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# Cultural Immersion Experience in Buenos Aires, Argentina


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# Cultural Immersion Experience in Buenos Aires, Argentina

University of Dayton Cultural Immersion Course



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This past summer, the University of Dayton offered its first study abroad course for graduate students in the Department of Counselor Education and Human Services (EDC). Eight school psychology graduate students, three students from other EDC programs, and two faculty members spent two weeks in Buenos Aires, Argentina learning about their educational system and experiencing firsthand what it feels like to be immersed in another culture.

*Dr. Susan Davies, faculty member:*

Promoting multicultural and international learning is a key element of the University of Dayton's commitment to excellence and transformative education. The objectives of this study abroad initiative aligned with the School of Education and Allied Profession's four unit outcomes of *embracing diversity for social justice, engaging in critical reflection, building community, and developing scholarly practitioners*. Overall, it was expected that this type of course offering would help prepare our graduate students for participation in an increasingly global economy and society.

Graduate students in the University of Dayton's school psychology and counselor education programs traditionally take a multicultural counseling class as a required part of their curriculum. However, taking a class on cultural awareness only begins to scratch the surface when trying to truly understand other cultures. Many of our graduate students have only lived in

Ohio, attended and/or worked in schools with relatively homogenous populations and have limited travel experiences outside of the United States. I developed this program so our graduate students would not only read about different cultures and how to be more culturally competent service providers, but also experience what it feels like to be in the minority, struggle to communicate, try to understand a different educational system, and navigate in a foreign country.

This program was developed through collaboration with the Center for International Programs (CIP) at the University of Dayton. I traveled with the student group and was responsible for arranging the appropriate educational experiences and other excursions. A school counseling faculty member also traveled with our group and will lead the class next summer. The CIP took care of many of the logistics of coordinating the program and identifying the host site and our guide. Our students stayed in a hostel near the heart of Buenos Aires; faculty members stayed in a different hostel across the street. School visits, class and/or other excursions were held on a daily basis, with two "free" days for students to explore the city on their own.

By providing an immersion experience for our students, it was expected that their cultural awareness and sensitivity to diversity issues would increase, thereby ultimately benefitting the schools and students whom our graduates serve. The

program also impacted students in our host country. Our students went into the Argentine schools and engaged in direct experiences with the faculty and students in several schools and at one university. Our expectation is that in future offerings of the class, we will increasingly share with those schools some of the "best practices" in counseling and education that our students have learned. The long-range plan is that every other year the program will alternate between Latin/South American and Asian countries.

In addition to the two-week study abroad experience, the course included Dayton-based face-to-face meetings before and after the trip (to prepare and debrief) as well as an online component to ensure that all of the course objectives in the traditional version of the course were met. The Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI) was used as a tool for measuring students' capability to accurately understand and adapt behavior to cultural difference and commonality. This survey was administered to students before the cultural immersion experience and will be administered again to measure participants' development. Students taking the traditional multicultural counseling class also completed the measure so we can compare outcomes of students who took the traditional version of the course compared to students who completed the study abroad component.

I have invited one of the program participants, Autumn LaRiche, to share her perspectives with the TOSP readers. Autumn is a former OSPA scholarship recipient and is beginning her internship in Miamisburg City Schools.

*Autumn La Riche, student:*

After spending nearly two weeks in another country, I generated new ideas about cultural diversity and how foreign travelers feel upon arriving in an unfamiliar place. The goal of the trip was to under-

stand another culture, but I learned more about being a struggling person in a new country. As a group, we ventured to a new place with only a cursory knowledge of the culture and language. We came back understanding more about ourselves and how diversity plays a role in relationships.

While in Buenos Aires, we had the opportunity to meet several high school students. Most of us have maintained communication with them via social networking sites and e-mail. Our ongoing communication helps me remember specific experiences and how welcome I felt in Argentina.

One word that comes to mind when I think of my trip, is hospitality. One student's family welcomed us into their home and cooked for us. They showed us around the countryside, walking us to a place where horses are raised. They did all of this without expecting anything in return. Our guide and newfound friend, Perico, was also accommodating, ensuring that I (a vegetarian, which was very difficult in a big meat-eating country!) was able to eat without feeling awkward about asking. He organized a party for the University of Dayton students and his students after hearing that we had a great time together. When new people found out we were visiting from another country, they would exclaim "Welcome!" This was a great experience, as I have never seen individuals from the United States respond to travelers in such a welcoming manner. Every restaurant we went to had someone who could help us order as we struggled with the menu. In addition, people who were sitting at tables nearby us also offered to help.

Reflecting on these experiences, I have learned a great deal. I experienced an overwhelming feeling of not understanding what was going on around me. Although I do not have a disability, I think my experience is similar to how those with disabilities experience life on a daily basis. I tried

to understand what was going on around me, using all the resources I had, and still struggled to with communication and knowing what to do in certain situations. I felt as though I needed accommodations, such as a translator and extra time to understand and express myself! Similar to students with certain disabilities, I needed resources and time to understand the task in order to succeed. At times I felt overwhelmed, frustrated, and incompetent. I so appreciated the individuals who were helpful and patient and offered multiple ways of helping me communicate and get around! I will most definitely remember the generosity of the Argentine culture and take time to help others out when I can.

