

Kristina Braunlich
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CWIL grant reflection essay

Rome: Once in a Lifetime Experience

One of the best choices I have made in my life was to study abroad. I just returned after studying abroad this last fall semester in Rome. I had an incredible experience that I know will impact my future. I feel the experience of studying abroad has helped me achieve important problem solving skills, has broadened my friendships, has defined more clearly my religious beliefs and helped me become independent and confident. I don't even know where to begin as I never imagined how incredible it would be.

Studying abroad in Rome brought so much more to my education than I ever thought would happen. First of all, living in a different culture with an extremely different language helped me achieve confidence and independence. There were many simple things to find out such as where the post office was and what you actually do once you get there, that took time but helped in growing independence. The grocery store was another obstacle that I had to figure out. Simple things, that I take for granted in the U.S., were difficult and took confidence to do overseas. By the end, I can truly say that I conquered a lot of obstacles and became more confident.

I absolutely loved the city of Rome! It was beautiful and the architecture was breathtaking. I was afraid that I wouldn't get the true "Italian scenery and streets" being in a big city. I was definitely wrong. Directly off of the main two streets, were the beautiful cobble-stoned small alleys that were often easy to get lost in. Also, I really enjoyed learning about and exploring all of the beautiful, huge churches in Rome. I could not believe how many there were. I learned that there were approximately 400 Catholic churches in Rome which means that you could go to church once every day of the year and still not experience all of them. They were all so different and richly decorated.

In addition to visiting many beautiful churches, I had other opportunities that broadened my religious knowledge. Rome is the center of Christianity, so there is no better place to experience and understand more of my religion. First I was able to go on the Scavi Tour, which is in the catacombs, underneath the altar in Saint Peter's basilica. The highlight of this tour was at the end when we were able to see Saint Peter's actual bones. They were in a clear container in the stone wall. After this moving experience, we

were also able to visit Pope John Paul's tomb. Another amazing experience was going over to a church that housed ancient steps that Jesus often walked on. I read that there are marks of Jesus' blood on the stairs, from when he was walking to be crucified. I decided to take the journey up the stairs on my knees, which was the only acceptable way to do it so they can be preserved. It was such a beautiful experience with marvelous paintings all around and people praying on every stair all the way up to the 25th. The third best religious experience I had was shaking the hand of Pope Benedict. I cannot even explain how joyful and pleasant the Pope is. We attended a mass for all of the college students in Rome. After the mass the Pope came in to say a special blessing over us. He took the time to go up the long aisle and look everyone in the eyes and shake the peoples' hands that were closest to him. I will never forget these experiences, which have all greatly impacted my religious beliefs and understandings.

One of the goals I had before I left was to travel and experience as much as possible. I believe I accomplished this goal. I did have the opportunity to travel and see 5 different countries and 5 major cities in Italy. I truly felt like my home was in Rome. I became so familiar and comfortable with all of my surroundings and realized how much there is to see and do in Rome. A few weekends I could have traveled to other countries but I opted to stay in Rome and explore this eternal city. This was one of the best choices and I can truly say that I know my way around most of Rome.

Traveling abroad was clearly an education one could not obtain in a classroom. The experience presented so many different situations and decisions to make. I will never forget when my friend and I traveled in Paris and we had to figure out the metro in French to find the way to our hotel. We did waste a good hour on a simple ten minute ride, ending up on the other side of the city. Ultimately we figured out the metro in another language, which was quite an accomplishment. Traveling taught me to be very flexible yet aware of the things around me. I learned to be flexible when I flew to Gerona, Spain and we ended up landing in France because it was too foggy to land in Spain. We had to make decisions about how we were going to get back to Spain then Barcelona. Then we realized we were out of minutes on our phone and that we had to somehow get a hold of the owner of the hostel to let us in around 4:30 am so we wouldn't have to sleep on the streets. To make all matters worse, we did not speak Spanish either. We did find

our way back through the foreign country and the hostel owner did let us stay in a room, but with some people we didn't know. These are just a few of the crazy experiences I had traveling. I learned so much from them though. Most importantly, I learned to be flexible, to try to communicate the best I could and not be afraid to ask questions. These qualities are extremely important in life.

I learned so much about myself and others while studying abroad. I truly learned to love the Italian daily customs, such as, spending time eating and enjoying my food. It was so much healthier and pleasant. I enjoyed walking everywhere, especially because the sun seemed to be out everyday! Also I really began enjoying going to church. We had our own chapel about 3 minutes away and the masses were so meaningful and directed toward us. I believe I became friends with almost all of the 50 girls on my program. Most of these are friends that I did not have before. Studying abroad was one of the best ways to meet people.

My semester in Rome went by so fast. I would have done anything to stay there for the whole year. The reason I couldn't was because of my major being nursing and we start clinicals this spring semester that I cannot miss. I often think about my relaxing, interesting and exciting days in Europe and I think that I would do anything I could to be back there and live one more of them. I am so blessed and thankful for being able to experience what I did. The Rome program is so well-organized and could not be any better at accommodating everything we could possibly need. My experience was very positive and will help my future in several ways. Thank you for helping to make this opportunity possible for me by providing the CWIL grant. It will have an everlasting positive effect and hopefully will help me make a difference in the world.