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Student Engagement Fund Program

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Five Weeks for an Entire Life

Throughout my academic career, I had never even considered studying abroad. It always seemed to me that going to another country to take classes would be an amazing experience, but it was just not something that I would ever get myself into. I am sure that a part of my reasoning was always some sort of fear, whether I was conscious of it or not. I had never been out of the country, but more importantly, I had never *fully* stepped out of my comfort zone. Never had I been put in a position where I was completely independent and self-reliant. Sure, I moved away for college. But NIU is still fairly close to my home and if something ever did happen, I would just be an hour drive away.

It wasn't until my first semester at Northern that I began to finally consider studying abroad. For some reason, whenever one of my professors or a faculty member brought the topic up, it really resonated and stuck with me. I began to think more about *why* I was minoring in Spanish.

The reason I decided to study Spanish at NIU was always because I felt passionate about helping ELL students. I know that there a number of students, especially in the high school I graduated from, who are taking all of their classes completely in English even though there are still in the process of learning the language. Math is hard enough on its own, but imagine learning it in your second language that you are not proficient in. I also worry that these students could feel isolated when being in a school where not many peers speak their language. If I was a

Spanish speaking student in Illinois, how many of my high school teachers would I feel comfortable going to just to talk or ask for help? That was when it occurred to me. If I want to help these students in my future career, I need to be able to at least somewhat understand the position they are in and the difficulties they face. All of a sudden, studying abroad in a country where I would be speaking my second language made all the sense in the world. This realization is what began my journey. I did not know where I was going to study, or how I was going to pay for it, but I knew this was something that I *had* to do.

After much research and planning, I ended up deciding on an NIU led program to Mendoza, Argentina. I had been accepted, and everything felt set. Then, a month later, I suddenly received an email notifying me of the program's cancellation due to a lack of students signing up. For me, that email was a gut punch. In the moment it felt like the rug had been pulled out from under me. I thought I wasn't going to be able to study abroad anymore. I really did consider just giving up and taking the cancellation as a sign that this wasn't meant for me. But thank God that I didn't.

I went and talked with the NIU study abroad office, and I found a CEA program to Buenos Aires, Argentina that seemed even more exciting to me than the previous one. I submitted my application, had my credits approved for transfer, and finally, everything was set into place once again. All that was left was to eagerly wait for the summer and for my study abroad program to begin.

The wait between my acceptance to the program and the day of my departure could not have felt shorter. Before I knew it, I was getting dropped off at the airport. It's funny, because along the way, it honestly felt like the cards were getting stacked against me. My flight got delayed five hours in Chicago, and I ended up missing my connecting flight to Argentina. I was

stranded in Houston for a day and stayed in the scariest and most disgusting motel I have ever seen. For being my first time traveling on my own, things definitely did not run smoothly. After spending a lot of time in airports and a lot of time speaking to customer service desks, I finally landed in Buenos Aires.

I thought I was ready to officially start enjoying my experience and begin soaking it all in. But on my first day of classes at the University of Belgrano, I arrived to find out I was put into the wrong Spanish class. I spent the afternoon after school waiting for the program director to arrive and get things figured out.

Looking back at all of these different roadblocks and problems along the way, it would be easy to have a bad taste in my mouth. But personally, I really do cherish these memories. In the moment, they definitely stressed me out more than I would have liked. But the process of figuring problems out on my own and getting myself to where I needed to be to this extent was an experience I never had before. I don't look back at these moments with spite. I remember them as opportunities where I was able to grow and learn.

Once everything was finally figured out, my month in Buenos Aires was nothing short of amazing. I have never had a full month of my life go by so quickly. There was always something to do. I made amazing friends in my program. There were beautiful places to see... delicious food to eat... interesting locals to talk to. I ate more meat, ice cream, and drank more lattes in that month than I think I have in my entire life. It wore me out, but I never wanted to go back to my homestay to rest. I spent every moment of my free time discovering and learning something new about the city I was in. There were countless moments where I would step back, take it all in, and just think to myself, "this is amazing."

As for my classes, I have never been pushed in a Spanish class like I was here. Five hours a day fully immersed in Spanish would be challenging enough, but we were also covering intricate and advanced grammar concepts. In the past, I had always gotten by in conversation with my Spanish not being perfect, but getting the point across. In this class, our professor expected us to speak as if Spanish was our first language. Every time we said or wrote something that sounded weird, if there was a tiny grammatical mistake, or if we used an incorrect tense, our professor would stop and correct us immediately. But this intense immersion really did pay off. By the end of the course, I found myself mentally correcting errors when speaking and avoiding bad grammatical habits in Spanish that I didn't even realize I always had spoken with. That wasn't to say it was easy. There were definitely low points along the way. Sometimes I would sit in class and just feel flat out stupid. There were nights when I would stare at a homework assignment and it felt like my brain had shut off. It was extremely difficult, but it was also completely worth it. My Spanish speaking ability grew exponentially during my time in Buenos Aires.

Growth. This is always a word that gets tossed around when people bring up studying abroad. The topic has already presented itself multiple times throughout this reflection. Someone would never be able to understand how impactful studying abroad is until they experience it firsthand. Every single part of this trip brought about growth. My Spanish ability grew. My self-independence grew. My confidence grew. My problem-solving skills grew. My people skills grew. My understanding of the world grew. My understanding of myself grew. I truly feel like a different person than the one who transferred to NIU last fall.

The high point of my trip was a three day getaway that my friends and I planned for our last full weekend in Argentina. We decided to travel to Iguazu Falls on our own little

“excursion.” My classes were wrapping up, and this felt like the definitive exclamation mark of my journey. Every aspect about it I loved; the moments of struggle, and the moments of discovery. There was researching together to purchase airline tickets in a foreign country... there was a complicated conversation in Spanish to figure out shuttle bus information... there was staying in a cheap hostile full of interesting travelers... and of course there was yet *another* flight delay. But the greatest moment was walking out from underneath a coverage of tropical trees to look up upon endless and enormous waterfalls stretching out across the horizon. Pure beauty. The type of beauty that can't be expressed with words.

My month long trip to Argentina is a collection of memories I will never forget. I took away everything that I had hoped to from these experiences and *so much more*. It's difficult for me to fully express the impact that this trip had on me as a person, but I cannot emphasize enough how much I have grown as a person. This trip was an absolute blessing. It was something that was merely a thought or a dream that ended up becoming a reality. And none of it would have been possible without the Student Engagement Fund. This trip was expensive and completely out of my academic budget. Aside from having personal fears and doubts, I simply wouldn't have been able to take this step of my life from a financial standpoint if it had not been for the SEF grant. I worked for every penny spent on this trip, and this grant made it possible for me to be able to afford it while also staying responsible when it comes to my savings towards the rest of my classes at NIU. Receiving this grant was the huge push that I needed to have this experience. It was reassurance. It was someone else saying “you can do this.” I can safely say that if I didn't receive it, my “study abroad trip” would have ended the moment the Mendoza trip was cancelled. I just want to express my complete gratitude for receiving the SEF grant. I do not say

this lightly when I say the SEF grant directly contributed to changing my life, towards me growing as a person, and towards helping me to achieve my future career goals.

