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Student Voices on Global Consciousness

*Maya Smith-Custer (chair); Emily Shanahan; Miranda Melone;
Elizabeth Henninger; Isabel Gerardino Ríos*

Maya Smith-Custer

Introduction

Welcome to the Global Voices Symposium Student Voices Session. My name is Maya Smith-Custer. I am a third-year undergraduate student at the University of Dayton studying International Studies, and I have the privilege of being today's panel chair. Today's panelists are bright University of Dayton students who will share with us their journeys engaging as citizens of the world and who will discuss why it is important to foster true community in our global society. Each student will share study abroad, campus, or local community experiences that emphasize the strength of individual impact we can each make when we put forth an active effort to increase our global consciousness.

Emily Shanahan

I'd like to start by acknowledging the ancestral and unceded territory of Native Peoples on which we live, work, and learn here in

Dayton, Ohio, including Adena, Hopewell, Shawnee, Miami, and Osage. It's important we recognize the contrast between the experiences of myself and other panelists who have had the opportunity to explore other cultures, and those indigenous groups whose culture, land, and lives were taken from them.

My name is Emily, I am a senior majoring in International Business Management and minoring in Human Rights Studies and Sustainability, Energy, & the Environment. In addition to my education, UD has given me countless opportunities to explore my passions and discern my vocation. I know that I want to use my education and career to work towards a more equitable food system that works for all people, from the seed to the plate. I am here today to tell you about the Global Flyers: India Program, through which I spent six weeks learning about agroecology and food security in Sikkim, India.

Expanding my worldview, living in community to learn about a different way of life, and building relationships with a diverse group to learn from one another are experiences I am privileged and humbled to have had. Our cohort of five adventurous, passionate, and inquisitive women from across the United States—women who are now some of my closest friends—spent our summer learning about the intersection of agriculture, globalization, climate change, food security, and culture in the context of rural agricultural communities of the Himalayas.

Food, in addition to the literal life-giving nutrition it provides, is a vehicle for language, culture, familial traditions, and interpersonal relationships. Vandana Shiva, Indian environmental and food sovereignty activist, scholar, and author, notes that the majority of the world's food is produced by small-scale farmers (less than 2 hectares) who hold just 12% of the farmland and who are among the most poor and hungry. This statistic alone illustrates the inequitable nature of the global food system. Due to climate change, the commodification of food, and inattentive globalization, farmers have been forced from their land and livelihood, despite the immense nutritional, economic, ecological, and social benefits they provide. They are being replaced with chemically ridden industrial agriculture

operations that act as cultural erasers. Today, as a result, 75% of private sector plant breeding research, 60% of commercial seed, and 76% of global agrochemical sales are controlled by the same five companies: Monsanto, DuPont, Dow, Syngento, and Bayer.

In India, a new phenomenon has been occurring. Over the past 20 years, 300,000 Indian farmers have committed suicide. Farmers are seduced into predatory contracts by these companies, and then, unable to meet the impossible seed and chemical costs and facing declining yields, many of these farmers feel they have failed their families and brought shame to their communities. In their minds, suicide is the only way out. A common way to do this for many of these farmers is by going out into their fields with the pesticide they cannot afford, and instead of spraying it on their crops, they will drink it and die there in the fields that have brought them so much pain.

These are facts and figures I learned about before I even left for India. I have always considered myself an empathetic person, and these statistics truly break my heart. But statistics have a new potency when you put a face to them. Knowing that my host father very easily could have been part of this statistic, and that my *bainis* could be without a father, makes the numbers so viscerally real for me that I am kept up at night. To paraphrase a quotation, “A single death is a tragedy; a million deaths is a statistic.”

I think now about the short time I spent with my host family and am immensely grateful for the opportunity to cross paths, let alone live, with such amazing people. I think about how hardworking, encouraging, and understanding my Indian family was and how inquisitive and accepting my Indian sisters were [I say “were” only because I’m not sure I’ll ever get to see them again. They’re fine!]. I never expected to feel the kind of love and connection I felt from my host family. We spent countless hours struggling through our language barrier to learn about one another and build a genuine connection. My host mother taught me how to harvest and prepare vegetables I have never seen before, how to fold momos, and how to churn butter in a hollowed-out piece of bamboo. She also taught me patience and hard work. My sisters taught me their favorite games,

and they always held my hand as we trekked to the stream to play. They taught me to be inquisitive and adaptable. My father barely spoke, but when he did it was usually to joke with one of the many guests who were always in the kitchen about how funny I looked trying to eat with my hand. He taught me compassion and humility. I still giggle about the quiet night when he asked, “Em-ly, what’s *Mamma Mia*?” (picture a very brooding man who doesn’t speak much), and I had to fumble through our language barrier to try and articulate the cultural icon that is *Mamma Mia*.

