

Melissa Pomaville

Major: Spanish Minor: Biology

Site of Experience: Valladolid, Spain

Dates of Experience: January 7th-May 16th 2015

Expected Graduation Date: May 2017

Support from UW- Eau Claire: Scholarship name: Sandra Nelson Study Abroad Scholarship \$1000

I have spent the last five months studying abroad in Spain and traveling Europe. I had an absolutely incredible time, and my experiences have impacted me greatly. I started my adventure from initially deciding to study abroad. I feel in love with the Spanish language when I was in high school, and it was always a dream of mine to study abroad. I even choose to go to UW- Eau Claire because of the fact that they have a good study abroad program. Going into college I was undeclared, but I knew I wanted to study abroad in Spain. I still really do not know what I want to do with my future, but studying abroad has helped me make some decisions. As my first year of college was underway, I applied to study abroad in Valladolid, Spain because I wanted to go for a semester. I did not even discuss this with my mom, I just told her I wanted to go and she supported me fully. A few months later I heard back that I had been accepted, and just like that my dream was coming true! I was so excited but the reality did not set in for a while. Little did I know that this experience would be so much more amazing that I ever thought it could be. All my expectations were exceeded and I am incredibly thankful that I was able to have this experience. Now writing this I have been home for one week, and I could not miss living in Spain more. I cannot believe that this adventure is over, and I am counting down the days until I go back to this amazing country.

After I had applied to the program and was accepted, my next step was actually getting to Spain. I had nine days to pack once I go home from finishing my fall exams to when my flight left for Spain. I frantically packed during those nine days between Christmas celebrations and festivities. I finished packing the morning before my flight left, but it was not a problem and I was beyond excited for my journey to start. I arrived in Madrid and then flew to Vigo, Spain to visit a friend for ten days before my program in Valladolid started. During that time I spoke only Spanish, and I felt that my Spanish had improved more over those ten days then the seven years that I had studied the language. From the start I knew this was going to be an amazing experience. On January 7th my friend's family dropped me off in Valladolid, where I met my host parents. I lived with an older couple; they were each 73 years old. At first I did not know what to think, but they welcomed me into their home with open arms. I also lived with an American roommate from Eau Claire. The next day we started our classes. I met my teachers and they took us on a tour of the city. I was amazed. The city was so big to me. I have never lived in a city before, so having everything so compact and close was new to me. However, I absolutely loved it. I remember feeling a little overwhelmed that first day because I had no idea where we were when we took the tour, but I was so excited to learn. Within the next few weeks I was able to get a route down to get to school, plaza mayor, the shopping street, etc. I thought the whole idea of walking 20 feet to the grocery store from my house was the coolest thing ever. Where I live in Wisconsin I have to drive at least 15 minutes to get to the nearest grocery store. It definitely is a different way of life, but I got used to it very quickly and loved it right off the bat.

The next week we started learning real material in our classes. By this point I had met some friends from Eau Claire. Going into this program I did not know one person, but it is very easy to meet the other students from Eau Claire because we all went to the same building for classes and some of us lived close. I really enjoyed my classes. I had seven classes that were taught completely in Spanish. I had grammar, history, geography, culture, oral expression, literature, and art. I found these classes interesting and I was surprised that I was able to understand mostly everything that my teachers said. This was a big change for me; as the weeks went on I found myself being actually interested in what I was learning, contrary to my previous classes at Eau Claire where I did not enjoy most of them. We did not receive much homework and even though I did have to study a lot for tests I found "Spain School",

as I called it, a lot easier than by tough biology classes at Eau Claire. And I absolutely loved it. I had time after school to go home, eat a delicious Spanish lunch made by my host mom, take the usual *ciesta* (a common Spanish nap time) and have time to explore the city with my friends. About three or four weeks in I got a tutoring job which would occupy most of my afternoons. Three days a week I would go to the houses of children and teach them English. I have always loved working with children so when I found out that I would be helping Spanish children learn English I was very excited. I would also be making spending money which proved to help me out a lot during my time in Europe. I loved tutoring because I was able to spend time with some really awesome kids and learn more about the Spanish culture while teaching English. It kept me busy during week nights and I found it to be something I looked forward to. Children can be very rewarding, and I was happy that I was able to help them learn.

