

SMEAL International Programs Newsletter

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I put on my biggest sunglasses, tightest jeans and a pair of high-heeled boots. I wrapped my scarf just as I'd seen the Italians do and left my apartment. I was ready to blend in with the Italians on the cobblestone streets of Siena. After all, that's what I've been taught to do: fit in. And beyond that, I wanted to combat the stereotypes that many Europeans hold against Americans by showing them that I could blend into their culture. Yet, my tactics of dressing up for every occasion, drinking



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espresso while standing at the counter and looking at others for longer than Americans would typically deem polite would only work until I opened my mouth. Then my gig was up and I was as American as could be. Despite my endeavors to learn Italian for three semesters prior to departure and my observance of Italian fashion and cultural customs, my study abroad experience quickly showed me that I cannot pretend to be something I'm not. Instead, I learned that I could be my authentic self by immersing myself in this new culture and doing all I could to live the Italian way of life.

I've always been one for alternative forms of learning. It's not that the traditional system didn't work for me, but why stop there when the world is so vast? After

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spending a portion of my gap year between high school and college in New Zealand, I came back knowing that I would study abroad in college. I didn't know where or when or what my major was going to be, but I knew that my educational experience would be enhanced by study abroad. What I did not realize was that my study abroad would be much more about studying life than it would be about studying curriculum. I went over to Siena, Italy as a marketing student and came back a better global citizen.

In Siena, Monday through Thursday I sat through several two-hour lectures given in both English and Italian. My course subjects ranged from politics and economics to language and art. The classes were interesting and served as an important foundation for the deeper learning I did outside the classroom.

My politics class titled *Regionalism and Nationalism in Italy* gave me insight into current events that continually surrounded me and appeared in the daily papers. For example, there was a national controversy over celebrating 150 years of unity in Italy while I was there. It would not have made sense to me had I not learned, in my class, about the historical and political struggles that caused many Italians in the North and South to want independence from one another. It allowed me to understand why women were protesting in our town piazza and why the Prime Minister of Italy was still in office after countless scandals and much dissent from citizens.



A protest on the streets of Florence. The banner reads "Remember the resistance of yesterday, fight the fascism of today."

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My Italian language class not only helped me to communicate in local shops, ask for directions and read signage (when it existed), but I was able to better chat with my Italian roommate, understand colloquialisms, and communicate with my internship boss, a local photojournalist who spoke mostly Italian dialect.



Briene (second from left) with other study abroad students in Siena.

In my economics course titled the *Economic Integration of Europe*, I better understood the ten year struggle that Italians, and other citizens of the EU, underwent to convert to a single form of currency: physically, mentally and emotionally. I could then comprehend why there was such tension between countries, yet simultaneously a need for cooperation.

My art history course helped me to understand the presence of the past in every inch of the medieval city I inhabited for four months. Without those lessons, I wouldn’t have understood why the recurring statues of a Roman shewolf were also a symbol for Siena, an image from the ancient myth of Romulus and Remus. I would not have noticed the palaces of medieval aristocracy that were camouflaged by the maze of four-story city walls. I would not have been privy to the fact that Siena is so beautifully intact because of its hospital that acted as a protective marker on the map against aerial attacks

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during the world wars. Understanding the history of the city I temporarily resided in enhanced my understanding of the culture dramatically.

Instead of living in a classroom, I was learning in the city. For me, the experience was about being immersed in a culture that was not my own. I walked down streets where I was a minority, a foreigner. I did my best to blend in at first, but what I found is that I couldn’t blend in, and that was okay. I was an observer to a beautiful dance of culture and life that you can’t experience in a two-week vacation. I saw the dynamic flows of culture, culinary creations and Italian hospitality while also witnessing the ebbs of tangled government, difficult immigration crises and intense criticism. I learned that yelling doesn’t mean you’re angry, it merely means your point is extremely important! I learned the Italian language is nearly meaningless without the accompanying hand gestures. And in turn, I was able to share my culture with the Italians I encountered and enhance our global community.

At the end of the day, being abroad for a semester gave me an affection for the colorful Italian culture, an appreciation for speaking a foreign language and a better understanding of cultural differences. It also gave me a deepened sense of gratitude for the American culture I have been brought up in, the education I am receiving and the freedom I have to explore wherever the next step of my journey takes me.



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