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1. Provide an introduction and overview of your study abroad experience.

   I remember back in high school I had heard about people studying abroad. To me, I thought the idea was a bit crazy and I had only heard about a few people so I knew it was a rare and extraordinary opportunity that I was interested in but never really believed that I would do. I kept my options open, though. Knowing UWEC was one of the better colleges to go to if I wanted to study abroad, I made my decision wisely.

   The idea escaped me until I had a classroom speaker in one of my Spanish classes. After the presentation I started to look for different opportunities and I found the Costa Rica program. I started the application, never thinking that I’d finish it, but I did. I vividly remember it all. I never talked to my parents about it even because I never really thought I would go. I got accepted into the program and then I told them and it continued to seem surreal.

   The next thing I knew I was on my way to the airport in Madison and it hit me. I was actually going to study abroad. I remember the tears, the smiles, the emotions I felt as I got to the new country. I remember travelling to the many different places; the mountains, the beaches, the cities. I remember my host family and how inviting and wonderful they were. I remember everything.

   I could probably write 50 pages and explain all the things I saw and learned but my words could never come close to describing the beauty of the experience. I hold my memories close to me, deep inside. When I am lost, I find myself again in the memories. The funny thing about being lost is, as Henry David Thoreau said, “Not until we are lost do we begin to find ourselves.”

2. Using one to two examples, explain how your study abroad experience advanced your knowledge and understanding of the world’s diverse cultures, environments, practices and/or values.

   In Costa Rica they have a saying. It is “Pura Vida”. It literally translates to pure life. The way of life in Costa Rica is at a much slower pace. In fact, being late is normal and expected. The people take their time and are more focused on their health and being happy. This was a weird experience for me and it took time to get used to. Here in the U.S. everything is fast paced and we are overall more worried about working and money than our own health.

   The thing I envy most about the Costa Ricans is their importance of family. I always been told that family is important, but Costa Ricans take it to another level. My
host siblings are 25 and 27 and both still lived with their parents and when they do move out, most likely it will be next door. This is the pattern in all of Costa Rica. Here in the U.S., if you still live with your parents at that age, you would be looked at as a bum.

Now I see life as something more precious. Because of the experience, I’ve adopted part of their culture. I still believe in being on time and money is important but it isn’t everything. Being happy is the most important thing to me, that, and spreading happiness to others. With the things I’ve learned, I understand that there are other cultures out there and we shouldn’t look down upon them. Yes, they are different but that doesn’t mean that they are wrong. It’s simply how they live and what they believe in.

3. Describe how your study abroad experience has impacted your knowledge and understanding of global systems, institutions, and relationships of power?

I’d have to say that I’m a fairly well educated man. I have learned about the role of the U.S. in other countries and other relationships between countries. What I did learn specifically is that Costa Rica and Nicaragua do not get along very well, which is a little confusing but it is a little similar to our relationship with Mexico. Many people here discriminate against Mexicans because we don’t know or understand their culture. Nicaraguans are having trouble making money in their own country so they cross the border and work in Costa Rica. To me, it was interesting to see something like this.

I also learned about how there is a Central American agreement. Even though they do not always agree, they meet twice a year to discuss problems in the region. I have heard about the European Union but nothing with just the Central American countries.

What I really learned is actually kind of sad and that is money is power. In the past I had heard and even seen example in the news but in Costa Rica and Nicaragua I had the opportunity to experience it firsthand. Driving through cities and seeing the homeless, I noticed that most people that were physically handicapped were also homeless. I never learned if there was an organization in Costa Rica that helped those people but I know that there isn’t in Nicaragua but with that negativity I now see how privileged we are to have that kind of aid in the U.S.