After about the first week I had made a solid friend group, and at the time I had no idea how close we would become. We went out together, traveled together, and these people were basically my family abroad. All of my friends were from UW- Eau Claire, and we all got along pretty well. We frequently took weekend trips to places all around Europe, and I had an amazing time traveling with my friends. All in all I visited 12 cities in Spain, Morocco, Porto, Prague, Budapest, Milan, Berlin, Scotland, London, Paris, and Ireland. We were lucky because we were able to find cheap airfare, cheap hostels, and we ate grocery food to save money. I was fortunate to find friends who also wanted to travel cheaply, and by doing so we were able to travel to so many different places during our five months abroad. I cannot express enough how much I loved this experience. I was so lucky to find such amazing friends to call my family during my time abroad. Every experience I had was new and exciting. I had a very friendly host family who taught me a lot about the culture and the food. My host mom always served us a ton of food, so my roommate and I were never hungry. I am very thankful that they invited me into their home and cared for me like I was one of their children. The whole experience was amazing, and I did not feel homesick once. My life abroad was so fulfilling that I actually dreaded going home. As the weeks went on and the number of days I had left in Spain shortened, I felt very sad. I wanted my adventures to last forever. I did not want my school to end; the first time ever that I felt this way. The amount of happiness I felt was impeccable, incomparable to my life before. I was overwhelmed by happiness, friendly people, enriching experiences and I absolutely fell in love with this incredible country. Now that I am home I still cannot believe that it is over. I am having a harder time adjusting to my life in Wisconsin than I did when I moved to Spain. Needless to say I had an amazing time abroad and will be back very soon. I am extremely thankful for this opportunity, and I would like to reach out to the people who awarded me this scholarship for providing me with some funding so that I was able to go on this amazing journey. I am extremely lucky to have had such a great time and to be able to have taken so much from this experience.

Through my study abroad experience I learned a lot about the world's diverse cultures, values, and environments. Spanish culture is very distinct, as my host mom would tell me in Spanish. One thing that is very different in the Spanish culture versus the American culture is the daily schedule. They both wake up around the same time, go to work or school and then from there it differs. In America, at school or work we eat lunch around noon and it is usually a rushed affair. I know in high school I had less than 30 minutes to eat lunch, something they find bizarre in Spain. Normally in Spain they work or go to school until 2pm, and then come home and eat lunch. They spend at least an hour or two talking with their families before going back to school/work. Some of the students that I talked to stayed at school for lunch, but they got a two hour break to enjoy lunch and to play. This is a big difference to school in

America where we got less than half an hour to eat lunch. Spanish lunches are usually the largest meals of the day, and they are a drawn out family event. Each weekend and sometimes on the weekdays my host mom's daughters would come over for lunch with their children, and sometimes we would sit at the table and talk for two to three hours. In America lunch is rarely done that way. We rush through lunch and get back to work or school. After lunch it is very typical in Spain to take a *ciesta*, which is a nap. We don't have a designated nap time in America. And after that in Spain they usually get together with friends, take a walk outside, go shopping, or sit at a bar or café and "*tomar algo*", which literally means to take something. The Spanish culture is very social, and they can sit and talk for hours. If you go outside at 8 or 9 pm the streets will be full of people, chatting and having a good time. In America we do not do this so much. I am not from a city so I am not sure what does happen in American cities, but where I live we never just go outside and mingle with friends. If I were to hang out with my friends it would be a previous arrangement, we would decide to meet at someone's house or at a popular ice cream shop. In Spain they just go roam the streets and usually run into friends. They eat dinner around 9 or 10pm and then after the children go to bed and the adults stay up and chat some more. This is different than American culture, where we eat dinner around 6pm and then go to the store or something after. In Spain, with having a later dinner time usually all the planned activities for the day are over, which allows the entire family to be home for dinner. The families are very close and like to spend time together. Here in America I do have a close family, but we rarely all eat dinner together because of our conflicting schedules.

