

“I Wish I Would Have Known: A Guide to Study Abroad”

By Nanette Smith

THESIS

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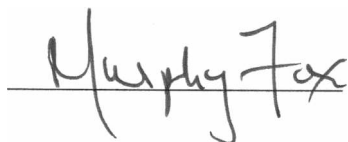
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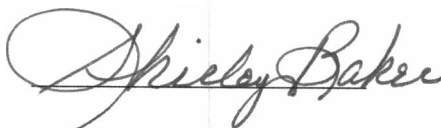
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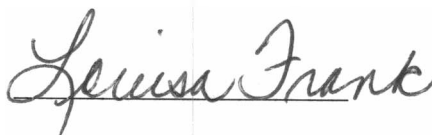
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Table of Contents

Title Page	i
Signature Page	ii
Acknowledgments	iii
Table of Contents	iv
Chapter 1 – Introduction	1
Chapter 2 – The Purpose of this Guide	13
Chapter 3 – Why Should I Study in a Foreign Country?	15
Chapter 4 – Who Should Study in a Foreign Country?	18
Chapter 5 – Where Should I Study?	20
Chapter 6 – What Should I Do Before I Go?	23
<i>Apply to the University</i>	24
<i>Financial Aid</i>	25
<i>Passport</i>	25
<i>Visas</i>	26
<i>Health Issues</i>	27
<i>Money</i>	30
<i>Copies</i>	32
<i>Safety</i>	33
<i>Culture</i>	36
<i>Religion</i>	38
<i>Masculine/Feminine Relations</i>	39
<i>Personal Items</i>	41
Chapter 7 – Where Should I Live While I Am Studying Abroad?	42
Chapter 8 – Culture Shock	48
Chapter 9 – Cultural Acquisition	50
Chapter 10 – Language Acquisition	51
Chapter 11 – Problems in a Foreign Country	52
Chapter 12 – Communication	53
Chapter 13 – Reentry ~ What Should I Do After I Return?	54
Chapter 14 – Making the Best of the Experience	57
<i>Host Family</i>	57
<i>Local Friends</i>	57
<i>Journal</i>	58
<i>Pictures</i>	58
<i>A Positive Attitude and Open Mind</i>	59
Chapter 15 – Conclusion	60

Chapter 1 – Introduction

My Story – Living and Studying in Mexico – A Brief Memoir

Where should I go, Mexico or Spain? When I began a year long journey with lifelong results, that was the first question I asked myself. I knew, before I was even a student at Carroll College, that I would spend a year of my college education in a Spanish speaking country, but as a naive, young student that was all I knew. I did not have the slightest notion of how I would get there, the trials I would face while I was there, the pain I would feel when I returned to the United States, or the emotional, intellectual, and spiritual growth that I would undergo while I was in a foreign country far away from everything and everyone familiar and comfortable.

With guidance from the Carroll College Study Abroad Office (CCSA) and my professors, I decided to study abroad during my junior year. This would ensure that I would have time to establish myself as a person and student at Carroll before I went away for a year. In addition, I would have only one year left at Carroll when I returned. I did not understand the significance of only having one year left at the time, but the well seasoned Study Abroad people knew the shock I would experience when I returned. The CCSA Office understood these feelings I have upon reentry into the United States and the American lifestyle before I knew the emotions even existed. The phrase *reentry* was tossed around quite often before I embarked on my academic adventure, but the full meaning and force of the word were not clear to me until May 2003 when I landed in San Diego, California and once again became a resident of the United States.

Back to the beginning: midway through my sophomore year I started to make preparations with the Study Abroad Office for my junior year. During my first meeting

with Shirley Baker, she matter-of-factly asked me where I wanted to study. Prior to that meeting, I had not thought about my year from such an open perspective. I had not considered where I wanted to go or where my heart was leading me. Rather, I had put myself in a box and limited my possibilities by asking myself where should I go, where do my professors want me to go, where do my parents want me to go, where will the school let me study? I started to ponder Shirley's question, and I discovered two answers. I was intrigued by Spain because of its connection to Europe, and its stability, but my heart kept leading me back to Mexico. The strong, intuitive pull I felt toward Mexico was the final deciding factor. Despite what other people thought and said, I had made my decision to spend a year studying Spanish and Latin American culture in Mexico. When I presented my idea to Shirley, she was nothing but supportive, and we found the perfect school for me. Not only did Shirley Baker support my decision to study in Mexico, but she went to the school, and developed an exchange program with Universidad Internacional (UNINTER) in Cuernavaca, Mexico.

Once I selected the university, I researched the school, the city, the state, and a bit more about Mexico in general. Most of my research was done on the Internet. I also relied on my previous experiences in Mexico to help prepare myself for a year in Cuernavaca at Universidad Internacional. My life was progressing, and I started to think more and more about my upcoming adventure. I was excited, I was nervous, and I was anxious for my year in Mexico to begin. When telling people about my plans I got a mixture of responses. Some people wished me the best, some people warned me of all the dangers I was sure to encounter, and other people mocked my decision to go to Mexico by telling me not to drink the water. I was proud of my decision to study in

Mexico, but people around me had a hard time accepting my choice. I know that living and studying in a foreign country is a scary, intriguing, and sometimes daunting experience. People who have not had the experience, or do not have the desire, often fail to understand the pull to travel and experience the world. This lack of understanding comes from a fear of the unknown, a fear of losing their American identity, a fear of losing contact with friends and those they love, but mostly from a fear of challenging what is comfortable in their lives. As I prepared for my trip, I stayed focused on the positive aspects so I could easily convince the people around me that I had made the right choice.

Being a procrastinator, I did not start with the important preparations until about a month before I was to leave. As time quickly passed, I made a list of the things to do before I embarked on a year long journey, and I made a list of things to be accomplished before leaving. Top priorities for me were safety and health. I read all the safety guidelines on the Internet and contacted the United States embassy to inquire about the safety precautions necessary for Americans traveling and living in Mexico. According to my investigations, it was safe. Natural disasters occur in Mexico as they do in every country, and crime is prevalent as it is in all large metropolitan areas; there was nothing further I could do to ensure my safety. However, once there, common sense, appropriate caution, and native advice would be the best guides.

With regards to health I was able to take a more proactive role and prevent potential problems before they had the chance to develop by following Center for Disease Control (CDC) instructions. I went to the county health department, and they gave health recommendations based on the region of Mexico where I would live. I chose to get

hepatitis A and B vaccines as well as take a live vaccine to prevent typhoid fever; however, I abstained from taking the malaria protocol. The region where I would be living is not a prevalent malaria area, so I made the personal decision not to take the malaria treatment.

As the weeks dwindled away and I started packing and making the final preparations, I became more nervous. I had my passport, a credit card, some cash, a backpack and a suitcase full of clothes and items to remind me of home, a hotel confirmation number, and the address of the school. One moment I was ready to get on the plane and experience a new world, and the next minute I was ready to call the whole thing off and stay put in my comfortable little world at Carroll College in Helena, Montana. Fortunately, I had strong support at that time. My parents kept reassuring me that I would have amazing experiences that would impact my life forever. They also told me that nothing is permanent and if Mexico was not what I thought it was going to be, then I could come home at any time. What a brilliant attitude! Again, I had put myself in a box and convinced myself that once I set foot in Mexico I would be there without the option of returning to Carroll. Studying abroad is a serious commitment but it is not a permanent decision, and one can always return.

As I stood in the airport saying goodbye, I shed tears; it was a mixture of excitement and nervousness. I walked through the metal detector and onto the plane with my passport, money, and the address of UNINTER. I had no idea where I would be living and I was scared to meet my host family. My plane ride went smoothly, and I arrived in Mexico City at about midnight. I collected my luggage, and my Spanish speaking endeavor began. Fortunately, I had been studying Spanish for about seven

years when I landed in Mexico City, but total immersion into the language was a new concept for me. I found my way to the airport hotel, where I spent the night before making the last leg of the trip to my final destination, Cuernavaca. The people at the hotel were more than kind and offered to speak in English, but I confidently asked if we could converse in Spanish as that was the point of my entire year. My Spanish was littered with mistakes, some minor and some major, but I persevered and eventually paid for my hotel room. When I got into my room, I was exhausted but made the effort to call my parents. As I was talking to my mom, I was suddenly struck with an overwhelming feeling of loneliness. I was in one of the biggest cities in the world, the language was foreign, and I felt like a little naive Montana girl completely out of my league.

The next morning I woke up and felt a bit revived, but still out of my comfort zone. I left the hotel and went to the bus station. I had to take the bus to Cuernavaca, which was about an hour and a half away. Just as my extreme feelings of loneliness were resurfacing, the lady next to me started to visit. She was inquisitive about why I was in Mexico and what I was going to do. This older woman was so nice to me and made such an effort to reach out that I started to feel a little less nauseous. We talked the entire way to Cuernavaca, in Spanish, and with her kindness my feelings of loneliness slowly dissipated. I spoke Spanish as best I could, and she would correct me when the meaning of my sentences were lost because of grammatical errors. This kind woman gave me tips about living in Cuernavaca, places to go and things to see, as well as places and neighborhoods to avoid. Although, I don't remember the woman's name, she made an impact on me, and I will remember her benevolence.

When I got off the bus, I had my first taste of culture shock, though it was just a nibble, nothing compared to the meal that awaited me. What I felt then was not the same as the feelings from the night before. I did not feel sick in the pit of my stomach. I did not feel like I was all alone. I did not feel like I wanted to get back on the bus and go home. Rather, I was in awe; I was in *shock*.