I think too about the celebration the night before we left—as my mother was dressing me in her sari and asked me to not forget about them. I think about my sisters asking me not to leave and then asking me to come back to visit on their birthdays so we can play together. I think about Perna, my 11-year-old sister, who stayed in the house as I got in the taxi to leave because we were both crying too hard to say goodbye. If the only thing I gained from this experience was the brief connection with my host family, it still would’ve been one of the most amazing experiences of my life.

The opportunity to immerse myself in a vastly different culture is an unparalleled experience. It pushed my comfort zones, built my cultural competency, and allowed me to grow as an individual. Each time I felt challenged, I could also feel myself growing and my resiliency becoming stronger. I was challenged when I felt particularly homesick and knew we didn’t have a cell phone signal, when I had to balance my feminist ideals with certain cultural norms, and when I couldn’t communicate and felt frustrated and alone. These were difficult, but the most challenging thing was being slapped in the face with the inequity of our world and knowing there is little to nothing I can do about it. Unequal distribution of power and wealth has given me a formal education—realizing that in my other world there is a waste system that takes my trash out of sight and out of mind, there is an internet connection that puts the world at my fingertips, there are countless creature comforts, and there are unimaginable opportunities. In fact, unequal distribution of power and wealth gave me the privilege to travel to India in the first place. Unequal distribution of power and wealth holds these same things

out of reach for the majority of the rest of the world. I, alone, will never be able to fix the problems in our world, and this challenge is one I will most likely never have a resolution to. But I do believe that building relationships across borders, whether internationally or just across the river, that naming the injustices we see, and that dedicating ourselves to open dialogue are important first steps to building solidarity.

Thank you for taking the time to listen to me tell you a little about my experience. I cannot thank the Honors Program enough for making this program possible for me. I am immensely thankful for the opportunity to learn about a topic I am passionate about in a new culture and context, and I am especially grateful for the relationships I built. My host family asked me to share their story with you so others will know about them and their experiences.

In collaboration with the community, we wrote a story book. The elders gave us the basis of the story, we gathered information from farmers to fill in the storyline with their voices, and the children illustrated it. They titled it *Nikhil and Organic Food*. It is a tangible piece of the community I have been able to hold on to, and I share it with anyone who will listen. I hope to use the voice this unequal world has given me to create space for those who have not been granted the same privilege and opportunity. And I hope you will do the same.

Miranda Melone

Good morning, everyone. Thank you, Dr. Amin, for inviting me to speak today. My name is Miranda Melone, and I am a graduate student pursuing a Master's Degree in Public Administration and the Nonprofit and Community Leadership Graduate Certificate. I graduated from UD in 2017 with degrees in American Studies and English. I will be giving a reflection on my relationship with Zambia, a country located in south-central Africa.

To be honest, I struggled greatly with writing this reflection. How could I sum up in just around 1,000 words and in 12 minutes my journey over the past four years loving the country of Zambia

and its people? It has been a journey which has stretched me, pushed me, challenged me, and rewarded me in ways I could never have imagined. Not only did this trip change what I knew about Zambia. More importantly, it changed what I knew about myself and my position in a global society.

I first traveled to Zambia with the University of Dayton cultural immersion program through the Center for Social Concern in Campus Ministry in the summer of 2016—the , summer before my senior year at UD. My previous travel experience included only the continental United States as well as France in Europe. I had never been to an African country before. I had no idea what to expect. I was so nervous about the trip. I shed a few tears as I spoke on the phone with my mom for the last time in the JFK Airport before we boarded the plane. Even though we had plenty of hours in flight to prepare for arrival, I remember feeling sick with anxiety as the plane landed, for the first time knowing that I was so far from home and about to step into a world that I knew almost nothing about. To this day, I am processing feelings felt on that initial trip.