Even though the Spanish have a very social culture, it is uncommon to go over to someone's house regularly. It is more common to go to the bar on the corner and get a coca cola and chips and talk for a few hours. This is something that I really enjoyed about Spain. I liked the social aspect and that the society was very friendly and welcoming. I was able to spend two weeks living with my Spanish friend who is 16 years old. She introduced me to her friends and even took me to sit in on her school day, and it was very interesting. Everyone was very welcoming and I sat with her and her friends to "*tomar algo*" many times during those two weeks. In my opinion, the Spanish culture is more relaxed than the American culture. They sit and talk even if they have somewhere to be. They do not rush around as much and they are okay with being late. In Valladolid, our classes rarely started on time. They have a common phrase of, "*No pasa nada*" which means don't worry about it, no problem. Most of the people are pretty chill and easy going. I feel that Americans move in a more rushed manner, and we really try to be on time. I feel like I run late a lot of the time, but I rush around to try to be on time. I feel like our daily lives here in America are very busy, and we rarely sit down at a bar on a Tuesday afternoon just to talk with our friends for hours. For me I am always rushing around from one activity to the next and I do not relax much. I have realized that Americans tend to worry about every little thing, and I think we need to be more chill and just let it go and be happy. The more relaxed lifestyle one thing I hope to pick up from the Spanish culture. I love the "*no pasa nada*" mind set, and I found myself saying that very frequently when I was in Spain. It has taught me not to worry so much and just to enjoy life, to go with flow and not to get mad or upset about little things. I really think that saying have taught me how to be more happy and content with life, something that the Spaniards practice every day. Genuinely not worrying about pointless things is part of their culture, and it allows them to focus on the fun and happy parts of life. This is one example of why I have fallen in love with the Spanish culture.

Additionally, while I was abroad I had the opportunity to travel to Morocco. I went with an excursion group and I truly had an amazing time. This was a very eye opening experience for me, and I

learned a lot about the world's diverse cultures and environments. My favorite city we visited on our weekend trip to Morocco was Chefchaouen, or commonly called the blue city. It was breathtaking, with all the walls of the buildings painted in a vibrant blue supposedly to keep the bugs out of the houses. But the blue buildings was not the thing that struck me the most. It was the culture of the people, and the way they lived their daily lives. As we walked along the streets I was brought to tears. Chefchaouen is a poorer village, and it is evident in the way the people live. The women were washing their families' clothes in the river, and hanging them out on the line to dry. The men at the shops yelled to us and even grabbed our arms to drag us into their stores in hopes that we would buy something. They even had young children trained to huddle around us and ask repeatedly if we wanted to buy their bracelets. At first one could find this behavior annoying and rude, but if you take the time to step back and realize the situation it is much different. The income from their stores is the only way a family can make money, and with tough financial situations the men will try anything they can to get you to buy something. It was definitely an eye opening experience for me. These people are just trying to make a living and support their families, and I am sure I would do the same if I was put in that situation. I even stopped in an alley to play marbles with some local boys. Even though we did not speak the same language, they were very friendly and helped me to learn their game. I could have been afraid of them and kept walking, but I gave them a chance and I learned so much from that experience. I heard so many people saying "don't talk to the people, they might rob you, they're not nice", etc. But I felt compelled to go up to these boys, and I am very glad I did because they were very friendly. I realized that no matter our social status, race or age, the majority of people are all striving towards one goal; to have fun, enjoy life, and to share your happiness with others. Even though these boys did not have much, they made do with what they had and were having so much fun. One of the boys even gave me one of their marbles for me to keep, which was such a kind act that I really took to heart. They do not have very much to begin with but yet he shared his toys with me out of kindness. This experience really made me step back and think about all the things I had in my life and how fortunate I am. I was moved that day walking through the streets of Chefchaouen and it is something that I will remember for the rest of my life.

My experience abroad has impacted my knowledge and understanding of global systems, institutions, and relationships of power in an interesting way. I am not sure that I really focused on this while abroad or learned much about it, but thinking back to my experiences I am able to draw some conclusions. While living in Spain I noticed that the people idolized America. America is seen as a super power of the world. I am not defying this fact, however I do not believe that this makes us any better than anyone else. When I would say I was from the United States some people would say "Ohhh America" and automatically judge me. Everyone knows about America and most people think it must be the greatest place to live. Almost everyone I talked to expressed their interest in traveling to America, because they have seen it in movies and it looks like a nice place. In my opinion, I do not see why the United States is any better than any other country in the world. I understand that there are very many good things about our country, but we have our problems just like any other country. It is by no means a perfect place to live, and we are not all rich. People would say to me "wow you are from America you must be rich!" and I would reassure them that I am not, I am a normal person just like them. I would tell them how I have to work for my money and that my parents work very hard to have a stable household. The Spanish people were completely shocked when I told them I have been working since I was 14 and that I work more than 40 hours a week in the summer. I would tell them that I pay for my college tuition without the help from my parents because they cannot afford it, a concept that rarely happens in Spain. They have this skewed idea that living in America means the glory life, and while it is a good life here it is

no more special than living in Spain or anywhere else in the world. While abroad I saw more people wearing shirts with American Flags on them than I do in the United States. It was crazy to me how much people love America and I think that has to do with the fact that America is a very powerful country. We do have a lot of good systems in place and I am very fortunate to have been born and raised in this country, however in the eyes of a foreigner America is viewed on a pedestal. In my opinion I believe that our country is not superior to the rest, rather parallel to the other first world countries. In America we struggle with debt, poverty, homelessness and unemployment just like any other country. Through this experience I have learned to really believe that all people are equal. Not one nationality or race is superior to another.

