

Institute of International Education: Final Evaluation
Mexico City. March-August 2008
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After spending a semester studying abroad in Argentina, I was itching for an experience where I could really integrate myself into the Latin culture on an even deeper and more professional level. A few months later I found myself, with the help of IE3, interning with the Institute of International Education in Mexico City. I spent the most intense 6 months of my life working as an educational adviser for IIE and learned more about myself in every possible aspect imaginable, professionally and socially. In between figuring out Mexico City on my own and adjusting to the professional lifestyle in a Spanish speaking country, I fell in love with the field of international education and found out just how incredibly special Mexico truly is.

Reflecting back to my journal, I can remember feeling incredibly calm as I was waiting for the plane to take off to Mexico. I wrote, “I’m not scared, which, ironically, scares me”. In fact, I remember not really feeling anything—in my experience, expectations tend to lead to disappointment, and so I tried to avoid expecting anything. The first few journal entries describe how pleasantly surprised I was with Mexico City, and how welcoming the IIE staff was during my training period—this of course mentioned amidst my obsessing over how delicious street tacos were, and in between the lists I wrote of Mexican slang that I heard around the city.

Mexico City is an incredibly underrated place, and having grown up hearing nothing but negative comments about its pollution and chaos, it was nice to discover that, although massive, it is still beautiful and has so much to offer. Aside from the wonderful climate, there is always something to do—from going out dancing, to seeing museums,

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eating tacos on the street, to soccer games, to Lucha Libre—if you're bored in Mexico City you probably aren't being creative enough. Above all though, it is home to some of the most open and welcoming people I have ever met, which made making friends incredibly easy. As infectious as it is though, it still is a city with heavy traffic, noise, and people living the urban lifestyle, so one of the best recommendations I can give to future interns is to explore outside of Mexico City occasionally. Leaving for a weekend allowed me to see a different side of Mexican culture but also to appreciate being a *chilanga* (a person from Mexico city) whenever I got back to the federal district. It's important to emphasize too that the issue of safety within the city is like any other large urban area---if you are aware of your surroundings and avoid the neighborhoods that are infamous for crime, there shouldn't be any problem. I personally didn't have any situation come up in which I felt my safety being threatened, and I can thankfully say the same regarding my friends and coworkers there as well.

While I think that one of the best aspects of the internship is that no week was ever the same, a typical day in the office consisted of working on personal projects in the morning and having student appointments in the afternoon. I would begin each weekday walking from my apartment to the IIE office, which was located inside an English language library, arriving at 8:30 am. The morning usually consisted of administrative tasks—answering emails, entering statistics, restocking materials, writing the newsletter, etc...---in addition to personal projects, which for me included designing presentations, creating handouts, writing scripts for a new online podcast series, planning a pre-departure orientation, and more. At 11 o'clock the advising center opened to the public, and students could drop in with their inquiries regarding education in the U.S. The

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amount of books and handouts the center has regarding educational opportunities is endless, and I was constantly providing materials for students who came in. After an hour for lunch, the afternoon was dedicated for personal student advising appointments. This was always my favorite part of the day because I would meet one on one with students, many of whom would work with me on a regular basis, and discuss their individual plans for going abroad. I fell instantly in love with advising and am now considering international student advising as a career possibility. Two or three times a month we would give open presentations to the public regarding different types of educational opportunities in the U.S—undergraduate, graduate, intensive English, etc. This was a great way to develop my presenting skills and allowed me to practice using Spanish in a professional group environment.

One of the greatest challenges I experienced was learning to overcome my fear with Spanish. Although I had spent 6 months in South America before coming to Mexico, I still would get nervous speaking in front of students. This hesitation began to fade though as I developed a stronger Spanish vocabulary regarding academic advising terms and also gained a better grasp of the information I was expected to provide students with during personal appointments and on the phone. I learned a lot about the importance of cross-cultural communications, and how body language and facial expressions can sometimes say a lot more than words alone, which will undoubtedly help me when I return back to Oregon and work with those who are trying to learn English.

I saw my largest period of personal growth when, two months into my internship, my supervisors left on a month long business trip, leaving me ultimately alone in the advising center. Without anyone to go to when a problem arose, or when a student asked

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a question I didn't have the answer to, I was forced to problem solve. My confidence in both my Spanish and what I knew regarding academic advising skyrocketed with this unique opportunity to be in-charge. This has always been one of the unique benefits of studying or working abroad, in that it is so easy to pinpoint moments when you personally notice a change in yourself, and the challenges you experience the first month of the internship seem so simple 5 months later. Growth is inevitable, and, for me is the most addicting aspect of living in another country.

When it came time for my internship to end, I made it a point to sit down and try to absorb everything that I had just gone through over the course of the 6 months working with IIE. It wasn't always easy—there were frustrations, moments of confusion, and occasional hurdles to overcome, just like with every job-- but an IE3 internship isn't suppose to be easy. I finished my internship knowing exactly what I want to do with my life, with a new level of confidence triple the size of what it was before I started, and with friends who I can confidently say will be a part of my life forever. I truly couldn't have asked for anything more.