The heat of the city surrounded me and invaded my body. I knew the city's nickname was "The City of Eternal Spring"; however, I did not expect such a dry heat to immediately encompass me. The smell of the city was everywhere: car exhaust, food, sweaty people, garbage, and fresh fruit. None of the smells were dominant, but rather they mingled together and created a unique smell that I eventually liked – an earthy fragrance that does not seem to exist in the sterile United States.

The noise of the city was loud and constant. There were deafening cars with ancient mufflers, incessant honking of horns, women announcing bus departures over loud speakers, the ceaseless humming of Latin music from boom boxes, and my personal favorite, the clamoring and shouting of persistent vendors, vendors of every kind, trying to sell their goods to anyone within a fifteen foot radius. The sight of the city, the small quadrant of it that I first experienced, was a disordered web of traffic, street vendors, old buildings, new buildings, graffiti, people who looked quite different from me, and a beautiful flora and fauna complimenting the entire chaotic scene.

I was not scared and I did not feel alone, but I was awestruck. I wanted to get my bearings and set out to experience and explore all of the colors, smells, sounds, and sights that I was observing. I did not need to hail a taxi because one came to me. Apparently the feeling of awe that I was experiencing was projected onto my face, and a nice, young

taxi driver asked me where I needed to go. His question shook me out of my daze, and I had to think for a moment about my destination. I gave the address of UNINTER to the driver. We loaded my luggage into the taxi and set off for the school. I vividly remember my first taxi ride in Cuernavaca. On the route that we took from the bus station to Universidad Internacional, we passed an elementary school with masses of uniformed students playing outside. We went up and down hills; the streets reminded me of those in San Francisco. We stopped for a red light on a steep hill outside a shop called “Duerme Mundo,” which means “Sleep World.” The name was appropriate because it was a mattress store. It was an insignificant yet memorable moment for me.

As we drove along, I looked out the window with the wide eyes of a child, totally fascinated and excited by the city that would be my home for the next year. Finally, we arrived at Universidad Internacional. I had no idea how much money the cab ride should have cost so in my excitement I paid double what I should have – one of many lessons learned my first couple of weeks in Mexico. Be sure to always ask what the price of the cab fare will be before getting into the cab!

The school was beautiful. The entryway was like a little tropical jungle. There were trees, shrubs, vines, and vividly colored flowers. I was greeted by a kind man who directed me to the department of housing. I walked into the administrative building where everyone was pleasant. I was told to take a seat and that my host mom would be there to pick me up momentarily. At this point, my nervousness returned. It had been a problem-free trip up to that point, and I just prayed that my host family was going to be the perfect fit for me. My host mom arrived, and she was very nice; however, I did not feel like we had an immediate connection. When I arrived at their home, I was a bit

uneasy. It was big and foreboding, not the picture I had created for myself. My mom showed me to my room and I had a sinking feeling in my stomach. My room was in a separate little house, like a guest house, and I just did not feel comfortable. My mom invited me to come into the main house to meet the rest of the family and eat lunch. I met my host sister and brother and the two other students that lived there. Everyone was cordial, but I got the feeling that the family did not have a close relationship with the foreign students who lived with them. My Mexican mom made me a lunch of soup, tortillas, and meat, which I ate alone. Nonetheless, she sat at the table and talked with me, explaining that due to conflicting schedules every one eats on their own. As I found out more and more about the family, I realized that I was not in the ideal situation that I had imagined, but I also told myself that I was going through a lot of adjustments. I needed to give my new home situation a chance.

I arrived on a Friday yet did not have the energy or the explorative spirit to go into town by myself. I spent most of Friday isolated, feeling lonely and confused, and writing in my journal. The feelings of loneliness were slowly returning. On Saturday I had to go to school for orientation. I was comforted when I saw other foreign students making adjustments just as I was, but I still felt quite alone. As the hours passed the feelings of isolation became stronger. I had a lump in my throat, and tears kept welling up in my eyes. When orientation was over, I returned home but felt no comfort there. The adventurous spirit that had captured me when I first got off the bus was long gone, and the only thing I wanted to do was return to the safety and comfort of Carroll College. I knew that I could not return so soon; I knew that I had to stay at least a week before I could make an objective, logical choice about remaining in Mexico or retreating back to

the security of the familiar. Since I could not board a plane with a nonstop flight back to Helena, Montana, I figured the closest I could get was a direct phone call with a conversation in English to the people I had left behind.

I ventured out of the house to find the nearest store to buy a phone card; luckily, it was only about a block away. At the store I bought a rather expensive calling card that yielded a total of twenty minutes of talking to the United States. Then, I stood on the corner in front of a pay phone trying to figure out how to call my parents. I dialed the litany of numbers to reach home, but no one answered the phone. I could not hold back the tears when all I heard was the answering machine. With the tears blurring my vision and dizzying my mind, I called everyone else that I could think of to call, but time and time again I was greeted with, "Please leave a message after the beep." One of the most humbling experiences I had in Mexico was standing on that street corner, sobbing, struggling to reach someone familiar, and questioning how the very same scene the day before had intrigued and mesmerized me. I felt like a lost child with nothing to grasp onto and no one to help me. I finally gave up hope of talking to anyone in person and resigned myself to the fact that my journal would have to suffice. I fueled the feelings of isolation by sequestering myself in my new room.

The following day I got up, put on the best attitude that I could muster, and went into the main house to eat breakfast. I ate breakfast with the host mom, and she told me that the family was going on their traditional Sunday outing. I was eagerly awaiting my invitation and a chance to see the city and get acquainted with Mexico, but I was waiting in vain. She told me that they were taking the motorcycles and there was not enough

room for another person. This news devastated me and my counterfeit positive attitude. However, she did encourage me to go to the center and check out the city. She drew me a makeshift map and wished me well. I walked back to my room and crumbled onto my bed in a flood of tears. I wanted to explore the city, but I was too scared. Instead of finding the courage to venture into the center, I stayed at home. My only outing for the day was my walk to the pay phone every half hour to try to reach someone to comfort me. Just as had happened the day before, my attempts at reaching the familiar were futile. In times of solitude and isolation it is quite easy to think and feel that the world is against you.

Sunday afternoon I finally reached my parents, and I was only able to mutter two or three words before the tears started pouring. There I was, once again, crying on the pay phone while buses, taxis, and walkers hustled by me. Hearing familiar voices in English was a most comforting experience. My mom and dad were sympathetic but also encouraged me to give my adventure more of a chance before calling it quits. The most solid advice I heard was not to dwell on my misery but to try to fix it. Up to that point I had still not unpacked my bags because I really wanted to go home. My mom told me to unpack my bags and make my new house feel like a home. She also told me to request a house/family change the next day when I went to school. After just fifteen minutes on the phone with my mom and dad and that slight bit of familiarity, I felt better. I brought myself out of the stupor and tried to focus on the good things surrounding me and the opportunities ahead. When I went home, I unpacked my bags and made my room comfortable. I figured that if I was going to be spending the next nine months there, it better feel comfortable and homey.

That was the first night that I slept well, and when morning arrived I felt refreshed and ready for school. I walked to school, and started classes. Again, everything was in Spanish, and by midmorning my brain was tired. I felt frustrated. However, the good news came right as I was starting to feel defeated and dejected. The head of the housing department, a woman that had been kind to me, had been informed of my unhappiness with my Mexican family. Tere Gallegos was her name, and she asked me, with her strong Mexican accent, just as if I were asking myself, "What the hell I am doing here?" I told her that I was asking myself that exact question. She then told me that regardless of which family students live with, they will always feel displaced the first couple of days; however, Tere went on to say that not every student/family match is a perfect match and that I could move in with a different family. She gave me a hug, assured me that everything would work out okay, and then asked me if I wanted to come to her house for lunch and see if it was a house that I might like. I cannot explain the overwhelming feeling of happiness that I had talking with Tere.

Later in the day, I met Tere at the entrance to the school, and we went to her house for lunch. She had called her family, which consisted of a husband, two daughters, a son, and two granddaughters, to tell them that she was bringing me home for lunch and, potentially, for the next nine months. The house was small but quaint, and the front courtyard was alive with green foliage and flowers. Tere's family was warm, welcoming, and full of energy, just as I had prayed my host family would be. The lunch was delicious and the conversation was easy and not awkward. For some reason, I am not sure why, I instantly connected with the entire Gallegos family. After lunch they showed me the room where I would stay. The room was not large, but it was bright, clean, and

had tile floors. I just smiled and asked if I could stay. Tere and Javier, my Mexican father, told me that they would love to have me. For the first time in four days I felt confident, self-assured, and satisfied with my decision to live in Mexico. My first meal with my new family was the start of a priceless, yearlong experience.

Once I was comfortable in my new house, my attitude changed dramatically, and I opened my mind to the opportunities ahead. A slight change in my persona made all the difference. I quickly started to make friends with locals and learn about the Mexican culture. The more interactions I had with Mexican people, the more I was touched by their openness and eagerness to befriend me and expose me to the richness of their culture and country.

I will never forget the night of November first which was my first hands-on experience with the *Day of the Dead*. I had been learning about the *Day of the Dead* since I started studying Spanish, but I did not have the smallest notion of how beautiful the holiday was until that night. The *Day of the Dead* is a celebration to honor and offer reverence to all the people who have died the previous year. One of my professors took me to a small village to partake in the ceremonies. Families that have suffered a death open their houses to the village so people can pay their respects to the deceased. The families build magnificent altars with flowers and all the favorite food and drink of the person who died. Visitors are invited to drink a traditional Mexican beverage called atole, eat tamales, and join in song with the mariachi bands. At first, I was nervous that I would be ostracized because I was a foreigner and not from the village, but that was not the case.

