ACADEMY OF PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Written Communication Student Artifact

Off Campus Study Reflection

Thinking back now, I find it hard to remember precisely what my learning goals were prior to leaving for New Zealand. However, I can imagine what they might have been by thinking about why I wanted to go to New Zealand in the first place. One of the main factors that went into deciding what off-campus study I would pursue was my major. Many college programs focus primarily on the sociocultural aspects of visiting another country, there are two semesters abroad with a biological bent: Tanzania and New Zealand. Either of these would allow me complete major requirements and-more importantly-continue my study of a subject I am passionate about.

I had certainly heard great things from both camps of biology travelers, and everyone wanted me to apply to their own program. Therefore, I had to try to make the choice myself. In the end, I applied for the New Zealand program. One of the main reasons was because of the outdoor aspect of the experience: hiking, camping, canoeing, and kayaking are all activities I have done before and really loved, though I'd never gone backpacking before, per se. Furthermore, I figured traveling to a place where they spoke English _would make it easier to communicate and connect with native New Zealanders.

So far, I have simply taken for granted the fact that I wanted to take a semester abroad. But this fact needs examination as well if l am going to determine what I hoped to get out of my off-campus experience. First, I felt a need to take a break from the regular college experience. After 15 consecutive years of classroom learning, I wanted to get outside of the "academic bubble" and try something new. I also wanted the experience of traveling to another country. At the time I applied, the most exotic places I had ever

visited were Quebec in terms of culture and language and Utah in terms of landscape. And in each of these places I spent no more than a few days.

From this, I can enumerate some of what I hoped to get out of my study abroad experience. Underlying the whole concept of off-campus travel, I hoped to spend time somewhere with a different country with a landscape and culture different from the one I was used to. In New Zealand more specifically, I wanted to learn more about biology and geology, especially things I can only learn there, experientially. In addition, I wanted to connect with nature while learning and practicing outdoorsmanship skills.

Although I was aware that cultural exchange was "supposed" to be one of my goals, I didn't think about it much when preparing for New Zealand. In a lot of ways, I didn't foresee much cultural exchange happening between me and the Kiwis. One developed, westernized, Anglophone country was likely to be much like another. What's more, since the focus of my studies were to be on the natural history (i.e. biology and geology) of New Zealand, rather than its cultural and political history, I expected there to be little discussion of cultural differences. This ended up being rather incorrect, as we had a whole course devoted to "Cultures of New Zealand," and I participated cross-cultural conversations all the time in informal ways, with our lecturers, residents on the Quaker Settlement, my host parents, and others.

Even though I had these goals, it was hard to think about what it would be like to live in another country. It was such a brand new concept for me that it was hard to internalize until my airplane touched down in Auckland.

While it's not surprising that I expected a culture in New Zealand similar to my own, considering our common language and largely English heritage, I was not aware of all the subtle but important ways in which we differed. New Zealand is so off the American radar that all most people here can ask me about it is "Oh, did you go to Hobbiton?" One way in which it differs is its very strong historical connection with England and the UK. Even after its official separation from the United Kingdom in 1853, many Kiwis continued to feel like British subjects and the country's economy depended almost entirely on British markets. Although today New Zealand has developed cultural characteristics of its own, these are often informed by this British history.

In addition, many New Zealanders have a rustic, ecological, or "outdoorsy" ethic. There is a great valuation of what is special about their land and what it has to offer. This likely grows out of the large amount of rural or undeveloped land in the country as well as the prevalence of New Zealand as an international ecotourism destination. People are proud of the natural spaces they have and the ways these spaces serve them. This is, of course, a generalization; there was certainly also an element of "anti-treehugger" sentiment in certain conservative Kiwis. Likely due to the decidedly environmental focus of the program, I was mostly only made aware of this sentiment second-hand, not through people we met.

The cultural, racial, and political issues surrounding Maori and Pakeha (European) New Zealanders was a fascinating glimpse into another political world. In 'the United States, the most prominent racial issues are between various immigrant populations: people of European, African, Asian, Middle Eastern, and Latin American descent are at times at odds with each other. There is comparatively little consideration for this land's native peoples. However, in New Zealand, perhaps due to a stroke of luck, the Treaty of Waitangi (often considered the founding document of modem NZ) sets up relations between English and Maori people, giving the Maori culture and structure a level of agency and legitimacy that is respected today--after an unfortunate period of intolerance in the mid-20th century.

In the lectures, workshops, conversations and discussions of our Cultures of New Zealand class, we had the privilege to hear from many different people about issues surrounding Maori culture's place in modem New Zealand. Particularly, I learned a lot from our Whanganui River guides, Awhina, a Maori historian in the Whanganui Regional Museum, and David James and Jillian Wychel, who led a workshop with us on Maori political history. These many voices added together to create a more nuanced understanding among our group of the context and importance of these isssues.

Because Maori tribes have their own functional hierarchy an4 constitute a largely continuous culture, they are able to work on some level apart from the functioning of the national government, and then come together as the Maori Tribunal to make their needs clearly known. This is so different than the United States; we don't have some

Hispanic Tribunal or African- American Council that is recognized as the official body that stands for that racial group. It makes me wonder how NZ's cultural and racial history could help to inform American issues (if it can be made applicable to us, which I'm not certain of).

One thing that the New Zealand program certainly did (and did well!) was get me out of the classroom. When I applied I wanted to have a change from the monotony of "classroom" learning, and I also wanted to spend more time outdoors in nature. Although we did have the unavoidable classroom time, it was supplemented by day trips and weekend trips and a three- week road trip in the middle. This helped me to connect with the country's physical and human geography on a personal level. The places we visited, whether mountains, towns, or historical sites, made an impression on me and hold a special place in my heart.

It can be easy, when in a classroom setting, to be somewhat distanced from the things you are studying. But when you hike a mountain to see critically endangered mistletoe plants or talk with citizens who have devoted years to fighting a controversial pesticide, the topics gain another level of reality and relevance. There's nothing like a beautiful vista to make you fall in love with a place and connect with nature, and New Zealand has no shortage of those!

When I was younger, my family used to go on camping trips with some regularity. But as my parents got older and my brothers and I got bigger, these trips became less and less frequent. This was something that I definitely missed, and hoped to experience in New Zealand. Fortunately, I got my fill of hiking, canoeing, and sleeping outdoors. It was a positive and renewing part of the experience for me. The camaraderie that I developed with my fellow students through these times and the connection to nature that I nurtured within myself were critical parts of my time abroad.

Although no experience can be universally positive, especially one that lasted for four months-- and my off-campus program certainly had downs along with the ups--I feel that without a doubt, it was the right place for me to be. I learned a lot and grew as a person in ways I often can't even really express. While I'm glad to be back home now,

I'm so glad that I was presented with this opportunity to discover new people and a new place and that I took it.

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