I had come to the country with my own perceptions of Zambia and Africa, perceptions that were shaped heavily by the media, by Hollywood, and by images perpetuated by foreign mission agencies. I came to the country with my own background—my middle-class upbringing, my whiteness, and my Catholic Christian religion—all of which I had never considered from the perspective of someone from a country like Zambia. I brought with me all of the practices that I knew as normal and a way of life I had been formed into believing was the right and better way of living. Nothing I could have learned in a classroom could have prepared me for how it would feel to begin deconstructing all of these preconceived notions and values. A lot of things can change when you realize that you are not the center of the universe.

Entering into a new culture is a lot like switching from a PC to a Mac. You go to easily move your cursor to the upper left-hand corner of the screen in order to close a window only to find that the red “x” is now a red circle on the opposite side of the screen. It’s not a worse or inferior way of doing things, just different, yet highly

noticeable. Change is uncomfortable. It feels awkward. It felt awkward when we were not given any silverware at dinner and were expected to eat with our hands or when everyone else started dancing at church. In such moments of awkwardness, I can become frustrated and resentful, or I can let go and attempt to go along, realizing that my way of life is not the standard way of living.

I will never forget the time when we were sitting down at dinner at the Marianist Formation house, Faustino House, and I was talking to my friend Willie who lives with the Marianist brothers in Lusaka, and he said something that truly stayed with me. He said that Zambia is not a country that needs to be saved, it is a country that needs to be known. At the time, I emphatically nodded my head in agreement. I was trying to be friends with this new person and take in everything he was saying. But later, as I sat in reflection on this statement, I truly came to understand both the simplicity and the complexity of it. Of course he wanted his country to be known. That is not hard to understand. But why did he have to say that to us? Why was his country a country that he knew was portrayed to the rest of the world as a country needing to be helped? Why was it necessary for him to say that he just wanted his country to be known?

The longer I remained in Zambia, the more I reflected on the bigger and more complicated questions regarding our trip. This trip started pushing me to ask “Why?”. Why did certain situations make me uncomfortable? Why does the United States have resources that Zambia does not? Why am I all of a sudden feeling guilty about who I am and where I come from? Why do I know of so many groups of western students who travel to countries like Zambia, and why do I not know of any students from Zambia who journey in groups to western countries? What is the point of going abroad to “make an impact” when there is so much need in my own neighborhood? Why do I feel like I need to “make an impact” anyway? Why is the Zambian currency worth 1/15 of the value of ours? What has created such an unequal world? What am I doing here?

With all of those questions swirling around in my head, I moved forward and focused on getting to know Zambia as much as I could. When I did, I wholeheartedly fell in love. Acquaintances quickly

became friends—people whom I truly care about. When you really love somebody, you cannot help but care about what happens to them. Falling in love and becoming friends with people in Zambia has driven me to advocate for this country and its people in the context of my own life. I'm slowly but surely learning how to use what I have been given to amplify the voices of those who become lost in the noise of international aid, travel bans, and mission trips—the practices and policies that perpetuate problematic narratives in which people are treated less like capable human beings and more like problems needing to be solved.

We live in a globalized world, a world filled with millions of images that we interact with every single day. I think it's important now more than ever to search harder and look deeper for the true and whole story about a person and about a country. We have a responsibility to pay attention to the narratives being perpetuated by those in power. We have a responsibility as American citizens to understand how our politics affects the lives of people in other countries. We have a responsibility to search for truth and love and to respect those from other parts of the world as our brothers and sisters. While I do not know the answers to many of the questions I listed above, it is important that I am asking them. Asking and sitting with those questions—that is the ultimate value of these experiences.

I have returned to Zambia three different times since my first trip in 2016. I remain in close relationships with many people in that country, and I continue to have conversations with them every single day. Through a friend, I recently joined a local NGO group called OPA, Organization for Poverty Aid. I have been communicating with the organization through Whatsapp, sharing ideas on how we can work together to help each other achieve our goals. I keep in contact with religious sisters and brothers I have gotten to know over the years. We chat about our lives as friends do and offer prayers for one another. For example, I keep in touch with Mercy, an amazingly strong woman and friend who is currently working on her midwifery degree at the University of Zambia. I chat with Willie about school and life and his goals for the future. Zambians are the kindest, most welcoming people you will ever meet. Their joy radiates out of the

most beautiful of smiles. Welcome and accommodation is in their culture. Their priority is people, making them feel at home. They are a friendly and loving people.