My professor and I went to eight different houses, and I was completely embraced at each house. People took time to talk to me and explain the tradition to me, and many families asked me if I wanted to take pictures. The smell of the foods, the colors of the flowers, the music and cries from the bands, and all the faces I saw will be with me forever. It was a magical evening but not a totally unique one. I was adopted by my friends and their families, and I was constantly invited to dinners, parties, and festivals. Through the personal connections I made I assimilated into the Mexican culture and lifestyle, and parts remain with me even though I am back in the United States.

I had a rough, lonely start for my year abroad, but the end result is seeing that I became a wiser person while living and studying in Mexico. Studying abroad removes one from the paradigm that has been one's reality for his/her entire life and reveals a new perspective of the world. Despite the undeniable benefits of looking beyond one's own constraints and creating a more complete consciousness of the world, it is a difficult, shocking, and lonely process. To study abroad is to remove yourself from the comfortable reality that you have always known and discover yourself in a brand new situation; it is to make yourself vulnerable, but beyond and through the vulnerability, a more mature person emerges.

Chapter 2 – The Purpose of this Guide

This guidebook is designed to encourage students to study abroad and help prepare them for the unforgettable experience of immersion in a foreign country and language. "I Wish I Would Have Known: A Guide to Study Abroad" is divided into eight sections that will inform and prepare students to study abroad. This book is a basic

guide, and students should consult material that is specific to their country and university prior to departure. However, for a brief overview of what you need to know, this book will serve you well and guide you in the right directions. The following questions will be answered in this guide:

- Why should I study abroad?*
- Where should I study?*
- What should I do before I leave for my trip?*
- What should I do if I don't speak the language?*
- What potential problems will I have while I am in a foreign country?*
- How will I keep in touch with people from home?*
- How can I make the best of my time in another country?*
- What is it going to be like when I return to the United States and Carroll College?*

These questions will be answered, and I will draw upon my personal experiences in Mexico as a reference.

Perhaps the most important part of this guidebook is the following caveat: This guide will not guarantee a perfect, problem-free study abroad experience. But it will prepare students for the amazing, hard, lonely, fun, challenging, sad, comical, priceless, and unforgettable experiences that are part of living and studying in a foreign country.

Let the information in this book be your ally. Every student will have a unique experience, but regardless of the country there are some universals about studying abroad, thus an awareness of these facts will help students through the hard times. This

guide is intended to encourage students to embrace each moment and to explore their intellectual, emotional, physical, and spiritual beings in a foreign country.

Chapter 3 – Why should I study in a foreign country?

Studying in a different country is one of the most rewarding experiences a college student can have. Beyond the academic learning that takes place, students are exposed to different life styles, completely different languages or dialects of English, and different foods, spiritual beliefs, cultures, and traditions. Studying in a foreign country is an incomparable opportunity to learn, question, form independent opinions, and mature. Most students return to the United States with not only a better understanding of the country they studied in but also a more insightful understanding of their own country and themselves as persons:

Before I lived in Mexico for a year, I had a great amount of contempt for the United States and the government of the United States. I disliked my own country and the elected officials that govern it. However, after living in Mexico, learning about their political structure, and talking to many citizens, I have come to realize that America is not unique. Corruption, lies, and deceit exist in all countries and all governments. I admired the Mexicans' ability to distinguish between the citizens of a country and the government and governmental policies of a country. This was a valuable lesson for me to learn.

~ Nanette Smith ~

The Cons

Other countries are not the United States. Students must realize that there is no other country identical to the United States. Depending on the country in which you choose to study you will find things and places that are familiar and comforting, and you will also come upon things that seem gross, unsanitary, unhealthy, or sacrilegious. However, to the citizens of the country, what seems gross and wrong to Americans may be sacred and traditional. Things are different, but that does not make them better or worse; they are just different. Students who arrive in a foreign country and continually utter the phrase, "This is not how it is at home," will soon find themselves miserable and homesick.

The academic expectations will be different. Indeed, each country or region of the world has different methods of teaching, concepts of school and learning, and systems for assessment. Depending on where you decide to study the academic expectations may be more or less challenging, and this can be a hardship for many students. Some students will feel that their time has been wasted because the standards of the foreign school are not up to par with Carroll's, while other students will feel the class schedule is too rigorous and structured, which prevents them from exploring the culture and lifestyle of the locals outside of the classroom.

The Pros

Other countries are not the United States. Exploring and experiencing the differences that each country and culture has to offer is the true beauty of studying abroad. You may be disgusted when pervasive little American icons, such as McDonalds

and Wal-Mart, appear in the country you chose to study in. It is unavoidable. Sometime during your time abroad you will encounter that which you wish to avoid. Perhaps the best advice here is that you do not have to look far to figure out where the tourists hang out and where the locals hang out, and to experience the true uniqueness of the country and city you are in, it is best to hang out with the locals.

The academic expectations will be different. As is mentioned above, some countries and schools have higher academic expectations than Carroll, but the majority do not. Carroll is a rigorous school even compared to other schools in the United States, so most likely the amount of homework will be less, and the quality expected of you will be less. This does not equate to a semester or year of goofing off, but rather it offers an opportunity to learn outside of the classroom. Teachers in foreign countries are aware that students will be learning twenty-four hours a day whether they want to or not. Simple daily activities transform into beautiful learning experiences when you are in a different country, especially if you are in the process of language immersion:

The expectations at University International were different...lower...than I was used to at Carroll. My teachers were always shocked and pleased when I would turn in a typed paper, as opposed to a handwritten rough draft with ragged edges. I did not have to work as hard as I did at Carroll to get the same grades, but I had to work a lot harder at life to survive in Mexico. Everyday tasks like going to the store, using public transportation, taking my laundry to the cleaners, eating meals with my family, or making friends were thought consuming and tiring. My first two months in Mexico, I was so tired at night...my brain just needed to rest...just needed to not think. However, it was exhilarating to be able to bargain with vendors about prices and hail a cab on my own.

~ Nanette Smith ~

Chapter 4 – Who should study in a foreign country?

Everyone should study abroad. However, each person needs to discover the country and language challenge best suited to his/her personality. At Carroll College there are numerous programs for people who want to expand their cultural knowledge. Time and money are not valid reasons to refrain from studying in a foreign country. Students can study abroad for a full year, for a semester, for a summer, for a short summer program, or for a week long trip during fall and spring breaks. Each program is different, but the value of visiting another country is applicable no matter how long a student is able to study. Just as time is not a barrier, neither is money. The Study Abroad Office does everything it can to make exchange opportunities affordable. In addition, there are some instances when financial aid packages are awarded for students. On the chance that your financial aid package is not transferable, there are loans that students can take out specifically for study abroad expenses.

Far more important than the logistics of studying abroad are the perspectives and open mindedness of the student. In addition, the comfort level the student has with change and adventure is a critical factor. When students study abroad, their world is expanded. Students must be comfortable with change, but more importantly students must be open, respectful, nonjudgmental, and accepting. Students who are open to new experiences benefit far more from the study abroad experience than students who are not willing to try anything new.

Students will be inundated with new sights, sounds, music, food, smells, and ways of living, and the open student will embrace the novelty and variety of the life he/she is living. The closed minded student is one who remains isolated from the new cultural

experiences. Isolation fosters isolation, and this is a guaranteed recipe for a miserable study abroad experience.

Students seriously interested in studying abroad need to first take an honest assessment of their personality. Students must ask themselves how they have dealt with change and diversity in the past and how they expect to acclimate to the new culture. The following is a list of questions to ask yourself before deciding to study abroad or before deciding which foreign program compliments your personality the best:

1. *Do I feel comfortable when I am by myself?*
 2. *Do I like adventure and experiencing new things?*
 3. *Do I feel comfortable around people who are different from me?*
 4. *Am I confident with my map reading skills?*
 5. *Do I rely on other people to always take the initiative in new situations?*
 6. *Do I make friends easily?*
 7. *Am I a particular or picky eater?*
 8. *Have I traveled out of the United States before?*
- If yes, what were my impressions?*

If you answered “no” to most of the questions, it does not mean you should not study abroad, but it does mean that the bombardment of new experiences will be overwhelming at times, and you should carefully evaluate which study abroad program will fit your personality best. Perhaps a well seasoned traveler who feels comfortable traveling alone would be happiest participating in an independent semester or year long exchange. On the other hand, someone who has not done much traveling, especially in

foreign countries, might feel more comfortable going on a group study abroad trip that is more structured. The most important thing to assess before deciding where and how to study abroad is one's adventurous spirit, ability to acclimate, and desire to experience an intriguing new culture. Students who are serious about studying abroad need to ask and answer these questions honestly.

Prior to studying in Mexico for a year, I had been there about eight times, and I loved Mexico. However, the central region of Mexico was new to me. I experienced new food, new indigenous cultures, new dancing, and a different attitude toward Americans, but I loved and admired the new Mexico as much as I did the old Mexico.

~ Nanette Smith ~

Chapter 5 – Where should I study?