4. Identify and describe how a decision (or lack of a decision) made by people in your home community or country has impacted your host community or country. Or, if you prefer, identify and describe how a decision/lack of a decision made by people in your host community/country has impacted your home community/country.
I actually have a couple things I want to discuss with this question. Costa Rica, right now, is powering their country with 100% renewable energy. This is a very good thing and because of that, their methods are being looked at in other countries and now other countries are trying to copy them, including the U.S. With the importance of the environment and talks of climate change, this is a big step. Hopefully others can follow in their steps, maybe even the U.S. someday.

Even though they are doing well with energy, they have a pollution problem. Their government has decided not to fund garbage cans in the city and some places don’t even get visited by garbage trucks, so all of the trash just goes outside. This part was hard to see, and because of that, San Jose’s tourism isn’t as good as it could be. Because Costa Rica relies on tourism, they should fix that problem. It would benefit them after the initial costs of setting up programs.

5. Explore how your study abroad experience has impacted your professional or career goals or aspirations. What skills did you develop or enhance during your study abroad experience that might be transferable or beneficial in your future workplace?

I went to Costa Rica for many reasons but the biggest reason was to learn more Spanish. Spanish for me is weird. I took it all 4 years in high school only because I was told to in order to get into UW-Madison, where I wanted to go to college at the time. I decided to take one more class in Eau Claire and see how it went and I loved it. It’s like I found out that I actually liked it after all that time. Now, as my minor is almost finished, I am almost sad. I have thought about switching careers to something that would use my Spanish more but I plan on using it when I can in my field. Also, it can be a hobby.

Along with the Spanish, I learned how to be more independent. Being in a foreign country is a scary thing, I was definitely out of my comfort zone but I learned how to take care of myself. The independence gave me more self-confidence and that I can and have been using to my advantage recently. I moved 3 hours from home and I’m living by myself and I have all kinds of new responsibilities as I prepare for the real world.

So basically, my goals have changed a little as I am a different, improved young adult. Instead of just graduating and getting by, I want to do better for myself. Maybe I’ll go to graduate school? Who really knows? The stuff I learned and gained from studying abroad haven’t left me and I’m sure they never will.

6. Study abroad can be a transformative learning experience, in which students learn more about themselves and the world in which they live.
a. Describe a disorienting dilemma you experienced while abroad and why you found it disorienting.

Many times walking down the streets of Nicaragua, a week-long trip including in the study abroad, there would be kids begging for money. The poverty in Nicaragua was hard to see. I truly wanted to help the kids but I learned that by giving them money, I wasn’t really helping them. I was teaching them that they don’t have to go to school to make money, that they could just continue begging and live off of tourists’ money.

This was hard for me because I have never been in a situation similar and I didn’t really know what to do. The first day I gave them money and I did some research and I found out that money does more hurt than help. Where I live in the U.S. the poverty isn’t near as extreme. I doubt there is even homeless in my hometown. In Nicaragua the wealth isn’t spread equally by any means, which is sad.

b. Describe how the dilemma challenged your previous knowledge of the world’s cultures, environments, practices, or values.

I knew that there was poverty in the world. I had heard stories and seen movies, but nothing compares to seeing it firsthand. I also had the opportunity to learn why there was so much poverty and that is because their government is corrupt. Experiencing this was also something that really made me aware that every place in the world is different.

c. Explain how the dilemma helped you to understand how your decisions and the decisions of others have global implications.

With the poverty in Central America, a lot of it is due to drug problems and not because of them using the drugs themselves, but because the drugs have to go through their country to get to the U.S., where the demand is way too high. I see know that every decision that we make individually and as a nation, has other implications that can harm/help others.

7. Finally, please attach two pictures, with captions, that illustrate what was important and
meaningful about your experience.

-These were my host parents. They were probably the best part about my study abroad experience because they were so caring. They have been hosting students for more than 20 years and they still connect with each new student. The love they have for each other was so beautiful, which is surprising to me after 30 years of marriage.
This picture shows the natural beauty that I got to experience in Costa Rica. I absolutely love the sunsets and being able to enjoy the outdoors, so Costa Rica was perfect for me.