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IE3 Final Report  
IIE Mexico City

I began my internship with IIE/EducationUSA on April 2<sup>nd</sup> 2007. My first day at the internship site was overwhelming, but interesting and exiting at the same time. Excerpts from the first week of my journal describe my experience:

It's [the workplace] also intimidating. Nichole is very nice, but not as encouraging and positive as my last supervisor (she was a luxury in this sense). Speaking Spanish on the phone in a professional environment makes me nervous. I'm making a list of vocabulary necessary to work here. There's a lot to learn and everyone's too busy to spend as much time training me as would be ideal. The place is so busy that it's hard to take time out to learn the things I need to learn to do my job well.

I was surprised at the pace of the office. I expected it to be a little more relaxed. It was so busy that Nichole didn't even finish going through the training PowerPoint that she started with me when I arrived. I learned a lot by just diving in, and the other intern, Devon, was a great help. She had been in the office for about three months, so she was very knowledgeable regarding the daily operations of the advising center. I was surprised at being given the role of managing the advising center. That's a lot of responsibility to hand over to a new intern.

At first, I was quite intimidated by the phone, especially. I lacked the vocabulary and knowledge necessary to serve our clients well. My journal describes my ability to communicate during the first week:

I feel like my Spanish is generally better than it seems right now. Probably because I'm nervous about making mistakes and advertising that I'm a foreigner. I can get the point across, but I hate looking stupid and I'm hard on myself when I don't speak perfectly.

I began keeping a notebook of useful vocabulary and I found it much easier to communicate over time. I also learned to ask folks to send an email when their questions were complicated or when I didn't understand them well over the phone. This gave me more time to look up unfamiliar words. Later in my internship, I had this to say about my language skills:

I have most definitely increased my Spanish skills, although I was progressing much more quickly while in Morelia, Mexico for a couple of months last summer. I had more free time there, which I used to take Spanish classes and I studied literature on my own. I'm far too busy here to focus on my language skills, which has been a little frustrating. I'm also surrounded by English speaking colleagues at work, which means I speak a lot of English during the day. Also, the more you know of another language, it seems the slower the progress. I will continue to improve my Spanish skills while here, even if more slowly than if I had time to concentrate.

As I gained more vocabulary, and more confidence, I began to take advantage of the contact I had with the public. This contact has been one of the greatest professional benefits of the internship, as noted in my journal:

I've spoken with an English Language Fellow about her experience teaching English teachers as well as with some former interns at EducationUSA who are now working at the Instituto Tecnológico de Monterrey (ITESM) in their English Language Program. They are teaching classes on various subjects in English. Last weekend, I spoke with a friend's aunt who promised to contact me regarding a possible Business English teaching position with a French company here in Mexico.

I've also connected with an English teacher from UNAM (Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México), a professional looking to hire a teacher of English teachers at a university in the state of Mexico, an independent English teacher who would like to start a business and include cultural training services, and a woman who contracts business English teachers to provide private instruction to business leaders in Mexico city.

Perhaps the greatest personal benefit came from one of the biggest challenges of the internship, volunteering to do a presentation on the U.S. Educational system to a group of 36 teachers at Universidad Nacional de Pedagogía (UPN) (Nacional University of Pedagogy). Since I have a degree in Elementary Education and three years of experience teaching in two public schools, I thought I could prove an asset to the organization by volunteering to take on this project and sharing my knowledge in this area from a personal standpoint. It was an intimidating and time consuming project. First, I had to conduct research regarding political and administrative facts. Then, I had to determine how to best present the information in Spanish. The following paragraph from my journal describes how I felt regarding the project:

...I didn't realize until the day of the presentation that my audience was made up of Master's candidates. I was responsible for representing a U.S. Embassy program to a group of 36 from a well known and well reputed university. The Liberal Arts model for higher education is a foreign concept to Mexicans. They study their subject area starting in their last year of high school and keep focusing in their specific area through the end of their Bachelors degree, so professionals here are very well trained and informed in their areas of expertise. I was also intimidated by my supervisor, wondering if I'd do well by her high standards.

I did struggle, and had a few poorly translated words, but overall the presentation was a success and a very rewarding experience. I was even able to act as the expert in a question-answer session at the end of the presentation, answering at least ten questions about U.S. Ed. Structure, politics, finances, legislation, ideology, etc. A few students stayed behind afterwards to ask me further questions after the group Q&A session and seemed very interested in the information and opinions I was able to provide. The professor of the class had a question/criticism about the U.S. system that I was able to respond to in an

informed and diplomatic way, which felt very good. I was awarded an official certificate of recognition by the director of the UPN and the coordinator of the graduate program as well as a nice 'thank-you' gift. I also took home a beautiful brochure that UPN had distributed to participants highlighting me as presenting the "conference." I was listed as Lic. Megan Lewis to reflect my professional degree status and a paragraph described my academic accomplishments and qualifications. (Lic. Stands for Licenciatura, which is the equivalent of a Bachelor's degree.)

