Experiencing Latin America II was a field course that focused on providing an in-depth, hands-on, multidisciplinary analysis of the cultures and lives of Latin American people. Instead of covering the broad geographic region of Latin America, the field course provided focused exploration of the topics covered in respects to the Mexican state of Chiapas. We visited a wide array of agricultural sites, artisan workshops, theaters, government officials and regular tourist stops.

During the two-week course in Mexico we spent a lot of time exploring various types of agriculture. We visited small and large-scale dairy farmers, coffee producers, flower producers and corn producers. This portion of the trip not only served the Agriculture students, but it served as introduction to agriculture systems for those students who have never been involved in agriculture. I found it fascinating to compare the differences between the large scale, modern coffee producer, Argovia, and the smaller producers just up the road. Some of the smaller producers had adopted similar production techniques to those of Argovia, but still haven’t managed to catch up in the sorting and roasting of beans post-production.

My favorite aspects of the trip to Chiapas was visiting local artisans and learning more about local arts and music. My two favorite artisan workshops were those of the marimba makers and the weaver. I was surprised to learn about the time, effort and precision involved with crafting a marimba. I thought it was fascination to see each step involved with making one of these majestic instruments. My favorite part, however, was
when the owners of the marimba workshop showed us the different sounds that various marimbas make. The visit was very interactive. The brothers that owned the store preformed for us and even took a few volunteers and tried to teach them how to play a song.

The trip to Chiapas coincidentally occurred right before Mexico’s elections. I think that this was a wonderful opportunity to meet government officials and learn more about politics in Mexico. We met with the Mayor of San Cristobal de Las Casas who formally welcomed each and every student, presenting us with a certificate. We also had the chance to learn visit a Zapatista camp and learn more about their system of self-government and their reasons for distancing themselves from the official government of Mexico. I wish that we had spent more time discussing the political system and political history of Mexico. It would have been interesting to see one of the candidates during their appearances or speeches throughout town.

Aside from all the educational aspects of the trip, there were a few activities that were purely for entertainment and cultural emersion purposes. One of my favorite stops on the trip would be Agua de Azul. This is a stunning touristic stop where (on a day where it has not rained) the water of this river and waterfall is a turquoise color. We stopped here as a midway lunch break on a day that we needed to spend over seven hours on a bus traveling from Palenque to San Cristobal de las Casas. At Agua de Azul we were able to swim, eat traditional foods, and browse through stands of local handmade crafts. This day was a relaxing way to have a break from the hectic schedule of the field course.

Overall this trip surpassed all of the expectations I had for it. We received such a well-rounded view of the culture, government, agriculture, ecosystems, and religions. I
got a lot more out of these two weeks than I expected I could learn in years. I would not change a thing about the two weeks. I would love to add more experiences, visits and talks to the course, but that would result in lengthening the duration of the stay. The days were long and at the end of the trip I was exhausted, but it was perfect and I would do it all over again.