



APROPOS OF

WELCOME TO INTERNATIONAL EDUCATOR'S FORUM, "Apropos of..." where readers have the opportunity to continue the dialogue of a given forum topic by submitting their own essays. Each essay will be considered but not all submissions will be published. In this issue, Nicole Vadino follows up to Wayne Parrott's article, "Classroom in the Clouds: Connecting People and Biology," which appeared in this column in the March/April 2005 issue of *IE*. Vadino offers additional perspectives on the benefits of experiential education combined with study abroad. In her experience, sociology and social science students can benefit greatly from their own group's diversity, especially when a foreign setting allows them to see themselves and each other in a different light. To contribute to the forum, contact *IE*'s managing editor, Eric Kronenwetter, by e-mail (erick@nafsa.org) or telephone (202.737.3699, ext. 237). Readers may also access all of the "Apropos of..." articles on the Web at www.nafsa.org/IE.

Apropos of..

Looking Outside the Box for Global Citizenship

By Nicole Vadino

STUDYING ABROAD ALLOWS students to experience education in a universal classroom. Around each and every corner, there is something to learn and something to be discovered. Sociology and social science study not only integrates theoretical perspectives putting theory into practice, but it allows students to understand their changes in self-perception they underwent while abroad.

For my students, who participated in a five-week study abroad program in Costa Rica, it all started when they assembled for a pre-departure orientation. During this orientation, the students' minds raced anticipating the journey ahead of them. The class was incredibly diverse in age, race, religion, gender, and socio-economic characteristics and each individual's predetermined

stereotypes were prevalent. Members of the class ranged in age from 17 to 72 and came from Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, and Buddhist backgrounds. Their life experiences and personal histories were as different as their skin tones...but it didn't matter.

Understanding each other's similarities and differences is one thing, but learning from each other's past experiences brings learning to an elevated level.



The students lived four weeks in Costa Rica with host families in Alajuela and one week at the Ecolodge in San Luis. During their stay in Alajuela, they enrolled in four hours of Spanish class daily at a Spanish language school and two and a half hours of sociology or social science class. Eight members of the group opted for a research option funded by a mini-grant for student research while we were in Costa Rica and the subsequent presentations at academic conferences.

Thrust into a completely different culture and forced to speak a different language and eat different foods, the students experienced first-hand culture shock. So why stop there—during the first week of class the students completed a number of mandatory class-related assignments. How better to understand the society you are in than doing ethnographic research? Their first assignment was to spend 30 minutes daily observing people in public places as well as their host family. They drafted four different journals, each discussing distinct areas of the society. Then came the field trips—not normal field trips, but excursions to cemeteries, senior centers, grocery stores, stadiums, and buses to small local towns and major cities. Each weekend we ventured to a different destination.

During the week, students interacted with their classmates only while in class and spent a majority of the time with their host families. During weekends, however, the students became one large family. Being a member of this family, students took on distinct roles and experienced good and bad times. In the beginning, the students tended to pair-off with others based on somewhat superficial characteristics, such as race, age, or gender. After the first weekend, barriers began breaking and students viewed each other as individuals. One amusing conversation took place midway through the study abroad experience, when one of the younger white students laughed at recalling a memory of when he was fretting at the fact that he would be spending five weeks with “old people,” when in actuality, he ended up having more in common with the older stu-

dents and had become closer with them.

Understanding each other’s similarities and differences is one thing, but learning from each other’s past experiences brings learning to an elevated level. One beautiful night while in Monteverde our group began a discussion on discrimination. Some of the students discussed how they felt the pressure of being an outsider in Costa Rica. This led to an in-depth discussion of race, class, and gender in the United States and abroad. The older African-Americans captivated the younger students with stories of their childhood—stories of racism and blocked opportunities. In turn, the younger students spoke of the many hardships and fears, especially those related to job searches, violence, and drug use. This discussion spiraled into something amazing—open communication and honesty for all. Before I knew it, students were asking each other about everything under the sun.

This focused experiential education

provided the students with the background of sociology and social science and incorporated subjects such as race, class, and gender. Moreover, it instigated students to take a critical view of the world they live in. Students who were viewed as minorities in the United States were easily able to mesh into the small-town society whereas others who never experienced minority status were faced with it daily.

Living in host families, the students were able to experience life as a Costa Rican. This is not to say that each of them had the same living arrangements. Some of the host families were rich, whereas others were poor. Some were traditional with extended families and some just a host mother. The host families were a vital source for the students’ experiencing and understanding the society. Class members read about the society and people prior to arrival and compared their experiences to their research findings. Each week the students spoke of their individual

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experiences, which turned into a period of discovery for the entire group. Rather than criticize the culture they now were in, there was substantial time spent debunking. First-hand research was the key. The students worked on formulating research questions and were assigned weekly topics connected to the textbook. Even though in the beginning the students were overwhelmed by their experiences, having the journals and discussing all these issues in a sociological context, they were able to put theory into practice.

The week at the Ecolodge allowed students to spend more time together and decompress from the entire study abroad experience. Time with nature provided the perfect backdrop. During their time at the Ecolodge, the students learned about ecotourism, women's rights from an activist, the Monteverde economy from trips to banana plantations and coffee crops, and how women in San Luis Valley were able to gain independence by selling their crafts.

After the time spent at the Ecolodge, the research team decided that they wanted to focus on minorities in Costa Rica. This entailed indigenous people, women, elderly, and black Costa Ricans. Armed with knowledge of research techniques, we set out to visit one of the indigenous tribes of Bri-Bri and spoke with the indigenous people. A four-hour trip by taxi, bus, boats, another bus, and finally a hike by foot, and we arrived at the foothill of the reservation. All the book

research did not prepare the students for what they were about to see and hear. Sitting in the dark ceremonial hut with a small bone dangling from a string, the students questioned the chief on marital issues, relations with the government, interracial relationships with the members of the tribe, and other pertinent issues. As they continued to ask follow-up questions and frantically scribbled the answers, the students became aware of their abilities as researchers. The four-hour trip home was spent in quiet reflection.

As the program was coming to an end, the students, who were strangers just a few weeks before, sang, laughed, and danced the night away, no longer looking at each others' skin tone, age, religion, or background but understanding each other as individuals. Their journey was a long one, which had all the elements of a great movie—love, tragedy, conflict, smiles, and growth. The connections they made, the lessons they learned, and the experiences they had will last a lifetime. They were taught to look outside the box and that after doing so there is no turning back. As one student stated so profoundly, "we have become global citizens!" **IE**

NICOLE VADINO is a full-time instructor of sociology at Community College of Philadelphia and was the faculty member for the college's Summer Study Abroad Program in Costa Rica in 2004.

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