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My Thoughts on Studying Abroad and How It Shaped Me

When I was a young man, I grew up in a small apartment in the city of Chicago. My family was not rich, so my fondest memories were when my mother used to share stories of how that there exists a world beyond our little rooms and floor and how she prayed that we can see what she could never see. When I went to high school in the city, I used to pass by posters of the foreign exchange program and dream wonderful thoughts about what it would feel like to travel to Europe. What would be my first thoughts as I stepped outside the plane that would carry me for many hours to a land that I only have read about and watched shows about? What would it would feel like to live out that dream that I've had silent prayers about? When I moved out from Chicago and near here, I finished up my high school years with a dream of being a federal agent for the F.B.I or the D.O.D. That dream only grew when I met a real F.B.I agent by the name of Harvey Pettry who helped reinforce that dream. His stories of travel and adventure made me realize that this is truly what I want out of life. I want to be amongst the few with stories from across the world to share with my loved ones to help that cycle of knowledge and experience grow. Global education and understanding. To be amongst the few and courageous agents, I would need to expand my horizons beyond my wildest dreams. Education is important, but experience is everything, so when I took that first step off the airplane at the Paris-Charles de Gaulle Airport, I stood and took in the scene. I listened to the beautiful French language rumor around the grand rooms, and I read all the signs in French from which I could not decipher

anything. I exited the tram that took me to Paris, and when I arrived above ground to stand in French Soil... I stopped breathing. Time froze for me. I closed my eyes and prayed silently, for I would not have been here for all the love and support my mother and others had given me. God bless everyone who had been part of this wonderous journey and who helped me reach this part. When I opened my eyes again, I realized.... This is just the beginning of my endeavors.

Now that I have returned from France, I can look back and say that my world has evolved dramatically. The mere exposure to another culture with its own language, customs, and rules shook the foundations that I had laid out as a student and a person. I was not a tourist who had heard of France from a travel brochure and decided to take my vacation time to visit the place; I was a student studying French Language and French Culture. I LIVED in FRANCE. I was observing the very essence of France in a very beautiful and powerful town by the name of Dijon. As a scholar who has dedicated his life to excellence and accomplishment, I found that France gave me lessons that no textbook or oral lecture could ever come close to touching. As a gentleman who has grown up with strict mannerisms, France made me re-evaluate the way I dressed, spoke, and behaved. As a person, France opened my concepts of life and how I handle my relationships with family, friends, and my significant other. While I admit that I was homesick time to time, my homesickness was nothing. I still went out every day to explore a new part of Dijon that I had not before. I went to restaurants and ordered what sounded intricate or different. I was not looking for cheeseburgers; I was looking for escargot and fine wine from Burgundy. I used what I learned from class to start reading bulletin boards or signs. I made friends with international students. We went out for drinks and to explore the beauties of the city. I once spent a whole day walking around Dijon, buying Shawarma from my favorite restaurant admiring the intricate and gorgeous layout of the city. While my grasp of the language was not

the best, I used my Spanish to pull through. France taught me to pay attention to details. It taught me to appreciate these finer details because they are what make things special. While I could have gone to eat at McDonalds in Dijon, I never ate something that I could have eaten back home. Search for difference and rather than attempt to change that difference, embrace it and allow it to give you something you would have never had in the first place. I learned that my mentors were all right: learning is something that will never leave us no matter what we do. On the days I felt ill or rather not as adventurous, I would take the tram to go grocery shopping in the French equivalent of Walmart, Carrefour. Even on my days that I would not consider as adventurous, I was still learning something. France taught me courage in strange ways. I shopped with the locals and attempted to speak French to them despite them smiling at me because they perhaps understood none of what I said, or they did understand me and appreciate the effort that I had put in. In the end, I was left to Google Translate and Spanish that sounded like French that surprisingly worked out okay. I summoned courage to go and talk to French people during French events to learn more about their thoughts of Dijon or simply to ask a question. France gave me a better look at myself as well. Every day, I would wake up and look myself in the mirror. I noticed I did not look the same. I had the same eyes, nose, lips, and face in general, but I was different. I believe that difference was in all how I perceived myself. I was not Justin Julian, American Student with a dream of being a federal agent. I was Justin Julian, an American turned French Student living out one of the few requirements needed to be a real federal agent. I was making a difference in my life, and that difference has stood with me even to this very day, and I suspect that this difference will stay with me forever. And that is something that comforts me. I never want to lose the lessons I have grown to love.

