Katie Piotrowska’s trip to Madrid, Spain

Interview conducted by Shay Galto, NIU sociology graduate student

Summary:
Katie went to Madrid Spain through a study abroad program. While in Spain she was able to study within the classroom and have numerous experiential learning opportunities. Because of her study abroad, Katie has decided to go to graduate school to study urban planning. She will graduate in Fall 2012.

Where did you go for your trip?
I went to Madrid, Spain in the Spring of 2011.

What was the purpose of your trip?
It was a semester long Study Abroad trip.

Why did you decide to go to Madrid for your Study Abroad?
I’ve always wanted to study abroad in Europe and Spain seemed like an interesting place to explore, since its history is much different from other European countries. I knew I wanted to study abroad in the Spring semester, so Spain’s mild winter weather also played a big part in my decision.

Who else from NIU went on this trip with you, including faculty?
The program I went with consisted of students from across the country, so I was the only NIU student that went on the trip. There were two more people from the Midwest; the rest of the group was mainly from the East coast and some from California, Texas, and Tennessee.

How have you personally been affected by your decision to go on this trip and the experiences you had on the trip?
Studying abroad changes you on so many levels. When you live in a foreign environment you’re outside of your comfort zone and constantly challenging yourself. I definitely became more confident.

How important do you think Study Abroad was in your learning experience here at NIU?
I think it’s a crucial part of it. When you study abroad you get to move beyond the classroom and learn by experience. A lot of the courses I took abroad incorporated museum visits and city exploration into the learning process. For example, in my art history class we would spend 3 hours a week at various art museums learning about different artists while physically looking at their work. It was so much more personal.

What were some of the memorable experiences you had on your trip?
There is just way too many, but one of my favorite experiences was a weekend trip to the South of Spain. We visited Seville and Cordoba, which were both beautiful cities. The architecture of
the region is breathtaking. We got to see a mosque that was built in the year 700 when Spain was under Muslim rule. We also went to a live flamenco show. It was amazing.

**How can you apply your experiences on this trip to sociology?**
When you study abroad you are essentially an outsider looking in. Experiencing a foreign culture forces you to critically examine the similarities and differences between that society’s norms and your native culture. I noticed many differences between American and Spanish society in terms of the importance of family. I lived in a homestay with señora who treated me and my roommates like family. She would even call us “hija” which is Spanish for daughter. Sunday was always family day in Madrid. Almost all businesses, besides restaurants, were closed on that day, and city parks were filled with families spending time together.

**How can you apply your experiences on this trip to your future career plans/goals?**
Living in Madrid enhanced my interest in urbanism and urban planning. I became infatuated with the city and its use of public space and urban parks. I loved exploring different neighborhoods of the city, each with their own distinct characteristics. After I came back from the trip I decided that I wanted to study urban planning at the graduate level.

**Would you recommend international experiences to other sociology students?**
Yes! I would definitely recommend it. The things you learn while studying abroad can not be learned in a classroom. I think you come out of the experience with a new lens through which you can view the world.

**Is there anything else you would like to tell me about your (Study Abroad / Internship / Other)?**
Studying abroad had a huge impact on my life. I think in order to have a clearer picture of the world you need to get out of the bubble and actually see how other people live. Studying abroad is an amazing adventure and I highly recommend it. The experiences and memories you will form while abroad are irreplaceable, and will have a lasting impact on your life.