

Lessons from Studying Abroad

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You know you've all heard it before: studying abroad is a life changing experience. Everyone that has done it can't tell you this enough. And everyone that hasn't is tired of hearing it. But it's the truth. Spending a semester or year away from campus and outside of the Muhlenberg bubble teaches you so much more than you could learn in the classroom. My entire junior year was spent away from the College. In the fall, I studied at Royal Holloway University, just outside of London. My weekends were spent traveling from country to country or taking trips into London whenever I felt the urge. And I learned that the most difficult part of the study abroad experience is returning home.

Then I moved to Washington, DC where I learned the challenge that comes with working full time (and then some) in a high stress environment. I learned how to deal with the "reverse culture shock" so often experienced by students after returning to America. I learned how to navigate the city and become just as unfriendly and disengaged as the rest of the DC commuters. And, much to my surprise, I learned that politics was not the career for me. My junior year was over, and I had had a year full of learning experiences.

But what I learned most of all is that Muhlenberg should not be taken for granted. Returning to a small campus after a year spent in Europe and in Washington, DC was difficult, to say the least. I felt myself longing for weekend jaunts to European cities and the exciting life that comes with living in the District. But here I was, the fall of senior year of college, back in Allentown, Pennsylvania on a campus of 2,000 students, after the most exciting year I could have imagined.

Life had moved on at Muhlenberg without me, and it was difficult to get back into the swing of things. Instead of traveling to a different city every weekend, I found myself bombarded with homework. While Washington would have offered many weekend cultural and social activities, Allentown's entertainment options were somewhat lacking.

And yet there are things that the College offers that I missed during my study abroad experience. Unlike the U.K. school system's notorious bureaucratic disorganization, the College is organized, efficient and looking out for the best interests of the students. The polite -smiles and small acts of kindness so common on Muhlenberg's campus were rarely found on the streets of Washington, DC. Professors at the College are genuinely invested in the best interests of the students and willing to help in any way possible. After returning from my year off campus, I am realizing just how lucky I am to go to a small school and get this one on one attention I know I would not receive anywhere else.

My junior year abroad was an amazing experience. I traveled to England, Scotland, Ireland, France and Belgium in a period of three months. I helped to coordinate and then witnessed the arrival of Pope Benedict on the White House lawn. I made some of the best friends I've ever had and acquired memories I will never forget. But what I learned from my year abroad was that Muhlenberg lives up to its reputation as the "caring college". While there are still times when I think it would be fun to go to school at a bigger university, or live in an exciting city, my time off campus taught me that I made the right decision in choosing a school like Muhlenberg. And for my remaining three months here, I'm going to enjoy every minute of it.