When deciding where to study students must take into account many factors. There are personal reasons as well as scholastic variables to consider. As students take a self inventory of the study abroad program that will best fit their needs, they should also take a personal inventory of what expectations they have for the school, city, and country. Students should consider what their major is, what, if any, languages they have studied, what climate makes them most comfortable, what their hobbies, interests, and passions are, and if they prefer small towns or big cities. The following form will help students find a country, city, and school that compliments their personalities.

Complete the following form by making a list of what is important to you pertaining to each topic.

1. *Language (continue learning a language, learn a new language, speak English)*

2. *Climate Restrictions (hot, cold, damp, rainy, humid, seasons)*

3. *Big City / Small Town*

4. *Geographical Factors (mountains, plains, ocean, island)*

5. *Cultural Opportunities (theater, music, museums)*

6. *Religion*

7. *Opportunity to Work*

8. *Proximity to Other Countries / Places of Interest*

Once students have completed the above inventory, they should go to the CCSA Office for a meeting. The people in the Study Abroad Office will tell students about the opportunities available, and together they will try to find a foreign university that will complement students' personalities and needs. The Study Abroad Office, advisors, and professors can all help narrow the search down to a country, region, city, and eventually a school. The personal factors are more important than the academic specifics because students will only be going to school for about six hours a day, but they will be living in the country twenty-four hours a day. It is absolutely crucial that students feel comfortable and safe at the university and in the city where they are studying. When students feel confident and secure in their new community, they will be able to focus on academic responsibilities in the classroom, and learning opportunities outside of the classroom will be abundant. However, in order to take advantage of the abounding learning opportunities students must have the self-confidence to venture out of the university or their house and into the city. If the weather is too hot or humid, if the city is too large, if there are no interesting cultural events or places, if students feel unsafe, if students feel isolated, or if students feel intimidated by the language barrier, they will not reap the benefits of living in a foreign country; they will not acclimate to the culture. As students acquire the culture of the country they are living in, their study abroad expectations will be realized.

In addition to talking with their advisor and professors, students can research possible schools on the Internet. The Internet contains a wealth of information, but sometimes the amount of information can be overwhelming. The Internet lends itself best to researching specifics about the university and city once they have already been

chosen. The Study Aboard Office is the best resource when trying to make a decision about where to study, especially if the student already has a clear idea of what he/she wants and does not want with regards to a city and university:

I am from Helena, Montana. I have lived here my entire life, and I have always considered myself a small town girl, but when I got to Mexico I realized that I was totally capable of stretching my own limits. The first time I went to Mexico City (one of the largest and most dangerous cities in the world), I was so nervous, but by the end of my year in Mexico I went to Mexico City about once a month. Sometimes I would go with other people, and sometimes I would go by myself, but regardless of the company I always had positive experiences. Of course, I was extremely cautious and vigilant, and I did not take any risks, which ultimately led to positive experiences. I never walked around alone at night, and I never used the green taxi cabs that even the locals discouraged me from using.

~ Nanette Smith ~

Chapter 6 – What should I do BEFORE I go?

There are many things a student should do *before* embarking on a study abroad excursion, ranging from paper work to logistics to research to mental preparation. The following section is applicable to every student studying abroad, but depending on the length of the visit some of the following suggestions might need to be adjusted.

Apply to the University

This is a process that the Study Abroad Office will help you complete. Carroll College has a direct exchange program with four schools and four other schools with which it is affiliated. Even for the above-mentioned schools that have a pre-arranged exchange program, students must fill out an application form. In addition to the application, a deposit is also required. The applications vary according to each individual university, but you can expect something similar to the application that you completed for entering Carroll College.

The application process should be started the semester before you plan to depart, preferably at the beginning of the semester. Once you have been accepted to the university, there will be many other forms that need to be completed. You will fill out general information forms, housing forms, and health and insurance forms. At the time of submitting the above mentioned documents you will also have to submit a copy of your passport. When all the forms that the university requires have been submitted, you can expect to receive information in the mail.

Some schools allow students to register before they arrive, while other schools prefer that students register upon arrival and completion of an assessment exam. If you intend to study with the purpose of learning a foreign language, you will undoubtedly have to take an initial placement exam.

Financial Aid

There are different scholarship and loan options depending on the university or college where you plan to study. If the school offers a direct exchange with Carroll, then your financial aid package should be transferable. However, if Carroll does not have a direct exchange with the school where you plan to study, you should talk with the CCSA Office and they will provide you with the appropriate forms to take to the Financial Aid Office.

Passports

Students must absolutely have a passport before traveling and studying abroad. Not only will the student need a passport in order to enter the country but also for the Study Abroad Office at Carroll and for the foreign university where the student is enrolled to study.

The first step in getting a passport is getting an official passport picture taken. You can go to *AAA* and get two passport pictures taken for a small fee. Once you have the pictures you need to go to the courthouse and ask for a passport application form. The form is lengthy and a birth certificate is required. Since Helena is a small town, the passports are sent to a larger city for processing, usually Seattle. You must keep in mind that this process can take up to six weeks and should not be left until a couple months before departure.

Again, the Study Abroad Office will assure that the student has a passport, and they can help the student complete the process. If you already have a passport, the most important piece of information you need to check is the expiration date. You should be

absolutely sure that your passport is not going to expire while you are in the midst of your study abroad experience.

Visas

Once you have decided what country to study in, you should buy a guidebook about the country and, more specifically, about the region where you plan to live and study. Book stores in Helena have a limited supply and of mediocre variety, so the best resource is the Internet. Amazon.com has guidebooks on almost every country. Travel books that are current and up-to-date clearly outline legal requirements for entering and staying in the particular country where you plan to study. Although there are, sometimes, different conditions for students, guidebooks provide general information and other resources that are available.

A guidebook will clearly identify if people need a visa to enter the country and if so how to apply for it. Many countries do not require United States citizens to have tourist visas, but they do require students who will be living and studying in the country for a prolonged period of time to have a special visa. Other countries require that every person who visits the country has a visa. Some countries give each visitor a visa upon arrival in the country while others require visitors to apply and receive the visa before they arrive in the foreign country.

The Study Abroad Office has information and guidelines regarding visas and student visas, but it is also important for the interested student to take an active role and research what requirements the country has:

Before leaving for Mexico, I was told by both Carroll College and the school in Mexico that I would not need a student visa while I was studying and living in Mexico for the year. When I arrived in Mexico, I received a ninety day tourist visa, which the Department of Immigration gives to all visitors. I asked the immigration officer if he could make my visa for 180 days, and he coldly told me, "No." In the weeks before my visa expired, I started to ask people at the school what I should do. I was instructed to go to Mexico City and ask for an extension. I had heard horror stories about the odd hours, the lines, the paper work, and the mean officials, but I had no choice. I went to Mexico City with all of my paperwork, stood in line, and finally got to talk to an immigration officer. I had to fill out forms, go to a copy center, go to a bank, and then return to the original office to wait in line again. As he was reviewing my case he asked me why I had been in Mexico for so long, and I told him that I was studying at a university. Immediately he started to question me and ask why I did not have a student visa. I stammered that I was told that I did not need one. The man informed me that I did indeed need a student visa and that not only could I get in trouble for not having one but so could the university. I was pretty disturbed by the whole ordeal, but when I asked the school how I could get a student visa, they once again told me that I did not need one. Even if you do your research, you may hear different things from every person you ask.

~ Nanette Smith ~

Health Issues

Just as countries vary with regard to visas, so do they with vaccine requirements. As soon as you have decided which country you will be studying/living in, you should consult the Center for Disease Control (CDC) website (www.cdc.com). The website contains a comprehensive list of countries and their required vaccines as well as

suggested health precautions that travelers should take. Once you are armed with the list of what is required and what is suggested, you should make an appointment to get the vaccines and talk with a health professional. There are many options as far as who to talk to. You can go to your family practitioner, to the county health department, or to the Student Wellness Center on Carroll's campus. Regardless of where you go, you should talk honestly with the health practitioner about what vaccines and recommendations are necessary.

Some vaccines are administered over a six month period (hepatitis), while others must be taken shortly before the trip (typhoid fever), or while the traveler is in the foreign country (malaria). This is a process that should start long before you depart from the United States. When working with your health practitioner, you should double-check to make sure all of your other vaccines are current, such as tetanus and tuberculosis, and ask for a comprehensive list of all your vaccines, that you can keep. You should take a copy of the complete list with you on your travels.

In addition to vaccines, students must evaluate their overall health. Students who take prescription drugs should not rely on getting the exact drug in the same dosage in a foreign country. It is much safer for the students to travel with an adequate supply of medicine and extra in case of an emergency. Although a student could find a doctor and pharmacy, the possible language barrier, difference in dosage, and availability of specialty and common prescription drugs could inhibit the student from receiving what is needed.

Students must also keep in mind that they will be living in a drastically different place and culture. Differences in food, water, sanitation, pollution, elevation, humidity,

bacteria, germs, and a number of other factors can affect the body and the immune system. You should anticipate a period of time when your body is adjusting to the drastic changes, but should also use preventative methods to keep the body and immune system strong. Taking a multiple vitamin is an excellent way to fight off potential sicknesses:

During my second semester in Mexico I got very sick. My throat hurt so bad that I could not swallow, I had a fever, and I was not eating. I went to a doctor who did not speak any English, and although my Spanish was improving, I did not have the vocabulary to express or understand medical terms. He gave me a prescription for something, and I started taking it that afternoon. Three days later I felt worse instead of better so I decided to visit another doctor. The second doctor I went to was considerably more expensive, but he spoke fluent English. He examined my throat and told me that I had strep throat, but that it was no surprise that the other doctor had not detected it because it is not a widely diagnosed bacteria in Mexico. He gave me another prescription and within two days I was feeling better. I learned that communicating with a doctor is very hard in another language. I did not even know the name of the drug that I was taking, nor did I understand how or when to take it. This is a very dangerous situation and until my Spanish improves, I will seek out a doctor that speaks English.

