The summer of 2014, I had the pleasure of participating with the World Wide Opportunities on Organic Farms (WWOOF) organization with their French division. Working with the organization was very easy from start to finish. With just a few months remaining until my international experience was suppose to start, I still didn’t have anything solidified. WWOOF had been recommended to me previously and I remembered it in time to give it a chance. In brief, the WWOOF organization is set up to connect volunteers with organic farm stays all around the world. The aim of WWOOF is to get more individuals involved with organic farming and aware of sustainability needs, while simultaneously providing help to usually small organic farms. Volunteers can stay for any length of time they decide on with their host farm and they are not paid, but are accommodated with room and board.

The concept of WWOOF appealed greatly to me, but I honestly didn’t know what to expect. I found the organization’s website at www.wwoof.net and was impressed with its clean and easy to navigate design. The WWOOF organization has nationally based WWOOF locations in over hundred countries, each with their own catalog that volunteers can subscribe to. The catalog contains a list of all their approved farms and organic operations to volunteer on and a brief description provided by the owners detailing their type of work, housing arrangements, and needs expected of volunteers. I chose to subscribe to the French catalog because I have had the chance to travel to France before, only to view the touristy locations, so it seemed like a neat opportunity to visit a country again and see it from a parallel perspective. I sent fifteen emails to farms that seemed most appealing and heard back immediately from three. With these three, I quickly worked out a length of time to stay and managed to coordinate a multi-farm stay that would last the entirety of the summer. Within a couple weeks, I went from having nothing planned, to looking forward to staying on a vineyard, a sheep farm, and a bed and breakfast located near Montpellier, Carcassonne, and Serres, respectively. I am very impressed and grateful for the quick turn around the WWOOF organization provided.

It’s very easy for me to go on and spend several more paragraphs discussing my summer experience, but honestly, there are three things in particular I would like to share that I felt were the most challenging over the course of the summer. Those three issues are work, traveling, and culture, and I’ll explain each in the context of how they tie into the places I stayed on.

As far as work goes, it was extremely diverse and I found myself in the position to try lots of jobs I’ve never worked before. For example, on the vineyard, there was a lot of work needed raising and lowering the trellises out in the field, while there was also help needed to bottle the wine. A couple weeks later on the sheep farm, work centered on gardening and shepherding sheep through moving them to a new location every other day, feeding and watering them, and responding to their injuries. Even after all that, the bed and breakfast required personal skills to interact with the guests, more gardening help, and help around the house to keep the operation running smoothly (doing dishes, cleaning, weeding, mowing, splitting wood, etc.) Much of this work I’ve never done before, but I never felt it was unfairly asked of me to do because each host family had a willingness to spend extended time showing me and teaching me how to perform each task. Upon
showing enthusiasm and demonstrating understanding, they would often let me figure out the rest of the challenge but still remain an accessible resource if I needed help. An example of this was in baling hay at the sheep farm. I learned the importance of turning and spreading the hay to ensure it dries, but sometimes judgment is needed to discern whether hay should be moved out of trouble areas like one that are poorly drained soils or excessively shady. At first, I was shown by the family and another volunteer a few examples where this was an appropriate and worthwhile effort to undergo (it’s exhausting moving hay!) and after those times I was challenged and expected to be able to make similar judgments and teach the new volunteers that joined later.

The intensity and frequency of the work definitely varied from each place. The vineyard operated on a fairly regular 7am-5pm work schedule with breaks for lunch and as many breaks as myself and the other volunteers needed to get out of the heat. The sheep farm was looser on its work hours, some days starting at 8am and others at 10am, and that was mostly dictated by the expected time needed to accomplish the task for the day. The afternoons on both the sheep farm and bed and breakfast always included a siesta, or a 1-2 hour down time in the afternoon when it’s the hottest part of the day, but then the volunteers would work late as 10:00pm most nights. Regardless of hours, the work every day was meaningful and I could feel the contribution it had to my host family’s livelihood. I had the chance to learn many new skills, and refine the ones I already possessed in a new environment.