These relationships give me hope. They show me how able we are to love despite such vast differences, how capable we are of learning from each other, and how much our livelihood as a global family is tied to those living thousands of miles away. These relationships will continue to shape my life going forward. I never planned on traveling abroad. I never planned on falling in love with a country so different from mine. While my relationship with this country and the people of Zambia has complicated my life in many different ways, I know that I am so much better because of it.

Veronica Halfacre

Conversations: Being a Global Citizen Where You Are

When I was invited to present, I wasn't sure where to start. I have not studied abroad and besides family vacations to the Caribbean, I haven't done much traveling abroad. But after reflecting more about my time at UD, I realized that I had become a global citizen without leaving Dayton.

Background

I was born and raised in Dayton, Ohio. I always knew I was going to go to school at UD because my father graduated from here. In 2018, I graduated with a Bachelor of Arts. I began as a business student, but I switched to visual arts my sophomore year, something that had a great impact on my experience. My time as an art student has shaped who I am today. However, I believe it is important that I give you an idea of the environment I was in during that time.

When I switched to an art major, it was 2016—the year that Trump won the election and coincidentally, the same year that xenophobia was extremely prevalent in our country. Not to say that that is no longer an issue, but it was especially visible to me this year.



Photo that elicited hateful responses on UD social media

This is a picture of me holding a sign quoting the Bible at a demonstration against all the xenophobia and Islamophobia that we were witnessing around the country. I was really excited to see myself on the University of Dayton's page, but then when I looked at the comments, I saw nothing but hate. Even more disappointing was that the comments were from alumni.

Seeing alumni react to that photo with negativity was one of the many events on campus that fueled my need to have a conversation. Too many people were staying silent, so I used art as a vehicle to start these conversations.

My piece *The Problem We Still Live With* is an appropriation of Norman Rockwell's *The Problem We Live With*, which depicts

Ruby Bridges, the first student to desegregate schools in 1964. My piece depicts instead a Muslim woman. I created this in response to the travel bans that were happening at the time.



'The Problem We Still Live With'

Global learning-living community

By my senior year I realized that I was not going to study abroad, but I saw the global learning-living community (GLLC) as an opportunity to have an intercultural experience here in Dayton. There are many opportunities offered to UD students to gain multicultural skills; however, they must be willing. I had two international roommates and one roommate from Cleveland. Our international roommates loved having people over and playing loud music. One morning we woke up and all the belongings of our Cleveland roommate were gone. Rather than discussing the issues she was having, she moved out without a word. Admittedly, having roommates is already difficult without adding different cultures. But unlike her, during my time in the GLLC, I learned how to have intercultural dialogue and how to use conflict management. And I really enjoyed coming home to hear different languages and having people from all over the world in my living room.

Women's Center

When I learned that I was working in the Women's Center as a graduate assistant, I was very excited because so much is done to work towards the University's mission for equity and the common good.

Hannah's Treasure Chest is a local organization that helps us to provide to faculty, staff, and students such resources as children's clothing, toys, and bedding. The majority of students we help are international students because the visas they have may not allow them to work or get government aid. The first student I remember coming to our office was a mother from Tanzania. Her infant had no clothes except the onesie he was wearing. By helping these families, we send the message that they belong here. Students should be concerned most of all about their grades, not whether or not their children have clothes for the winter. Providing these resources helps us to make UD a more equitable environment.

My work

As a graduate assistant, I do lots of programming. I love programming because it is another way to have conversations on campus.

Body and Culture is a program I created that examines the impact that culture has on body image. I begin by talking about simple and relatable topics like social media and the ways they impact body image. But then—BOOM—I next bring up colorism, skin bleaching, and hair discrimination. These are topics that many UD students do not even think of because they are topics that most likely do not affect them directly. In fact, many students leave comments saying that they had never heard of terms like *colorism*. Or that they had never considered that culture impacts the way we see ourselves.

My goals are to plant seeds that probably weren't there and to help students to think outside of their immediate worlds.

What needs to be done?

Start the conversation. This is the simplest thing we can all do. You don't need money or specific tools, just a willingness to talk with others.

Don't be afraid to have difficult conversations. The more often you have these conversations, the less difficult they become. We must take on these difficult conversations because silence is not an option.

Remember that the decisions we make have a global impact. Although many of us may not travel the world, every decision we make and word that we speak can have a lasting impact. So we must speak up, stand against injustice, and be kind.

