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My Study Abroad Experience

Introduction and Overview

For my study abroad program, I spent eight weeks in Costa Rica. For the most part, we lived with host families in Bagaces, Guanacaste, but we also spent one week in Upala and another week in San José, the capital. While in Bagaces, we attended two classes: History of the Costa Rican Health Care System and a Spanish course dependent on experience (I attended Spanish for the Health Professions 1). In these classes we learned about how the public and private health care systems function in Costa Rica and about the patient-physician relationship. In our Spanish courses, we also learned how to translate between patient and physician as if we were working in a hospital setting. During our week in Upala, we were assigned to a specific small town where we job shadowed with the health care workers, lead classes about leading a healthy lifestyle, and learned more about the health care system through general observation. During our week in San José we were able to tour the larger hospitals including one of each of the following: a public, private, and public-private hospital.

Global Learning Element A

There were many differences between the United States and Costa Rica. The main differences is that the pace of life is much slower in Costa Rica. Unless it is for business meetings or school classes, many people do not arrive on time to events. For example we went to a birthday party after it started, and many people did not show up until half way through the party or toward the end because they were spending time with others. In Costa Rica, it is considered rude to leave someone you are visiting to go see someone else. If you show up late to a meeting, the other person would understand you were in someone else's company.

Another example is that the bus system in Costa Rica does not have a set and published bus schedule. As the main mode of transportation there, I thought that there would be a schedule I could look up online, much like the Eau Claire transit system. I could find some bus schedules online, but most were either incomplete or wrong. Instead I had to ask locals for help navigating the country and finding the right bus to get me where I needed to go.

Global Learning Element B

Studying abroad has impacted my knowledge and understanding of different types of institutions. For example, the institution of health care in Costa Rica gives a stark contrast to that of the United States. Costa Rica has a government-run public health care system with a co-existent private sector as opposed to the mostly private health care system in the United States. They pride themselves on the fact that they have open doors to anyone who needs medical help, even if it means that those with a job are paying for those who do not. They realize that universal health care is overall much less expensive and prevents the spread of diseases. This knowledge has given me a different point of view, especially because health care is a “hot topic” in the United States right now.

Another institution I learned about was religion and how it is truly integrated into every part of the Costa Rican lifestyle. Many families go to church every week, they have statues or paintings of Jesus in their homes, and many daily phrases reference God. For example, every day when I went to school, my host mom would tell me, “*A Dios le acompa e*” or “that God accompanies you”. Any time I would talk about plans I had for the weekend, my host mom would remind me, “*si Dios quiere*” or “if God is willing”. This shows the differences in the way Costa Rica and the United States look at religion, because here many are worried about offending others with differing opinions.

Global Learning Element C

The United States affects the lives of people in Costa Rica in many ways. One of these is that different wealthy companies and organizations give money to Costa Rica to prevent expanded deforestation. They do this because the way the air currents work, the polluted air that leaves the United States circles around through Central America and is purified through the trees in the rainforests. The purified air is circulated back up through the Atlantic and spreads to Europe and back to the United States.

Another way the United States affects people in Costa Rica is commercially. There are many entrepreneurs from the United States that move to Costa Rica to set up new businesses in coastal cities where there will be many tourists that speak English. Many of the restaurants we visited had Costa Rican staff but were actually owned by a United States businessman. This brings in jobs for their community, but it also seemingly diminishes the culture in those areas because they become more “Americanized”.

My Disorienting Experience

Figuring out the bus system was a disorienting experience for me. As described above, the bus system in Costa Rica is much different than the one here in Eau Claire, and because of this, I actually got lost on one of my travels. I was supposed to be on one bus to my destination and it was supposed to take forty-five minutes, but when I was on the bus longer than that and had not yet reached my destination, I knew I was in trouble. I was very nervous at first because I was afraid to ask for help (my mother ingrained in me the “stranger danger” attitude at a very young age), but I realized that I had to in order to figure out where to go. I asked around the bus where other people were going, and a man asked the girl behind me if she would help me out because we were going in the same direction. It turned out that I actually had to take two

different buses and I had to change bus terminals. The girl took my hand after the bus stopped and walked me through Alajuela (a large city) to the other bus stop. She needed a different bus than I did, but she found a group of women going nearly the same place I was and put me in their care. When we boarded, the women checked with the bus driver that he would know where to bring me, and had me sit right behind him so he could make sure I got off at the right stop. In the end, the whole trip took two and a half hours, which was much longer than the forty-five minutes I was anticipating.

Because of this experience, I learned that my knowledge of how people treat others is very narrow minded. All of the people I met on that trip were more than happy to not only tell me where to go, but to personally lead me in the right direction. It shows that Costa Ricans value other people over time and efficiency. In the United States, I do not doubt that a lost person could find help, but generally I do not think that the person would be so friendly or patient about it. I know when I am asked for directions, I tell the person where to go, but I do not walk or drive them there myself. Usually I have somewhere I need to be or something I need to do, and helping them would be out of my way.

My Experience Integrates My Life

My study abroad trip has changed the way I see our culture. I have realized how self-absorbed of a culture we truly are. For example, we call ourselves “Americans”, which is true, but we do not consider those outside of the United States to be Americans either, which technically everyone living in North, Central, and South America are all Americans. After talking to some of the locals in Costa Rica, some grudgingly accept that the term has changed, but others are angered by it, and understandably so. We try to take a label away from others just so that we can keep it to ourselves.

Studying abroad has also reminded me how much I truly want to travel in the future. It has also changed the way I want to travel. We mostly stayed in hostels when we traveled on the weekends to save money instead of staying in private hotels. This is a habit I would like to follow in the future because it not only a financially effective way to travel, but it is a great way to meet new people. I realized that it was not too big of a hassle to use community bathrooms (especially after living in the dorms for two years), and you can even pay for private rooms much cheaper than a hotel room would be.

Photos from the Trip



This picture was taking in one of the EBAISs we visited during the week in Upala. We did some job shadowing with the general physician, the nurse, the ATAP (like a CNA that visits homes and schools), and the secretary. We also taught the patients about living a healthy lifestyle.



This picture was taken at one of the hostels I stayed at. We stayed in a lofted room with six beds and there were community bathrooms, a kitchen, and a lounge area downstairs.