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MESE, Morelia, Michoacán, México
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I completed my internship at MESE Street Children's Project as the final component to my graduate social work practicum. I thoroughly enjoyed my time, both with MESE and in Morelia in general. This report is comprised of 4 components, which I wrote to assist future interns, as well as to inform IE3 about my experience. First, I will talk about my experience at MESE in general, my activities there, preparations beforehand, what I wish I would have done differently etc. I will then focus on my experience with the orientation of the IE3 internship, my in-country supports and the layout of the internship. Third, I will discuss my homestay experience, in particular how living with a Mexican family assisted with my growth both culturally and linguistically. Last, I will address the overall experience, cultural issues and other points I think are particularly important for future interns.

Experience at MESE

MESE is a very well run organization. Everyone there is very dedicated and passionate about the work they are doing. MESE is very used to having interns; for that reason, there is some fluidity with incorporating new students. It was, however, challenging at times to understand why they did things a certain way. I found that I needed to be patient and understand that things were probably not always going to make sense to my cultural/professional expectations from the living in the United States. Towards the end of the internship, the other intern and I were able to discuss plans with the organization, from our point of view, on how to better utilize students from the start of their internship so that there is not as much lost time at the beginning.

My project was a public health project focused on nutrition. For the project we weighed and measured the children, as well as gave presentations and held individual group sessions with some of the families on healthy eating. During the time that wasn't spent on the project, the majority of time was spent going on home and school visits with the social workers. This was extremely interesting and informative. It felt, frustrating at times, though, because it could sometimes feel as if I wasn't contributing fully to what MESE does. For that reason, as well as professional development, I very strongly suggest that future interns come to the internship with an idea of what they would like to focus on. I was fortunate enough to have another intern with me and this helped a lot in organizing and carrying out the nutrition project. I think that grouping future interns could help both the interns and the organization attain better results.

What really stuck out to me during this internship were the very strong class lines that were present, not only within the Mexican culture, but also within the organization of MESE. The Patronato, which is akin to the board of directors, consisted predominately of well-educated, white Mexicans. The social workers were kind of more in the middle-class and the families that MESE works with were poor. The lines were very clear and this issue is something that I think future interns should be prepared to address or at least be ready to see when they go. One thing I wished I had done would have been to find a tactful way to talk about this issue with the social workers; at the time, I did not feel that it was my place.

I feel like I gained valuable professional experience working with a Mexican population in their environment; however, I do not feel that my skills were adequately employed. That is, I thought that I could have done a better job from the beginning of

articulating my skill set and what I could offer, which would have led to a better usage of my abilities. I also feel like the combination of my imperfect language skills, my age, and my nationality led to me being under-utilized. I think this was one of my biggest challenges because I came at a time when the organization was going through some employee turnover and I did not have a supervisor for a month. As such, it was even more up to me to be extremely active about describing my skills and ability to contribute.

Overview of IE3 Internship/CCL

The structures put in place by CCL and IE3 made my time in Morelia an even better one. All the organizations communicated well together, making a smoother experience for the intern. This aspect alone makes the program fee worth it. Through CCL, I took a 1-week language brush-up course prior to my work at MESE. While I do not feel that it was totally necessary for grammatical purposes, I did learn a lot about the Mexican culture, Mexican politics and Morelia in general. Thus, I would suggest taking a class at CCL. It is, however, rather expensive and if money is a major issue, it could be skipped by a future intern.

CCL is also a very dynamic, well-run organization. They were very helpful with assistance as well as letting me use their computer lab for Internet use. The CCL employees are all very helpful and kind. I would recommend using them as a resource whenever possible, even if you do not take classes.

During my time in Mexico, I worked with CCL to teach English classes at MESE 2 afternoons a week. This required a little organizing at the beginning, but it greatly enriched my experience in Morelia. If this is something you are at all interested in, I highly recommend it. Moreover, because the working schedule at MESE is generally

from 9-3pm, the afternoons can be a little mundane and it is nice to have activities to continue to being involved.

Homestay Experience

I loved my host family. They were fabulous, warm and welcoming. They immensely added to my experience. I am a vegetarian and was therefore placed with a vegetarian family, which was extremely helpful. This goes back to CCL being supportive, because they were the ones who organized everything with the host family. I think I was extremely lucky with my family; I also feel, however, that I was open and considerate in the home. The family opened up their home to me, they involved me in their lives and they really made the experience for me.

The host family experience is what I feel helped hone my language abilities the most. There were definitely times when I did not want to risk looking like an idiot, but every time I spoke I gained so much more than if I had been quiet. Overall, my language ability improved at the level with which I put forth effort.

Travel, Cultural Questions, Etc.

I would recommend traveling as much as possible while interning. Morelia is a centrally located city, making it easy to get around to other parts of Mexico. I feel that my learning on these weekend travel excursions helped me learn and improve my Spanish almost as much as working at MESE did. Mexico is an insanely beautiful country with a lot to offer.

I really enjoyed learning about Morelia and spending time there in addition to traveling. Morelia is a gorgeous, colonial-style city and is relatively untouched by American tourists. There is plenty of time to explore the city, both in the evenings and if

you don't travel on a given weekend. The transportation system consists of converted VW bug vans, called combis, and buses. The routes are challenging to figure out, but usually if you ask someone at the stop or the driver, they will help you.

Other suggestions include bringing more money and fewer clothes than planned. The dress code at MESE is extremely casual, particularly when you travel with the social workers to the schools and colonias (neighborhoods). You will probably, at most, need one "nice" outfit. That's not to say it would be appropriate to be at work in "ratty" clothing, but you will not need fancy stuff.

Additionally, I would suggest looking into flights to Mexico City, as it usually significantly cheaper than flying to Morelia. The buses from Mexico City to Morelia are very clean, easily accessible, and inexpensive. Lastly, I would suggest all the other information you probably already know: take advantage of all the opportunities you can, be adventurous, (but not stupid) learn, and have fun.

All in all, this experience was a very good experience. I feel that stepping outside the box to work professionally in a different culture was particularly enriching; I highly recommend it. Check out all of the sites you are interested in, speak to both representatives of IE3, your home program and previous interns. I would say the latter might be your best resource in getting a well-formed perspective as to what goes on during the internship. Good luck!