Elizabeth Henninger

Hello, everyone. My name is Elizabeth Henninger. I am a senior Sociology major, minoring in Social Work and Family Development. I grew up in a small suburb of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Since I was

young, I was exposed to different global populations, values, and cultures, although it was not until I was a junior in college that I recognized how much I had been influenced by these experiences. These principles inspired me to pursue work with vulnerable populations not only here in the United States, but also abroad.

While I was growing up, my mother worked for South Hills Interfaith Movement (SHIM), a nonprofit organization that serves over 4,000 individuals by providing clothing, food, and services to vulnerable populations within the South Hills neighborhoods of Pittsburgh. Within the population that SHIM serves, there is a large concentration of refugees who have been resettled from countries such as Nepal and Myanmar. My mother works as the community garden manager at SHIM and has helped establish more than fifteen community gardens, which provide fresh produce to the food pantries that serve the refugee populations. One of the gardens is dedicated solely to the refugee population that SHIM serves, allowing them to grow their own fresh food. This garden also helps to bridge the gap between the refugees' former lives in their home countries and their new lives in the United States. Families use this space to form new social bonds and friendships, while also creating routines that comfort them in times of uncertainty and chaos. The garden is located within walking distance of where the majority of the population has been resettled, and the families are invited to grow vegetables in their own respective garden beds.

I began by volunteering at SHIM's food pantries to help distribute food to the patrons of the program. This slowly evolved to my being more involved in the actual gardening process by assisting with planting, weeding, and weekly harvesting with other volunteers. I also volunteered at the summer camp that SHIM provides for the younger population. During the camp, the kids take a field trip to the community garden to learn about the different vegetables and the garden environment, as well as to learn about how eating fresh produce contributes to a healthy diet.

With the help of SHIM, the refugees in this community are working to build new lives for themselves, and they live only about 20 minutes from where I grew up. Through my experiences

volunteering with SHIM, I have experienced the adaptability, enthusiasm, and resilience of people trying to regain control of their lives after facing so many struggles in their home countries. By working in a casual garden environment, participants can build relationships and feel more comfortable opening up about their lives. These interactions allowed me a unique glimpse into the poverty, struggles, highs and lows, and ultimate successes experienced in their lives. It is a strong reminder that most of us don't always see, let alone understand—the lives of people who live right next door.

As I entered the second semester of my sophomore year at UD, I wanted to more fully experience cultures other than my own. I chose to study abroad in Seville, Spain, during the second semester of my junior year. I left the United States not knowing anyone in Seville and knowing a lot less Spanish than I thought I did. A few weeks after getting settled in to my host family's home and community, I was eager to get involved in my new city. One of my professors introduced me to a cultural center called Factoría Cultura.

Factoría Cultura is located in a neighborhood called Tres Mil Viviendas, or the three thousand homes. It is considered one of the most dangerous slums in the city of Seville. The neighborhood is made up of nearly 50,000 people, primarily gypsies. These are typically people of Romanian descent who have resettled in Seville and are commonly discriminated against because of their reputation for being thieves. Because of this anti-gypsy mentality, Tres Mil Viviendas has become an area that stimulates social segregation. This forced isolation and social segregation both break down social connections and social capital, which in turn inhibit integration. Factoría Cultura plays a pivotal role in intercepting the breakdown of social connection for this vulnerable population. Its physical location in the middle of the neighborhood serves as a gathering space for all residents of Tres Mil Viviendas. The center helps restore the growth of social capital and cohesion through the formation of relationships with other community members.

My last, and perhaps, most influential experience with global equity was during Christmas break of both my sophomore and senior years at UD. During the senior holiday break, I participated in a

week-long immersion trip to Ladyville, Belize, organized by the University of Dayton Center for Social Concern. Our group of student volunteers stayed and worked at Liberty Children's Home, a local orphanage. Days were spent assisting with groundskeeping work by painting, and then when the children came home from school in the afternoons, working one-on-one with them to help them complete their homework. While I spent only two short weeks of my life at this orphanage, I learned more from the children than I could have dreamed. They are the most carefree, upbeat, and happy children, despite their extremely challenging circumstances. I learned that in America we are sometimes so occupied with our busy lives that we don't sit down and reflect on the good fortune that many of us have been blessed. With that being said, one of the most challenging things about being in Belize was witnessing firsthand the wealth and poverty gap within a short ten-mile radius of the orphanage.