The group seemed very appreciative and Nichole, my supervisor, said that she was impressed by the knowledge and experience she didn't know that I had, the presentation, and my presence as a presenter. She asked me to add notes to the presentation so that it could be distributed to other advising centers, used in future presentations, and sent out to others who request this type of information. What a compliment!

Probably the greatest challenge of the internship was writing the grant proposal for FY08, which was sent to the IIE office in New York for review before moving on to the U.S. Department of State Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs. I began working with this document less than a month after beginning the internship. I was given a draft, last year's proposal with very few modifications. This helped tremendously, of course, but I was still at a loss, not knowing enough yet about the organization, last years' activities, and plans for future. I had to do some research, meet with Alan and Nichole, and ask a lot of questions. In the end I felt good about the proposal, but I can't say I exactly

enjoyed the process. Nevertheless, I'm glad I had the experience, and it forced me to learn a lot about IIE and EducationUSA.

Nichole met with me for three hours to help me make corrections, make suggestions, and answer questions regarding the grant proposal. I don't think she looked at the document after I made the revisions. Alan took over from there. This has been the kind of guidance I have received from Nichole throughout my time here. She gives initial direction and asks for my ideas. Then she 'lets me at it' and waits until I hand her a product. We review the work together, she makes suggestions or corrections, and then she trusts me to improve the project and deliver the material. I've enjoyed this relatively hands-off approach, knowing that her assistance is available when I need it. She was also very open about delegating various projects to me according to my interests and showed a personal interest in my career goals by discussing post internship opportunities over lunch. In my journal, I mention another reason I believe she is a good leader:

She also does a wonderful job of paying attention to cultural and systematical differences in the countries she works with in order to understand and work with their specific needs. She recognizes the aspects of her personality that conflict with cultural characteristics of the people she directs, and tries to make fair compromises to meet their expectations and hers at the same time. She works hard to keep herself informed in her field to better serve the advisors she is supporting.

I had much less contact with or guidance from Stan, my professor on my home campus, apart from creating a learning contract with him at the beginning of my internship. This was invaluable assistance, as the contract focused and motivated me throughout my internship and allowed me to receive credit for my masters program. He also read my journal a couple of times and wrote some words of encouragement.

I appreciated his encouragement, and that of my classmates, because both the internship and Mexico City were quite intimidating when I arrived. The following excerpt from my journal describes my first impressions of the country:

With my limited experience in Morelia, I can confirm what I've read about D.F. being a very different place than the provinces. It's very busy, very graffeted, very rushed, and very intimidating. I don't know how to navigate the city and I don't know where, who, or what is safe. I feel I stand out quite a bit and am worried about being a target in the metro or anywhere else. People are not as friendly as they were in Morelia. I expected this, but it's still a bit of a shock to be here in such a large place. I've been here before on vacation, but it feels different being here when I have responsibilities and I have to figure out how to take care of my daily needs.

Of course, as time went on, I felt more and more comfortable here. I took the metro to unfamiliar places, drove a car, and asked strangers for directions. For such a reputation that Mexico City has of being a dangerous place, the people are surprisingly warm and generous, although not as warm as in the provinces. Part of my adjustment, although it might sound strange, was gaining the ability to take in larger quantities of visual information. Part of my feeling overwhelmed was the entourage of billboards, signs, people, colors, street stands, etc. The city is so visually stimulating that at first I found it hard to focus on specific landmarks to locate myself. It was stressful. And this is after legislation was passed last year to take down several billboards and clean up the visual "clutter" of the city. I couldn't think straight. I'm now accustomed to this and am wondering if Seattle will look like a big grey blur when I get home. Of course I've slowly learned where my local resources are for daily needs, which makes me feel more empowered and less overwhelmed.

While I was adjusting, it helped to have some routine at work. Every morning, I turned on the computers, the rotating EducationUSA PowerPoint

presentation, and the IIE sign. The next step was the free coffee. Then I returned to the front desk at the advising center to enter the previous days statistics, clear the Outlook account of junk email, and assess the day's 'to do' list. While most of the experience was anything but routine, I enjoyed such tasks as opening the mail and filing out book sales receipts when feeling stressed or overwhelmed.

The only thing I would have really appreciated knowing before my arrival is how to find housing. It wasn't until I arrived that I found out about [www.compartodepa.com.mx](http://www.compartodepa.com.mx) which is how I found my house. The listings on Craigslist are mostly ex-pat living situations and are expensive, partly because they are in an expensive part of town, and partly because the advertisements are directed towards foreigners. I was also having difficulty identifying which parts of the city were safe zones and what they had to offer practically and recreationally. It would also be helpful for future interns to know what the renting culture is here; rights of tenants, responsibilities of landlords, precautions to take, and awareness of cultural norms in this area.