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Biology Major

Spanish for the Health Care Professions Minor

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### What My Time Abroad Has Taught Me...

- 1) As cliché as it may sound, my study abroad experience changed my life. In the beginning I was hesitant to apply for the program knowing that if I was accepted, I would have to make a serious decision as to whether or not I would be able to spend three and a half months in a completely new environment 3,000 miles away from my family. Before Costa Rica I had never spent more than a month away from home, and even then I was within the same state. Although scared beyond belief, I was accepted into the program, and decided that studying abroad was something that I needed to do.

After months of planning and preparing, January 23<sup>rd</sup> came and I was off to Costa Rica. After the long seven and a half hour plane ride, I was united with 16 strangers that soon became family. After an entire day's worth of orientation, we were introduced to our host families and sent home with them. I was so nervous that all of the Spanish I had known and practiced for so many years, completely left my head and I was left speechless for the first two days at home with my family.

After the first extremely long weekend, the 17 of us were reunited at the school to start classes and slowly but surely my Spanish knowledge came back to me. Although at first things were awkward with my family, the uncomfortableness did not last for long at all. Before I knew it San Isidro was just like home. My friends and I began planning weekend trips and spent almost every weekend traveling the country. I visited the ocean for the very first time in Costa Rica, I zip lined through the rainforest, snorkeled over coral reefs, and even spent 10 days in a rural town in the mountains completing my 30-hours of service learning.

I think the best part about my time abroad was how normal it felt. Monday thru Friday we had classes at the school, and then returned home at night to spend time with our families and do homework. Then on the weekends we either explored all that Costa Rica has to offer, or spent even more time getting to know our families. Costa Rica is by far the most beautiful place on earth, and I am beyond grateful that I was able to live there for over three months.

- 2) My study abroad experience helped to improve my understanding of the world's diverse cultures. Although the cultural differences between the United States and Costa Rica were very clear, living with a host family definitely helped me to understand and appreciate diversity more than I think I would have if I hadn't lived with a family.

For example, the way my Costa Rican family lives is very different than how my family lives. In Costa Rica they are very appreciative and connected to the environment. Our front door was always open, as well as the two side doors to enter our yard. Another thing I noticed was the lack of screens. In Wisconsin, although my family loves to be outside, our doors are always closed, or protected with screens, to keep insects and

plants and animals out. I grew to admire this difference between the cultures and understand why Costa Ricans are so in tune with nature.

Costa Ricans value family more than things, and make that very clear in the way that they live. My family, my grandparents, and both of my aunt's houses are all located on the same property, and they are in essence, neighbors. This is a very distinct cultural difference from the United States as my family lives all over the state of Wisconsin. My family in Costa Rica thought it was strange when I told them that it takes around four hours in a car to get to some of my families houses. I can now appreciate why people live so differently, and understand that that's what makes us all unique and special.

- 3) My time abroad has definitely impacted my knowledge and understanding of global systems, institutions and relationships of power. I knew that Costa Rica and the United States have maintained close relations for a long time; as they have common interests in terms of democracy and human rights, but I was worried about how Costa Ricans view those from the United States. Luckily, the people who I talked to concerning the matter had nothing terrible to say, and were happy to know that if for some reason they were under attack their allies, the United States, would protect them.

It was very interesting to me to be able to see the United States in a different light. Prior to my experience I had never been to another country, let alone lived abroad for an extended period of time. I had an idea of how powerful the United States was, but studying abroad helped me fully see things clearly. It was important to me to know how those in other countries feel about the country in which I live.

Relationships of power was something that I have come to understand very well. The United States is one of the most powerful countries in the world, and it was made apparent to me that all other countries truly know that. The United States has quite a large impact on life in Costa Rica. News, music, movies, fashion, food, and ultimately all ways of life from the United States have made their way to Central America and effect those in other nations on a daily basis.

During my history class that I took abroad, we learned that some people feel smothered by the United States and the immense power they hold. Sometimes the United States crosses the line and focuses too much on other countries and not enough time on things happening on the home front. This was a new way of seeing things for me but after I thought about it I tend to agree. It's important for me to understand relationships of power and see how the country in which I live, effects those elsewhere.

- 4) The United States and Costa Rica are very much aligned in terms of government and politics, therefore it is without a doubt that decisions made within these two countries would affect the other. Although I don't know much about how a specific decision made in the United States has impacted Costa Rica, or vice versa, there was one thing that I definitely noticed while in my host country. The decision of the United States to expand their businesses, especially fast food chains, to Costa Rica has undoubtedly affected both economies.

I was shocked to see so many familiar fast food chains when I arrived in Costa Rica. In the more populated cities it seemed like there was a fast food chain from the United States on every block! According to a Costa Rican blog on economy from 2013, there are more than 180 foreign franchises being operated in Costa Rica. This boom in American fast food chains in Costa Rica has both benefits, and negatives.