This experience has really opened my eyes to equality. After seeing many people of different cultures, different social levels, and different backgrounds I have come to the conclusion that in general we are all striving towards the same goal. Everyone is looking for success and happiness. We are all trying to live our lives in the best way possible, and everyone deserves a chance. We cannot choose where we are born or the social class that we live in. When I meet someone I have learned to judge quickly, and to accept people for who they are. I have met an abundance of people on this journey and through each person I have listened to their story and taken a piece of knowledge from them. An example of this comes from when I was on a ferry boat coming from Morocco going back to Spain. I sat by this Moroccan woman. We started talking and through her broken English and my knowledge of Spanish we were able to communicate. She told me about how she moved to Madrid to get a job so she could make enough money to support her family. She was a single mom, three sons, and worked as a cook. Two of her sons were teenagers and they lived in Madrid with her. Her youngest son was four, and he lived with the rest of her family in Morocco. She explained to me how hard it was for her to leave her son but she simply had to. As much as she wanted him to live with her in Madrid it would not work out, because she had to work during the day and she could not afford a babysitter. She had about 10 or more siblings who lived all over the world as they tried to support their families. She had gone back to Morocco this time because one of her brothers had died. I really took her story to heart. She was such a sweet woman and she answered all of my questions about the Moroccan culture. I felt like a friend to her as she told me her heart wrenching story about her family struggles. She even told me her phone number if I ever needed a place to stay in Madrid or if I ever returned to Morocco. As I am writing this I cannot hold back the tears as I think about how genuinely nice this woman was. Her story really touched me. Most of all through my journey abroad I have learned that love is absolutely universal, and that most people want to help you, make you smile and be your friend. We live in a beautiful world filled with amazing, complex people, and that does not change through country borders. Granted there are a lot of differences between world powers and how each country plays a role in the system of our world economics and systems, but in total we are all just people trying to live a fulfilling life.

The decision made by the staff at Eau Claire to send students to Valladolid had impacted the community of Valladolid greatly. Through this program we are able to travel to this city and not only gain cultural experiences for ourselves but also to share our culture with the Spaniards that we meet. This program provides numerous learning opportunities for all parties involved. First of all, the students from Eau Claire live with host families in Valladolid. This is a very nice way to give back to the community, because these families get paid to host us. They usually end up making money, which in turn helps out their family. I do believe that these families learn something from each and every student that they host, even though some of these families have been hosting students for over 20 years. I know

that my host family in particular has hosted many students, however we were still able to tell them things about our culture that they had not heard before. In my situation, my roommate and I got along pretty well with our host parents, and we would engage in conversation with them at mealtimes. I recall sometimes where we would all be laughing so hard at the dinner table because of something one of us said. I think that we brought joy into our host parents lives. When we were gone traveling our host parents would tell us that they had nothing to do while we were away. My host parents were in their seventies, so they usually stayed home during the day. My host mom loved to cook, but when only she and her husband were home she would not cook a big meal. Our host parents really enjoy hosting students, and it is a way for them to make a little money as well to help pay their bills. The decision of our faculty at Eau Claire has helped some of these families in Valladolid.

Additionally, the decision to send students to Valladolid has not only impacted select families, but also the community as a whole. As we adventured around the city we met many people and were able to share our stories with them. The locals gave us opportunities to practice our Spanish and learn about the Spanish culture, and in turn we could teach the Spaniards a little about American culture. Additionally, many of the students from my programs were able to tutor Spanish children. This was very beneficial to these students and their families. By having a native English speaker talk to the children weekly, they were able to improve and advance in their studies of the English language. Because of the decisions of the staff at Eau Claire to send students to Valladolid we were able to impact the society by helping people learn about our culture and our language. In turn, these people were able to help us by teaching us about the Spanish culture and the Spanish language. It was a win win situation for both my home community and my host community, because now I can share my experiences with community here.

