

From Puerto Rico to Spain and Singapore: My Experience Studying Abroad

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When I first arrived at Madrid's Barajas airport in February 2012, I had no idea what to expect. I had never been away from home for this long, and certainly not this far away from home. I was scared. However, I was also excited. As a kid, I always dreamed of traveling. Growing up in a low-income community in Puerto Rico, I never thought this dream would come true. But it did! Thanks to a scholarship from the Benjamin A. Gilman International Scholarship program, I was now about 4,000 miles from home.

Once in Spain, I committed to stepping out of my comfort zone as much as possible. First, I made an effort to engage with students outside of the group from the University of Puerto Rico. As an introvert, talking to strangers has never been my strength. However, by intentionally "forcing" myself to engage with those outside of my group of friends, I ended up learning and engaging with incredible people from completely different backgrounds. Second, I decided to use it as an opportunity to explore other areas of interest I had not been able to explore at that point. In Spain, I chose to take classes exclusively in the Education and Psychology departments. This not only exposed me to topics and concepts I had not yet explored but exposed me to a group of people with experiences and interest different from those of my classmates back in engineering school.

These commitments allowed me to make the most out of my experience in Spain. In fact, I had such an amazing experience abroad that I recently applied (and got accepted) to spend a semester abroad at the National University of Singapore next spring (in 2020). During my time in Singapore, I expect to learn more about Singaporean culture, as well as gain a better understanding of how business is conducted there, given their rapid growth and expansion as an economy.

You can probably tell I'm completely bought into the idea of studying abroad. Here are a few (more practical) reasons for why I think you should be bought in as well:

- **It gives you the opportunity to travel.** During my time abroad, I had the opportunity to visit nine different countries (mostly in Western Europe). Visiting all of these countries exposed me to different languages, cultures, and views of our history, which undoubtedly changed my view of the world.
- **It expands your network.** My time abroad introduced me to incredible people, some of whom I'm still in contact with to this date. The opportunity to interact with, and learn from, people from different backgrounds has proven exceptionally helpful in my professional career.
- **It provides you with international experience.** As companies become more global, the need for professionals with experience abroad has increased as well. Multinational companies are looking for employees who are able to navigate their way through multicultural teams and effectively engage with people from diverse backgrounds.

- **It takes you out of your comfort zone.** Being so far away from home taught me to be more independent. No longer being able to rely on my support group (i.e. my friends and family), my experience in Spain led to tremendous personal growth.
- **It is an incredible learning opportunity.** While in Spain, I learned from incredible professors and tried to absorb as much knowledge as possible from my classmates. Given everyone's diverse backgrounds, our classrooms discussions were dynamic and incredibly interesting.

If you're student, and are considering studying abroad, I'd say go for it! It's an experience you'll never forget! I would recommend you start by reaching out to your Student Affairs/Student Life office to ask what schools they have partnerships with. As you think about where to go, here are a few questions to consider:

- Is there a particular region in the world I'm drawn to?
- Are there schools that align more closely with my academic/professional interests?
- What are the requirements (e.g. language skills, year of study, etc.) for each program?
- What are the costs for each program? Are there scholarships available?
- What is the timeline? When you I start the application process?
- What are you looking to learn from this experience? How does that play into what region/program you should apply to?

If you have any questions about my experience abroad, or if you need help thinking through whether studying abroad is a good fit for you, feel free to reach via email at giovanni.cruz@yale.edu.