There are few words that I can use to accurately describe my time in Argentina. I had chosen to study abroad in that country because of my desire to practice my Spanish, live in a cosmopolitan city, and live among a people known for their love of the arts, sports, and politics. I have to admit that I had absolutely no idea what I was getting into. I traveled to Argentina in the Spring Semester of 2013 with the Institute for Study Abroad at Butler University. The program I was in allowed me to matriculate into an Argentine University, live with a host family, and intern with a local organization. I recommend the IFSA-Butler program wholeheartedly because it gives you the perfect balance of academic experiences, cultural experiences, and social experiences. This program truly believes that your time outside the classroom is just as important as your time in the classroom and as a result, through their programs you visit the theater regularly, you travel regularly (they even take you to Uruguay- twice!), and you are able to embrace Argentine culture than you could ever imagine.

I studied at the University of Buenos Aires in the schools of Social Science and Humanities (called Philosophy and Literature). At the University, I took one class (that counted as six credits before they were so demanding) that ran once a week for four hours straight. The class was called “Justice, Education, and Human Rights” and was in the philosophy department. In that class, for the first two hours we would discuss the philosophy behind education in Argentina and for the second two hours we discussed the practical application of these ideas. To give an example, we would spend two hours discussing whether Argentines believed they had a right to free university education and then we would spend the next two hours analyzing the successes and failures of the free university structure in Argentina.

What was so incredible about my experience in the classroom was not necessarily the material (taking a senior level philosophy class in Spanish meant that I not only had trouble understanding because of the language... but because of the content), but the style of the class. Students of UBA are known to be incredibly radical and passionate and thus, class discussions were not necessarily
conversations as much as debates of students arguing over each other. It was unbelievable to see the passion that these students all had for the subject matter.

Also at the University of Buenos Aires, I conducted an independent research project under the guidance of a professor of political science. My project entailed writing a 50-page thesis in Spanish on the topic of my choice. I wrote a detailed political-economic analysis of Argentine-African relations in the past ten years under the populist government. It was fascinating to be able to pursue a topic of my choice in a foreign country under the personal guidance of such an esteemed professor. I also loved being able to interview experts in a field that I have not engaged with already at Cornell; in addition, it was great to leave my experience there with a “deliverable” to bring back to the United States.

To round out my academic experience, I also interned at a refugee women’s rights organization called AMUMRA (Association of United Migrant and Refugee Women). With AMUMRA, I would help host seminars for refugee and migrant women on how to navigate Argentina’s complex immigration process. In addition, I helped the organization research types of violence and discrimination refugee women experience in the immigration, healthcare, and work environments in the country. This experience was a wonderful opportunity for me to practice my Spanish and learn the ins and outs of a reputable civil society organization in Argentina. I also loved that it introduced me to a different socioeconomic class, as my experience thus far in Argentina had been with my host family who were of upper middle class. Working with refugee women allowed me to understand how a different part of society interacts with the city and engages with its politics.

In discussing my host family, I must admit that I could not have been luckier. My host mother was a fabulous retired woman who loved to sit around and drink maté (a bitter Argentine tea) and talk about literature and politics. We would sit around for hours talking about different aspects of Argentine culture and society. I would go to the theater with my friends (Buenos Aires has more theaters per capita than any country in the world) and come back and be able to discuss the show with my host mother who had obviously already seen it. We would talk about books we have read and movies we both enjoyed. The palpable presence of culture in
Argentina life made me fall in love with the country. Buenos Aires is a city where the peddlers on the street are not trying to sell you blockbuster hits like *Iron Man 3*, but critically acclaimed award winning films like *Amour*.

Now to finally get to above and beyond my favorite aspect of my time in Argentina: the politics. It is no hyperbole when people warn you not to discuss politics in public in Argentina. The Argentine people are incredibly passionate about politics and are also incredibly divided. The current president runs on a populist platform that draws support from the masses in the rural parts of the country and the lower economic classes because of her support of the welfare state. The middle and upper classes despise the president because they believe her policies are driving the country’s economy into the ground.

As a bystander outside of politics with a relative understanding of development economics, I could understand where both sides are coming from. However with this said, I do feel that the government is pursuing economic policies that were proved defunct in the 70s in order to appease the masses. Still, it was incredible to be a student of political economy and live in a country with such a tumultuous history of its political economy. Never had I experienced such a visible form of inflation (that is a result of these populist policies), but once every month or so I would go to my favorite café and find that everything had increased by one peso.

When I was in Argentina, the president was trying to implement a law that would have allowed the executive branch of government to intervene more in the judicial branch. Many people were upset over this proposed legislation and one day while I was coming home from class these upset parties took to the streets. The city was essentially shut down and I had to leave the subway and walk with the protesting crowd in order to get home. Two million people took to the streets that night in Buenos Aires and as we walked with them, people stood on their porches and hanging out their windows banging pots and pans in support. When I got home, I told my host mother what happened and she told me, “You see how these people protested at night, that’s because they are working people and did not want to have to take off work.” I thought this comment was astounding and really showed the complexities of Argentine politics. The people took to the streets not to disrupt and
shut down the city, but to make their voices heard. They intentionally chose to protest at night to make this point clear.

Perhaps I should end this reflection piece with some nice overarching thoughts about my time in the country. In Argentina, I learned how to physically, mentally, and emotionally absorb everything around you. From learning the public transport routes of the city to engaging with political debates with my mother to having candid chats with coffees over women refugees, every experience is an opportunity to be a learning lesson if you take the time to reflect and critically think about it. I learned more during my 5 months in the country than I could have ever imagined. I learned how to apply all those skills and theories that I learned at Cornell to the real world and to analyze various events with a critical eye. Buenos Aires is perhaps one of the most interesting cities in the world and has the world to give you, if you let it.