My experience abroad has definitely impacted my plans for my future. Before I went to Spain I had declared a Biology major and a Spanish minor. Coming into Eau Claire I was undeclared, and I still do not know what I really want to do. I originally declared a Spanish minor just so I could study abroad, and then later I declared a biology major so I could get into a chemistry class. I did not enjoy my classes during my last semester at Eau Claire before I went to Spain, and I especially disliked my biology class. For me, Spain came at a perfect time. I was able to take a semester without biology and experience different classes. I really liked my classes in Valladolid, and I was interested in what I was learning, a feeling that I had not felt for a long time. I have decided that I would much rather study something that I enjoy, and I want to be done disliking my time at school. The first thing I will do when I get back to Eau Claire is change my major to Spanish and minor to biology. I fell in love with the Spanish culture, and I am determined to go back. As of right now, I plan to go back the summer of 2016 and work as an au pair for the summer. I love working with children and after helping children learn English in Valladolid I know that this is something that I want to do. Additionally, after I graduate from UW- Eau Claire I plan to go to back to Spain for a year or two to teach English. It is pretty easy to get a teaching job in Spain because they are in need of English teachers. Through my time abroad I met several Americans in Spain who were working as English teachers. They all worked through the same program, and I am determined to do the same. After that I would still be able to go to graduate school if I choose that is what I want to do. I really want to continue to speak Spanish for the rest of my life. My knowledge of the Spanish language is a skill that will be beneficial in most workplaces. Right now I am looking into going into the medical field, and knowing Spanish will be beneficial so I can communicate with many different patients. My

study abroad experience has made me realize that I want to continue to study Spanish and that I need to choose a path that I really enjoy.

In Spain I did not really experience a time where I felt completely disorientated. I never once felt homesick and I adjusted very easily. I was excited and eager for all the new experiences, and I learned to be very flexible and easy going. If I had to choose a disorientating experience it would be the fact that people found it very interesting that I had natural blonde hair. In Spain the people have mostly dark hair and dark eyes, and it is not very diverse. Valladolid is not a tourist city, and there are almost no people with natural blonde hair. Daily numerous people would yell at me, screaming “rubia, rubia!” which literally means blonde haired girl. At first I was completely shocked. People would stare, point, and yell. It was uncomfortable for me and I just wanted people to stop looking at me. One time I was even in approached by a man who grabbed my hair and stroked it. It was strange for me, but eventually it became normal because it happened so frequently. I learned to ignore the cat calls and the rubia shouts. This experience made me realize how our culture is different in America. First of all, in America it is considered rude to stare, however in Spain it is completely normal. Moreover, the United State is a melting pot of many different races. The stereotypical American can be blonde, brunette, dark skinned or light skinned. It is very typical to be intermingled with many different people from different backgrounds. For instance, in a classroom you can find white people, African Americans, Asians, and people with all different colors of hair. In Spain I would go to a library full of people and I would be the only blonde person. From this experience I realized that I am fortunate to have grown up in an area where I have daily interactions with different races. In Spain most people have the same traits, and then when they see someone different it is a big deal. They are not very cultured because the city is mostly composed of Spaniards. It was a very interesting feeling being a minority, but I am glad I was able to learn from the experience. Although I felt like everyone was always staring at me, I learned to accept it. This experience furthered my feeling of equality towards everyone. After being a minority and living through it I am now more able to accept people from all different races and backgrounds. These decisions have global implications because this happens all over the world. Now I know the feeling of being looked at as an outsider and I will try my best to not make anyone feel that way. I can decide to treat everyone equally regardless of what they look like.

Overall, I had an incredible time studying abroad in Spain. I have learned some very valuable life lessons that I will never forget. I am very thankful for this opportunity and I am extremely honored to have received this scholarship and to be able to share my experience. I cannot express my gratitude towards all the people who have supported me during this journey. Thank you all so much!

Pictures:



My host parents from Valladolid, my roommate and I. I am very thankful for them and how much they took care of me. They really taught me a lot about the Spanish culture and I enjoyed living with them.



These are the boys from Morocco who I played marbles with. They were all so sweet and welcoming and I am really glad I was able to experience their kindness.



These are my friends from Eau Claire who I met in Valladolid and this was our graduation day. It was a very bittersweet moment for all of us. I am very thankful for them and for the time we shared abroad.