I will also be a better advocate for students who do not speak English. I was immersed in a culture that does not speak the same language as I do, and it was incredibly difficult. With this knowledge, I can empathize with what it is like to be thrown into a classroom and have people speaking to you in a language you do not know or understand. Using nonverbal communication was a big help during my two weeks in Buenos Aires, and I will remember this and use it when I am speaking with people from other countries. Smiling when appropriate and greeting others with respect (preferably in their native language) are some other things I will be keeping in mind as I am consulting in schools and working with others who are from other cultures than my own.

Another thing I learned is to appreciate my own world. I previously traveled to Uganda, Africa, and while I appreciated my home when I got back, I think I appreciate it even more so now. After traveling to Uganda, I found myself thinking that life in other prosperous countries is much different from life in a developing country, and that the United States is similar to other developed nations. However, although Buenos Aires is a large city, it

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seemed to lag behind in technology. I did not realize until I arrived in Argentina how much of an impact technology really has. In the United States, we have access to technology that exceeds the technology in many other places. Traveling to Argentina was an eye-opening experience for me regarding the way technology is viewed and used. For example, many of the students we interacted with had cell phones that lacked the features of our more basic phones, such as cameras and flip open features with full keyboards. The students were aware of these differences and seemed interested to hear how many of us had iPhones or Blackberry's. iPods, cameras, and computers are also a high commodity in Argentina and very expensive.

My own world, while not luxurious in comparison with others in the United States, consists of renting an apartment on my own, owning my own car, and having several technological devices including my own computer, two cameras, a cell phone, and a GPS. While I enjoy the freedom of independent living, I can see how much richer one's life can be when living collectively with family and the community, such as in Argentina. From a young age, many citizens of the United States dream of having their own room, followed by their own home shortly after graduating from high school or college. Many times, we move far away from our families to find jobs. The students in Argentina indicated that this would not be ideal for them, as they enjoy staying close to their family.

One incident that surprised me was a conversation I had with some of the students of Argentina. We were discussing the way culture has an impact on the society. One of the girls responded with "Many people here really idolize your culture." I was taken aback by this because I never

viewed the United States as having one specific culture. Instead, I thought of the culture of the United States as a mix of different cultures, with everyone independently observing what his or her ancestors celebrated. When I asked the student what she meant by the "culture of the United States," she explained it in terms of pop culture; our music, our dress, our dance, our media. While this was a revelation, it was also a bit embarrassing. The people who represent our "culture" are a small number of famous celebrities who impact what people wear, watch, listen to, and do. The students asked us if we celebrated our "Sweet 16" like the people on television (MTV has a show entitled "My Super Sweet 16" where teens throw lavish parties, spending millions of dollars on one night). In addition, many other questions focused on what we do and do not have, such as iPods and the iPhone. It appears that our "culture" is sending out this materialistic view of the United States.

My experience in Buenos Aires will certainly influence my work as a future school psychologist. Students who are first-generation citizens or immigrants will likely need support from school staff who can be sensitive to their needs. This trip has allowed me to develop that sensitivity for those who do not speak the native language or understand native traditions and customs. I learned not only from the students of Argentina, but also from others that I traveled with. While I found myself to be fully involved in the culture of hugging and kissing when greeting, others found it difficult and uncomfortable. This is important to consider because as a helping professional, you want to be genuine and comfortable with what you are doing. Greeting another person with a simple "Hello" in their language is one way to put them at ease, but also respecting other ways of responding, such as appropriate body language and proximity, makes a huge difference when someone is on the edge of feeling uncomfortable.

An important lesson I have learned from this cultural immersion experience, is how important it is to develop rapport before "getting down to business." Too many people from the United States are concerned with time and schedules. Without maintaining a planner or time schedule, we would be lost. However, I learned that relationships are a very important part of life. Taking the time to truly understand another person is essential to building trust and rapport.

When growing up, I never imagined myself to be the type of person to travel to other countries just to experience them first hand. My experiences before college were limited to the people in close proximity to my home. I have learned how to overcome culture shock and jet lag in order to immerse myself in another culture. Argentina has changed my view of immigrants and travelers. For example, like many people from the United States, I would often become frustrated with people who did not speak English. I am now more willing to try and help these people. In addition, I discovered how essential it is to know more than one language. It is unfortunate that the United States educational system does not value the development of other languages. Many of the students in Argentina are bilingual, and several of the adolescents we met speak other languages in addition to Spanish and English. With increasing globalization, citizens of the United States also need to be able to speak more than one language. I would also like to learn to speak another language fluently, most likely Spanish. After traveling to South America, I made plans to take Spanish courses and hope to travel again to a Spanish-speaking country. As a student and a future helping professional, traveling abroad was an excellent way to develop sensitivity to cultural differences and build a network of friends in other countries.



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The OSPA Multicultural/Diversity Committee is compiling an Ohio Directory of Bilingual School Psychologists. If you would like to be included in this directory, please email Committee Co-Chair Meghan Shelby at [Meghan.shelby@esc-cc.org](mailto:Meghan.shelby@esc-cc.org)

**Susan Davies, Ed.D., NCSP**, is an assistant professor and coordinator of the school psychology program at the University of Dayton. In addition to cultural immersion program development, her research and professional interests include increasing educator awareness of TBI incidence, studying the efficacy of specific interventions for TBI, and developing model service plans for students with traumatic brain injuries (TBI).

**Autumn La Riche, M.S.**, received her bachelor's degree from Walsh University in Psychology and Sociology and her master's degree from the University of Dayton. She is currently an intern school psychologist at Miamisburg City Schools. Last year, Autumn was the recipient of the Valorie Wolcott Mendelson OSPA Scholarship.