Next, I just want to give some practical advice on traveling in France. Since I was staying at three different locations, I did quite a bit of traveling. I mostly used trains, but sometimes I took the bus when the nearest train stop was far away. Traveling days easily became my most stressful day and I usually did not look forward to them. Grant it, while on the train or bus it was great getting to see the changing countryside, but navigating the logistics of buying tickets, dealing with delays and train worker strikes (which there were quite a few and even cancelled one of my trains), and figuring out where everything was in new stations made most of my experiences pretty rough. Not knowing the language was a huge part of my stress, and so was traveling alone. The most practical advice I can offer is if you don’t know the language, try and find someone who you can travel with, or at least someone who will help you negotiate purchasing tickets and figuring out the layout of the stations. I befriended a PhD student while in France, and when I had an issue with my ticket, he was truly a life-saver interpreting between me and the train personnel. If it’s not possible for you to find someone to travel with you or help you out, I would recommend giving yourself generous amounts of time during your travel. This may include arriving at the station an hour earlier than you would normally need, or scheduling longer delays when making connections, which is not always feasible. The last bit of advice I would give for traveling, and this seems like something I always heard but didn’t realize the importance of, is to always have physical money on you. Staying in rural areas made access to banks very inconsistent, so most times I traveled I did not plan ahead well enough to pick up money beforehand. Many times my card was denied, or places didn’t even take cards, which added unnecessary stress as I tried to rush to find an ATM. Giving yourself more time at a station by arriving earlier is one way to deal with locating a bank or ATM, and can really save you a lot of trouble at the end of the day. But after telling my, often negative, travel woes to my host families, I soon realized it’s something that everybody deals with, even if you know the language. It was especially fun to laugh at other volunteers
travel stories as well as have mine laughed at, which brings me to the last point I want to talk about on culture.

I want to distinguish two types of culture during my WWOOF experience. There is the culture of France and the various regions, and culture of the WWOOF program itself. Clearly, French culture is very different from the United States. There were both obvious and subtle cultural cues I had to learn and picked up on during my stay. The families I lived with did a great job of informing me about social and political issues during the summer happening in the French and EU governments, and how those policies might affect the culture and people of France. One example of this was discussing the prospect of establishing the Transatlantic Free Trade Area and further trade agreements. The family I was with passionately spoke their views and shared with me their hopes and concerns for the impacts it would have on the French way of life. Of course this is just one side of the issue, but their endeavor to expose me to not only that issue but several others put me in a position to do further research on my own and engage in conversation with other French people.

Furthermore, all three families strived to bring me and the other volunteers to culture events happening in the towns or cities around their locations. I also have several examples of this including: attending a parade for Bastille Day, traveling to a village to celebrate Fête de la Musique, going to a ballet, traveling to local markets (where one family receives part of their livelihood) on the weekends, and simply visiting local towns and cities to learn about their history. This was a component of my summer experience that I was not actually considering before going abroad. I knew that in interacting with the families I would have the chance to learn a lot, but the commitment all three made to make the effort to bring myself and the other volunteers around the area was a surprise I’m grateful for.

The second kind of culture made present this summer was the culture surrounding the WWOOF program. In light of the last statement in the previous paragraph, these families have been a part of the WWOOF program for several years and have learned what volunteers like to do during their stay. Aside from just the history of volunteers who have been to each of these operations, all three places have multiple volunteers come and leave during the period I was there. On the vineyard there were two other volunteers, and at the bed and breakfast there was around ten. Everyone was from different parts of the world, so the stories other volunteers bring with them are both inspiring and challenging to your worldview. Often times the best moments I had were sitting and listening and asking questions to learn from the other volunteers. This interaction with them was absolutely crucial for bringing the summer to the level of regard I have for it. This is because these fellow student and adult volunteers engaged in conservation at all times about life and how we each saw where ourselves were in our lives. These were the conversations that helped me discover and learn about myself and not surprisingly, provided me with the current trajectory I am on now with my life.

My summer abroad experience with the WWOOF program in France was an absolutely life changing opportunity. France was an absolutely amazing country, and the industries I volunteered with reflected some staples in French culture. But most importantly, these families were compassionate and dedicated to their volunteers. Whether helping their volunteers development external agricultural skills, knowledge about organic operations, or staying committed to help WWOOF volunteers learn more about themselves,
they were involved at all levels at all times. I’m truly grateful for the opportunity WWOOF France provided me with, and I would easily recommend it to anyone. More generally, the WWOOF program as a whole is a unique organization that I believe delivers on their mission. Not every moment of the experience will be flawless, I had my own set of issues with my host families at times, but they really prove to understand the mission WWOOF sets out and they know it’s most important to work through these differences and reach an understanding with their volunteers.