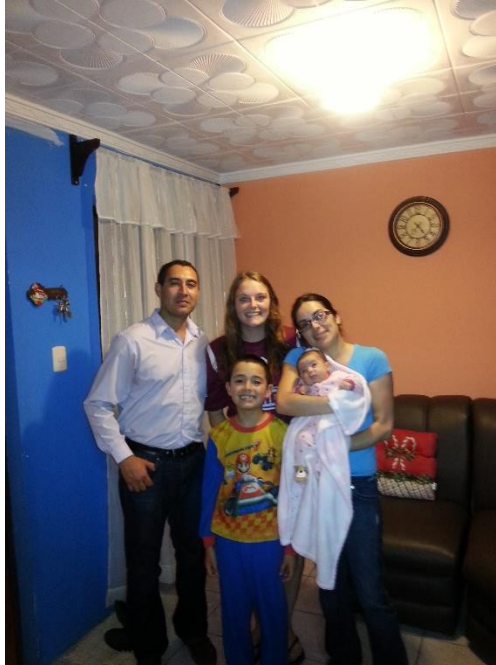
Clearly, foreign investment is of extreme importance to Costa Rica, and they rely on it to boost their economy. Although it is great that the economy of Costa Rica is doing well, relying so heavily on foreign investment through franchises can cause problems of its own. Another effect of U.S. franchises making their way to Costa Rica, is that some of their authentic culture is being stripped away. Although I visited authentic Costa Rican restaurants, fast food restaurants were much more prevalent. Ultimately, the decision of the U.S. and Costa Rican governments to set up so many franchises throughout the Latin American country has impacted its people tremendously.

- 5) Above all else, my time abroad has impacted my career goals. There were several skills that I already had but had the opportunity to enhance while abroad in Costa Rica. I was also able to develop some completely new skills that will benefit me in the work environment in the future. These skills include effective communication strategies, the ability to adapt to new and different surroundings, and a more open and accepting mind.

As of now, my professional aspirations are to become a Pediatrician at a hospital. With the career goals I have, it is no doubt that effective communication skills are a must. I was able to enhance my communication skills during my time abroad in Costa Rica in numerous situations. Obviously the difference in languages proved to be a struggle that I had to overcome. At the beginning I could communicate a few straight to the point things, and that was it. Due to the situation I was in, I needed to use other means of communication such as facial expressions, and hand gestures, together with Spanish-English dictionaries and other learning tools to help me better communicate. I finally learned the true importance of facial expressions, and how to adequately use them to communicate. I was able to overcome the hardship I was in, and now I am an even better communicator due to the fact that I can speak two languages almost fluently.

Furthermore, the ability to adapt to new surroundings was a new skill that I developed while abroad. The ability to adapt is of extreme importance, especially in the medical field because no two people are the same and it is important to know how to change and adapt to the current situation. Last but not least, I feel that having an open mind is an important trait to have in all careers. An open mind allows one to experience so many more things and see things in a completely different way. Although prior to my study abroad program I had a slightly open mind, studying abroad completely changed the way I view situations, and has allowed me to view the world at a global scale. Overall, my study abroad experience has allowed me to perfect skills that will continue to help me throughout my career and life.

- 6) Study abroad was undeniably a life changing experience. Now looking back on my time abroad, I think it showed me more about myself, and the life I live back in Wisconsin then I ever would have saw otherwise.
  - a. The lack of recycling in Costa Rica was definitely a disorientating dilemma that I experienced. To me it was disorientating because I've grown up recycling and have never not done so. At my elementary school we were shown how to recycle and what items may be recycled and from then on, I've had access to recycling bins and have never thought twice about it.
  - b. This dilemma challenged my knowledge of the world's practices and values. I've always thought that everyone recycles. This situation showed me that I really don't know as much about the world and all of its diverse cultures as I thought I did. Every culture has different practices and values and it was important for me to see that. I now know that just because a practice is customary here, does not mean that it is elsewhere.
  - c. Due to this situation, I was able to see firsthand how the decisions of both myself, and others have global implications. For example, the lack of recycling and ultimate litter scattered throughout Costa Rica has a negative effect on the environment and health of all species. The effects of improper waste management in Costa Rica have global implications.



*My family in Costa Rica definitely helped make my time in Costa Rica the most meaningful. Without them my time abroad would have been totally different. I cannot wait to return to Costa Rica and visit my second family and home.*



*This picture was from my time in Bajos de Loaiza, a rural community located in the mountains. This was the most meaningful experience of my entire life. I was able to learn so much about myself, and the world through my service-learning project. It changed my life for the better and has allowed me to see things in a way I never thought possible. It has opened my eyes to the world and the beauty it holds and for that I am forever grateful.*