high school or college. There were several times that I began to get confused because they used a different definition for the same word and I eventually caught up with the learning curve.

Understanding of Global Systems

One of the main reasons for going to Costa Rica was to better understand their healthcare system which was accomplished through in-class learning, hospital tours and presentations, and volunteering in local clinics. The Costa Rican universal healthcare system is unique compared to private systems, similar to the U.S., and compared to other universal systems. It operates on a three level system of care that essentially “triages” its clients to determine what level of care they require. The first level of care is the EBAIS. Similar to a clinic, it is operated by a health care team including a doctor, a nurse, an ATAP worker, and a medical record technician. These include treatment of diseases, basic rehabilitation, contraception, vaccination, oral health, and many other basic services. The program spent an entire week studying and interacting with this level of care. My experiences during this time

helped immensely with personal and professional growth. The second level of care includes basic specialized care for those who have more serious illnesses or injuries. For example, it provides ER services, diagnosis support, specialized outpatient consultation and simple surgical treatments. Finally, the third level of care gives care to patient with diseases that require complex technology for treatment, long term patient admission, or large surgeries. The program was able to visit two third level care facilities to understand how they operate. It was surprising to see that at national hospitals, especially private hospitals, gave nearly the same level of care as one would expect to find in the United States.

Global Impact on Host Community

There is not one specific action that occurred in the United States that affected my host community. However, during my time in Bagaces there was a massive drought which was killing of plant and wildlife in the area. The climate changes in Bagaces could have been caused by the developed countries, like the United States, disregard for their environmental impact. Bagaces is a small town with many of its men working on farms that cannot grow sufficient crops. As a result of climate change, the environment and the economy of my host community was at risk.

Professional Influences

Empathy is an important trait for every person to have, but it especially important for nurses. Although the United States healthcare system puts emphasis on being an empathetic nurse, in Costa Rica it is on a whole new level. While observing the doctor during the rotation, and again when we went on house visits, I was astonished at how close the medical staff was to all of its patients. The doctor and nurse knew every patient and their family and listened to each person without questioning the relevance to the patient's treatment or considering time to be an issue. It also demonstrates that when you treat a patient you

shouldn't just treat the physical ailment; the emotional and spiritual well-being of the patient and/or their caregivers is just as important. Most importantly, the time spent in the EBAIS has shown that I can still grow in this area.

Communication has been a key element to every activity that we planned in the EBAIS. It was extremely important to communicate with group members about what still needed to get done for our presentations and we had to effectively communicate our message to the community. We had to plan our communication with consideration of the different cultural beliefs that we were taught in class. Also, we had to be sure that our translation of the language was correct to avoid confusion and educate as many people as possible. I believe that the EBAIS was the perfect way to practice our communication in Spanish because it gave us the opportunity to present to an audience that was interested in our message and would not be overly critical of our mistakes.

The traits listed above also relate to my own professional growth along with my professional growth with team work and Spanish speaking skills. Communication, which I listed in the section above, is an important aspect of effective team work, but it also includes accountability and leadership. We each had an established role for the week which we had to prepare and present to the waiting room. By having all of our parts ready when we arrived at the EBAIS it made practicing and presenting easier because we did not have to cover for another team member. We also all had to be leaders at some point during the week. For example, I took leadership in the waiting room when I noticed that patients were not participating in the exercises another team was demonstrating by standing up and showing the patients that they should try and do the exercises.

Improving my Spanish skills to use in a professional setting was one of the main reasons for joining the study abroad program. Presenting the activities gave me the chance to

practice with a Spanish speaking audience. Although they would giggle when we used the wrong word, it was less nerve-wracking than speaking in front of a professor because I knew they weren't there to judge my abilities. For this reason, I believed I gained confidence and became more open to speaking Spanish than I was before working in the EBAIS. It also helped me grow by being able to explain technical medical issues to the everyday person in Spanish. Gaining confidence and being able to communicate effectively in another language will be invaluable in the future when I use my abilities in my career.

Personal Influences

Tico time was an aspect of the culture that tested our patience because we spent part of each morning waiting for the doctor to arrive so we could plan and start our activities for the day. I believe this is an important lesson, albeit a frustrating one, because not everything in the healthcare profession will go according to plan. Having flexibility in a schedule and in life allows people to have many more opportunities and keeps people better prepared for the future. This is in direct contrast with what I have been taught because in the United States we are expected to be on time or even early to every class, event, or meeting.

Impacting Local Communities

