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A Window to the World

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Wednesday August 2, 2017

By Eric F Spina

I have mentioned to several UD students that the two great regrets of my college career are not studying abroad and not learning a foreign language.

While I've since had the opportunity to travel all over the world — from Japan and Russia to Europe and the Middle East — I know I would have benefitted greatly from living outside my comfort zone while in college.

The lessons I've learned traveling internationally have given me a deeper appreciation of our shared humanity. When you immerse yourself in another culture, you develop empathy, you learn to respect differences, you see your life from a different angle, and you confront your fears and inhibitions. These are life-shaping experiences that you just can't pick up in other ways.

So, when prospective students ask my advice about their academic journey (and even if they don't ask!), I tell them about my regrets and urge them to learn a language and to study abroad, which is particularly accessible at the University of Dayton.

As we head toward the end of the summer, I have already chatted with University of Dayton students who jetted home from China, Ireland, Italy, and Africa, where they participated in study-abroad or immersion opportunities. To a person, they said their views of themselves and their place in the world had changed. In all, more than 500 students this summer traveled abroad, exploring health and sport professions in Chile, studying art and culture in Florence, and navigating the waterways in China, to name just a few cross-cultural experiences.

Cross-cultural immersions are life-changing. "They are really incredible experiences," says Mary Niebler, associate director of the Center for Social Concern, which organized trips to Guatemala, India, Zambia and Cameroon. "Each one is really different, but the main focus is cross-cultural understanding and sharing of each other, learning through the lens of faith, culture, and group reflection."

That type of experience is more than a line on a résumé. It's a window to cultural understanding — both our own and people we engage — and help us imagine and advance the common good.

We want to give every University of Dayton student that chance to explore another culture, whether in an African village or an Appalachian community, where our students live and work with others: humbly, simply and with grace. When Karen and I visited what's affectionately called UDSAP — University of Dayton Summer Appalachia Program — I understood immediately why this is our longest-running service-learning program, still going strong after more than 50 years. UD students and families in Salyersville, Kentucky, have cultivated friendships, creating a bond that's spanned generations.

During our strategic visioning process, the value of intercultural and global engagement experiences for students emerged as a strategic priority as we shape our curriculum, our faculty, and outside-the-classroom experiences. We want to grow opportunities of this type and ensure that they are available to all students, no matter their financial circumstances.

I encourage all students to explore the many opportunities available to them. Contacting the [Education Abroad Office](#) is a good next step.

I look forward to the day when all students graduate with a diploma in hand — and either a stamp in their passports or an indelible experience living and learning in a culture other than their own.