~ Nanette Smith ~

Students should also contact their insurance company prior to departure to ensure they are covered in the country where they will be living. In addition to checking for coverage, you should request a detailed list of procedures for filing an insurance claim from another country. Many insurance companies have the same policy internationally as they do nationally, but other companies have different procedures for a claim being filed by someone in another country. If the company does not offer coverage in a foreign

country, you must change insurance companies to one that has international coverage. The plan at Carroll College has international coverage and is a good option for someone seeking insurance.

Money

Students must have ample money for their study abroad experience. You should evaluate how much money you spend per week and what you spend it on when you are home. Based on this information you will have a basic idea of how much money you will need. It is always a good idea to estimate high because you will be surrounded by new and different things that you want to experience, but unfortunately many of them cost money. Despite the often cheaper prices, it all adds up and students do not want to feel limited in their cultural acquisition by lack of money.

The best form of money to travel with is an ATM card. ATMs can be found anywhere in the world and the surcharge is only slightly more than it is in the United States. Traveling with a large amount of cash is always dangerous and provides absolutely no insurance. Traveling with travelers checks provides insurance, but it is often a hassle to cash them and the exchange rate is usually lower.

You should carry about one hundred dollars cash and take an ATM card. Of course, it is not enough just to have the ATM card; it is also critical to have money in your account. There are drawbacks to ATM cards, such as not being able to withdraw more than three hundred dollars per day, the surcharge, and the possibility of theft. A three hundred dollar limit on withdrawals is not a major inconvenience, and it actually adds some security to the ATM card. The surcharge is minimal, usually about two

dollars from the bank in the United States and one or two dollars from the bank in a foreign country. The greatest danger is the possibility of theft, but unlike cash, you can call the bank and cancel the ATM card, with a maximum loss of three hundred dollars.

Regardless of which monetary form you use, you must be vigilant with your money. When arriving in a foreign country with a large amount of cash, travelers checks, or an ATM card, you should use a hidden money belt and carry enough spending cash somewhere else on your person or in a bag that is accessible. Never access a money belt or show a large wad of cash in public. Many people in foreign countries make their livelihood by pickpocketing unsuspecting people.

Once you are established in the country, it is wise to carry only enough cash for the day's activities. Leaving the majority of your cash at home in a safe place will reduce the loss if you should get pickpocketed. You should not carry an ATM card with you on a regular basis, but rather you should withdraw enough money to last for a week or two weeks and then leave the ATM card at home in a safe place. When you withdraw money from an ATM, it is important to use an ATM in a busy, well lit area, as opposed to a dark, deserted area. People always watch what foreigner's do with his/her money, where they put it, and how much they have, and it is the foreigners job to be vigilant about their own money.

There are many pick pocketing tactics that you should be aware of, which will enable you to avoid being robbed. Pickpockets usually work in teams with one causing a distraction and the other slyly reaching into a pocket or purse to grab whatever is available. Do not put wallets in back pockets; do not wear a backpack with money or other important documents in it on your back in crowded areas, and do not hang or rest

your bag anywhere. Perhaps the best piece of advice is to be extra vigilant. Pickpockets target people who are not paying attention and are not alert; you should always be alert and aware of what is going on around you.

As a final safety precaution, students who are studying abroad for an extended period of time should have an emergency credit card with them. This is just a piece of insurance that can be stored away and never used, but in the awful chance of an emergency it is available and helpful. Students should never carry a credit card anywhere, unless they have a specific purpose for using it on a particular day. An emergency credit card belongs at home in a safe place and hopefully it will never have to be removed and used.

Copies

Students must make copies of all their important documents before they leave. You should make three copies of your passport, visa (if applicable), immunization records, name and dosage of prescription medicine(s), insurance card, ATM account number and the name and phone number of the bank, and credit card account number and the name and phone number of the credit card company.

You should give one set of copies to someone in the United States, such as a parent or guardian, because if you encounter a problem or emergency, it is much easier to resolve if someone stateside has all the critical information and numbers. You should give the second set of copies to the CCSA. They are willing to help you, but it is much easier for them to resolve problems if they have the necessary information. You should take the third set of copies with you. Do not store the originals and the copies in the same

place, or even the same bag for that matter. You should keep the originals close to your body in a money belt and the copies in a backpack or purse. The copies are almost as dangerous as the originals as they contain personal information and account numbers so they should be stored in a safe place in the student's home.

Safety

Safety is one of the most important topics to think about before departure. The first rule is do not do anything in a foreign country that you would not do at home in the United States. People often go to foreign countries with the attitude that they can do whatever they want and it is totally acceptable because what happens in a foreign country stays there. This is a dangerous and ignorant attitude that should be avoided. Be vigilant, be smart, and use common sense. If you perceive yourself as a cautious and safe individual in the United States, then be more cautious and safer in the country where you plan to live.

Students who are transitioning from a small town to a big city have the most difficult time because the sense and level of trust that they are used to does not exist in big cities. Before exploring a big city, read a guidebook and talk to some locals about what is safe and what is dangerous. It is not safe to wander alone in a large city if you have no idea where the dangerous areas are.

People who are going to commit a crime against an innocent person do not want to get caught so being aware and alert substantially lowers your risk of being a potential victim. Perpetrators target people who look confused or who are not paying attention.

Talk with your host family or the school and ask where it is safe to go alone and where it is not safe to go. Ask them for advice about using public transportation and taxi cabs, about walking, about your neighborhood, and about law enforcement officials. This information is important for all students but especially important for females who are traveling alone.

Just as it is not safe to walk around alone at night in the United States, it is not a good idea in foreign countries. Just as you should not leave a drink unattended in a bar in the United States, you should not leave a drink unattended in a foreign country. Just as you should follow your gut instinct in the United States, you should do so wherever you study.

Making local friends is the best way to fully understand and absorb a different culture; however, precautions must be taken. Be friendly and make friends, but establish a comfortable level of trust before being alone with new friends, getting into cars, or revealing where you live. Many foreign students meet locals at bars and clubs, which is not a bad thing, but when alcohol is involved, judgments are skewed. Should you decide to go to a club, be very conservative about the amount you drink, never leave your drink on the table, and never accept a drink from a stranger or a casual acquaintance.

Drugs and the local police should be avoided at all cost. Many countries operate on bribery and corruption so do not give the police a reason to find or fine you. Drugs are available everywhere, but they are illegal in most countries, apart from the Netherlands. Although, it may seem like a fun risk, the consequences could be profoundly detrimental. Getting caught could cost you a large amount of money, perhaps a jail sentence, or both. Being a foreigner in jail is one of the most dangerous situations

possible in a foreign country. The monetary and legal consequences are not the only dangers. As a foreigner you have no idea what exactly is in the drug or how pure it is, both of which can be deadly. Carroll has a no tolerance policy with regard to drugs, and the administration will not bail you out of a situation that you put yourself in and caused by participating in illegal activities.

The best advice for a student who wants to experience the treasures and richness of a foreign country and be safe at the same time is use common sense and do not put yourself in questionable or dangerous situations:

I was always told not to take taxis alone at night in Cuernavaca, but that seemed unreasonable to me. I would use taxis in the evening and until about ten o'clock, but I would not go out to the street and flag a cab down. I would always call a taxi company and have them pick me up at my house. Although some people told me this was dangerous, I asked my Mexican mom and dad and they told me that if I used the taxi cab company that they used and called one to the house that it was safe. Before getting into any taxi, I would always negotiate the price and while I did that I would get a gut feeling about the driver. There were numerous times when I did not feel comfortable with the driver or the car and I turned them away and called for a different car. The switchboard operator got to know me and he would always send the same driver.
~ Nanette Smith ~

Culture

Every culture is different and should not be judged or compared to other cultures but rather examined and valued for its uniqueness. At first, you will concentrate on all

the differences between your new environment and the one that you left behind. Slowly, you will focus less on the differences and start to see similarities.

There are three important steps in the cultural assimilation process. First, and perhaps most importantly, you must know and understand your own cultural identity. You must evaluate what your cultural norms and constraints are and from where they originate. Through this process you will begin to understand your values, morals, and what you deem to be important through the construct of the culture that you have lived in your entire life. This evaluative stage needs to be started in the United States when you are surrounded by familiarity and can directly identify different aspects of your culture and your belief system.

The second step begins when you arrive in the foreign country where you are going to study. The first couple of days will be overwhelming and exhilarating at the same time, and you will start to notice surface-level differences in the new culture. As much as it should be avoided it is impossible not to make comparisons the first couple of days, weeks, and maybe even months between the culture from home and the new culture that is surrounding and embracing you. This is a period of curiosity, observation, and fear. One moment you will want to explore and dissect all the intricacies of the new world, and the next moment you will want nothing more than to retreat to your bedroom and think about all the comforts and familiarity of the old world. These feelings are natural, and they are part of the cultural acquisition process.

Eventually, you will begin to combine and meld the previous two steps, which leads to the third step. You will start to have a deeper, more thorough understanding of

your values and morals, not just in the context of your culture but in any culture. An awareness of your own culture will help you understand and appreciate the new culture.

Participate in as many cultural events that you can. Read the newspaper to find out what is happening each week. Going to plays, concerts, movies, and any other activity in your new community will open your eyes to cultural traditions and societal norms.

