A Journey Towards International Interdependence and Cultural Immersion

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AJRL 499 Honors

Spring 2014

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Introduction

The area I grew up in Westchester was homogenous: white, Irish-Italian Republicans. My grammar school was just a few blocks from my house and my parents would drive me to school every day. Occasionally, my sister and I would walk the quarter mile alone to our mother's business, which was a leap of independence for us. As a child, I would sometimes sleep over my grandmother's house, the only time I was ever away from home. Every time without fail, I would get sick from eating as many Reese's candies and instead of staying there for the night, my mom would pick me up and bring me home in the middle of the night.

My dependence upon my parents and sheltered life continued throughout high school. Both my mother and my father had the luxury of flexible job schedules so they could attend every one of mine and my sister's sports games. We went to church every Sunday together and had dinner as a family every night. Summer vacations with the four of us were annual.

Going to college two and a half hours away from home at the University at Albany was a huge change for me. It was a culture shock. Not everyone looked exactly like me and they definitely did not share all the same views as me. In college, I learned what it was like to live on my own, without my parents guiding me through everything. I missed my mother's homemade cooking and the stability my life at home provided. But my time at UAlbany provided me with a sense of independence and an understanding of myself. After a while, I became comfortable with UAlbany and wanted to continue challenging my partiality for familiarity. I applied for a study abroad program in Florence, Italy and learned about myself while becoming aware of different cultures and
lifestyles. I hope to pursue a career as an international broadcast reporter.

The following is a mix of my personal journey of growth as I sought to learn more about the world outside my bubble and about cultural awareness and international interdependence as a whole.
My Own Journey

China, Australia, England, Denmark, Scotland, Switzerland, Germany, Ireland. I Googled a map of the world and wrote down the name of every country. UAlbany advertises a "world within reach." However, the study abroad office wasn't making that world easily attainable for me. I had no idea which country, nevermind the city, I wanted to study abroad in, so I wasn't helping the study abroad office help me. I considered throwing a dart at a map and going to the country the dart landed on. I subscribed my email address to every SUNY school to send me information about their programs and read.

Where could I see myself living for four months? Which universities would allow me to get credit for business courses? Will I still be a business major when I come back? Overwhelmed, I let almost every deadline evade me for spring 2013 programs. I was nervous to regret the same thing all my graduate friends do: not studying abroad. I scanned any open applications and found Stony Brook University's program through Florence University of the Arts. I couldn't wait any longer. This was my last chance. I wrote what I thought was a killer application essay and emailed it to Jen Green, coordinator of international education at SBU.

These dates are engrained in my head:

November 15: "Now or never" the application deadline
January 3: "Sign my life away" saying I would definitely go.
January 23: "The point of no return." My flight from JFK to Florence.
May 11: the day I would finally come home allegedly a new person.
I asked my best friend, Brittany, about her sister's study abroad experience in China. I asked my advisor if my credits would transfer. I asked my dad if I had filled out all the correct paperwork. I asked my roommate, Laura, with whom they would replace me. I asked my boyfriend if he would visit me. I asked my mom if she thought I was capable of being away from home for four months.

I spent my entire winter break stressed out. Thinking about living in a different country for four months consumed my thoughts. I dropped my Acer computer on my tile kitchen floor. My only form of communication, my laptop, shattered a few weeks before my trip. I didn't read an email thoroughly and had my parents buy me a ticket for the wrong date. A few emails from the study abroad coordinator, a few calls to the airport, and a couple of hundred dollars later, they changed my flight. My iPhone didn't have international capabilities. My dad switched cell phones with me but our softwares are still linked. I would text my friends and they received messages from Larry.

My dad bought me a new laptop. A red Acer, exactly the same color as my old one. I spent days stuffing everything I could fit into one black suitcase. For three weeks, I felt like I could throw up at any time. I thought my anxiety would suffocate me by January 23.

January 23 came and the car ride to the airport felt days long. I had nothing to say the whole way there. It was $20 to park. I wanted to shout, "Keep the $20, take me home." But I faced the whipping wind and walked to John F. Kennedy airport. My mom, sister, and dad sat in the food court. The Wifi was limited. I sent my last text message to my little sister in my sorority saying I'm sorry I couldn't be there for her this semester.
The drop of a pin could set me off. In the food court, my mom and I started fighting about something so trivial that I don't even remember what it was. I choked up. My emotions were on steroids. I wanted to freeze time but I had to go through security before it was too late.