Our group of UD student volunteers had the opportunity to travel outside the orphanage for a day on an excursion, spending the day snorkeling alongside many tourists from Europe and the United States. After driving twenty minutes outside the gates of the orphanage, I could immediately see the dramatic cultural imbalance. The landscape became littered with tourist stores and shops and provided a blatant glimpse of the income disparity right next door. We spent seven hours on a boat exploring the beauty of Belize from the water—something the children living in the orphanage may never have the opportunity to experience. That day it felt inappropriate we were using time that we were supposed to be using serving, participating instead in an activity that only a portion of the world's population would ever have the means or opportunity to do. My awareness that day also forced me to recognize that the wealth and poverty gap will always be present in any country, city, or town.

My involvement with SHIM, Factoría Cultura, and Liberty Children's Home has challenged me to accept the fact that I am unable to completely change people's lives. It is a frustrating realization to know that my impact is not indefinite. While I have accepted that I am unable to solve many of the issues surrounding

poverty and class disparity, I realize that what I can do is use my spark and passion for the people in Pittsburgh, Sevilla, and Belize to make a difference in my local community here in Dayton. In many ways, the Romanian families in Seville are quite similar to the Nepalese population in Pittsburgh and the children in Belize. No matter your geographic location or economic capital, all people strive for the same things—happiness, connection, and love.

My experiences have demonstrated the stark contrast in wealth and poverty in all cultures, communities, and geographic locations of the world. The important element is not only being able to recognize this imbalance, but also challenging oneself to stay connected with the communities you have impacted, as well as remembering that it isn't necessary to travel the world to serve vulnerable communities. Poverty exists right around the corner. This is no more visible than traveling outside the UD campus.

My community involvement here at UD now comes in the form of volunteering with the Optimist Club, a club on campus that serves vulnerable populations in the greater Dayton area. Our largest service activity is working twice a week with the African Christian Community Center (ACCC). The ACCC is an organization that works directly with African Refugee children, mainly from the Congo. Optimist Club volunteers provide tutoring and opportunities for social engagement to elementary-aged students twice a week. My involvement has allowed me to stay connected to the global values, cultures, and principles that have inspired me while being a student at the University of Dayton.

My life experiences leading to my senior year of college have provided me with an interest in how to best support marginalized individuals, specifically refugees, in our communities. My senior year Sociology research analyzes and identifies the parallels of social connection and disconnection between refugees and host communities. The goal of the study correlates the scholarly work done regarding integration strategies and the success of such strategies by comparing social integration levels through education, employment, and poverty. My analysis focuses on individual refugee households and analyzes how integration programs, social bridges,

and access to education influence one another in order to effectively and successfully integrate refugees into their host communities. This work will emphasize the importance of combating severe levels of social isolation among refugee populations by connecting refugees with community resources and services to aid in the assimilation process.

I hope that the student experience I have shared has shown that, from a University perspective, many students can benefit from experiences helping communities in other countries, but it is equally important, if not more so, to offer opportunities for students to connect with their Dayton community by assisting the marginalized individuals living right next door. The challenge is to maintain continuity in supporting these at-risk groups through leadership and creative opportunities for student involvement.

Isabel Gerardino Ríos

Good morning, everyone. I am Isabel Cristina Gerardino Ríos. I identify as a woman; therefore, you can refer to me by my name or by *she* and *her*.

My roots were planted in San Juan, Puerto Rico, and they have grown with several cultures, such as the Dayton, Ohioan culture and many others, such as the Ecuadorian culture.

I'm currently a senior expecting to graduate in May with a Bachelor of Arts in International Studies, with a concentration in Global Migration and Economic Development and a minor in Economics.

I have to reemphasize where I'm from. I consider it the most influential identity that impacts how I view the world, besides my identity as a woman. I was born and raised on a beautiful small island in the Caribbean, and for some "mystical" and "mysterious" reason, I am one of the few people in the world who have the privilege and blessing to hop on an airplane and learn from many different cultures ... in addition to the honor of getting educated through a university.

It's so important to recognize where you come from and the factors that led you to be able to be present here today.

I would not be talking on my experience of a growing global awareness if it wasn't for those "mystical" and "mysterious," unequal and inequitable reasons that have been historically institutionalized and have slowly included more identities along the way ...

I will be sharing a little bit about how my experience in a 9-day trip to Ecuador transformed me.