The best way to learn about a new culture is to make friends with locals. People from around the world are interested in Americans and it is fairly easy to make friends. Be friendly, smile, listen, and show interest in the new culture, and you will have local friends that not only want to learn about your culture and language but also want to teach you about theirs. If you chose to live with a host family you have an inside view of family life and traditions:

One of my Mexican friends invited me to his house for New Year's Eve. I was so nervous because I was the only foreigner there, and I was not totally confident in my Spanish skills, but that did not matter. His family completely embraced me and made me feel welcome. I got to see the New Year's traditions in Mexico first-hand. When the clock strikes midnight, you eat one grape for every dinging of the bell, which is twelve grapes. Each grape represents one month of the upcoming year, and you have to make a wish for each grape. The bells ring fast and it is not easy to fit twelve grapes in your mouth. After the bells are done, the head of the house gives a long, heartfelt toast and then finally at about twelve-thirty you eat dinner.

~ Nanette Smith ~

The last piece of cultural advice stems from the old saying, "When in Rome, do as the Romans do." This saying holds true for any country or any culture in which you

immerse yourself. Spend time observing the locals: the way they dress, talk, greet each other, eat, and all their other daily habits. Observe, record, and try to repeat your observations. One of the most important issues is clothes. Americans have a reputation of dressing like slobs and always wearing tennis shoes. There are times when it is okay to dress casually and wear tennis shoes, but if you observe that the locals always dress up for dinner, it is polite to follow suit. Shorts are not a socially acceptable form of dress in many countries, yet Americans insist on wearing shorts to restaurants, churches, and museums. If the majority of the locals do not wear shorts, even in hot weather, it is better for you to follow suit.

Watch how the local people greet each other and greet them the same way. If a slight bow is the tradition instead of a handshake, then bow. If a kiss on the cheek is socially acceptable, then kiss people on the cheek when you see them. There are many different kinds of greetings, some more intimate than others, and you may not adjust to the new method, but it is important to try.

Religion

There are prominent religions in all parts of the world, but that does not mean you will not find your religion in the country where you plan to study. If you are a spiritual person, bring things that will keep you connected to your religion or spirituality. Of course, once you are settled in your new country, you can inquire with the university or your family about different churches and religious services. The Internet and local phone book are two other resources for locating your church in a foreign country.

Participating in religious services in different countries and cultures is a great experience. The local people are typically warm-hearted and eager to have a foreigner join their spiritual group. This is an excellent way to meet local people and become connected to the people in your new community. In addition, seeing your religion from a different cultural perspective has the potential to change and strengthen your own spiritual beliefs.

If you are not a religious person and do not participate in any organized religious services at home, you should go to at least one service in a foreign country. It is a rewarding experience and can change your perspective and stereotypes about religion:

I went to a Catholic mass in Cuernavaca in the Cathedral, and there was a mariachi band that played throughout the service. I was blown away by it, and I loved it. It added so much color, music, and Mexican tradition to the service.

~ Nanette Smith ~

Masculine/Feminine Relations

This is definitely a topic that you will want to investigate and research before you embark on your grand adventure. Travel guidebooks offer a general overview of gender roles. This is excellent preliminary information. Beyond the guidebook, the best resources are the Internet or, if it is at all possible, talking to someone who is from or has been to the country where you are going to live. Of course, all the information you hear will be sweeping generalizations or specific cases, but it will still open your eyes and prepare you for what you are going to encounter.

This section is especially pertinent for women because as United States citizens our position as women is quite unique. This is not to say that other countries or cultures

are bad, but the way women are viewed and treated and how they are expected to act in other countries is very different from what American women generally expect. Before you leave for your study abroad experience, you should have a solid idea about what clothes are appropriate to wear, where it is safe to go alone, how men are going to treat you, and what laws exist with regard to rape.

It is unfortunate that this section needs to be directed specifically toward women, but American women have a reputation in almost all foreign countries as being beautiful, carefree, and promiscuous. It is wiser to dress more conservatively, especially if that is how the local women dress. In addition, it is also sensible to be conservative with regard to alcohol consumption which will help you avoid unsafe situations. Many countries have different laws regarding rape. If a woman is scantily dressed and flirtatious with a man who later forces himself on her, then it is considered her own fault. Women who find themselves in this situation feel belittled and demeaned not only by the perpetrator but also by the law enforcement officials who offer no help and no compassion. This is not fair and it is severally different from the United States, but when you are in a different country, you have to abide by their rules and regulations. Laws are different in all countries and you should be aware of them before you go. Awareness can help you avoid frightening situations and serious problems.

Personal Items

This section is to help students decide what to take and what to leave home. Just as in all the previous sections, you must research the country, region, and city where you will be living. If it is a large city with modern amenities, then you need not worry about not being able to purchase the things you need. On the other hand, if you are going to be in a remote area, you need to arrive prepared with sufficient personal items to last the duration of your stay – or learn to live without them.

Regardless of whether you are going to be in a modern city or an unpopulated rural area, you should take enough prescription medication to last the entire length of your study experience and extra in case of an emergency. You should also consider other items that affect your health, such as a sufficient number of contact lenses and solution if your eyes are sensitive or specific face creams if you have sensitive skin. The basics are available in most countries and cities, but be sure to be prepared, even overprepared, with items that affect your health and well-being.

Take enough shampoo, conditioner, soap, razors, shaving cream, lotion, and other such items to last you the first couple weeks of your trip. This will give you ample time to get to know the area where you are living and where the nearest grocery stores and markets are located. Once you know where to buy goods, you can purchase personal items; however, you may not be able to find the exact brand that you are accustomed to using. Try new products. You might find something you really like:

I found the best lotion in Mexico. I could not find the brand that I use in the United States so I settled for something different, and I ended up loving it. I bought a couple of extra bottles to bring back to the U.S. with me. The smell still takes me back to Mexico when I use it.

~ Nanette Smith ~

In addition to toiletries there are other crucial items from home that you need to take with you. Think about special things in your dorm room or house that make you feel comfortable. These are the items that you should take with you. You will be living in a foreign country with a family that you do not know and small comforts from home in your room will make it feel familiar. Keep in mind that you will want to take small, packable items that will comfort you and relieve feelings of homesickness. Pictures, candles, tapestries, religious figurines, small stuffed animals, or other things that have sentimental value for you. It is also comforting to take your favorite pillow, alarm clock, blanket, CDs, CD player or small stereo, and any other item that helps you sleep soundly while you are at home. Falling asleep, sleeping, and waking up are three tasks that take a considerable amount of adjusting to so if you can aid the process of adjustment by making yourself feel comfortable, you will be much happier.

Chapter 7 – Where should I live while I am studying abroad?

There are three basic housing options for students who are studying and living in a foreign country: dorms, apartments, or homestays with a local family. The most recommended and most popular option is a homestay in which students live with a local family. The other two options are possibilities but not as common and not available at all foreign universities. Some foreign schools have dorms, but it is not as common to live

away from your family in other countries as it is in the United States so dorms are not nearly as prevalent at foreign universities as they are in the U.S.

Some schools will help students find an apartment while others leave students to their own devices if they seek housing outside of the school. Living in an apartment will provide privacy and the comfort of personal space, but apartments can foster feelings of loneliness and isolation. Students will have feelings of loneliness when they are surrounded by people in a foreign country so living alone can feel overwhelmingly solitary. In addition, before living alone students must check to make sure the neighborhood they plan on living in is safe. Living alone as a foreigner can be dangerous, and it is the student's responsibility to take all precautions to ensure personal safety.

The most popular housing option is living with a local family. This is not only a safe option but also a great way to learn about traditions and cultural nuances. Families agree to house students for a number of reasons. First of all, the family is paid by the university which provides much needed additional income. Beyond monetary reasons, families house foreign students because they want to expose themselves to a different culture and way of thinking, and they want to share their traditions and culture with eager students.

When deciding where you want to live, you must evaluate where you feel most comfortable. If you know you are an introverted person who likes to be alone, then you may be thinking that an apartment might be your best option; however, stretching your limits and your comfort level by living with a family might expose you to a new perspective and enrich your study abroad experience. In addition, there are still private

space and time when you live with a host family. Ask the foreign university what your housing options are and what they recommend. Consider all of your options before making a final decision but be assured that nothing is permanent, and once you try your housing situation it is always possible to change if it does not feel right.

If you decide to live with a family, there are many variables that you must take into consideration. Think about the following:

- Do you like living with young children?*
- Do you want to live with young children?*
- Do you want to live with cats, dogs or other animals?*
- Do you want to live with people who smoke?*
- Do you want a private bedroom?*
- Do you want a private bathroom?*
- Do you have special diet needs?*

All of these questions must be answered on a person-to-person basis, and every student will have a different idea of his/her ideal homestay situation. If you do not have younger brothers or sisters and you feel like you do not relate well to little kids, then living with them might be a challenge. On the other hand, if you love children and are accustomed to living with them, then you might feel more at home if you have daily interaction with young kids. Regardless of whether your ideal situation is to live without young kids or with them, you should be aware that they will be fascinated by you and your things. Children will go into your room and snoop through your things. Even if you tell the family that you do not want the small children in your room, they will, at some point, enter your room unsupervised and look at all the different things you have. This

can be especially frustrating for someone who does not feel comfortable with children or for someone who does not like people invading his/her personal space.