When I reached the point of no return, I looked back at my parents in the distance. This was my first step of being alone. My eyes were clouded by tears. Even though I was wearing my glasses, my vision was blurred.

I boarded the massive airplane to France. I sat down, texted my dad "I love you daddy" and my mom "I'm so sorry," and I cried. I cried because my mom and I weren't getting along during the five minutes before I left. I cried because I was tired and hungry. I cried because four months is so long. I was scared of being alone without seeing my family or anyone I know.

I watched "Pitch Perfect" and finally laughed for the first time in days. Between laughing and crying for the duration of the eight hour flight, the poor French guy sitting next to me probably thought I was insane.

After hours of discomfort and falling in and out of sleep, I landed in Florence. Stony Brook University provided transportation to our apartments in Florence.

And that's when Florence became my new home.

Abroad, I met two of my best friends, Keara and Brooke, who lived in my building full of other American students. I visited Germany, Ireland, Switzerland, Greece, and England on weekend trips. When I felt homesick, my dad and grandmother flew to Florence to visit and we toured the Tuscan vineyards. I took courses about international reporting and travel writing. I followed the Italian presidential election and visited the
Vatican just days before the Pope resigned. I lived in Italy during a politically charged and eventful time and became aware of international interdependence. I understood what it felt like to be an outsider. I learned some Italian and was appreciative of the culture.

When I was in Italy, I kept a journal. My last journey entry read, "The biggest thing I learned is to embrace opportunities more quickly. I feel that I only started enjoying myself and feeling comfortable in Florence until the midway point. I look back and wish I would have made more of an effort in the beginning, because now, as my experience is about to end, I wish I had more time here."

May 11, a date engraved in my head, came. The countdown was over. On the cab ride to the Florentine airport, I cried. I didn't want to go home.

While four months ago, I was scared to leave America, now I'm scared to return, to leave what became my new comfort zone. My best friends will have graduated. My boyfriend and I broke up. My parents and sister are counting down the hours to see me and although I am excited to see them, I could have stayed a few more weeks abroad without being homesick.

I thought studying abroad would immerse me in Italian culture and language, that I would come back fluent and cultured. But it didn't. I learned so much from my experience but nothing that I thought I would. I learned to be appreciative. How lucky I am. How to break out of my comfort zone and push myself because no one else will. Maybe I will visit Florence in the future. But never will I have this experience again. Never will I live in Via Delle Terme 6 with 50 SUNY kids who treated the building like a fraternity house. I'll miss David and Anthony coming into the apartment screaming at the top of their lungs at 5 a.m. I'll miss knowing that Keara and Brooke are only ever a flight
of stairs away. I'll miss booking a trip to Germany and Switzerland on a whim.

I never thought I would cry over leaving. On my first day in Florence, I wrote in my Acer that I hoped time would fly by so I could be home already. I now look at the Florentine hills through clouded eyes and feel guilty for wishing the best four months of my life away.

I had unearthed the part of me that finally appreciated living in a different country, away from home and everything I knew. I wish I made more of an effort to speak Italian. I regretted not going to the top of the Duomo, to Piazza Michaelangelo, and seeing more of the city I lived in for four months. The city I grew to love. The city that forced me to grow up.
UAlbany’s International Side

“I Could Be the One,” by Avicii and Nicky Romero is pulsating throughout The Pub. The four on the floor beats drown out any sane thoughts.

Over the music, a dark skinned, slightly overweight man with a black beard says, “I would like to introduce you to my friend from Brazil. He thinks you’re cute.”

The friend stands a few inches away and stares with a grin on his face.

He has blonde spiky hair and a tall frame. In his furry, heavy coat, he looks out of place in the hot, sweaty bar. He has fair skin and light brown eyes.

“You can call me Feitico,” the blonde says.

“Do you like my new hair?” he asks in Brazilian accent, running his hand through his freshly cut mohawk.

He and his friends form a large circle near the bar.

“Want a shot?” his wingman, Renato, asks.

The bartender lines up four shots of clear liquid. The boys throw them back like water.

The wingman will tell you it’s Patron. Might be Fleishmann’s.

Each foreigner introduces himself with a shake of the hand or a kiss on the cheek.

“Hey, I’m Joe from Ireland,” booms a red-haired, freckle faced senior from UAlbany.

