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Study Abroad Reflection

As a Language and International Health student, I had the opportunity to study abroad. From January to May 2024, I both took classes in and completed an internship in the ancient city of Toledo, Spain. As I prepared for my semester in Toledo, my expectations left me with feelings of both excitement and worry. I was eager to integrate myself and embrace everything that Spain had to offer. At the same time, I anticipated struggle. Alongside the anxieties surrounding living in a foreign country for a semester, I found myself anticipating a difficult time developing a routine. I knew that I would not be able to simply replicate the life I lived here, but what if I was never able to adapt? What if I got stuck? This fear led me to create a goal for myself before arriving in Toledo. My goal was to develop a routine that was based in exploring and learning. I wanted to socialize with my new environment, feel less like a tourist in the new city I was going to be living in.

Above all, I expected change, and my goals led me to embrace the change as much as I could. In doing so, I was confronted with many cultural differences. One of the biggest cultural differences I noticed was within the social behaviors. Daily routines or activities revolved around socializing or enjoying the company of others in a way that I do not witness in the United States. I noticed this often during my internship in the hospital. Throughout the day, the doctor I was working with would ask to join her for coffee. What I expected to be a quick coffee break in between work was rather a time to relax, socialize, and enjoy the company of our peers. I remember feeling a sense of urgency to return to my work, like I was breaking a rule by participating in these “coffee-breaks”. In reality, I was not breaking any rules, but I was experiencing an important component of Spanish culture, that is the importance of slowing down and taking time to enjoy socialization and the presence of others.

Alongside navigating cultural differences, my internship at the National Paraplegic Hospital of Spain offered many opportunities to challenge myself. My role at my internship consisted of objectively two different responsibilities where I was either uploading data or collecting it. Uploading the data was relatively easy as it just required me to log patient data in an excel worksheet. Data collection, on the other hand, involved interviewing cervical trauma patients about their experiences with pain. I was always excited for the days when we had a patient scheduled. It was my first time experiencing provider-patient interactions where I was not the patient. It was a glimpse into my future in healthcare.

In these interviews, I quickly noticed that my presence may be a source of unease for these patients. Provider-patient interactions require the patient to be vulnerable and disclose very personal information about themselves. This can be difficult for some patients, and on top of things, I imagined how I would feel if a stranger from another country with no medical experience was listening and documenting everything I was saying. I shifted my perspective to that of the patient and thought about what I would need in that situation to feel more comfortable. Prior to this experience, I had never had to consider how my presence would affect a patient’s healthcare experience. It was challenging to think about how I could make a stranger feel comfortable enough to feel as though they can share their personal experiences in the clinical setting.

Though challenging, this experience shaped how I thought about my future career in healthcare. In health classes, you learn about the importance of empathy in healthcare, but to experience this outside of the classroom opens your eyes to the responsibility of care providers in shaping their patient’s experience. What I learned through this experience will be invaluable to take with me into my future career in healthcare as I approach provider-patient interactions.

My experiences abroad influenced the perspective through which I view the world in many ways. I learned the most from the cultural differences that made me stop and think, or the differences that challenged me to live outside of my comfort zone. Exploring these differences opened my eyes to the importance of connection in our social interactions. Whether it was on a leisurely coffee-break with doctors or interviewing a patient about their personal experiences with their pain, one of the most important things my time abroad taught me was to embrace, foster, and seek out human connection in everything that you do.