In addition to the kids' curiosity, they are children, and they like to make noise. If you are a soft sleeper, you may find that living with a family without small children is more restful for you. Weigh the pros and cons and decide which situation will better fit your personality:

There were two little girls in my family, Annacamila and Lorenza, that were five and two years old. They would go into my room and sit on my bed or look at my stuff when I wasn't home sometimes, but they never really hurt anything. Their mom always told them not to go into my room, but their curiosity was too strong. However, their smiles made it well worth it. They were great teachers too. They taught me songs, dances, and games in Spanish. In addition, I always felt like I could talk to Lorenza, the two year old, without being judged. When I felt frustrated with my Spanish, I would sit with Lorenza and just talk to her with all of my grammatical mistakes and bad pronunciation. She would just sit, smile, and nod her head. She was so understanding.

~ Nanette Smith ~

You also have to decide if you want to live with a family that has pets. If you are allergic to certain animals, it is obviously better if you do not live with them, but it is also a matter of personal preference. If you have pets at home in the United States, you may enjoy the companionship that foreign pets can provide. Animals are great listeners and stress reducers that might provide a level of comfort that humans cannot. On the other hand, if you do not have pets and do not consider yourself an animal person, then dealing

with cats, dogs, and birds might add to the stress and discomfort that you may already be feeling.

If you have allergies, another issue to consider is if you want to live with people who smoke or with people who do not smoke. If you are sensitive to cigarette smoke, it is critical that you request a smoke-free house. Living in a place that jeopardizes your health will not create a comfortable and safe environment, which is crucial. If you do not mind the smell of cigarette smoke or if you are a smoker, then perhaps you will want to live with people who smoke. It is quite common for people to smoke in their homes in foreign countries so if you do not like the residual smell or the negative health effects of second hand smoke, you must inform the school of your desire to live in a smoke-free house.

Personal space and time is something that will become very sacred to you on your study abroad trip. You will be experiencing new sights, sounds, smells, and people every moment of every day so having a sanctuary to retreat to is definitely important. This is another situation of personal preference. You must ask yourself if you want your sanctuary to be your own or if you want to share it with someone. If you have a constant need for human interaction and you are scared that you might be isolated in a foreign country, then sharing a room might be perfect for you. However, if you are a person who needs time alone to think, then you should consider requesting a private room. Having a private or a shared room is not a matter of better or worse but rather a decision that should be based on each individual's personality.

Just as students can decide if they want a private or shared bedroom, they can decide if they want a private or shared bathroom. If you are accustomed to dorm life and

communal living, then sharing a bathroom with one or two other people will probably not affect you; however, if you live alone and have your own bathroom, you may not feel comfortable sharing a bathroom with people you do not know on a personal level, especially the first couple of weeks.

Opting for a private bedroom or bathroom is more expensive, but you must weigh the pros and cons of sharing or paying more money. Some people would rather save the money and take a weekend excursion, while other people value their personal space so much that they would rather pay more money for privacy. This is a personal decision that you have to make after evaluating what amount of time and space you need for yourself on a daily basis. When making this decision, keep in mind that your room is the one place that you can make your own, and it is a place that should be totally comfortable and safe.

You should also take inventory of your diet. If you have special diet needs or if there are foods that you simply do not eat, then you need to inform the university of your dietary needs. There are some families that are more willing or equipped to provide certain foods for students. If you are a vegetarian, it is critical to let the university know because you need to be placed in a vegetarian house or in a house that can accommodate your needs.

As you make a list of what you want and expect from your homestay, it is important to remember that it may not be possible to meet all of your needs. Make sure the school is aware of your ideal situation, especially if health concerns are involved, and be willing to compromise. Regardless of the family, you will feel a little uncomfortable the first couple of days, but give the new situation and house a try and then listen to your

intuitive voice. Not every house is right for every student. It is okay to tell the school that you do not feel just right in your house and that you would like to move to a different house. Nothing is permanent and it is always possible to change. A good or bad homestay can make or break a study abroad experience so if your home does not feel right, do not be afraid to speak up and firmly tell the university that you want to try a new house.

Chapter 8 – Culture Shock

Culture shock is not something that happens all at once the moment you arrive in a foreign country, but rather it happens over time. Culture shock takes on many different forms, and sometimes it is difficult to identify that what you are feeling is indeed culture shock. When you arrive in a foreign country, you will be overwhelmed with a mixture of emotions, and you will probably identify this as culture shock. However, as you become more comfortable with your new surroundings, the influx of emotions you experienced will taper, and you may think that you have experienced and overcome culture shock. You will have overcome a stage of culture shock, but it will continue to surface in different forms throughout the duration of your stay.

You can experience culture shock in the following ways: extreme homesickness; avoidance of new social settings at school, in the community, or with your family; physical illnesses or insomnia; lack of appetite or unhealthy eating; periods of sadness or depression; trouble completing and concentrating on school work; loss of your sense of humor; boredom; and bitterness toward the foreign culture. Culture shock will ebb and flow in and out of your life as you are living and studying in a foreign country. As you

begin to know and feel comfortable with your family, the university, the community, your new friends, and the culture, the shock will begin to dissipate and return less frequently:

About my seventh month in Mexico culture shock revisited me for about two weeks. I became so bitter at the entire Mexican culture because no one was ever on time. Everyone was always about twenty minutes late. My Mexican friends would always make jokes about Mexican time, and I had a hard time laughing because I was so angry. I think I was just feeling really homesick and the different concept of time in Mexico from the United States was so obvious that I turned my sadness into anger and blamed the Mexican culture for being consistently late. The most bizarre part is that when I returned to the U.S., I had culturally assimilated, and I was always running about twenty minutes behind.

~ Nanette Smith ~

As you experience culture shock and trying to culturally adapt, there are some things you can do to make the process less painful. The first thing to do is acknowledge that what you are feeling and experiencing is totally normal and common. The simple acknowledgment of the process will make your body and mind less resistant to the new culture. The second thing to do is to take care of yourself. Read a book or rent a movie in English. This is a simple thing to do that will calm and comfort you while allowing your brain to not think in a foreign language or different dialect. Be sure to eat healthily and get plenty of exercise, both of which will help you sleep better at night. The third thing you can do is try to enjoy some aspect of your new surroundings everyday. Try to notice a different kind of flower that is not native to your hometown, listen to local music, go to a park, talk with your family. Do not judge or compare; just notice

something small that is pleasing to one of your senses. Even if you can only notice one thing for ten seconds, it will make you feel good and more accepting of your situation. The last thing you should do during your period of adjustment is stay in contact with your family and friends from home. Describe your new surroundings to your family and friends and tell them what you are feeling and experiencing. Staying connected with the familiar is an anchor that will not only stabilize you but also allow you to explore and grow without fear of losing yourself.

Chapter 9 – Cultural Acquisition

Just as culture shock does not happen immediately, neither does cultural acquisition. Cultural acquisition happens in conjunction with culture shock. It is a process of becoming comfortable with your new culture and assimilating to the customs and habits that the locals practice. This is a process that happens naturally, without much effort. You will be surrounded by the culture every day, and you will naturally pick up sayings, gestures, and habits without even realizing it.

Just because you acquire a new culture does not mean you will lose your native culture and traditions. Rather, you will be able to understand, practice, and possibly combine two unique cultures. You will naturally maintain the concepts and beliefs from your native culture. However, with the understanding and knowledge of a new culture, you may decide to adopt and combine some of the new beliefs and practices into your perspective to replace concepts that you do not agree with or conform to from your native culture. The experience of acquiring a new culture will give you an expanded worldview which promotes mental, emotional, and spiritual growth.

Chapter 10 – Language Acquisition

This section is intended for people who will be studying a foreign language while they are studying abroad. Going to a country to learn a language is one of the hardest and bravest things you will ever do. Even if you are fairly fluent in the language, it is still a trying task because you are separating yourself from English which has been your mother tongue your entire life.

Arriving in a country where you do not speak the language is daunting and frustrating, but it is the best way to learn a language. You will be surrounded by the language twenty-four hours a day, and you will be forced to use the language in order to complete everyday tasks. This is a tiring process and it takes time. Language acquisition does not happen overnight. It is a process that takes time, and just as culture shock and acquisition have ebbs and flows, so does language acquisition.

When you arrive, your language skills will improve rapidly, and then they will plateau or even decline. This is perhaps the most frustrating part of language acquisition. As your foreign language skills level out or decline from the overload of information, you will feel like you cannot speak or think in the foreign language or English. During this period you will feel like you cannot communicate with anyone about anything. Talking with your family and friends feels like more work than it is worth. School work becomes increasingly more difficult and frustrating. This is a normal process and just when you feel like giving up, you will overcome and not only will your foreign language skills start to improve but also your communication skills in general will recuperate.

You will make mistakes all of the time; it is totally normal to have both major and minor mistakes when you are learning a language. The most important factor when

acquiring a language is to not be afraid to use it. Talk to people and practice using the language. Do not be afraid to make a mistake or many mistakes for that matter. People will not judge you or condemn you, but rather they will try to help you. If you spend fifteen minutes trying to formulate a grammatically perfect sentence, people will get bored waiting and walk away; however, if you try your best to express yourself, people will be willing to try to understand your questions, ideas, and opinions. As long as you are willing to try your best and laugh with your friends, you will acquire the foreign language, and it will be a far easier process than sitting in a classroom in the U.S. learning a language:

I learned more Spanish my first three months in Mexico than I had in studying Spanish for seven years in the United States. I was surrounded by the language, and that made all the difference.