“I’m from Galway but decided to study a little bit more north in Dublin. It’s amazing.”

This Irish man lures in girls for the night with an impeccable accent with the help of his Brazilian counterparts.
“American girls are so nice,” he says as his eyes dart around the bar.

He’ll input his cell phone number in your phone with the name “That Irish Guy.”

But what these American girls don’t know is that liquid courage has this lad speaking blarney.

While Feitico flirts with any girl at The Pub who has a pulse, Hanghai Qiu types away on his computer at 148 Manning Boulevard, just a few blocks away. He is updating his resume to send to Pricewaterhousecoopers. If he finishes editing soon, he will study for his upcoming accounting exam next week. He is a graduate student in the accounting program at the University at Albany. Young people who go to bars are up to no good, or so his ancestors think.

Eighteen year old Klea Albrahimi has only been living in America for three years. She can take 15 shots before passing out. She’ll brag about how she’s from Albania which is why she can drink so much. She’s always the one to guilt trip her friends into going to parties every night of the week. In each frat house you bet the five foot foreigner will be funneling beer while harassing the boys to let her do another keg stand.

Increasing numbers of international students, like these few, have chosen to study in America in the past few years.

“An American education has a better reputation than many other countries,” Qiu says. Many students come here for research opportunities and advanced technology.

But the reputation of an American education might be better than the night life, according to Brazilian party boy Sibelius Seraphini, also known as Feitico.
At noon on a Friday, the sun cooks his skin. You might a Brazilian would be tan but Seraphini is as pale as a New Yorker in December. He is standing outside in his college town, mentally preparing himself for the biggest festival of the year. The annual festival attracts more than 20,000 people to the local bars and clubs. Wearing a bright yellow T-shirt, he shows his São Paolo University pride. The alternative games have just begun.

Game 1: Throw one another as far as you can into a soapy mess of foam. Whoever throws a person farthest will win.

As a freshman, Seraphini was the thrown. He didn’t win.

Now, as a junior, he will participate in the beer pong tournament and watch Game 2: Roll a blunt the quickest you can. Seraphini doesn’t know how to roll a blunt but he sure can smoke one.

“We don’t really care about soccer or volleyball,” he says.

These alternative games are a great way to learn about each city in Brazil, as cities alternate annually to host festivals.

The boys from his fraternity house named “Seven Isn’t Enough,” will all be participating, mainly trying to get the attention of the girls from The University of Campinas.

Halfway across the world in China, girls aren’t crossing Qiu’s mind. Not even on Valentine’s Day. On this lovers’ holiday, Qiu has received the news he got accepted into the University at Albany’s graduate accounting program.

“This is a kind of relationship” he gushes, referring to himself and the University at Albany.
He is one of the 74,516 Chinese international undergraduate students in the United States who have studied abroad this year, according to the nonprofit Institute Education in New York. In the fall of 2013, 78.73% of international students at the University at Albany came from Asia.

Qiu wants to study in America because he does not like the way they teach in China. In China, parents can pay for their children to excel. Chinese schools “just care about scores; they don’t care what kind of person you will be in your career.”

Albrahimi can relate to this corrupted form of education. Until she was 15 years old, she went to a school in Albania where parents were slipping $10 bills in exchange for higher grades for their children. She hates the Albanian school system. Her father spent 10 years alone in America trying to obtain immigration papers for his family. On Albrahimi’s 15th birthday, she received the much awaited news. She and her family could finally move to America to start a new life. She and her sister, Megi, could learn in an environment where education doesn’t have a price other than tuition.

Albrahimi initially had a hard time adjusting to life in America and was self-conscious of her accent. Now, as a freshman at the University at Albany, she is grateful that she can study in this country.

An American education is considered superior to other countries such as China and Australia, according to Jiao Zhou, an international student from China who has been studying at the University at Albany for the past three years.

Seraphini, to get the most out of his academic experience, put a lot of effort into his first homework assignments in America. He is used to excelling in Brazil. His
university’s slogan is, “With knowledge, you will conquer.” But in America, “I can have
like my grade be low, like a 2.0 but I think it’s going to be easy,” he says.

When he realized less effort was required to earn an A, he began to do the
minimal amount of work, he admits. When he has finished his homework for his own
classes, he works on a final project for graduation for a friend in Brazil who is paying
him to complete it.

