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Language and International Health

EDossier

### Study Abroad Reflection

I have grown to love the Spanish culture after studying in Toledo for my abroad experience. There are many stark differences between the American culture that I have grown up in and the Spanish culture that I experienced. While becoming acquainted with the differences in relationships, work-life balance, and overall daily life I couldn't verbalize the constant pattern that I saw. This all changed when talking to a local waiter he pointed out that, "Americans live to work, but here we work to live". This made me realize the differences in values between American culture and Spanish culture. Spaniards prioritize family and make time to enjoy the company of their loved ones, especially over food. They live to enjoy life and deeply value group affiliation - to family, organization, or community. Spanish daily life is very slow paced, with a siesta built into my class schedule, I learned to appreciate this cultural difference.

For my internship while abroad, I shadowed a case worker at a local homeless shelter. Here is where I was able to deepen my understanding of cultural norms in the workplace. I would walk twenty minutes to my internship two times a week. Sometimes my advisor would be at his desk working, other days he was a few minutes late because he stopped for a coffee or churros. Timeliness is not one of the main values of Spaniards, which was beneficial for me as well. After I arrived, we would not start work for another forty five minutes because we would chat about our days and other elements of our lives. There was never any urgency or rush to get things done. The way my advisor interacted with the participants of the program was very

impactful to me. He treated every participant like they were his friend, always joking around with them and he put extra effort into getting to know them.

Here in the United States, homelessness is stigmatized. People experiencing homelessness in the US are often ignored, isolated and exploited, while having labels such as “addicts” or being “lazy”. Throughout US history there has been a lack of affordable housing and federal urban planning policy failures. In contrast, the Spanish constitution guarantees housing in Article 47 when it states, “all Spanish citizens have a right to decent and adequate housing”. There are far more organizations and institutions set in place in order to support the housing crisis in Spain compared to the United States. This distinction could also be attributed to the differences in values among the two countries. Americans value independence and self-determination, placing an importance on individualism. Culturally the United States has a strong tendency to emphasize finding identity in cultural successes. On the other hand, Spaniards deeply value collectivism, an attitude of group priority over the individual. Consequently, in Spain, homelessness may be seen more as a social problem, rather than an individual failing. Collective culture in Spain places a greater value on community and social welfare, which supports the efforts fighting homelessness more so than in the United States.

My experiences in Spain will undoubtedly shape and enrich my future perspectives, decisions, and actions. The knowledge and skills that I gained during my internship at Caritas will equip me to better serve marginalized communities here in the United States. There are both negatives and positives to individualistic and collectivist societies, but now that I have experienced both, I can provide a different perspective on life in the United States. In Spain I experienced how a good work-life balance can enhance your quality of life. I saw how collectivism helped create a strong sense of community and cooperation. I saw how a strong

system worked to help the homeless community by providing affordable housing options. But, on the other hand I experienced a workplace that struggled with timeliness and time management. I oftentimes struggled with the slow pace of life in Spain and often felt unmotivated to work hard. All of these factors have provided me with valuable insights and a better understanding of culture and how to make the most out of life.