I believe the Study Abroad program is a core necessity of a well-developed scholar, for scholars need to be academically sound, but their grasp of the world as well should be solid. This is where the study abroad program comes in; the study abroad program promotes global education and allows a student to travel while still assuring them of security for themselves and allowing them entrance into a foreign institution where they may continue their academic endeavors. Whether your major be in Criminal Justice like my major is, or you are a graphic designer, or you are a communications major, studying abroad will do any one justice. The experience is enough to justify the cost, but I will admit the sticker price is more than enough to intimidate a student from even considering such a program. I believe more efforts should go into popularizing the many ways that a student can achieve scholarships or financial aid that can go into a study abroad program because that is how I managed to go to France. I fought for more information regarding how I can go study abroad and not worry about financial burden. I ended up extremely fortunate because I managed to obtain enough scholarships that I sought out on my own to pay off almost the entire trip. It is from my personal experiences studying abroad that I grew as a scholar, gentleman, and as a person. I believe whether a student decides to study for a month in France or a year in Germany, they will truly benefit. To what extent is up to the student because the student must be willing to open themselves up to experiences that seem unfamiliar to them. I cannot say that my experiences will be the same as the next person to take this program, but I can say that they will learn greatly even within their first weeks there. I have come across students within the ICISP program whose homesickness got the best of them, but towards the end they realized the significance of their journey. They realized... they were in another country, with a new language, with new people never seen before, with concepts truly strange to them. It is an opportunity to learn something that few can ever live out. The sudden urge to be sick kicks

in for some, but the pure adrenaline and excitement is truly addictive for the others. I am proud to say that I am the latter. France was the beginning of something beautiful for me. I realize that there is a world out there just as my mother once told me about. She told me to live and explore the world one day because you will find your answers out there about who you want to be and how you want to live. As I sit here typing this paper, I can't help but flashback to every single moment I had in France. The joys, the excitement, the determination all flood into my head. I can't help but smile. I am forever grateful for the experience, and I know for a fact that I will not stop at France. I will make it one of my life goals to explore the rest of the world.

People often ask me to describe France when I tell them I lived abroad for a bit. I simply look at them and smile while saying, "Words do me no justice, but I can tell you that it was life-changing". They often scowl at me claiming that I am not trying hard enough to describe France. What they fail to see is what flashes through my head when the word, "France", is brought up. How can I describe the feeling of seeing the Eiffel Tower light up in person, sitting on the park grounds, less than 10 feet away from touching the actual tower when I only could see it before on a tv screen or textbook? How can I describe the awe and fascination that took hold of me when I watched fireworks sprawl from Lac Kir (Lake Kir) on Bastille day that made me reconsider what Independence Day was to Americans? How can I describe the pure sadness and happiness that I felt looking back at the Paris Charles de Gaulle Airport because I am leaving behind an experience strong enough to shape my very being?... No words will ever do me justice to describe how powerful and life-changing my time in France was. The only real thing I can say to Studying Abroad and France is this: My mother always said to me that goodbyes are too permanent. It means I may never see you again. Say, "See you later". That means that this is not the last time you will see of me. I will be back. It will just a little bit of time. To the world, I say,

“This is not goodbye to France, studying abroad, friends, memories, or experiences for me... this is simply a see you later. And I promise you that it will be sooner than later.”