“It is much easier to get an A in classes in America than it is in India,” says
Kamal Goswami, a second year undergraduate student at the University at Albany.
Goswami’s family moved to America five years ago to evade an overly competitive job
market in India.

The struggle to find a job India is much greater than it is in America.

Bharath Shivat, an Indian graduate student in the College of Nanoscale Science
and Engineering, explains the competition. The large population in India forces many
students to study hard sciences, finance, or economics to have a better chance of getting a
job. In America, there are more opportunities to study social sciences and humanities.

Shivat is one of the 160 international students who have studied at the University
at Albany from India this year. There has been a 20 percent increase in the past year in
the number of students from India studying at UAlbany.

The United States has a reputation as being one of the most prestigious countries
in which to study. Students from all over the world chose to study in America every year.
Many hire agents to help them through the application process. Exams such as the
TOEFL require a certain degree of fluency in English. You must apply for also apply for
a student visa.
Many countries, especially China and India, encourage students to study in America for the prestigious education this country offers, as well as the greater job opportunity.

"A student from virtually any country can find an opportunity to study in the US," says Allan Goodman, president and CEO of The Institute of International Education.

This year, 1481 international students have chosen to study at UAlbany, a 13 percent increase from last year.

According to the latest Open Doors Report, published yearly by the Institute of International Education (IIE), the number of international students at US colleges and universities rose to 819,644 students in the 2012-13 school year - an increase of more than 7 percent over the previous school year.

Although the number of international students at the University at Albany rose this year, the number of countries represented shrank slightly. A total of 1659 students from 98 countries enrolled in fall 2013, compared to 1445 students from 102 countries in fall 2012.

Recently, some countries have been creating initiatives for students to study abroad. Large government scholarship programs are sponsoring international education worldwide. Brazil has formed a program called “Science Without Borders.” There has been a 20 percent increase in the past year of students coming from Brazil mainly because of this program.

“Science Without Borders” includes an all-expenses paid trip to certain countries for a full year.
Such programs foster diversity globally. An experience abroad helps develop cultural awareness. Many universities are encouraging students to study abroad because an international perspective can create more marketable job candidates.

The number of international students studying in the US is expected to reach 1 million within the next one to three years, as a result of similar programs.

"The Brazilian government has established a national scholarship support service on an unprecedented scale," says Marina Donohoe of Enterprise Ireland.

"It is funding the tuition and living costs of 101,000 Brazilian students over the next four years," according to The Irish Times.

Seraphini is part of this initiative. He realizes, “I’m not spending money here but they are spending money on me so I have to improve myself.”

However, he feels that he is being paid to party. His classes are as easy as crushing that bottle of Crystal Palace on his bedroom dresser.

Every weekend, international students at the University at Albany get together and host a bash. The location of the party is posted on their Facebook page called “My Vagina Is…,” named after a drinking game. “LN 122,” Seraphini types the location for tonight.

Saturday evening, Seraphini wheels a black suitcase across the parking lot of Liberty Terrace, where he lives on campus. Inside the luggage is a small quarter keg of Heineken. He doesn’t understand why 21-year-olds can’t throw parties on campus but respectfully hides his cargo in the luggage anyway. He brings the keg into Liberty Terrace North Tower Room 122. His apartment is strangely clean for a college boy’s room.
He flips the chairs in the kitchen on top of the table to create more room to dance. He sets up a small beer pong table and lines it with red Solo cups. He throws on a shirt too tight for him and some jeans and waits for the international students to show up to his gathering.

International students from all over the world file into his apartment. Germans, Italians, Irish, and Russians. The united nations bond over a bright green funnel. For hours, Seraphini practices his talent of funneling 20 ounce cans of Natty Daddys.

A Residential Assistant pounds on his door. When Seraphini answers, the RA orders everyone to leave. He isn’t fazed. This is not the first time he has gotten in trouble for drinking on campus.

A few weeks ago, in the tower of Colonial Quadrangle, Seraphini was at a party with his friends drinking and smoking. University police officers came to the quad to break up another party. They heard the music of Seraphini’s party and knocked on the door, ordering them to leave. Seraphini was drunk and started arguing with cops. He doesn’t remember a word he said.

He lives to party, and he thinks, “If you don’t drink, if you don’t go out, you don’t deserve to be my friend.”

But he’s not stupid. He realizes, “I really don’t want to lose this opportunity by using drugs. I can use drugs in Brazil.”

