

The Internship Experience and Studying Abroad

In some ways, I am the wrong person to write about study abroad programs: spent all four years of college in residence, a decision I regretted. And I regretted it so much that I decided to go overseas soon after I graduated. I had it in my head that a real education required spending some time abroad, so I found a job teaching ESL in the Czech Republic and spent the next three years there.

Though this was not a traditional study abroad experience, I think it has given me an especially good sense of the benefits of a study abroad program combined with an internship. Indeed, that is exactly what I was doing. And based on my experience, I would go so far as to say that the combination of study and work is the best way to get the most out of a study abroad program and learn about a foreign culture. To give the reader an idea of why I think this, let me tell you both about my own experience and that of Suji Jhaveri, who exemplifies how to combine work and study. Suji spent her junior year in a study abroad program that allowed her to take classes and intern with a member of the newly-formed Scottish parliament.

Internships give students a chance to get outside the university. Universities are wonderful places, but hardly representative of any country as a whole. I was particularly impressed by how much Suji's internship allowed her to see different faces of Scottish society. She visited several nursing homes, sat in on committee hearings where unhappy constituents made their unhappiness known and even knock on people's doors soliciting opinions, .

Internships not only press one to witness new things, they also force one to engage with people in depth. As an ESL teacher, every week I had to come up with new topics to engage the students in conversation, from their favorite Czech film to their favorite Czech book to their favorite food etc. I picked up incredible tidbits from these conversations. Suji got an excellent taste of this type of experience when she went door-to-door encouraging people to vote. As she wrote in her diary, many people gave her a piece of their minds (both positively and negatively). Or, after a conversation with officemates, she writes,

“Two of the assistants were telling me all about how they thought Thatcher was a witch, and proceeded to email me lines about her, ‘Ding Dong the Witch Is Dead,’ and explain that you could not wear black when she died. Wow, pretty strong opinions.” This is what you go to a foreign country to learn. These are things not taught in classes.

Perhaps the greatest satisfaction from an internship abroad is the feeling that you are actually accomplishing something. Suji actually did something for the entire Scottish people as part of her internship. In part because of her effort, Scotland will soon have fire sprinklers installed in many public places. Though the policy memo printed in Suji’s paper here was not turned into law, she contributed to the policy debate and perhaps influenced the views of her member of parliament.

I’ll conclude with some advice for those going on a study abroad program, even if it does not include an internship. First, take notes. You will be surprised by how many experiences you will forget if you don’t write them down. Probably the best way to do this is to keep a diary. Suji wrote diary entries at the end of each week of her program. I think the diary is even more fascinating than the paper published here, and probably what she will return to in later years. Technology has recently given us a new way to keep a diary and keep our friends at home informed at the same time, the blog. A diary, even an online one, however, takes some discipline and is not for everyone. My preference is simply to carry around a little notebook in which I jot down interesting things I observe.

My second piece of advice is to explore everything you can. I remember telling Suji that whenever she saw something on a restaurant menu that she had never seen or tried before — say, haggis — then that was what she should order. And if you have any hobbies or activities that you pursue at home in the states, then try them abroad. If you do charity work, play soccer, or like dancing, then make sure to do these same things abroad. The differences (and similarities) with what you are used to will give you real insight into the foreign culture.

In these ways, you’ll learn abroad from the sites you visit or the classes you take, and from what you hear and experience. What you will remember is not the museums or churches you saw, but the people you met and talked with. Internships abroad will let you meet more and more interesting people who will be your best memories of that experience.

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