Individualized Majors Abroad

This issue of the Individualized Major Program Newsletter focuses on experiential learning abroad. Education beyond the classroom offers students insight into the practical and applied aspects of their studies. Therefore, we strongly encourage all individualized majors to do an internship, conduct research, and/or study abroad. Enrolling in a university abroad, participating in community outreach abroad, or working with an international student organization are all excellent ways to get this kind of hands-on experience in a foreign setting. About one third of all IMJRs have worked or studied abroad and they invariably report that it was one of their best experiences as an undergraduate.

This issue contains articles by three IMJRs who have taken this path: David Andrew, who studied abroad in South Africa this past Spring semester; Rachel Gagnon, who is currently studying abroad in India; and Chandler Ford, who spent two summers with the Global Medical Brigades in Ghana. Their experiences illustrate the ways in which working in a foreign culture can transform one’s assumptions about the world in which we live.

South Africa
- David Andrew, “Health and Social Inequality”

How does your experience in South Africa integrate with your major?

As a Health and Social Inequality major, I study the diverse social, cultural, and political factors that contribute to health disparities on the population level. My study abroad experience allowed me to witness the manifestation of these dynamics in the incredibly rich and complex environment of modern day South Africa. The component of my study abroad experience most salient to my major was my internship with the Treatment Action Campaign (TAC), a grass-roots community organization that was responsible for forcing the South African government to acknowledge HIV theory and begin offering widespread antiretroviral treatment to the millions of South Africans who live with the disease.

I worked at TAC’s Khayelitsha branch office, a tiny outpost of community mobilizers and activists within South Africa’s single largest township. Khayelitsha is a Xhosa township of close to one million and is a place of concentrated poverty, high infectious disease prevalence, widespread unemployment and food insecurity, and chronic crime and violence. Through our work with TAC, we came to understand how the current health inequalities experienced by the people of Khayelitsha and other impoverished communities are the direct re-

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sult of historical, political, economic, and social factors. I saw everything I had learned about as an individualized major playing out in front of my eyes, in a way almost too real and immediate for me to even comprehend. What was once conceptual became incontrovertibly real.

**What were the most vivid experiences that you had in South Africa?**

While I was abroad in South Africa, I was able to engage with issues on a level that few are able to experience. I explored the township of Khayelitsha on foot, met with people in their homes, and navigated deep into the informal settlements, where impoverished migrants have built shack homes on vacant land. There are vast accumulations of shacks that lack even the most basic requirements for habitation: road access, lighting, basic sanitation, and other services. As an intern with TAC, I canvassed for mass action events and distributed educational materials within these communities. I witnessed incredible poverty and deprivation, but also strength, kindness, and generosity as I was welcomed with open arms into people’s homes. There is no way I could possibly relate the value and impact of the experiences I had while working abroad.

Experiences like this were made more vivid by our eventual return to our home in the suburbs, where we lived a lifestyle that was profoundly removed from that in which we worked. The comforts of our house, the assumption of safety, the easy accessibility of cosmopolitan Cape Town, a world to which we had the keys—credit cards, passports, privilege—only made this disjunction more wrenching. South Africa is a place that never lets you forget how privilege, oppression, and inequality shape our lives.

**What advice would you give to IMJRs who are considering going abroad?**

I would encourage all students to study abroad, and to do it in a place that is as far removed from their comfort zone and past experiences as possible. Cape Town is a place that consistently challenged me, confounded my expectations, and left me frustrated, angry, and conflicted just as much as it left me inspired, thrilled, and awed. It was more than a vacation or a tour abroad; it was a period of learning, about the world and about myself. Take a chance and immerse yourself in a culture that is unlike that with which you’re familiar, and savor the opportunity to learn and grow.

I would also recommend that students examine their goals and expectations before going abroad. I was very lucky that the UConn in Cape Town Education Abroad program had a strong emphasis on reflection and self-examination at all points in the experience, and doing this work—through journaling, discussion, reflection—contributed greatly to my inner experience. I also found, through talking with my peers and other foreign students, that our experiences were often very different from our expectations. I know that my experiences diverged wildly from my expectations, and the outcome was a rich, rewarding, challenging, and deeply humbling experience. So take a chance, make your own experience, and find your own truths.

**India**

- Rachel Gagnon, “International Relations with a focus on Human Rights”

**How does your experience in India integrate with your major?**

As major in International Relations and Political Science, I find India the most fascinating country in the world. It should not have survived as a democracy, and yet against all odds it has done relatively well. It is remarkably diverse, with over 14 official national languages, and yet every-
where you go people proudly call themselves Indian.

My area of concentration in International Relations is human rights. While here I have seen abject poverty, and all the rights violations that come with it, including violations of women’s rights and labor rights. More importantly, I have been able to see all the strides people and NGOs have made in an effort to remedy the wrongs that have been happening in this beautiful country.

