

Critical Reflective Assignment- What I Learned in my Study Abroad Experience

**Amaris Vesely
Microbiology Major
Spanish for the Health Profession Minor
Bagaces, Costa Rica
June-July 2015
Graduation Date: May 2018
Viennese Ball Scholarship Recipient -\$250**

Out of all the study abroad programs the University of Wisconsin Eau Claire offered, no other destination aligned so precisely with my future career and education path than the immersion in Costa Rica for Nursing and Healthcare Professions. I am pursuing a job in the medical field as a Physicians Assistant and, in order to extend my practice to a more diverse group of patients, minoring in Spanish for the Health Professions. My time spent in Costa Rica, learning about the country's unique, Universal healthcare system, touring the different national hospitals and clinics, and shadowing the medical staff, was invaluable experience in my professional development.

In addition to the phenomenal educational insight I gained from my study abroad experience in Costa Rica, there was also a third dimensional, cultural aspect that introduced me to world's diversity. Immersed in a new environment, I got to diver deeper than the superficial level of common tourists by living side-by-side with country natives. My host family catalyzed my ability to explore the country. I ate the country's signature rice and bean dishes, felt the pride of being on the winning soccer game's team, and watched brave bull riders in the arena.

Always propped wide opened, my host parent's wooden door welcomed passing visitors, extended family, and pedaling salesmen into the house. Other neighbors and local businesses kept their entranceways accessible as well throughout the day. This common practice in Costa Rica preludes to a culture in which personal interactions between individuals are more communal and attainable.

People flowed in and out of our house regularly for a quick cup of coffee or to watch replays of the latest soccer game. My host sister had her school friends stop by before and after class. Relatives, living only a block away, made frequent appearances in the evening,

relaxing in the cool of the veranda while chatting about the events of the day. The atmosphere was always relaxed and casual. Because of the excessive time spent together, there are more intimate and personal relationships between the family members and friends in the town.

Especially unique, the Costa Rica for Nursing and Health Care Professions program allowed its students to experience and visit the different levels of the Costa Rican healthcare system. The classroom, in which we learned about the history and structure of the country's medical system, took on another dimension as we shadowed side-by-side with the doctors, nurses, and pharmacists in rural hospitals. We also toured several different medical institutions and clinics, ranging from limited, one-room centers to state-of-the-art, national superstructures.

Costa Rica believes that the health and wellbeing of its citizens is a constitutional right. Thus, the country implemented a three-tiered, universal healthcare system. The local, regional, and national levels work together as a funneling system, treating the patients with the most severe conditions at the top, national level. Prevention, annual checkups, and education occur at the local level. Even though all residents receive medical attention, it is incorrect to label the healthcare as free. Workers pay 10 % of their income to the government while business owners contribute 13%. The notably positive health statistics of Costa Ricans reflect on its effective medical structure implemented by the government.

As quoted from the U.S. Department of State, "The United States and Costa Rica have a history of close and friendly relations based on mutual respect for democratic freedoms, free trade, and other shared values." Among these "shared values," one of Costa Rica's main emphases is in its energy efficiency and a goal in having a carbon-free environment. During

one of the many fieldtrip outings, our professor pointed out long, white tubes running vertical to the mountain on which we stood on. The pipes were part of a complex system that utilized the natural heat of volcanoes to produce geothermic energy.

In an interconnected world, reducing the output of toxic chemicals is crucial in the sustainability and condition of the environment. Eau Claire, although not seemingly directly related, is affected by the choices the Costa Rican government makes. Despite the political borders that divide countries, the actions of a single country have the potential to influence the habitat of another.

“Tico Time” is a phrase that refers to the extremely relaxed timetable Costa Ricans follow. It is common for individuals to start events, concerts, and meetings much later than the scheduled time. There is no rush or social pressure to arrive precisely on the hour and begin immediately. When a person leaves their house, for example, the journey to their destination is an opportunity to chat with the people and buy the street vendor’s produce on their way.

“Tico Time” drastically contradicts the on-the-dot itinerary common in the United States. I experienced the collision of two cultures in an incident during my study abroad trip. The peers in my group scheduled a paid driver to transport us to Nicaragua for a weekend trip. In order to get a head start in our long day of travel, we told the driver to pick us up at 4:00 in the morning. We checked out of the hostel and had our bags packed to go, expecting a prompt arrival and quick departure. However, because of the different understanding of time, our driver pulled up almost an hour later than what was scheduled. The people in the group, frustrated with his late appearance and annoyed with early morning drowsiness, found his action unprofessional and inconsiderate.

My study abroad experience has been the one of the most impactful and influential periods in both my professional and personal life. During my time immersed in the customs and culture of Costa Rica, I had time to reflect on my future goals and aspirations. I witnessed the importance of quality healthcare in a country and now am passionate to give medical attention to all people, regardless of socioeconomic class or status. On a more cultural side, I have grown accustomed to the catchy beat of the maracas and drums of traditional Costa Rican music that my host sister constantly played from her room. The songs now accompany me while I go throughout my day, subconsciously exposing me to the Spanish language.

My outlook on the world has expanded as well. I am more appreciative of the different people, food, communities, and customs spread throughout the world. Costa Rica is one page in a whole colorful novel, bursting with spectacular variety and endless possibilities. For me, studying abroad in Costa Rica was my first time experiencing another country and its culture; it was the beginning chapter to my long adventure in traveling the world.

Photos:



The Pre-Health Professions group on top of Clinica Biblica in San Jose, Costa Rica. After touring the private hospital, we explored on top of the roof and got to see a bird's eye view of the city



Annexation of Guanacaste Day. The local schoolchildren dressed up in colorful costumes and danced in a performance for the town.