“I go out. Four times a week. It’s really killing me sometimes. Sometimes I wish I stopped that but I can’t.”

“I always have a lot of girls with me…if you know me, you’ll realize why I’m called “The Spell,” referring to the Portuguese meaning of his nickname “Feitico”.

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Keane pretended to be from Ireland after watching Seraphini allure girls with his accent.

Seraphini says Keane “doesn’t understand that it’s not only my accent that gets me girls.”

“Voulez couchez avec moi, c’est soi?” is Seraphini’s pick up line.

Americans are “friendly with me. I don’t know if it’s because it’s me,” he says.

“I’m really enjoying it here. Sometimes I think I am one of the persons enjoying it the most here from the Brazilians because I’m always going out. I’m always saying yes.”

Recently, he traveled to Boston for the night and snuck into Harvard University frat parties, where he experienced the best American parties he’s ever been too. He’s visited Philadelphia and just bought a ticket to Las Vegas for Christmas time, where he will try his hand at the poker table and see Calvin Harris in concert.

He has been taking advantage of the full cultural experience in America through “travel without borders,” mocking the educational aspect of his program.

But he didn’t win this free ride to America for nothing. This party boy gives “nerds” a whole new meaning.

A computer science major, he codes and knows the ins and outs of programming. He creates his own mobile phone applications. He has had more than six scholarly papers published on varying topics: ranging from the energy consumption of appliances to how to create a mobile phone that automatically changes the interface to suit each individual user.
In his free time, he studies the art of persuasion. He scans through databases with articles containing graphs about the relationship between motivation, ability, and persuasion. With the correct balance, a person can be persuaded to do anything.

Seraphini disagrees that he is bright, but he is applying for an advanced master’s degree in computer science, a program from which he could graduate within a year. His master’s proposal is about creating a mobile phone application that can predict human moods. With this application, your iPhone could tell if you will be cranky the following morning so it will persuade you to be in a better mood by the morning.

Although he begins every week by taking shots of liquor out of a Dasani water bottle, he has a stellar academic record. He chose to study in America because it is the “most powerful country” in the world and is home to many computer based companies such as Facebook and Google. “Science Without Borders” has provided him the opportunity to expand his cultural awareness and learn more about technology in his field.

Similar programs are providing the unique opportunity to foster international study and understanding of other countries.

The University at Albany seeks to integrate these international students into American life through immersion programs such as International Buddies and the Friendship Program, according to Michelle Huang. Huang is a graduate student at the University at Albany from China who is in charge of international student programs.

To gain the most out of their experiences abroad, international students should “Try something new. Challenge yourself. That’s what I always do,” advises Seraphini.
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Home Away from Home

Four months. It may seem like the longest duration of time you have ever been away from home. You might be homesick. You might miss friends, family, and familiarity. But familiarity can be attained anywhere over time and Florence will become your home.

At first, you may compare the United States to Italy. Don’t. They are incomparable. Appreciate the differences between your old home and new home. Soon, the showers in your Italian apartment will no longer seem so small, traditional dinner will no longer seem so late, and the city won’t seem so unfamiliar. You will adjust to the lifestyle, in your own way and on your own time.

Placed in a different setting with new people and fresh opportunities, you will occasionally feel uncomfortable. The willingness to step out of your comfort zone and intentionally become an outsider is admirable. From studying abroad, you will learn a lot about yourself, about others, and about new cultures. You will return to America changed by this experience. Do not limit yourself. Always be open-minded.

Purchase an Italian translator as soon as you arrive and attempt to learn as much Italian as you can while you are here. You will be proud of yourself when you can understand a few phrases of conversation while passing locals talking in the street.

Explore your interests. Florence is a spectacular city dotted with museums that display historic sculptures, paintings, and art. Enjoy a wine tasting tour through the Chianti region, go to an opera at St. Mark’s Church, or attend a Fiorentina football game.
Plan day trips within Italy or weekend trips to other European countries. Your time abroad will be unforgettable. The pictures you take, memories you create, and friends you make on these trips will help you fondly remember these months. Eventually you will be returning “home” from a weekend trip and be relieved to be back in Florence. In time, (maybe to your parents’ dismay) you will refer to Florence as your new “home.”

The United States will be always be there for you to return to. While in Florence, embrace the lifestyle. I guarantee by the end of your time abroad, you are going to wish that you had more time. Welcome to your new home.
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