

PERSONAL STATEMENT (Fulbright to Brazil in Psychology)

I have danced with the Kung Bushmen in Namibia and have hugged a kangaroo in Australia; I have watched penguins peck at my boots in Antarctica and have shared tea with Tibetans. This is how many of us experience the world when we travel – a series of fleeting but memorable experiences that allow us to celebrate other cultures, but do not always promote a deeper understanding of those cultures. Growing up, I only had these “postcard” experiences, and not until college did I begin to pursue deeper, more immersive cultural experiences abroad that both reflected my academic interests and inspired my engagement in social issues.

My first real immersion experience occurred when I studied in Valparaíso, Chile, for five weeks in the summer after my sophomore year. My host mother, Patricia, spoke no English, my classes were taught all in Spanish, and I learned how to navigate a strange city, using my less-than-perfect Spanish skills. As my confidence increased, however, I started to pick up “chilenismos” – Chilean slang – and began having incredible conversations politics, psychology, religion, travel, and more with my host mother and her friends. In my classes, we discussed many aspects of Chile that I had learned about abstractly in my classes in the United States. It’s impossible to understand the ramifications of Pinochet’s reign of terror, for example, without talking to people who lived through it. And it’s one experience to read Pablo Neruda’s poetry, but another experience entirely to stand in La Sebastiana, feeling as though he is just in the next room.

Although my experience in Chile was primarily educational, last year I discovered what it feels like to fully engage with a community through service. Through the my school’s Center for Civic Engagement, I planned and led an Alternative Spring Break trip to Cartago, Costa Rica, where we served at a local elementary school. In the months leading up to the trip, I helped to organize meetings in which other students and I educated ourselves about important social issues in Costa Rica, especially education. When we arrived in Cartago, we were ready to work with the local community to create a positive learning environment for elementary school students studying English. Lesson plans and home-made flash cards in hand, we entered the classrooms at Llano Grande and felt an immediate connection with the children and the teachers with whom we were working.

While these experiences taught me a great deal about global service and cultural engagement in general, the month I spent studying neuroscience in Germany introduced me to the power of international collaboration in the scientific and academic community. We spent two weeks in Berlin at Charité University studying techniques in neuroscience and two weeks in Munich at the Ludwig-Maximilians University studying comparative and behavioral neuroscience. Though we were able to experience German cultural life by relaxing in beer gardens and hiking in the Alps, we spent most of our time with some of the top scientists in the field, learning about the neurophysiology of febrile seizures, examining slices of the gigantic cerebella of electric fishes, and looking through microscopes at the “art” of neuroscience – the Brainbow – where fluorescent proteins are used to stain individual neurons and trace their paths from neuron to neuron.

My proposed project in Brazil puts me in a position to pursue more intensively this type of international scientific collaboration. The Fulbright grant would give me the opportunity to make connections abroad that I might otherwise never make; to gain important insights about my research and others’ by approaching scientific problems from a different angle; and to enter into the world of global research and cross-cultural collaboration.