

Study Abroad Reflective Essay

In the spring of 2024, I went on a life changing trip to Córdoba, Argentina as part of the Clemson University faculty-directed study abroad program. At first I wanted to fight the feeling of displacement and to get into the heart of Argentina's culture. I wanted to improve my Spanish, make friends, and understand the local healthcare system during my internship at a free healthcare clinic. I did not know that this experience would be much more than I had anticipated and would actually change my outlook on life.

The cultural experiences in Argentina were a huge surprise to me, given how I was raised in the United States. Argentine people are very direct and friendly, which is rather different from what I am used to. Even though I am of Hispanic descent from Mexico, I grew up in the United States and was not prepared for that level of candidness. For example, the practice of sharing mate,' a traditional herbal drink, showed how the culture is very oriented towards community, making everyone feel like family. Daily life in Córdoba was marked by late dinners—typically around 11 PM—reflecting the relaxed pace of life. It was normal to walk a lot since transportation was not reliable. This was rather inconvenient for me since they had a rather laid-back attitude towards punctuality, which made me rethink my perceptions of time and productivity. These cultural interactions opened my eyes, making me realize that people are very different and that one should make an effort to comprehend these differences in order to connect with them.

The learning process at a free universal healthcare clinic called a dispensario was one of the most enriching activities I undertook during the study abroad program. This is where I was able to see how healthcare workers strive to give their best even with limited resources. The

Argentine healthcare system for instance is universal but it has its share of problems due to the economic situation. It was possible to see that many doctors used pen and paper to document their patients since the internet and electricity were not reliable. This made me realize the differences in healthcare and more importantly, access to healthcare between Argentina and the United States. It widened my vision and inspired me to contribute my efforts as a physical therapist to help those who are in need. I also came back to the United States with the determination to fight for the right of all people to quality healthcare based on what I observed.

Among all the experiences that I had, the impact of technology on education was the most striking. In Córdoba we were told to limit the use of electronics because of safety reasons, which made me realize how lucky I am to be able to use technology that enhances learning. This experience also made me realize how appreciative I should be for the facilities that are readily available to me in the United States. Moreover, I had some problems with transportation and safety. My host family was quite busy during the day, which left me and my friends with no choice but to walk everywhere, which was rather pleasant and healthy. Safety was a concern that did not cease, especially when I had to walk alone at night. I had to do this by not wearing bright colors and being very alert of my surroundings. These challenges, along with many others that I faced, convinced me of the importance of being resilient and adaptable in society. Based on this, my perception of safety and personal responsibility was changed. In analyzing the study abroad experience, I have learned that it has changed my life and who I am in the most fundamental way.

During my time in Córdoba, I gained a better understanding of the inequalities in healthcare and other social factors that affect people's lives in different parts of the world. This realization has seared itself in my consciousness and has informed my decision to work in

underserved communities to make quality healthcare available to everyone. This experience in Córdoba has inspired me to adopt a more open-minded approach to life, encouraging me to appreciate the present, and to view challenges as opportunities for growth.

Looking forward, the experiences I have gained during my time in Argentina will help me in my future endeavors. I have gained cultural sensitivity, communication skills, and resilience that will benefit me in my personal and professional life. This experience has made me learn to keep an open mind, especially when it comes to privileges that I have and how I can use them to positively contribute to society.

In conclusion, my study abroad experience in Córdoba, Argentina has been a journey of identity, dedication, and knowledge. The major implications of this experience include cultural sensitivity, flexibility, and gratitude, which will remain with me throughout my career in healthcare. I am determined to make a difference in the lives of those less fortunate, ensuring that every individual has access to quality care, regardless of their circumstances. This journey has not only shaped my educational and career goals but has also deepened my commitment to social equity and cultural understanding in the world we live in.