What are the most vivid experiences that you have had in India?

Before I left for India, one of my advisors told me that the whole purpose of travel was not to set foot on foreign land, but to set foot in one’s own country as a foreign land. The longer I spend here the more critical I get of certain aspects of US culture.

One experience stands out as it is about something close to my heart: food. On a weekend trip to Mumbai, my group met with Tushar Gandhi, Mahatma Gandhi’s great grandson. He said that when he visited the United States for the first time he was struck by the incredibly large serving sizes at restaurants.

My family has always been against wasting food; everyone takes only what they will eat, yet we still throw away a lot. Leftovers go bad in the fridge all too often. This simply doesn’t happen in India. I am extremely well fed here, but no food is wasted. Food is not taken for granted in this country, even amongst the wealthy.

Eating out at a restaurant in the United States is all about how good of a “deal” one can get. We want the most food, for the cheapest price, even if it is more food than we could ever finish. Maybe it is time to rethink this notion of a good “deal” at a restaurant, and to consider the impact of our Western consumerist culture on the developing nations of the world.

What advice would you give to IMJR’s who are considering going abroad?

My advice would be: go! I decided that I wanted to study abroad because I wanted to challenge myself. I have found that some of my greatest life experiences have come when I felt uncomfortable, out of place, scared, or a combination of all three. Being hesitant is normal, being scared out of your socks is normal. Once I stepped out of my comfort zone, it stretched; I have found myself willing to try things I never thought I would, and it all comes back to my decision to study abroad.

Ghana

- Chandler Ford, “Global Health”

How does your experience in Ghana integrate with your major?

Although I did not study abroad for a full semester, I travelled to Ghana in western Africa during the summer of my sophomore and junior years with a group on campus called Global Brigades. This organization allows students to fundraise and staff sustainable service projects around the world ranging in focus from medical and public health to microfinance.

It was through this experience that I realized a true passion for global health issues. With an individualized major in Global Health I am afforded the opportunity to continue my exploration of this passion here on the UConn campus. My experience abroad allowed me to adopt a more open mind set in my life and my studies. I learned that expanding our understanding of issues in a global context, and not just in the context of our own lives, grants us an opportunity for much greater learning.
“You will experience things outside your comfort zone and as a result grow as an individual.”

Global Brigades UConn is a student organization that is part of a larger non-profit that provides medical and other assistance to people in developing countries like Ghana and Nicaragua.

and change.

While in Ghana I worked alongside other students and medical providers to staff a medical clinic within rural developing areas. I was able to triage patients and learn a great deal from medical providers. Furthermore, and most importantly, I was able to explore another culture unlike my own. Being accepted into a community halfway across the world is an indescribable feeling.

What were the most vivid experiences that you had in Ghana?

On my very first day in the community I traveled with a translator and a small group and walked through the village door to door to meet the people we might be working with in the upcoming week. Community members invited us into their homes, offered us a seat and shared their life experiences with us openly and honestly. Meeting people in their own homes before they came to the clinic as patients allowed us to make connections between living and working conditions, lifestyle choices and the health issues that came up during their medical visit. The value of meeting someone first as a person and second as a patient is something I will carry with me into the healthcare field in the future.

What advice would you give to IMJRs who are considering going abroad?

I would encourage all those who want to study or work abroad! I started traveling my senior year of high school and have searched for opportunities ever since. If you approach your trip with an open mind you will gain much more than you ever could have imagined. You will experience things outside your comfort zone and as a result grow as an individual. Also, you will inevitably and undeniably have fun exploring a new culture and all its traditions, cuisine and people.

Office of Education Abroad

- Dorothea Hast, Assistant Director, Office of Global Affairs-Education Abroad

Are you interested in interning at a grassroots community organization in Cape Town, South Africa, doing research in Pune, India, or studying in at the University of Auckland, New Zealand? These opportunities are among the many programs offered by UConn’s Office of Global Affairs-Education Abroad (http://abroad.uconn.edu). By studying, interning and/or doing research abroad, you will gain global knowledge and skills that are essential in an era when work reaches beyond national borders and technology is expanding at a rapid rate, interconnecting people in new ways. Universities across the country have recognized the need to provide substantial international opportunities for students at the undergraduate level as a way to better prepare them to meet, and solve, the significant global challenges of the 21st century. At UConn, Education Abroad has approved over 300 programs on six continents, designed to meet the individual needs, interests, and academic requirements for our students. We provide one-on-one advising sessions; so in consultation with your academic advisor, come in to discuss your ideas and goals about incorporating an international experience into your overall academic plan. We are located on the first floor of the Rowe Building, in Room 117.