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Semester Around the World

CWIL Reflection Paper

The Semester Around the World Program was an eye opening experience. I embarked on the trip knowing that the semester would be like no other semester in my college career. I have gained more worldly knowledge in four months than I have learned in years of sitting in a classroom learning from books. When I reflect on the months spent traveling around the world, many things stand out. Cultural differences are the most prevalent thing that grabs my attention when visiting other countries. Religion, political system, and family life are other differences that were standard.

The first country on our itinerary was Japan. I felt very comfortable in Japan because of its modernization. Tokyo reminded me of any big city in the United States. The only difference was that all of the signs were in Japanese and I could not understand anyone. Japan is a very rich country. This wealth has brought many Western goods to the country in search of profits. The main cultural difference I found in Japan was the friendliness of the people and the feeling of security. In many large cities throughout the world people appear cold and distant. Japan was the opposite, people were very friendly and willing to help us. Large cities are usually unsafe, filled with crime. Tokyo seemed like a very safe place. I did not worry about being robbed or worse.

The second stop on our itinerary was China. China and the United States have such a rocky history that I felt awkward when we first arrived. I did not know what to expect. I never learned much about the history of China but I have always been told that it is a communist country. This was apparent since the communist flag was everywhere. It made me

uncomfortable at first because I have always been told about the horrors of communism. As the days in China passed, I realized that the people are the same whether they support a communist government or a democratic government.

China was the first place that we saw real poverty. The amount of hawkers and beggars astonished me. The government does not seem to be helping the people to further their well-being. Even though China has a law on the amount of children a family can have, overpopulation still exists especially among the poor citizens. It seems like there are too many people for the government to help.

One huge cultural difference surfaced when we visited Tiananmen Square. All of us had seen many pictures of the square in history books and had read about the massacre in the famous square. We all looked at Mao as a horrible dictator. Our tour guide told us that the people in China revere Mao because they believe that if it were not for him China would not be where it is today. Everything I have heard about him has been bad for the Chinese people. I now realize that what I have learned has been fed into my brain by the United States educational system that teaches that communism is wrong, no questions asked. I did not gain any of my knowledge from outside sources. This opened my eyes because it affirms my belief that everyone needs to make conclusions for themselves before believing what others tell you.

Tibet was the third country on our itinerary. It was the first place that I felt complete culture shock. I felt disconnected from the rest of the world, which made me enjoy it more than I ever expected. Even the flight into Lhasa made me feel like we were going to a place like no other I would see again. Flying over the snow-capped Himalayas made my heart skip a beat. There was barely any Westernization in Lhasa compared to the other places we traveled. Unfortunately, Tibetans are losing their culture because of their domination by China. The

communist and Chinese flag was all over Lhasa. Religion is at the heart of the Tibetan culture. There were prayer flags all around the city. I learned so much about Buddhism and the Dalai Lama in Tibet. I knew of the Dalai Lama and Buddhism before the trip but did not realize the magnitude of the religion.

Vietnam was the next destination on our trip in which we spend a considerable amount of time. I was shocked at how openly the Vietnamese welcomed us to their country. I thought that there would still be many hostile feelings towards Americans because of the Vietnam War. There were not as many cultural differences as I believed there would be. On our way from the airport we saw hundreds of teenage couples in a park hanging out.

India was our last official destination. It was also the place where we spent the most time. Their dedication to their religion was the cultural difference that stood out to me. Everything revolved around their religion which for many was their culture, Hindi. The Hindi gods were represented in many areas of cities. The sacred cow could be found wondering any street and was not harmed by anyone. The one aspect that I did not understand about the Hindi culture was their lack of respect for nature. They are supposed to respect nature, which they do in some ways, but they also use the side of the road as their trash can and then burn the trash. Sewers were connected to the ocean which contaminates the ocean.

Another cultural difference that was obvious was the different way of looking at relationships between males and females. Women were not supposed to interact with men; of course this has changed in some areas. Arranged marriages are the expected while dating and love marriages are unheard of. Many students were curious about dating and seem to want to marriage for love.

I feel as though with all of this worldly knowledge I can now continue my college career

with a better understand of my peers. I believe this knowledge will help me in my future as a psychologist to understand the cultural background of others. Hopefully in the future, I will have the opportunity to help those less fortunate than I and again will be able to immerse myself in other cultures.