

SMEAL International Programs Newsletter

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Ben Simasek studied in Puebla, Mexico which led him to his position as a Community Economic Development Adviser in the Peace Corps, stationed in the Dominican Republic.



My time at Penn State was without a doubt the best four years of my life, so far. Of course, as any blue and white-blooded college student can attest, Happy Valley offers seemingly endless opportunities for fun and festivity as well as learning, growth and self-discovery. Looking back, I now consider my study abroad experience in Puebla, Mexico to be a major turning point of my life.

When I decided to study abroad, I knew it would be a major step outside of my comfort zone. I knew I would have to adapt and adjust to a new culture in several ways while remaining true to myself. Despite being further from home than I had ever been, I knew I would have to reach out and make new friends and connections to fully immerse myself in the experience. It was the kind of challenge I welcomed. I could only begin to fathom exactly how much the cross-cultural experience would help open my eyes to the world around me.

I started studying Spanish at the beginning of high school, recognizing it as a way to cross linguistic, social, and cultural barriers with my community's sizable Hispanic population. In college, I realized that language abilities can be a great asset in today's international job market and I started to envision a career in international business. I learned that by studying with the Puebla summer program, I could fulfill most of the requirements for minors in both Spanish and International Business. It was too perfect an opportunity to pass up.

Although the summer program lasted only a month and a half, it would turn out to be the most eventful, enriching and exciting six weeks of my life. I took classes in Mexican culture and history, art, and linguistics at La Universidad Iberoamericana. Each class was interesting and invaluable. In art class, every student was surprised to find their unknown ability to observe and draw. Linguistics was one of the most exceptional classes I took in college. We learned to transcribe the unique spoken language of the Mixtec tribe to Spanish by using phonetic symbols. The class was led by two Mixtec people and our professor, who had studied and lived with the tribe for years. In culture class, we discovered that Mexico is a rich and colorful mosaic where a fascinating past is interwoven with the

modern world. Classes were only four days a week, so on weekends our group traveled all over southern Mexico, from ancient Mayan and Aztec ruins to vibrant, sprawling cities in the central mountains to tropical beaches and jungles. Our travels were all part of the experiential learning design of the program. We also had a couple of free weekends to spend traveling wherever we wanted or just exploring Puebla, a huge and energetic city in itself.



To really learn to live like a Poblano, I knew it was important to meet and socialize with Mexicans my age. After our first day of class, I stayed at the campus with a few other Penn State students to play some basketball. We met a local named Hector and his cousin Alessandro and invited them to join our game. Little did we know that we had just met a minor celebrity of Puebla. Hector, also known by his TV personality Chacho, hosted a weekly program geared towards young adults. We loved his sense of humor and his fun-loving personality. With Hector and our growing group of Mexican friends in the neighborhood we watched soccer games, frequented the nightclubs (where Chacho offered his expert advice on picking up chicas Mexicanas), and were even treated to a VIP table at a trendy salsa club where he was emceeing a dance party for several hundred people. While it was great making friends and finding a thriving social scene in our city, from the beginning I learned of the importance of family in Mexican culture.

When I got home after the basketball game, I discovered that my host family was disappointed that I had missed "la comida". Comida, served around 2 or 3 in the afternoon is the most important part of the day for Mexican families. It is much more than a meal; it is a social event. Several courses are served and the family and friends linger long after the food is finished to play cards, smoke, and talk. I soon realized how fortunate I was to have the best host family and best food of anyone in the program.

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**International Study
Scholarship**
<http://ugstudents.smeal.psu.edu/academics-advising/scholarships-and-awards>



Dinner with my Mexican mother, Carmela and her sister, Gloria.

“Being part of a great family was a very important part of my experience living abroad. If I had lived in a dorm with only other Americans, I doubt I would have enjoyed the same full cultural and social immersion.”

A family birthday party for my hermanita Mariana (center).



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My Mexican mother was a sweet widow named Carmela. I lived with three generations of her family in a lively and beautiful house located in a nice part of the city. Our house was something like the social hub of the neighborhood. Neighbors, family and friends would often come over for meals and spend the afternoon. Carmela, who had her own small catering business, was well known around town for her delicious cooking. The family was of Lebanese descent, so many of the traditional Mexican dishes were mixed with Middle Eastern type cuisine. The women of the family made sure that I ate until I couldn't physically handle another bite. Needless to say, I was sure never to miss comida again.

I quickly earned my family's acceptance and amusement by trying anything that was put in front of me. The women got a kick out of watching me suffer after chomping into a small green pepper that turned out to be extremely spicy. At the kitchen table, I socialized with the adults and played games with the kids. By acting like an older brother to the three young sisters (ages 11, 8, and 5), I felt like I became a part of the family. I made them laugh, helped with their homework and ran errands with them. I even went to see Shrek III (in Spanish) with the little girls. Being part of a great family was a very important part of my experience living abroad. If I had lived in a dorm with only other Americans, I doubt I would have enjoyed the same full cultural and social immersion.

Another unique and extremely valuable part of my study abroad program was the service component. Each student had the chance to volunteer at schools or community centers in the area a couple days a week. My service project was at

Capulli de los Niños, a small family-owned farm in the impoverished outskirts of the city. After class, a fellow Penn State girl and I embarked on the adventure of finding a rickety public bus to take us on a long and bumpy ride to the farm school. After taking the wrong bus at first and getting lost in the city for what would be the first (but certainly not the only) time, I managed to find the farm. The surrounding neighborhood

had a humble sort of charm, characterized by cinder block buildings, cactus patches, small storefronts, and old churches. The farm was on a plot of land slightly more than an acre, with a house, cow pen, yard, and two room schoolhouse bordered by a stucco wall with a large colorful mural. It was a busy little place, with several cows, chickens, dogs, cats, goats, and children all bustling in the yard.

When we arrived at the farm, we met the owners and the farmhands and immediately got to work shoveling alfalfa for the cows. After an hour

or so of work, we found ourselves standing in front of a classroom full of eager and energetic youngsters with no instruction other than to teach them English. The first day proved to be a challenging adventure, but we eventually settled into the routine of finding our bus, helping out with manual labor on the farm, and coming up with lesson ideas for our English class. Although I'm not sure how much the kids' English improved after only six weeks of informal lessons, I feel that everyone benefited from the exchange, especially me. It was such a unique opportunity for people from very different walks of life to learn from each other.

After returning to the U.S., I was able to reflect on the experience and think about its lasting impression. Mexico had become a part of me. The wonderful people I met, the spectacular things I saw, and all that I learned and did that summer had an incredible impact on me. I realized that humans pretty much everywhere in the world are surprisingly similar in their core values and desires. Although we speak different languages and live in different places, we are all locals of the same planet. Along with countless others, I share a vision of an interconnected world where people not only coexist peacefully, but help each other thrive. I believe that to change the world for the better, we should allow ourselves the chance to see how the world can change us as individuals. Penn State's study abroad programs provide a valuable opportunity to experience the world while making academic progress in an exciting new environment.

I graduated from PSU in the spring of 2009 and will start my training for the Peace Corps in the Dominican Republic in a few days. Right now, I am experiencing a wide range of emotions when I think about my impending two years of service, but I feel mostly excitement. I will definitely miss my family, friends, and life in Happy Valley but I am ready to take another step outside of my comfort zone and towards my career and life goals. I feel very fortunate to have had such great opportunities for education and growth. I hope to apply what I have learned to help people in my role as a Community Economic Development Adviser. Even though my college years are now in my rearview mirror, I realize that I will never stop learning and growing. I enjoyed my time at Penn State to the fullest, but I feel that the best years are still to come.