~ Nanette Smith ~

Chapter 11 – Problems in a foreign country

When you are in a foreign country, any number of problems can arise; problems that are both unavoidable and avoidable, minor and major. You cannot guess and predict what problems you may be presented with while you are studying abroad, but you can be prepared to mitigate and solve problems that you may have.

Take a list of important names, phone numbers, e-mail addresses, fax numbers, and mailing addresses with you. The most important people you want to be able to reach are your parents. Be sure that you can reach them and that you have established an emergency contact just in case you cannot get hold of your mom or dad. Be able to reach

the Study Abroad Office at Carroll College. Establish a contact person in the office before you leave so you will know who to reach should you need their assistance.

Know where the nearest U.S. embassy and/or consulate is in your city. These are the places that will be able to offer limited assistance if you should need help.

Chapter 12 – Communication

Keep in touch with the people you left behind. These people are your anchor and your support even though they may be thousands of miles away. You will grow and change during your time abroad, and you can share your evolution with the people you love by e-mail, phone, letters, and postcards.

It is easier and cheaper than ever to keep in touch despite distance with e-mail. The university where you will study will most likely have free computer and Internet services that you can use. However, if you are only allotted a certain amount of time or there are not ample computers, there are Internet cafes in even the remotest of areas. It is not a guarantee, but most cities and towns have Internet cafes. Through e-mail you can write a quick note to say “hello,” and “I love you,” or you can write a detailed description of the new music you heard, the new food you tasted, the new friend you made, the new word you learned, and any other unique experience that you want to share. Your family and friends will appreciate hearing from you, and they will see you gradually grow and change, which will reduce the shock of *reentry* when you return.

Sometimes e-mail is just not enough, and you actually want to speak English and hear a familiar voice. There are many methods, ranging from cheap to very expensive, for calling home. The cheapest way to call the United States is to buy an international

phone card in the community where you are living. International phone cards have clearly written instructions on them, usually in English, and are easy to use. If you want to call home as soon as you land in the foreign country, you can buy an international phone card in the United States before you leave. However, the rates are usually not as good as those of most other countries.

If your news is not urgent, it is always fun to send letters and postcards from foreign countries. They tend to take a long time to get to the United States, but they are a great method of communication. In addition, you will probably receive something in the mail in return which is one of the best ways to relieve feelings of homesickness.

No matter how you do it or what method you choose, the important thing is to keep in touch with the people you left behind. They will be supporting you, and they will want to know that you are okay. Communicate often with friends and family from home, and everyone will feel more connected.

Chapter 13 – Reentry ~ What should I do AFTER I return?

The term used for returning to your native country after spending time in a foreign country is *reentry*. *Reentry* is especially difficult because you will be returning to your native culture with the expectation that it will feel familiar and normal. However, after spending time immersed in a foreign culture, the United States will feel as foreign to you as the other country did at first. When you return, it will be quite possible that not much has changed, but you will have changed immensely. You will have a new perspective, a different worldview, and you will have to try to maintain and explain the growth that took place while you were gone. It is also quite possible that changes will have taken place in

your town or on campus and that your friends and loved ones will have grown while you were gone.

You may find that your place with your friends and family is different since you have been gone. This is hard to adjust to because upon your return you will be searching for normalcy. You will expect that you know what to expect; however, time does not stand still, and you will have to adjust your relationships according to the changes that each person has experienced. Relationships often grow stronger when the individuals themselves become stronger and more confident in their own person. It may be shocking and hurtful at first when your relationships are not identical to when you departed for your adventure, but you will be amazed at the strength that develops once you have been home and had time to reestablish your connections.

You will experience the feeling of a communication gap as a result of *reentry* when you are with your friends. If you have been speaking and thinking in another language for an extended period of time, you may simply have trouble expressing yourself in English; however, the communication gap you feel will probably be caused by the content of conversations rather than the logistics of language. Friends and family will talk about all the people you know and what happened while you were away, and you will be able to relate and create a mental picture. On the other hand, when you talk about who you met and the experiences you had, your friends will not have the same understanding, and they will not be able to create a mental picture as you did when you listened to their stories. This phenomena is painful because you will feel like no one understands or wants to understand the experiences you had and the life you lived while you were studying in another country:

When I got back, I would think about a funny story, such as sitting in the front of a bus drinking a mammy smoothie out of a plastic bag and being so enraptured by the graffiti on the walls that I missed my stop and ended up lost on the bus for over two hours when the bus finally stopped because the driver needed to take his fifteen minute break and I had to take a taxi home, but people had a hard time visualizing the scene. Without the mental picture the story really isn't that funny, but I still laugh when I think about it. I listened more than I talked when I first got back because I didn't think anyone wanted to hear my stories. I was wrong. People did want to hear my stories and look at my pictures. Maybe they didn't know exactly what I had experienced, but my friends and family tried to understand. My amazing experiences in Mexico were worth a thousand painful reentries.

~ Nanette Smith ~

Upon *reentry* you will feel the reverse culture shock that you felt in the foreign country. Just as it did not happen all at once before, neither will it when you return. Allow yourself to feel shocked and take care of yourself while you are going through the process. Connecting with someone who also studied abroad is a great tool because you can talk and commiserate together. Few people will understand the emotions you will be experiencing so if you can find one person who is experiencing the same thing or has in the past, you will be able to visit and share stories.

Another way you can ease the pain of *reentry* is by reading your journal, looking at your pictures, keeping in touch with the people you met, and sharing your stories with people from Carroll College and Helena. You experienced something very unique; people will be fascinated by your stories. Organize a night to share your experience by showing your pictures and telling your narrative. This will help you adjust to being back

in a place that was once totally comfortable and familiar, and it will give people the opportunity to try to understand what you experienced while you were gone.

Slowly, you will reestablish your place with friends and family and the communication gap will grow smaller. *Reentry* is painful, but it is not permanent. The amazing memories you have in the form of pictures and yourself as a more mature person are well worth the period of acclimating that you will go through when you return.

Chapter 14 – Making the best of the experience ~ Before, During, and After

• *Host Family*

Above all else, make sure that you are comfortable in your house and with your family. Time and time again, students have returned from study abroad trips to say that their experience was just okay because they did not really like their living situation. Living with a family can be awkward, but you must be sure that it is the best situation for you. Do not be shy to tell the university that you would like to live with a different family. Not every student and every family is a good match, and schools generally understand and are supportive. If you are not comfortable being in your home, it will be hard to make the other necessary adjustments in order to fully experience the foreign culture.

• *Local Friends*

Make friends with the locals. Making friends with locals will open a completely different world to you. Many people travel to foreign countries and hang out with Americans and speak English. You are traveling to another country for a reason, take

advantage of it. By not making any local friends you are not exposing yourself to the colorful world that they have to offer you. You are limiting your cultural exposure.

• *Journal*

Keep a journal of what you see, what you do, and what you learn. Keeping a journal can be time consuming and tedious, but it does not have to be. Do not write down what you did every single day in chronological order, but rather write down the good stuff, the juicy stuff, the heart of each day or each week. Try to write at least one entry a week that talks about what you saw and how you reacted to it and what you did.

A journal serves two purposes. The first and more immediate purpose is that it is a safe outlet for you to express your emotions about your new situation. You can write in your native language about everything that you are feeling and experiencing. A journal may be your only outlet for your deep emotions, and it is much healthier to express them on paper than to keep them bottled up inside of you.

The second purpose of a journal comes into the picture after you return to the United States. The journal is a memory book of what you did, saw, experienced, and felt. The journal will be able to take you back to your time in a foreign country every time you open it and read it.

• *Pictures*

Take pictures and take a lot of them. They will not only help you remember all the amazing things you did but also give your family and friends at home a glimpse into the world you lived in and experienced. Do not be ashamed to carry a camera and take

photos but be respectful of who and what you photograph. When taking pictures of people, especially indigenous people, be sure to ask permission beforehand. Some people will smile and say sure, while others will politely decline, based on their spiritual beliefs.

Pictures will capture the places you visited and the faces you saw. The photos will preserve the image, and your heart will preserve the emotions. You will be able to conjure up feelings you had during your year abroad just by looking at your pictures.

• *A Positive Attitude and An Open Mind*

Above all else, your attitude, sense of humor, and your open mind are the most important parts of your study abroad adventure. Embark on your trip with a positive attitude and try to maintain it throughout your entire experience. Sometimes it will be hard, but if you plant the seed of a positive attitude, it will prevail even when you are suffering from culture shock and homesickness.

Be accepting, respectful, and nonjudgmental of people and customs that are different. If you have an open mind, you will be more willing to try new things, and you will be surprised at what you like that you never thought you would. This is the best opportunity to stretch your limits and your mind. You just need to give them the chance:

While I was in Mexico, I ate every part of the cow from head to tail. Before I went to Mexico I would not eat cow tongue, but now I have tried hoof tostados, tongue tacos, brain quesidillas, stomach soup, and tail. I ate what my friends ate, and I was open to trying anything. The only thing I wouldn't eat again are cow brain quesidillas. I didn't care for the texture, but at least I can say that I tried them.

~ Nanette Smith ~

Chapter 15 – Conclusion

This guide does not tell you where to go, how long to stay, or any other specifics, but it does tell you to study abroad because it is a priceless experience, and it does tell you to have an open, accepting mind if you do study abroad. You can read about different countries, cultures, and languages, but the only way to truly experience and absorb them is to live and study in a foreign country. College is the best time to travel and learn, and I hope you take advantage of all the study abroad opportunities at Carroll College.