The office of the Center for Social Concern is under the umbrella of Campus Ministry, and this is one of the main offices that provides the opportunities to travel abroad with the intention of immersing into a new culture. The Spring Break-Out to Ecuador is approximately a 10-day trip that includes getting there, enjoying the time there, and then traveling back. Ecuador is the same word for *equator* in Spanish. That 0°0'0" Degree that marks the center of the planet's sphere.

Those who apply to the program have to take a course that prepares them for the trip. The classes consist of community building to get acquainted with the other participants, as well as classes educating the participants on some characteristics that make Ecuador unique, and classes to connect the participants' experience with their spiritual lives and to help them reflect on how the entire experience is a learning process.

At first, I thought I wanted to do this because my friend had recommended it. Through the time of preparation, I acknowledged I wanted to do it to get out of my comfort zone and really challenge my assumptions by learning from a culture that connected to mine through some similar, yet very different history, geography, and culture. Puerto Rico and Ecuador share similar factors that have influenced their culture because of the Spanish colonization and invasion of indigenous tribes. Both nations also speak Spanish. Yet the main differences are that Puerto Rico was later invaded by the U.S., while Ecuador found its independence.

With Ecuador's independence came a lot of freedom of expression for the indigenous tribes. What I understood from the

people I learned from there is that there is a beautiful solidarity in respecting the environment. The aspect of the Ecuadorian government legally recognizing that about 25% of the population is indigenous really taught me that there are many indigenous tribes that are keeping their traditions and cultures alive but that they are in constant collaboration with each other so that they are able to stand for what they believe in.

I had the opportunity to stay in the city, as well as in the jungle. We went to the jungle because Dr. Giovanni Onore, the founder of the Fundación Otonga and a Marianist brother, has one of his research residencies in the providence of Pichincha, right next to Santo Domingo. In Santo Domingo, we went to one of the schools, Escuela Maltón, which Dr. Giovanni Onore provides resources for so that low-level income kids are able to go to school. The Otonga Foundation is about environmental conservation and education in Ecuador. Thankfully, we had the opportunity to be part of this experience and learn about ways to develop a nonprofit that can change the world by educating those who may lack the opportunities as well as by educating about the importance of biodiversity.

The entire experience of the Break-Out challenged me through strengthening my open-mindedness, transparency with myself and my surroundings, and an infinite growth in my gratitude for every person who has crossed my path.

The group of twelve students, a graduate student, and an Ecology professor taught me how far determination can drive you towards your goals, the beauty of faith and reflection, and how every living being has a purpose. We got to experience the life of the city by adventuring as a tourist through a cable railway up a 13,000+ ft.

Demographics are a matter of self-identification with region of birth:

- Mestizos
 - Indigenous “cholo”: Quichua-quechua/bilingual with Spanish
 - Afro-Ecuadorians
- Historically a rich cultural heritage: Inca Empire

mountain, a beautiful walk around the city of Quito, and an opportunity to be inside a butterfly house.

Ecuador is known to be one of the most environmentally diverse countries in the world. This can be validated through the Theory of Evolution that Charles Darwin found in the Galapagos Islands, which is actually the first ever UNESCO World Heritage Site. With its vast range of biodiversity, Ecuador is home to many different habitats.

Climate change is a global issue, but since 2008 Ecuador has been an exemplary country through its policy-making. For example, it was the first country to ever recognize environmental rights in its constitution, recognizing nature as an entity with its own legally enforceable rights: “right to exist, persist, maintain and regenerate its vital cycles.”

The group I travelled with got to go to a frog conservatory in which they breed frogs that are nearly extinct. The workers of this frog conservation showed us how important each plant and insect is for the development of one frog or for an entire population of frogs. Their main goal was to reintroduce frog species that have been extinct due to habitat loss. In addition, we also went to a butterfly house in which we were able to learn about the lifespan of butterflies and their purpose in biodiversity through the spreading of pollen.

The best of the conservation part of the trip was learning through our five senses. Dr. Giovanni Onore, the Marianist brother and scientist that founded the Otonga foundation and who hosted us, believes that to be able to learn, we need to use all of our senses more precisely and more fully. This was certainly one of the most amazing aspects of the trip, something that changed how I value learning and now appreciate the ability to enjoy the senses. Dr. Onore would take various plants and ask us to smell them, taste them, listen to them and their environment, feel them, and observe them. This experience was amazing because it made me learn in all ways possible.

Pictures and words do not do justice to the beauty of Ecuador’s culture, geography, and biodiversity.







