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Reflection Paper on International Experience

It seems impossible to summarize the learning experience of a lifetime in just one brief paper, especially when that experience encompassed such a vast variety of lessons. I had always planned on participating in a study abroad program during my undergraduate education, which is one of the reasons why the IARD major initially appealed to me. When I found the SIT program on Regional Integration, Development, and Social Change in Argentina, it seemed to offer everything I was looking for; I could improve my Spanish skills, have access to the professors and academic resources of one of South America’s educational epicenters, share a home with an Argentinean family, travel to and study rural agricultural systems, and spend a month conducting research on a topic of my choice. After four months abroad in Buenos Aires, Argentina, along with trips to Peru, Brazil, and Paraguay, I feel as though I have developed a global context to which I can apply the knowledge I have acquired in the classroom at Cornell. In order to discuss the most significant aspects of my international experience, I will reflect upon the areas of culture, language, and research in which my study abroad experience had the greatest impacts on my worldview.

Before Argentina, I had only ever traveled on family vacations, which offer a recreational opportunity for cultural observation but little in terms of immersion. Studying abroad is an altogether different experience, since the destination actually becomes one’s home. Argentinean culture is unique not only for its history of European immigration and political populism, but also for its turbulent political
past. My host family loved to boast about their Italian grandparents who immigrated to Argentina to start a family ranch with only a peso to their name. These stories are common throughout the country, and the rich Italian influence and image of the rural cattle rancher have blended to form the romantic yet rugged Argentinean feel.

During my program, we had the opportunity to spend a week living with a rural family. I personally requested to stay on a farm, and was shocked to discover that farmers in Argentina no longer live on their land. The family I stayed with, the Toscanelli’s, raised cattle, pigs, and poultry, and cultivated nearly 50 acres of soybeans. Though the old farmhouse still stood on the property, like most farmers in Argentina today they commuted from their home in a local city. In the past 30 years, nearly all of the rural schools have closed in Argentina, which has forced rural families to move into more populated areas. When I asked the Toscanelli’s how commuting affected their lives, they seemed happy to have the best of both the rural and city life. Both daughters were able to attend universities nearby, and their parents were glad to offer their children opportunities that were unheard of during their own upbringings. I will never forget the night that we did sleep in the old farmhouse, and the family killed and roasted a pig in honor of my stay. The father handed me the pig’s feet to eat, since apparently they are the most delectable part of the animal (though I would have to disagree). This experience was quite the adjustment from ending my six years of vegetarianism right before the trip, but it nonetheless helped me appreciate how much pride their family took in raising the animals that fed their family.
Though the cowboy culture of rural Argentina offers a romantic view of the Argentine way of life, the country has also faced a brutal political past, most notably under the National Reorganization Process. Under the military dictatorship from 1976-1983, nearly 30,000 Argentinean citizens were murdered for their political beliefs. This phenomenon was known as “Operation Condor”, which spanned the military dictatorships of South America in Chile, Bolivia, Uruguay, Paraguay, and Brazil and was responsible for the disappearances of over 60,000 people. Today in Argentina, the events of the military dictatorship still feel tangibly recent. The mothers and grandmothers of “los desaparecidos” (the disappeared) have formed a well-known political force in Argentina called “Los Madres de la Plaza de Mayo”. Every Wednesday, the women circle the city's central plaza to remember their lost family members and fight for political justice today. One day after class, I went with some members of my group to participate in their march, and it haunted me to realize how recently these atrocities occurred. The march of the mothers taught me how fear can so easily obstruct the pursuit of what is fair, and how I should never take the political stability in the United States for granted.

The most exciting and rewarding part of cultural immersion for me was the opportunity to learn Spanish. After nearly eight years of studying Spanish in the classroom, I expected to be adequately prepared for the trip. However, no one can ever be fully prepared to comprehend the social nuances, truisms, family interactions, and cultural know-how that accompany the language. On the first day that our group met, our program director spoke to us only in Spanish from thereon. Every class and assignment was in Spanish, and my host family did not know a word
of English. At first, speaking in and listening to another language is extremely stressful and tiring. At the end of the day, it left me with a feeling of mental and physical exhaustion unlike anything I had experienced before. After a few weeks, once I became more confident in my speaking and accent, I began to take on a new perspective. Studying a language in its context is unlike studying any other subject matter, since every moment of every day is part of the learning process, from watching television with my host mom to riding the subway to eating in a restaurant. It was incredible to feel myself improving, and to push my brain to function at its highest capacity.

Most importantly, as my Spanish improved, so did my relationship with my host family. When I first arrived, my host family and I had a difficult time understanding each other for both cultural and linguistic reasons. Throughout the course of the semester, as my language skills progressed, I was able to offer my opinion on matters, make a joke, and participate in friendly political debates over dinner. Through a strengthening of my language comprehension, I was able to overcome the cultural barrier that I initially felt when I arrived and become an active participant in my household’s family life.

Academically, my experience with SIT exceeded my expectations for a study abroad program. I had the opportunity to conduct original research on a topic of my choice for one month and coordinate interviews with specialists in those fields. I chose to study the beef industry in Argentina, and the reasons for recent domestic shortages and price hikes in beef markets. Eugenia Saini, a previous Humphrey Fellow at Cornell, helped me organize a visit to the Ministry of Agriculture, during
which I attended a meeting of one of the cattle commissions. Through the connections I made at the meeting, I interviewed one of the most prominent political forces in the beef industry, Hector Salamanco. The findings of my research concluded that the beef industry is deeply rooted in Argentinean culture, and the general population associates their economic well being with their ability to afford meat. In order to appease the public, Argentina’s populist government has enforced policies that distort markets and drive down prices. These pricing mechanisms have led Argentinean farmers to convert their cattle pastures for more productive uses, such as soybean cultivation, leading to an exacerbation of shortages and even stronger price controls. The opportunity to write my independent study project was an academically enriching experience, and taught me how to conduct investigative rather than scientific research. I also learned extensively about the political and agricultural policies of Argentina, and was able to draw my own conclusions about how agricultural policy can either improve or obstruct productivity.

My abroad experience in Argentina helped to deepen my knowledge of agricultural systems, political policy, and the cultural differences that can shape international development. I also greatly improved my Spanish speaking and writing skills, which I will continue to use for the rest of my life. By immersing myself in an entirely foreign culture, I also gained a stronger sense of independence and confidence. I can summarize my semester abroad by saying that one can only take away from an experience that which one puts into it. The most crucial mistake I made before my trip was to assume that I would arrive in Argentina, have a life-
changing semester of new experiences, and go home a smarter, stronger person.

However, everyone in my SIT group seemed to take away different lessons from the trip based on where they invested their efforts. In my opinion, the best way to benefit from a study abroad experience is to approach every situation with an open mind, always ask questions, try to spend time with locals, and invest oneself in learning the language.